

ISLAM

THE STRAIGHT PATH



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Modern Islamic Movements

While premodern revivalist movements were primarily internally motivated, Islamic modernism was a response both to continued internal weaknesses and to the external political and religious threat of colonialism. Much of the Muslim world faced a powerful new threat—European colonialism. The responses of modern Islamic reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the impact of the West on Muslim societies resulted in substantial attempts to reinterpret Islam to meet the changing circumstances of Muslim life. Legal, educational, and social reforms were aimed at rescuing Muslim societies from their downward spiral and demonstrating the compatibility of Islam with modern Western thought and values. Because of the centrality of law in Islam and the importance of the Muslim family, Islamic modernists often focused their energies on these areas. In many modern Muslim states, governments used Islamic modernist thought to justify reform measures and legislation. For some Muslims, neither the conservative, the secular, nor Islamic modernist positions were acceptable. Their reaction to the “Westernizing” of Islam and Muslim society led to the formation of modern Islamic societies or organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami (the

Islamic Society), that combined religious ideology and activism. These organizations served as catalysts for Islamic revivalism in the middle decades of the twentieth century and have had a major impact on the interpretation and implementation of Islam in recent years.

Islamic Modernism

European trade missions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries progressively expanded so that by the eighteenth century many areas of the Muslim world had felt the impact of the economic and military challenge of Western technology and modernization. A major shift in power occurred as declining Muslim fortunes reversed the relationship of the Muslim world to the West, from that of ascendant expansionism to one of defensiveness and subordination. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europe (in particular, Great Britain, France, and Holland) had penetrated and increasingly dominated much of the Muslim world from North Africa to Southeast Asia (the French in North Africa, the British and French in the Middle East and South Asia, and the Dutch and British in Southeast Asia).

Western imperialism precipitated a religious as well as a political crisis. For the first time, much of the Muslim world had lost its political and cultural sovereignty to Christian Europe. Although the Muslim world had endured the Mongol conquests, in time the conquerors had embraced Islam. Colonial rule eclipsed the institutions of an Islamic state and society—the sultan, Islamic law, and *ulama* administration of education, law, and social welfare. Muslim subjugation by Christian Europe confirmed not only the decline of Muslim power but also the apparent loss of divine favor and guidance. For the believer, it raised a number of religious questions. What had gone wrong in Islam? Was the success of the West due to the superiority of Christendom, the backwardness of Islam, or the faithlessness of the community? How could Muslims realize God's will in a state governed by non-Muslims and non-Muslim law? In what ways should Muslims respond to this challenge to Muslim identity and faith?

A variety of responses emerged from Muslim self-criticism and reflection on the causes of decline. Their actions spanned the spectrum, from adaptation and cultural synthesis to withdrawal and rejection. Secularists blamed an outmoded tradition. They advocated the separation of religion and politics, and the establishment of modern nation-states modeled on the West. Islam should be restricted to personal life, and public life should be modeled on modern, that is, European, ideas and technology in government, the military, education, and law. Conservative religious leaders, including most of the *ulama*, attributed

Muslim impotence to divergence from Islam and deviation from tradition. Many advocated withdrawal, noncooperation, or rejection of the West. Western (Christian) ideas and values were as dangerous as their governments and armies, for they threatened faith and culture. Some concluded that where Muslims no longer lived under Islamic rule in an Islamic territory, they were now in a land of warfare which, following the example of the Prophet, necessitated either armed struggle (*hijra*) or emigration (*hijra*) to an Islamically governed land. In India, the son of Shah Wali Allah, Shah Abdul Aziz, issued a *fatwa* declaring India a non-Islamic territory, a land of warfare in which to fight or to flee were Islamically appropriate responses. While some attempted to emigrate, more joined jihad movements. However, the majority of religious leaders advocated a policy of cultural isolation and noncooperation. They equated any form of political accommodation of Western culture with betrayal and surrender.

A third major Muslim response, Islamic modernism, emerged during the late nineteenth century. It sought to delineate an alternative to Western, secular adaptationism on the one hand and religiously motivated rejectionism on the other. A group of reform-minded Muslims sought to respond to, rather than react against, the challenge of Western imperialism. They proclaimed the need for Islamic reform. They blamed the internal decline of Muslim societies, their loss of power and backwardness, and their inability to respond effectively to European colonialism on a blind and unquestioned clinging to the past (*taqlid*). Islamic reformers stressed the dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability that had characterized the early development of Islam, notable for its achievements in law, education, and the sciences. They pressed for internal reform through a process of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and selective adaptation (Islamization) of Western ideas and technology. Islamic modernism was a process of internal self-criticism, a struggle to redefine Islam to demonstrate its relevance to the new situations that Muslims found themselves in as their societies modernized. The Middle East and South Asia produced major modernist movements. Their themes and activities are illustrated in several key figures—in the Middle East, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciples, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida; and in South Asia, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97) was an outstanding figure of nineteenth-century Islam and a major catalyst for Islamic reform. A tireless activist, he roamed the Muslim world, calling for internal reform in order to defend Islam, strengthen the Muslim community, and,

Legacy to Modernity

The legacy of Islamic modernism has been mixed. Islamic modernists were trailblazers who did not simply seek to purify their religion by a return to an Islam that merely reappropriated past solutions. Instead, they wished to chart its future direction through a reinterpretation of Islam in light of modern realities. They were pioneers who planted the seeds for the acceptance of change, a struggle that has continued. While their secular counterparts looked to the West rather uncritically and traditionalists shunned the West rather obstinately, Islamic modernists attempted to establish a continuity between their Islamic heritage and modern change. On the one hand, they identified with pre-modern revivalist movements and called for the purification of internal deficiencies and deviations. On the other, they borrowed and assimilated new ideas and values from the West. For some, like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, this was accomplished by maintaining that Islam was the religion of reason and nature par excellence. For others, like Afghani and Iqbal, the rubric was the reclaiming of a progressive, creative past whose political and cultural florescence demonstrated that the very qualities associated with the power of the West were already present in Islam and accounted for its past triumphs and accomplishments. Thus, the belief that Muslims already possessed an Islamic rationale and the means for the assimilation of modern science and technology was strengthened. For all, the key was to convince their coreligionists that stagnation and decline were caused by blind imitation of the past and that continued survival and revitalization of the Islamic community required a bold reinterpretation of Islam's religious tradition.

Islamic modernists, like secular modernists, represented a minority position within the community but with less direct influence to implement change at a national level. In general, it would not be unfair to characterize modernism as primarily an intellectual movement, though activist reforms were initiated. Modernists sought to inspire and motivate a vanguard within the leadership or future leadership of their communities and had to contend with the resistance of a more conservative religious majority. The religious establishment was often alienated by the reformers' rejection of their traditional authority as the sole interpreters of Islam. They bridled at modernists' claim to independent interpretation and their attempts to chart the course for modern reforms. Abduh's educational reforms, while welcomed by younger *ulama* and students, were resisted by many of the more established religious leaders. Sayyid Ahmad Khan's favorable evaluation of evolution caused *ulama* to condemn him as an infidel. Though he gave

the *ulama* control of Islamic studies at Aligarh University, they proved resistant to his reformism.

As noted earlier, Islamic modernism engaged in a process of interpretation or individual investigation (*ijtihad*) that was qualitatively different in its methodology from that claimed by premodern revivalists, who had wished simply to reclaim and implement authentic teachings of the Quran and Sunna. However, modernists, while agreeing with revivalists about the need to reform Sufism and purge Islam of un-Islamic practices in law, also felt free to suggest that many practices acceptable in the past were no longer relevant. Moreover, they claimed the right and necessity to formulate new regulations. Instead of simply engaging in a restoration of the practice of Muhammad and the early community, they advocated an adaptation of Islam to the changing conditions of modern society. In effect, this meant new laws and attitudes toward religious and social reforms. Traditionalists criticized such changes as unwarranted innovations, an accommodationism that permitted alien, un-Islamic, Western Christian practices to infiltrate Islam. Reforms were condemned as deviation from Islam (*bida*). Reformers criticized the *ulama* for being out of touch with the modern world, incapable of adequately leading the community, and for being in need of reform; this deepened the resistance of many, though not all, of the religious establishment to Islamic modernism.

What were the effects and accomplishments of Islamic modernism? First, modernists implanted an outlook or attitude toward the past as well as the future. Pride in an Islamic heritage and the achievements of Islamic history and civilization provided Muslims with a renewed sense of identity and purpose. This countered the sense of religious-cultural backwardness and impotence engendered by years of subjugation to the West and by the preaching of Christian missionaries. At the same time, emphasis on the dynamic, progressive, rational character of Islam enabled new generations of Muslims to embrace modern civilization more confidently, to regard change as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Second, the example and writings of modernists inspired many like-minded Muslims in other geographic areas. Belief in the absolute relevance, compatibility, and adaptability of Islam to the twin challenges of colonialism and modern culture influenced modernist movements in many other parts of the Muslim world. In North Africa, the influence of al-Afghani and Abduh on the thought and outlook of reformers like Morocco's Bonchaib al-Doukkali (Abu Shuayb al-Dukkali) and Al-lal al-Fasi, Tunisia's Abd al-Aziz al-Thalabi, and Algeria's Abd al-Hamid ibn Badis (Ben Badis) was such that Islamic reformism in North

Africa is often simply referred to as Salafiyya or neo-Salafiyya movements. Salafiyya reformism extended across the Islamic world to Indonesia, where it influenced the Muhammadiyah and Sarekat Islam movements. While these organizations had significant differences, they were similar in their desire to respond to internal decline and external encroachment. All rejected blind adherence to tradition and un-Islamic popular religious practices, and advocated Sufi reform, modernist reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) of the sources of Islam, and educational and social reforms. Most, like the Muhammadiyah, established schools that combined Islamic studies with a modern curriculum and ran social-welfare programs. They published reform-oriented newspapers and journals, such as *al-Islah* ("The Reform") and *al-Muntaqid* ("The Critic") in Algeria. Many modernists were anticolonialist and thus participants, often leaders, in nationalist movements that were rooted in religion and harnessed Islam for mass mobilization. Allal al-Fasi organized the Istiqlal (Independence) party in Morocco, combining Islamic reformism with the organization of Sufi orders. Islamic reformers in Algeria joined with some *ulama* and established the Algerian Association of Ulama, whose motto was "Islam is my religion; Arabic is my language; Algeria is my Fatherland."

Third, reformers' espousal of a process of reinterpretation that adapted traditional concepts and institutions to modern realities resulted in a transformation of their meaning to accommodate and legitimate change. As a result, subsequent generations, whether modernist or traditionalist, have come to speak of Islamic "democracy" and to view traditional concepts of consultation and community consensus as conducive to parliamentary forms of government. Similarly, it became quite common for many, including the religious establishment, to accept the use of *ijtihad*.

Fourth, the holistic approach of al-Afghani, Rida, and Iqbal, which viewed Islam as a comprehensive guide for private as well as public life, became part of the modern understanding or interpretation of Islam. Their emphasis on Islam as an alternative ideology for state and society, coupled with the example of eighteenth-century revivalist movements, has been a major influence on modern Islamic activists and movements throughout the twentieth century.

However, the record of Islamic modernism is mixed. Though it was able to prescribe, it proved less successful in implementation. Al-Afghani, Abduh, Rida, Ahmad Khan, and Iqbal failed to provide a systematic, comprehensive theology or program for legal reform. Conservative Muslims continued to see reformism as less an indigenous Islamic movement than an attempt to accommodate Islam to Western

thought and culture. Though they attracted a circle of followers, the reformers were not succeeded by comparable charismatic figures, nor did they create effective organizations to continue and implement their ideas. After their deaths, their followers went in many directions. While Rida continued the work of al-Afghani and Abduh, Abduh's associates Saad Zaghlul and Taha Hussein became secular nationalists. Though Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League party rallied mass support for the creation of an independent Pakistan through the appeal to Islam, he did not follow Iqbal and implement Islamic law. Islamic reformism tended to become a legacy that was not developed and applied systematically, but instead employed or manipulated on occasion, in a diffuse and ad hoc fashion, when convenient by individuals, nationalist movements, governments, and Islamic organizations. The influence and limitations of Islamic modernism are evident in the interpretations of Islam employed in Muslim family law reform, which became the primary arena for Islamic modernist reform, and in the creation of major organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami.