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Islam's Reformist Tradition

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Abstract

The search for an authentic path that links Islam's traditions to the modern world - the Muslim reformist tradition - has deep roots, stretching back to the middle of the 19th century. Reformists have aspired to participate in the centuries-long discussions among Muslim scholars about the proper ordering of Muslim life, reflecting on and seeking to reform the state of their own societies. The influence of the first wave of reformers has been significant, but paradoxically their ideas have spawned conservative trends amongst Muslim thinkers. Today, although there are many reformists amongst Muslims, their existentialist voices are often drowned out by the noise of more essentialist thinkers. Within the larger contemporary context where conflicts have manifested, Muslim reformists are subjecting traditional frameworks to scrutiny, attempting to separate the core ethical principles of Islam from the various historical adaptations that conservatives have enshrined as sacred, and seeking to better understand how universal principles can be expressed through Muslim tradition.

Keywords:

Reform, Reformist, Abduh, al-Afghani, European Enlightenment, Salafi, Fundamentalism, traditionalists, Soroush, Taha, Ijtihad, tradition

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Introduction

The "clash of civilizations" supposedly underway between the West and the Muslim world, which many see as manifested in Iraq, as well as in Saudi Arabia's growing violence, in fact masks other conflicts - disputes that will probably prove to be far more significant in the long term. One of these struggles is taking place among Muslims themselves over the shape of reform within their own societies.

The Muslim reformist tradition - the search for an authentic path that links Islam's traditions to the modern world - has deep roots, stretching back to the middle of the 19th century. Back then, Muslim thinkers contrasted the decline of their own societies with Europe's dynamism, a particularly painful distinction in light of European successes in colonizing large parts of the Muslim world. Then, too, Muslim intellectuals focused on the "decadence" of Muslim societies, their debilitating political and social corruption.

Early Reformists

Many early Muslim reformists were clerics or senior bureaucrats, who had seen first hand how diminished their societies had become. More importantly, they were members of a tiny minority that had been educated in the written heritage of Islam. Far beyond Qur'anic recitation, these men aspired to participate in the centuries-long discussions among Muslim scholars about the proper ordering of Muslim life. This training enabled them to compare the debased state of affairs of their time with the norms and aspirations of earlier generations of clerics and thinkers.

Their judgment was clear: Muslims had sunk far below what their religion required them to be, and lagged far behind the accomplishments of their ancestors. For the reformers, normality meant the progressive development of Muslim societies, and they tied this to the interaction of Islamic teaching with relevant, worldly ideas of the time. So these first reformers sought to engage with the ideas that they saw emerging from Europe: rationality, tolerance and ethically determined behaviour.

These early reformers, among them Muhammad Abduh and Jamaleddin al-Afghani, did not ignite the mass mobilization they hoped for, and were not able to redress

Conclusion

The reformists of the first wave attempted to "reopen the doors of *Ijtihad* (interpretation of religious commandments)" in order to adapt the inherited systems of Islamic thinking to new conditions. Today's reformists are subjecting these traditional frameworks to scrutiny and attempting to separate the core ethical principles of Islam from the various historical adaptations that conservatives have enshrined as sacred.

Adapting Islam to modern conditions was the purpos