

## **17 Islam in the twenty-first century and beyond**

With the move into the twenty-first century, the question may well be asked, what of Islam (or, indeed, religion in general) in the new millennium? Few doubt that Islam will continue to exist. Rather, it is the variety of forms in which it will be found that is of interest. Doubtless, the main trends which have already been sketched above will be the most significant. Islam, however, will face challenges on a variety of fronts, which will likely both change it and strengthen its determination in the ongoing march of human history. Some of those challenges will come from within; others will come from without. Some of the modern thinkers within Islam, such as Mohammad Arkoun and Shabbir Akhtar, who may well stimulate these new lines of thought, have already been mentioned previously in the context of discussions of Muslim sources of authority. Others, such as Farid Esack, who attempts to face human problems from his own sense of Muslim identity not constrained by traditional Islamic practices,<sup>1</sup> are just starting to make their impact. Still others present a revolutionary Islam that will topple existing social structures. From the outside, it is not only the forces of creeping secularism but strident humanist voices who pose a new challenge, along with rival religious groups. Among the latter, it is groups whose origins are from within the Islamic milieu that are particularly significant, since their appeal is precisely to those familiar with Muslim claims and activities. Other religions, including Hinduism and especially Christianity, play a major role as a challenge to Islam as well, of course, but they fall outside the purview of this book, although their influence is to be noted in many places.

### **The move outside Islam**

It is a common phenomenon in religion that, if the questioning of the authority of the past is taken far enough in the desire to be able to

accommodate or compensate for the changes of the modern period, there is a need for a new source of authority. This may even account for the rise of each religion in its formative period also. Modernity, as such, may not be the root cause of the emergence of these movements, therefore, but they may stem from a very basic dislocation in human existence. Such an understanding can be used to characterize various offshoots of Islam in the modern period which clearly have a modernist stance and a renewed sense of authority.

The Aḥmadiyya is one such group, founded by Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad (1835–1908) and now comprised of some four million members.<sup>2</sup> Ghulām Aḥmad was educated with law or government service under the British in mind, but in 1877 he started devoting himself to the cause of Islam. His earliest writings aim towards a revitalization of Islam within the modernizing platform. As early as 1882, he claimed to be the *mujaddid*, the “renewer” of Islam and, by 1891, had put forth the proclamation that he was the promised Messiah of the Muslim community. Later, he suggested he was also an avatar of Krishna, Jesus returned to earth, and the manifestation of Muḥammad. He claimed to be a prophet in receipt of revelation, but one who was sent without a book of scripture or a new religion (and thus he always asserted that he was subordinate to Muḥammad). His function was to return Islam to its proper formulation, by means of a prophetic-revelatory authority within a messianic-eschatological context. Debate has followed Ghulām Aḥmad, dividing both his followers and the Muslim community as a whole, concerning both the extent of and the validity of his claims, and the status of the finality of Muḥammad’s prophethood and revelation, doctrines which are considered central to Islam, as it has been classically defined. For our purposes here, however, it is sufficient to note that the Aḥmadiyya vests authority in Ghulām Aḥmad beyond that normally associated even with a *mujaddid*. This was done in support of a Modernist stance, embracing modern science and many moral ideals associated with the Enlightenment, in combination with a return to the essence of Islam as it is revealed in the Qur’ān and through the guidance of the person of Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad. For the Aḥmadiyya, the correct interpretation of Islam has been vested with the authority of revelation.

The members of the Aḥmadiyya proclaim themselves to be Muslims, although in countries such as Pakistan they have been declared outside the Islamic community and, in many places, severe concern has been raised concerning their missionary activity, which remains a very strong emphasis of the movement reflecting an effort from the very beginning to counter Christian missionary activity in

India, and is also associated with an active Qurʾān translation programme, something generally not encouraged within more traditional circles. The situation is quite different for the Bahá'ís who do not wish to consider themselves Islamic but rather proclaim themselves to be members of a new "World Faith" which supersedes Islam.

The Bahá'ís trace their origins to 'Alī Muḥammad Shīrāzī (1819–50) of Iran who referred to himself as the Bāb, the "Gate," and proclaimed himself to be the returned Hidden Imām, longed for by the Shī'a, and a prophet of God. His appearance is taken to imply the abrogation of Islam and the initiation of a new religious dispensation. After the Bāb's death, Mīrzā Ḥusayn 'Alī Nūrī (1817–92), who took the name Bahá'u'lláh, proclaimed himself the Messiah who had been promised by the Bāb in the words, "He whom God shall make manifest." Bahá'u'lláh's platform was strongly Modernist from the Muslim perspective within which it arose, and the Bahá'í faith remains that way. Legal reforms on matters such as women and family rights were implemented; disarmament, world government and interreligious harmony became central proclamations, much in keeping with certain nineteenth-century European ideals (parallel to Christian and Jewish movements at the time). From the perspective of the history of religions, this was an attempt to re-universalize Islam (even religion in general), by taking it out of its culturally bound forms and into the modern context.<sup>3</sup>

As with the Aḥmadiyya, the Bahá'ís support a programme of modernization emerging from the context of Islam, but, in this case, not by a return to the sources and a renewal of the past; rather, this takes place by a replacement of the sources of authority (even though the Bahá'ís do revere the Qurʾān, as they do all other scriptures, as the "word of God"). This sort of radical rupture with the past is, of course, precisely what more conservative elements of society fear Modernists of all types are actually aiming towards.

### **The role of Muslim intellectualism**

Many of the Modernist voices that are being heard from within, rather than from outside, the Muslim context have at least one common element among them: they speak from an intellectual context. This is an often neglected source of Islamic thinking in surveys (and categories) of modern Islamic trends. This neglect may come as something of a surprise to students of other religions, since it would not seem possible to study modern Christianity without taking into account Hans Küng, for example, nor could we consider modern

Judaism without Emil Fackenheim. Neither of these people can claim to represent a very substantial portion of the believers within the religion as their followers, it might be argued, yet it would seem that a picture of those religions within the modern world would just be incomplete without them.

In fact, in the cases of Judaism and Christianity, I do not perceive that there is much difficulty in including such figures in a survey of modern thought; it is more likely, in fact, that the conservative sides of those two religions are going to be dismissed as having no significantly enunciated platform to be discussed. When we come to the study of the future of modern Islam, however, the case seems to be different. Attention to the intellectual side seems to be sadly lacking. Many reasons for this can be suggested. Often the excuse is made that the intellectual trend does not seem significant numerically within Islam (especially as compared to modern Judaism and Christianity). Where are we supposed to turn to find the impact of such people? But yet, it would seem overly paranoid to suggest, in this era of the ramifications of attacks on Orientalism by people such as Edward Said,<sup>4</sup> that the suspicion is that this ignoring of the intellectual trend is a part of the necessary degradation of Islam itself by Orientalists. To credit Islam with the possibility of such persons existing would seem to be counter to the basic Orientalist stance of picturing Islam as a constraining and reactionary force.<sup>5</sup>

Mohammed Arkoun, an Algerian living in Paris and writing primarily in French, is one of those intellectuals who is often ignored, not being considered representative of anything to do with modern Islam itself. The first impression some people receive of a figure such as Arkoun is one of a person who has “sold out” to the West, a person who has adopted so much of the European intellectual tradition that there is no Islamic root left in any meaningful way. Of course, it is a fact that, in general, many of the intellectuals found in modern religions do live and work in the university context and conduct themselves as academics with all that requires – learned papers, the prolific production of books and articles – and this seems to give some credence to the stance that such people do not need to be considered part of the intellectual construct of the given religion as such. This may account for some of the reality behind the idea that there do not seem to be many people like Arkoun in Islam. Many, perhaps, are lurking within universities without ever identifying themselves in a particularly overt way.

Arkoun himself wants to use the term “the critical tendency in current Islamic thought” when speaking of the “intellectual and

scientific directions” in modern Muslim thinking. Significantly, in terms of understanding how his position fits into the overall picture, he has clearly attempted to embrace what he would term a *contemporary* theoretical stance (as opposed to simply modern, that being equated to a historicist perspective) and this he sees as the basis of his work. Arkoun poses the question in an essay written as an introduction to a translation of the Qurʾān and then reprinted in his *Lectures du Coran*: “How should the Qurʾān be read?” with an emphasis on the idea of “How should it be read today?”<sup>6</sup> This is not a question commonly posed in the Muslim framework and reveals immediately Arkoun’s concerns. The point is not really one of simply how to read it, but how to understand the book in the light of modern intellectual thought. The problem is, as the Christian post-modernist theologian Mark C. Taylor expresses it:

[T]he “texts” that have guided and grounded previous generations often appear illegible in the modern and postmodern worlds. Instead of expressing a single story or coherent plot, human lives tend to be inscribed in multiple and often contradictory texts. What makes sense and is meaningful in one situation frequently seems senseless and meaningless in another setting. The resulting conflict creates confusion that extends far beyond the pages of the book.<sup>7</sup>

How, then, is one to retrieve the Qurʾān both from the mountains of learned philological knowledge and from the literalist tendencies of many modern Islamic movements, and to discover something which speaks to the modern, intelligent individual? As Arkoun suggests, the task is one that is already underway in Judaism and Christianity but is still to be confronted in the Islamic context. It means coming to an understanding of the social and historical conditioning of all human existence, including language, leading to a liberation from the categories of thought imposed by past places and eras. This is not simply a study of history, because that discipline, in much of its Orientalist manifestation, is still deeply entrenched in the nineteenth-century notion of a search for absolutes and essentials. Rather, the historicity of knowledge will be discovered by the totality of the methods of the social sciences, according to Arkoun, asking questions not of “what really happened” (in the formulation of the discipline of history) but how it is that certain ideas came to be a part of the social imagination<sup>8</sup> and the role that those ideas play in the construction of reality for society.

Mohammed Arkoun passionately believes that what he has to say is of relevance not only to the university academic tradition, but also to the Muslim faith. The claim is that what he says should have some bearing on the basic understanding of faith in the modern world and how that faith should be expressed and understood, not only in the academic framework but also from within the faith perspective. His position may represent a thread of Islamic modernism in the intellectual, theological sense, but it is one which is very attuned to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Other Modernists from a lay background (as is apparently the case with Arkoun) have pursued scholarship but have frequently found theological liberalism too dangerous a course to follow. Whether that will change in the future we must wait and see.

In the posing of these questions Arkoun is marked as “post” the Modernists of Islam, as one who ventures into post-modernism, or even a “post-Islamic” position, if that be understood in the same manner that post-modernism is intimately linked with modernism. However, the adverse reaction which such positions evoke among other enunciators of modern visions of Islam cannot be overestimated. The historicity of Islam is seen as being rejected in the attempt by Arkoun and others like him to escape from the dualisms of religion and society; as in similar suggestions in contemporary Christian thought, such views are often termed destructive of everything which people hold dear in their religion.

### **New voices in a Traditionalist framework**

An example of theological reflection within Islam that presents a more conservative framework for discussion is to be seen in the works of Shabbir Akhtar who has been cited a number of times already.<sup>9</sup> Akhtar became famous during the uproar over Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*; he was an extremely eloquent spokesman for the Muslim community, especially in Bradford, England, where much of the controversy centred. Akhtar has a Doctorate in Philosophy of Religion and brings to the modern expression of Islam precisely that which is said to be missing: a theological re-evaluation of Islam, expressed in modern philosophical terms. Consider the following:

The silence of God in this increasingly religionless age is certainly damaging to the faithful outlook. It does seem to open up the possibility of supplying impressively plausible cases for the atheistic stance. Indeed it creates a serious doubt about God’s

alleged miraculous activities even in the past. Is it not an arguably superior assumption that the different human claims about the miraculous are better explicable in terms of a cultural shift in our thinking rather than in terms of God's decision to introduce in recent years a basic alteration in his ways? Given the credulity and gullibility of early man, his ignorance of the moods of Nature – an ignorance poorly compensated by the pagan appeal to magic and its illusory technique – the atheist's suggestion is surely not altogether implausible.

The current silence of Allah could spell a crisis for Muslim faith. Nature is as revealing as it is ambiguous, hence of course the need for a revelation in a sacred language in the first place. The God of Islam seems to have retreated from Nature and community, the two matrices in which, according to religious believers, he typically used to reveal himself.<sup>10</sup>

Akhtar's point is that the challenges of contemporary philosophy to the tenability of religious faith as a whole have been ignored by Muslims, but they can only continue to be ignored at the peril of the survival of the faith itself. Christianity, for Akhtar, has virtually self-destructed through the efforts of (Protestant) theologians bending over backwards to assimilate the latest theories of secularism to their faith. This too will happen to Islam if the example of Christianity is not studied carefully and profit taken from the mistakes made in that arena.

Akhtar's theological position tends to support the moderate side of Islamism. Most significant in this is the all-encompassing nature of Islam (Christianity's "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" has, it would appear for Akhtar, been misused in recent centuries to support the separation of church and state). But it is in the reformulation of philosophically supported arguments in favour of traditional Islamic doctrine – the inerrancy of the Qur'ān,<sup>11</sup> the eternal message of scripture, the concept of the one God – where Akhtar, as he says of himself, breaks new ground. Just what the future might hold for this development is certainly unclear. For many Muslims, it would seem that even the opening of such questions for debate is going too far. For Akhtar, however, the failure to treat such questions openly and honestly could spell the end to Islam as a viable religion in the modern, secular context. Akhtar's future enquiries could well move him out of the Islamist camp which he has defended "out of a desire to empathise with members of his own community, to avoid taking the road that enticed the intellectually gifted sons of Islam into the enemy camp, so to speak."<sup>12</sup> In other words, Akhtar has not yet

created for himself (and those like him) a philosophically integrated and consistent stance within Islam; further work in the area and, as Malise Ruthven has pointed out, greater exposure to the classics of Muslim philosophy, theology and history may well yet produce that new vision. Indeed, as time goes by, Akhtar himself seems to be discouraged by the possibilities; in 1997, after three years of university lecturing on philosophy and comparative religion in Malaysia, he resigned his position. He found his fellow Muslim intellectuals totally lacking “a sense of history” and was appalled when told “Believers . . . [have] nothing new to learn. Western-style free inquiry is aimless. Besides what is the point of free inquiry if God has already revealed to us the whole truth?” He was totally dismayed at the lack of intellectual freedom: “Freedom is a precondition of profundity: no wonder philosophy has no place in the cultural life of Muslims.”<sup>13</sup> Akhtar’s line of thought is full of possibility for a “re-visioning” of Islam, but the likelihood of it being taken up by a new generation of Muslim intellectuals is uncertain.

Challenges to Akhtar’s position exist also, precisely in the way in which he, himself, sees them as coming. Ibn Warraq is one of those writers who sees the failure of freedom of thought in Islam, along with what he describes as a dismal track record of concern with basic human rights, as reason enough to abandon Islam (and all religion). For Ibn Warraq: “Muslims cannot hide forever from the philosophical insights of Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, Feuerbach, Hennell, Strauss, Bauer, Wrede, Wells, and Renan.”<sup>14</sup> For him, however, religion becomes impossible when viewed in the light of modern thought, and he willingly declares himself an apostate and a “secular humanist.” Islam cannot be redeemed in any way because it is fundamentally flawed:

Perhaps the worst legacy of Muhammad was his insistence that the Koran was the literal word of God, and true once and for all, thereby closing the possibility of new intellectual ideas and freedom of thought that are the only way the Islamic world is going to progress into the twenty-first century.<sup>15</sup>

On the evidence of the people discussed in this book, by no means do all Muslims find Ibn Warraq’s conclusions compelling. Some certainly recognize more than others the need for carefully considered contemplation of the future role and structure of Islam. But the value of Islam as a source of identity, as a grounding in life, as a way to understand existence, and as a way to relate to God is far too strong for the challenges of today not to be faced up to.

### **Putting matters in perspective**

The challenges to Islam and the future directions it could take are apparent, especially when the issues are taken out of the newspaper headlines and placed within the lives of individuals. Underlying all such discussions are the topics related to the status and interpretation of the fundamental religious sources of authority. It is important, however, to reflect just briefly upon what all this might mean in terms of Muslim religiosity, although that is a question which is not easy to approach. Richard Antoun puts it well:

How are we to determine, for instance, whether the building of new mosques, the establishment of government-sponsored religious publishing houses, the setting aside of special places in parliament for prayer, the establishment of religious political parties, or the establishment of bureaus to safeguard the Holy Quran are indications of religious-mindedness, indications of a shift in the attitudes of elites only, or simply an increase in political action in the name of Islam? Is an increasing use of Arabic, an increase in veiling, an increase in attendance at the Friday congregational prayer, or an increase in pilgrimage to be taken as an increase in piety, religious-mindedness, or hypocrisy?<sup>16</sup>

The fact is that the range of contemporary Muslim religiosity varies tremendously. One of the reasons for this is that people understand and “use” religion in a variety of ways; that is true whether we are dealing with Islam or Christianity or any other religion. The following summary within a contemporary anthropological study provides an interesting perception of the ways in which Islam manifests itself:

In this village, Islam can take the form of a bland legalism or a consuming devotion to the good of others; an ideology legitimizing established status and power or a critical theology challenging this very status and power; a devotive quietism or fervent zealotism; a dynamic political activism or self-absorbed mysticism; a virtuoso religiosity or humble trust in God’s compassion; a rigid fundamentalism or reformist modernism; a ritualism steeped in folklore and magic or a scriptural purism.<sup>17</sup>

The basis for these variations appears to depend on a wide variety of factors: childhood experiences, individual personality, education, general social context and so forth. All the variations, however,

emphasize the independence of thought which is possible even within a society frequently characterized by its apparent uniformity. Plainly, Islam is a multi-faceted phenomenon which is able to encompass within its fold many different views of the world and of religion in general.

The diversity of Muslim voices will remain. The intellectual evolution of the community will continue. Powerful voices of different stripes will continue to push the community to self-examination and healthy debate. Clearly, however, the contemporary situation is often viewed (out of necessity) as a crisis rather an opportunity. Groups such as al-Qaeda, who proclaim that any Muslims who do not struggle in a *jihād* against the Saudi government, American interests and the Israelis are unbelievers or infidels, function to create deeper fractures within the community rather than solve the problems being faced. A response to such groups and platforms which simply then declares these “radicals” not to be a part of the true, peace-loving Islam likewise results in a confusion of identity for Muslims themselves: how to respond to those who proclaim their Muslim status but act in a manner which is unbecoming to Islam? It hardly needs to be reiterated that such a problem has faced Islam and Muslims from the very beginning.

Al-Qaeda does proclaim that its actions are the legitimate expression of Islam. Underneath their position is a fundamental principle which asserts that there exists such a thing as a single and pure Islam which was practised by Muḥammad and his closest followers known as the *salaf* (and thus adherents to this position are often termed Salafis). The use of violence towards the goal of spreading Islam is believed to be an Islamic duty. To argue this position, a number of dogmatic and rhetorical points are made. To begin with, they reject those who disagree with their stance by declaring them corrupt (a frequent charge against governments), ignorant (of religious law) and hypocritical (usually because of their actions which support the United States). Next, they declare that a defensive *jihād* is needed against the United States and its interests because the West has declared war on Islam. Finally, the highly contentious point is made that the killing of civilians purposely is allowable under certain conditions in Islamic law. It is declared that those conditions are being met because, for example, such acts against civilians are reciprocal, the civilians cannot be distinguished from combatants, and civilians are – by the process of democratic elections and public opinion – supporting the corrupt forces.<sup>18</sup>

The success – or at least the influence – of groups such as al-Qaeda in attracting followers reflects the reality that discourse about Islam

in the public sphere, which emphasizes basic issues of the rights of individuals and the like (what is often referred to as “political Islam”), is dominant among all Muslims. Islam has become the only vehicle for enunciating the concerns of people in the Muslim world. Political Islam serves as the critique of authoritarian regimes, of foreign powers, and of oppression in a culturally “safe” manner, precisely because Islam itself remains a largely unquestioned ideology. The widespread success of political Islam is very much a function of modernity in both its technology and its appeals. Mass communications through every possible means result in knowledge of contemporary events and debates spreading among Muslims instantaneously. The championing of the rights of peoples, whether they are Palestinians, Kurds or Afghans, is a discourse born of an age of charters of human rights. The rhetoric against authoritarian government capitalizes upon notions of democracy and the rightful distribution of political, economic and social power.<sup>19</sup> It is notable that these pressures can also create the counter-effect, as was seen with the Taliban in Afghanistan whose highly conservative approach to Islam displayed a response to these very same pressures but was characterized by a rejection of all external critiques and a re-definition of its own notions of “rights.” Such could be true of other groups such as al-Qaeda as well, but their practical socio-economic platforms generally remain very ill-defined and only if or when they achieve political power would the character of their stance become fully apparent. Given the general instability of the political context in the Middle East at least, making predictions at what would happen should political Islam truly come into ascendancy is hazardous in the extreme. The situation in the aftermath of the war in Iraq with the struggles between factions of Islam, both within Sunnī and Shī‘ī camps and between them, illustrates the incredible fluidity of political alignment, often leaving the less Islamically defined powers managing to walk a narrow and dangerous path, at least temporarily, to hold the balance of power.

Parwez Manzoor has described the situation as one in which “Islam itself has been devoured by the nihilism of modernity”:

The ransoming of Islam’s universality for parochial causes, the sacrifice of its humanity for primal passions, the repudiation of its legal reason for self-endorsing piety, the relinquishing of Divine justice for messianic terror, all of which were the distinguishing marks of these terrorist deeds, have still not entered the public debate. Islam, there’s no mistaking, is as much a victim in this tragedy as any other.<sup>20</sup>

Manzoor's response is to push for a re-enunciation of an Islamic "moral vision" that will address the universal issues which humanity faces. That Islam remains in the parochial and specific situation of those who try to enunciate its position is its failing. Muslims, he says, must confront the issues of "faith and violence, transcendence and existence, politics and morality"; a theological rethinking is required in order to reaffirm Islam in the face of modernity.

Other thinkers would express matters differently, but all agree that answers must come through Islamic principles. The strengthening of what some people are calling "civil society" within the Muslim world is seen in the increasing emphasis on education, freedom of speech and freedom of the press in the countries of the Muslim world. Replacing in some contexts the word "democracy" as the key goal to which Muslims should strive, civil society is understood as that which lies underneath contemporary democratic principles. It suggests that there are parallel social institutions within society that act alongside the state in the public sphere and serve to promote and safeguard the interests and concerns of citizens. This, it is argued, has a strong basis in Islamic history, as perhaps illustrated by the tension between scholarly and caliphal power in classical times. Today, we may be seeing this emerge in the "digital *umma*" as the Muslim community asserts its existence online.<sup>21</sup> The concept of civil society itself may be more of a critical tool for scholars and a motivating slogan for activists than a concept easily identified and developed, but the very fact that the notion is being grappled with and considered once again demonstrates the range and depth of Muslim commitment to have Islam continue to be relevant in day-to-day life.

Muslim faith is a complex phenomenon, just as is any other religion. It may be tempting to suggest that there are two different faces to Muslim religiosity: the intellectual debate over principles of the faith confronting the personal practice of individual Muslims. The danger here is that we may exaggerate a dichotomy which, while it may have a certain analytical convenience, may lead to a distortion of the presentation of Muslim faith. Better would be a conception which sees faith on a continuum, attempting self-conscious definition at times and reaching into the experiential dimension of religion in order to refresh those definitions at other times. This would seem to be the genius of religion, and of Islam especially.