

The Clash within Islam

Emmanuel Sivan

Despite the international terrorist threat from al-Qaeda, some analysts claim that radical Islam is on the wane.¹ We are already, so they say, in the era of post-Islamism. They have a point – provided one considers only the violent, *jihadi* aspect of that broad socio-cultural and political movement that is radical Islam. However, the movement as a whole – which is made up of a plethora of groups, more or less structured, loosely coordinated (at least within the boundaries of individual states), often overlapping – is still vigorous and exercises a measure of influence in various Muslim societies, including on politics. This influence continues, despite the fact that in most places, the movement is unlikely to take power, either by ballots or bullets.

Even the original *jihad* launched by the movement some 50 years ago, against the ‘apostate’, or secularised regimes in the lands of Islam, is far from over. It did suffer heavy defeats in the late 1990s – the end of the fifth, decade-long wave of Islamic violence, following previous waves in the early 1950s, the mid-1960s, the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Yet, in Algeria the civil war goes on, though on a smaller scale. The Armed Islamic Group (GIA) has been largely exterminated, and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) has laid down its arms, but these two groups have been superseded by a new, no less murderous organisation, the Salafi Group for Combat and Propaganda (GSPC), which operates outside the big urban centres. In Egypt, security services remain on alert, despite the fact that the Jama’a Islamiyya has laid down its arms and renounced recourse to violence against fellow Muslims. The other major terror organisation in Egypt, the Jihad, is split between militants abroad, headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri (who joined al-Qaeda), and those on Egyptian soil, many of whom are underground, awaiting the propitious hour to re-launch the *jihad* against the regime. Other Jihad members – mostly those militants in prison – have formally abjured *jihad* against fellow Muslims. Jihad suspects are arrested from time to time, as well as presumed militants of other terror groups such as Takfir wa-Hijra and the Islamic Liberation Party. A state of alert is evident in Morocco and Tunisia,

Emmanuel Sivan is professor of history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His publications include *Radical Islam* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), *The 1948 Generation* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ma’arachot, 1991) and *Mythes Politiques Arabes* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

two countries that fear infiltration and overspill of groups from the North African diaspora in France, with or without an al-Qaeda connection. Jordan and the Gulf states are also on high alert. The semi-legal and legal civil-society associations affiliated with radical Islam, where many former terror activists and sympathisers have found refuge, are subject to constant police surveillance and harassment, as well as the occasional arrest and military trial. Though the security services might be over-suspicious, the possibility of a new conflagration of violence cannot be excluded, especially if economic conditions worsen. Causes for economic downturn could include another slump in oil prices, like those in the late 1970s and mid-1980s, which boosted support for the radicals, and the decline in tourism to the Middle East following the 11 September attacks.

Then there are Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which seized control of events in the second Palestinian *intifada*. Although badly bruised, these two groups

The greatest feat of radical Islam is its sheer survival

are continuing the fight against the infidel, Israeli occupation, a fight quite distinct from that of most radicals who fight fellow Muslims in Islamic states. (The other exceptions are the anti-Russian *jihād* in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Pakistani militants fighting the Indians in Kashmir and some of the Chechen groups fighting the Russian army). Hamas, the more powerful of these two Palestinian groups, is based upon a powerful socio-political movement active within

non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and municipal and cultural life. As in other Muslim lands, this movement contributed to the renaissance of civil society, which throughout the Middle East had been greatly enfeebled by populist military regimes (including, in the case of Gaza, the same Nasserist regime that smashed civil society in Egypt in the 1950s).

Social and cultural vigour

This essay is concerned with the state of radical Islam within Muslim lands themselves, and therefore does not consider al-Qaeda, a phenomenon of the Muslim diaspora. Almost all the radical Islamic movements, except for the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) and perhaps also the Indonesian Jama'a Islamiyya, hold grave reservations about al-Qaeda strategy.² Of course, the al-Qaeda dream is that success against the 'far enemies' — the United States and Israel — will rebound into the successful toppling of the 'near enemy', apostate Arab regimes. But this is the dream of an apocalyptic future, a dream most radical Muslims do not share.

This essay also deliberately avoids the term 'political Islam', which has the effect of flattening out the diversity and density of a multi-layered movement. This movement was born of a deep concern that Muslim

societies were losing their Islamic essence under the impact of imported modernity. If the radicals, among others, turned to politics – and ultimately, to violent action to seize power – it was because many came to perceive the state as the major modernising agency, controlling education and media. Not all of them made this choice. While many radical Muslims concluded that they had to wrest power from the ‘apostate’ rulers, whether by force or through the electoral process, others have preferred to create a political or social lobby, or to fall back upon that age-old solution practised by dissident *ulama* (men of religion) as far back as ninth-century Baghdad – creating their own socio-cultural presence within civil society.

Over the last four decades, Islamic radicals vacillated between these options according to the changing local circumstances, often combining two or more at the same time. In periods of ferocious repression, as at present, semi-legal political activity, educational and welfare action have the added merit of serving as a refuge for persecuted militants. The key merits of NGO activity in the eyes of the radicals are, firstly, that it may change the nature of society, moulding hearts and minds, especially of the young, effectively countering government efforts at modernisation. Secondly, it creates networks of grateful clients, a ‘counter-society’ immune to the secularist credo, and a potential social and political power base oriented towards re-Islamisation. The experience of past periods of repression has proven that it is out of this social base that a future violent outburst might arise. This explains the vigilance of various governments with regard to the *da’wa* – an Islamist term which denotes a combination of propaganda, education, medical and welfare action – and its practitioners. Yet the *da’wa* has an importance beyond that of being a possible cradle for violence. It is bringing about change in many Muslim societies, and sometimes plays a role – albeit indirect – in politics.

The greatest feat of radical Islam is its sheer survival over half a century of ferocious state repression. It has, at the same time, made tremendous inroads into the hearts and minds of Muslims, especially in Arabic-speaking countries. By the early 1970s militant Islamic discourse dominated the public sphere, replacing pan-Arabism and Marxism, and it has maintained this hegemony to the present day. It has influenced gender roles, relations with local Christians (growing erosion of these relations is evident in Egypt, Jordan and Palestine), consumption habits and public mores. Governments in various Islamic countries have succumbed to militant pressure, censoring books, plays and films critical of Islam. The Islamist media – notably audio- and video-cassettes – is growing, and religious activism is becoming a major avenue for venting protest. Young militants engage in grassroots vigilantism against alcohol, pornography and TV satellite dishes, impose Islamic dress codes and monitor the

behaviour of non-Islamic tourists. Activists mount court cases and press campaigns against 'permissive' writers and artists, and mobilise mass demonstrations against the rising cost of living or in favour of introducing a constitution.

This success resides, above all, in the strength of voluntary Islamic associations, the backbone of the radical Islamic movement. They carry on the *da'wa* work, create support networks and show that Islamic values can be fully implemented in the modern era. Despite the high turnover rate, due to attrition and police harassment, there is always a large pool of new recruits, mostly young urban males aged 15 to 25. This is to be accounted for, in part, by the organisational genius of the Islamists, who devised an intricate yet elastic structure for its *jama'at* (association), which is decentralised with minimal hierarchy, endowing members with the empowerment they lack and crave in contemporary society. This is a sort of 'enclave', a term devised by anthropologist Mary Douglas, which ensures equality of status among members without hampering decision-making.³

Moreover, the Islamists have a knack for tailoring the message to changing circumstances. In the last 15 years or so, the message has been that the failure of the all-providing state in the lands of Islam is due to its moral dissoluteness and secularism. This message appeals to a deeply ingrained cultural tradition connecting private anxieties to public woes. The message falls on ready ears, because the failure of states in Muslim countries is clear. This state failure to provide has been exacerbated by the decline in oil and gas prices, which has impoverished some oil-rich states and also caused the drying up both of Gulf state aid to poor Islamic countries and employment for expatriate 'guest workers' from those countries. For some states, these woes were worsened by the demise of the USSR and the resultant loss of assured East European markets.

The revenue crisis helped the Islamists almost everywhere. Governments responded to the crisis by breaking the unwritten covenant of the 1950s and 1960s, in which subjects relinquished their claims to basic human and civil rights in return for the state providing them with education, health care, employment and subsidies for such necessities as staple foodstuffs, cooking gas and transportation. The poor and the young are suffering the most from these retrenchments. The 'retreating state' creates disgruntled citizens by the legion: university students no longer assured of government jobs; workers barely able to eke out a living, let alone save for a dowry and start a family; masses of rural immigrants who lack such basics as shelter. Radical Islam provides a plausible moral explanation for their predicament. It also furnishes, through the *jama'at*, some of the services curtailed by the state, such as pre-school education and free-of-charge medical clinics.

The inroads made by radical Islamists are not restricted to the lower urban classes. *Jama'at* have sprung up among professional classes, whose higher income and sophistication enable them to act independently. After trying to shape decision-making within their respective professions, such professionals then stake out positions on wider public affairs. Lawyers' associations tend to take a stand in favour of application of the *sharia* – a major plank of the Islamist platform. They also back court cases presented by militants against so-called heretics such as Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who was condemned for apostasy and ordered to divorce his wife (he has since gone into exile in the Netherlands).

There is a measure of collaboration across borders, thanks not just to the munificence of Saudi princes, but also to religious luminaries, who act as higher legal and moral authorities in other countries. For example, Egyptian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qardawi, who lives in Qatar, serves as supreme mufti for the Palestinian Hamas. Sheikh Ibn Qatada, a Palestinian–Jordanian living in London, is mufti to the Algerian GIA.

Perhaps more important is the osmosis of radical Islamic ideas into the conservative Islamic establishment. Despite the efforts of a few moderate clerics (such as the current rector of al-Azhar University in Cairo, Sheikh Tantawi), the tilt to the right is unmistakable. In the case of al-Azhar, this is due to the action of the Ulama Front group, headed by the firebrand Isma'il al-Habalush, a popular preacher. Habalush and his Front have opposed any liberal amendment of the divorce law, and demanded that a female al-Azhar researcher, Dr Amina al-Nasir, be fired for casting doubt upon the authenticity of a famous *hadith* (oral tradition) proclaiming the innate inferiority of women. They clamoured for the banning of *A Thousand and One Nights*, defined as a lewd book, and for the removal from theatres of the film on the Prophet Muhammad made by the famous filmmaker, Yusuf Shahin. In these and other cases, al-Azhar, which has been empowered by the Egyptian government to wield censorship on matters religious and moral, followed suite, with the Chief Mufti (the rector's second in command) giving full support to radicals. Conservative members of the judiciary take their cues from al-Azhar and tend to interpret moot points of the law by referring to the *sharia*, in a distinctly anti-modernist interpretation.

The same drift towards radical Islamic positions is evident in Algeria, thanks to presence there in the 1980s and early 1990s, as state-appointed head of the establishment, of a major Egyptian radical thinker, Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali. The Kuwaiti and Jordanian religious establishments have moved in the same direction. As the institutional *ulama* control religious education in the state system, these men of religion are able to promote openly a sort of indoctrination hostile to pluralism in religious affairs: one-size-fits-all

solutions, infused with dogmatic hostility towards modern culture as well as against the West, which is seen to include Japan and Russia.⁴

Political parties that used to be conservative on religious matters, such as the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in Egypt, changed course. During the public debate on the Nasir Hamid Abu Zayd affair in 1994–96, the party's religious weekly, *Liwa Al-Islam*, did not publish a single article, editorial or op-ed in support of the scholar. The same holds true for *Aqidati*, the religious organ of the so-called al-Ahrar (Liberal) Party. The radicals' hope is that this gradual infiltration into the elites will ultimately have further political implications. Perhaps, one day, even the army top brass might be won over to the radical cause.

Politics: against long odds

The Turks might need some convincing that political Islam is on the wane, after the landslide victory of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the November 2002 elections. It remains to be seen, of course, how free a rein the AKP government will be allowed by the army, the self-appointed guardian of secularity, and for how long. It also remains to be seen whether the moderate tone – introduced over the last three or four years in the AKP plank by its present leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a former anti-democratic firebrand – is more than cosmetic. Most seasoned Turkish observers are sceptical.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood are banned as a political organisation. Were it otherwise, by the estimate of the Al-Ahram Institute for Strategic Studies, the Muslim Brotherhood could win one quarter of the vote. (Currently the Muslim Brotherhood has just 17 deputies, all of whom ran as 'independents', out of 454 in the People's Assembly). The Wasat (centre) Party, founded by younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood and former Jama'a Islamiyya militants who had abjured violence, was likewise refused registration as political party. After a long court battle, it was registered as a 'cultural association', which meant that the regime would tolerate it, much like the Muslim Brotherhood, in a sort of a semi-legal limbo.

None of these three groups offers a persuasive democratic credo. All three have more than dabbled in violence: the AKP in the late 1960s to early 1970s; the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s; and some Wasat members in the 1980s and 1990s. All of them have come around to a de facto acceptance of the rules of the democratic (or rather semi-democratic) game after crashing against the iron wall of the regime and its mainstay, the army and security services. They have, presumably, cut off all relations with the extremist, violent fringes of radical Islam, but their differences are in method, not in platform. Chastised by repression, long imprisonment

and the execution of comrades and torture, they seem to bank on the ballot as the way to power. Still, the ruling regimes are adamant that this is merely a *pro forma* conversion. They point out the denunciation of democracy by Islamist leaders and preachers as a 'poisonous Western import'. They cite Muslim Brotherhood hostility towards the Copts, whom it wants reduced to their age-old status as second-class citizens, or the Muslim Brotherhood position (shared by the AKP, Wasat and the Tunisian Nahda movement) that no right of free speech should be extended to atheists or agnostics. The Nahda has in fact been driven underground under the stringent rule of president Zayn al-Abidin Ali. And the same is true, with a vengeance, for similar movements in Syria and Iraq.

Translating socio-cultural vigour into political presence, let alone influence, is not easy. This represents a real conundrum for radical Islam, given the importance of the state as a major agent of secularisation. The radicals have learnt, from their own bitter experience, the futility of the armed struggle, yet the electoral road into the political process remains blocked. Infiltrating the top bureaucracy and the courts may provide a side entrance, but regimes are vigilant, especially with regard to the army, where periodical purges of 'religious minded' officers are a matter of routine.

Not all regimes practise exclusionary policy towards the radicals. Pakistan, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain and even Algeria follow a line of partial inclusion: granting some, though not all, Islamist groupings legal status and the right to run in elections. However, the regime sees to it that their parliamentary presence is minimised through single-member constituencies with preference given to rural and more docile candidates, as well by gerrymandering, ballot rigging and other such methods. Nevertheless, in September 2002, Pakistan's United Action Front Islamist parties had significant electoral success, garnering a parliamentary contingent trailing just behind the two major parties. Similar success was attained in October 2002 by the Moroccan Justice and Development Party and by the Islamists in Bahrain, both having been allowed to run on a platform calling for application of *sharia* law. This right was not extended, however, to the veteran Moroccan party Al-Adl wa-l-Ihsan (Justice and Charity), whose charismatic leader, Sheikh Abd al-Rahman Yasin, was in jail for years and is currently under house arrest. The Islamic Front in Jordan, the Jama'a Islamiyya (Sunni) and Hizbollah (Shi'ite) in Lebanon, and the Islah (reform) Party in Yemen have been running in elections for years. So has Algeria's Movement for Social Peace. (However, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which won a plurality in the first round of elections in December 1991, prior to the army takeover, remains outlawed.)

Election tampering and limited parliamentary presence are not the only political obstacles faced by Islamist groups. The regimes' policies of semi-

inclusion also mean that when these groups enter government, they are usually assigned minor ministries, or their minister is not allowed any budgetary discretion (as was the case in Jordan when the Islamist party was given the Ministry of Education). There is little wonder that Islamists tend to leave office after a while, or stay merely for the sake of the (rather limited) patronage it allows. They have no real results to show for their effort, at least not in what matters most: blocking slippage down the slope of de facto laicisation. Promises to make legislation conform to the *shari'a* are buried in committee. Participation in government tends to discredit Islamist parties in the eyes of their electorate either as a sell-out or as

*The
conservative–
liberal centre
embraces
authoritarian
regimes for
fear of the
alternatives*

ineffectual, and they lose votes in the following elections – as happened in Jordan in 1993 and Yemen in 1997. The radicals may find solace in government concessions to their cause in education and media, concessions which may slow down the erosion of Islamic values and mores. Yet whether this is attributable to parliamentary activism is doubtful. Islamist parties may also find comfort in the fact that left-wingers are likewise repressed or at least similarly harassed. It is, however, cold comfort indeed to have political life stifled all around. The only (less than meagre) consolation the radicals do enjoy is that they have maintained a hegemonic position among the submerged opposition forces, even where the Left is well organised and active, as in Algeria, Morocco and Lebanon. This is not exactly the 'failure of political Islam' as pronounced by analysts. Hegemonic they

might be, but their supposed conversion from *jihad* to *da'wa* is doubted not just by security services, but by the bulk of the secularists and the pragmatic new middle class.

This state of affairs was illustrated during a conference held in Cairo on 8 September 2002, entitled 'The Future of the Islamist Movement in the Aftermath of September 11'. The star of the gathering was the organiser, Muntasir al-Zayat, barrister for many Islamists brought to trial, and close to the fledgling Wasat Party. Zayat argued forcefully that the conversion of the Jama'a Islamiyya from violence to peaceful means (partly through its role in the Wasat) is wholeheartedly sincere and that the organisation wishes to become a pragmatic socio-political movement. Respect for the law of the country they live in is incumbent upon Muslims everywhere, he said, whether in Egypt or in the West. Violence or hatred against Copts must be eschewed. While members of the pro-Muslim Brotherhood Labour party supported from the podium his claim that that warfare against the

Mubarak was over, sceptical voices were heard from the floor, mostly from liberal intellectuals. The most powerful challenge came from Nasserist human-rights lawyer Negad al-Bora'i, who cast doubt upon the speakers' renunciation of violence and respect for freedom of expression. 'Where do you stand on democracy and specifically on peaceful transmission of power?' he asked. 'Where do you stand on freedom of belief, particularly the right to change one's religion?'⁵ 'These are crucial questions that must be answered with honesty and integrity', al-Bora'i said.⁶ All he received from the Islamist speakers were evasive answers.

The dilemma of the middle class

If the radicals are thus caught between a rock and a hard place, so is the modern middle class which favours broader human and civil rights and the evolution of a participatory polity. Fearful of radical Islam – all the more so given the experience of Islam in power in Iran, Afghanistan and Sudan – the middle classes have had to acquiesce to the dashing of all hopes for democratisation. Even new, younger rulers such as the kings of Jordan and Morocco have made only paltry progress towards democratisation, lest they play into the hands of the radicals, who would benefit from freer debate in the public sphere, greater accountability of the rulers and fair electoral process. The harsher regimentation of political life, which was the response of most regimes to the Islamic threat in the 1990s, has not been alleviated after the defeat of domestic terrorism. The middle class dares not protest too much, viewing this regimentation as a precautionary measure and the lesser evil. 'Hubzism' (from *hubz*, bread) is the term coined in Tunisia for the tacit bargain struck between the middle class and the new president, who seized power in late 1987, a time of mounting Islamist turmoil. The bourgeoisie agreed to harsh repression, which entails heavy-handed restrictions on human and civil rights, not only of Islamists, but also of human-rights activists and other liberals, in return for physical security and political stability. The *hubz* in question goes beyond sheer necessities and includes owning a flat and car. Eighty percent of the new bourgeois possess both. Much like the spectre of Marxism in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, radical Islam has the effect of making the soft conservative–liberal centre embrace authoritarian regimes for fear of the alternative.

Even in countries where partial inclusion is the rule, there is no Latin American-style Democracia Pactada with a road map and time table for the transition to democracy. No final target, no stages; all depends upon the goodwill of the powers-that-be. And indeed, in some places, such as Jordan, there has recently been some retreat from the relaxation of political participation. In Morocco, where recent elections were singularly clean, one could nevertheless note a slowing in the pace of reform.

It is an open question whether this blocking of the political channels might not sooner or later push a young cohort of militants to opt once again for violence. The shake-up of a regime under an international crisis (such as a war in Iraq), an economic crisis (due perhaps to another oil slump), or a succession crisis and bloody squabbles among the rulers – all are likely to goad the young towards the same violent option that attracted them in 1964–65, after years of ferocious repression under Nasser; in 1974–77 (in Egypt); in 1981–82 (in Egypt and Syria); in 1987–92 (in Tunisia, Iraq, Algeria and Egypt); and in 1995–97 (in Egypt and Algeria). Another wave of armed revolt cannot be excluded. The security services certainly do not exclude it: watching closely even semi-legal groups of the Muslim Brotherhood type, harassing and making so-called pre-emptive arrests in their ranks.

Is there a liberal Islamic alternative ?

The clash within Islam – and this is the clash that counts, not the alleged clash of civilisations – is between radical Islam and the powers-that-be. Conservative Islam – for example, Friday and Ramadan preachers on state-sponsored TV stations – supports the governing regime on political matters and radical Islamists on social and cultural matters. Yet what of the liberal Islamic alternative, an ‘Enlightened Islam’ (*al-Islam al-mustanir*)?

Both the radical and the liberal trends are offshoots of the Salafiyya movement. Born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it called for a substantial reform of Islam to end its cultural stagnation and decline, which was seen as the root cause for Islam’s lagging behind European civilisation. Reform was to centre around the return to the Salaf al-Salih (the virtuous ancestors). In the glorious early age of Islam, the religion is said to have been flexible, capable of progress and development by relying on rational adaptation to changing circumstances while preserving its essence. It lost this ability somewhere late in the third century of its existence. The aim of the Salafis was to help win back this ability.

As Islam is an orthopraxis (that is, behaviour is given precedence over belief) rather than an orthodoxy, the way to regain Islam’s original flexibility, according to the Salafis, was to revitalise law and education rather than theology. The major tool was to be the *ijtihad*, the authority jurists had to amend, even change, the *sharia* by applying personal legal reasoning in evaluating the urgent needs of the Islamic community. Innovation in such matters should not be considered nefarious, as most traditionalist *ulama* held, but beneficial. Ideas to be absorbed into innovation could be indigenous or European, for Islam had taken on great ideas in the Middle Ages (such as Greek philosophy). As far as possible, said the Salafis of the early twentieth century, such borrowing should be made in accordance with the norms of the Salaf al-Salih, as expressed in the

rich, pluralistic legal and *hadith* literature. This would assure a measure of control and preserve Islamic identity while at the same time encouraging progress.

This intellectual movement had quite an influence upon the young educated generation, especially in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, and kept its unity till the eve of the First World War. It is typical that in 1913 the new leader of the Salafiyya, the Syrian Rashid Rida, then living in Egypt, wrote a rave review of a translation made by Ahmad Fathi Zaghoul, brother of the Egyptian nationalist leader Sa'ad Zaghoul, of a book entitled *The Roots of Anglo-Saxon Superiority*. One should learn from the pace-setting civilisation of our era, wrote Rida, and borrow as many of its ideas as possible that are congruent with our identity. The fight against British occupation of Egypt, which he lauded, should not extend to culture. According to Rida, Egyptians had much to learn from the British while flatly rejecting their political rule and claims about the 'White Man's Burden'.

The war years and their immediate aftermath made Rida and many other Salafi militants revise such ideas. The Ottoman Empire, a bulwark of Islamic identity, suffered a crashing defeat, lost most of its territory and was soon to be abrogated by the secular moderniser Kemal Ataturk. Larger chunks of Dar al-Islam (the Islamic world), notably the Fertile Crescent (from whence came Rashid Rida) fell under European domination. Egypt was no more the exception in the Middle East but the rule. Europe showed what Rida and his ilk came to see as its real face – arrogant, domineering and expansionist. For the radical Salafis, it was no longer possible to preserve the distinction between Europe's cultural and political facets, all the more so as the Great War seemed to unveil underlying irrational and destructive streaks in European culture. Could it be that Europe itself was in decline and didn't have much to offer? This doubt was sustained by recently translated writings such as Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Spenglerian prophets of doom and gloom, such as Alexis Carrel, Stuart Chamberlain and later, Arnold Toynbee, became best-selling authors in the Arab Middle East during the interwar years.

Yet the major doubt preoccupying the *Al-Manar* trend, named after the weekly newspaper edited by Rida, was internal: are we still Muslims, the radical Salafis came to ask. Could it be that, enfeebled by centuries of decline, Muslims had already surrendered to the temptations of a European civilisation? In line with the liberal Salafis who preserved their hope that Islam and modernity were reconcilable, Rida answered in the affirmative, that most Muslims were no more than 'geographical [nominal] Muslims', following solely external rules of behaviour learnt by rote, devoid of belief and understanding of the rules' significance. They cut corners in ritual and, above all, did not apply the *sharia*, certainly not under foreign rule. In such

a state of affairs, the *ijtihad* was still needed, yet it should be more uniform for all Islamic lands, far more controlled. The weak identity of present day Islam was incapable of assimilating too many innovations, and definitely not pluralistic ones. These are the core ideas of radical Islam, striving to build up mental and behavioural siege-walls to defend a beleaguered faith.

The Salafiyya was thus split between radicals and liberals. While the radicals grew in strength, thanks to the Muslim Brotherhood (founded in 1928), the liberals, who claimed allegiance to the Salafi founders, moved

*Liberal Islam
was badly
bludgeoned
by the
militaristic
regimes that
came to
power in
the 1950s*

further to the left, embracing world culture and progress. Some of them, like Egyptian thinker Taha Hussein, now put early Islam under scrutiny, according to norms learnt from the Western Orientalist scholars, whom Rida saw as enemies of the Faith, burrowing into and sabotaging Islam in the service of missionaries and imperialists. Others, like Ali Abd al-Raziq, an Al-Azhar scholar, raised the question of whether it would be better for Islam to be separate from the state. The Prophet Muhammad, after all, was a spiritual rather than temporal leader, and many of the corrupt despotic caliphs were the ones to blame for the Islamic decline. Others still, like the great jurist al-Sanhuri, less polemical and more constructive, worked assiduously to amend major Egyptian laws in a liberal fashion by creative use of modes of reasoning and devices unearthed in the vast literature produced over the ages by Muslim jurisprudence. New policies, such as equality of women before the law and equal status for

minorities, were bandied about. Despite its elitist character and lack of a broad social base (which the Muslim Brotherhood had succeeded in building for the radicals), the liberals wielded a certain influence over intellectual life and over cultural mediators such as high school teachers and journalists.

Like other vital forces of Middle Eastern civil societies, liberal Islam was badly bludgeoned by the militaristic, populist regimes that came to power in the 1950s. These regimes espoused belligerent nationalism, were ferocious in preserving indigenous heritage and were deeply suspicious of any ideas originating in those Western empires it had dislodged. They stood for unity, uniformity and one-man, one-party rule, and sought to manipulate religion to win the populace to their cause. When civil society returned to life in the 1970s, in the context of the 'retreating state' and initiatives by the radical Muslim *jama'at* coming out of the underground, the liberals were slow to emerge. This is to be partly explained by the

importance in Arab intellectual and political life of Marxism, which attracted those of the budding intelligentsia who were open to the outside world.

It was in the 1980s, when the decline of Marxism and the populist ideologies of the Nasserist and Ba'athist type became evident – and with some states embracing, at least in theory, the market economy, democracy and pluralism – that a generational mix of liberal Muslim thinkers and polemicists started to come to the fore. This process accelerated in the following decade. Liberal Egyptians worthy of particular mention are: the jurist Muhammad Sa'id; the High Court judge Ashmawi; Husayn Ahmad Amin, a senior diplomat and Islamic scholar (the son of Ahmad Amin, a prominent liberal thinker of the interwar era); Hasan Hanafi, a French-trained philosopher; and Faraj Foda, an agricultural engineer and self-taught Islamic scholar. Another engineer and autodidact, the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur, produced a best-selling study of the Koran and its relevance today. Two brilliant al-Azhar graduates, the Egyptians Muhammad Sayyid al-Qimni and Khalil Abd al-Karim, combined scholarly credentials and polemical ability to great effect in both their journalistic and scholarly articles. The Lebanese Ridwan al-Sayyid, a graduate of al-Azhar and Tubingen University, straddled both worlds of discourse, as did the Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari of Qatar. North Africans soon joined the fray, combining Islamic and French educational backgrounds, among them the Moroccan Abdou Filai-Ansari; and the Tunisians Muhammad Talbi; Muhammad Charfi; and Abd al-Majid Charfi. One could add to the list the now-exiled scholar, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.

These fourteen intellectuals do not offer a uniform message. Nevertheless, they all share the overriding aim of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, the Salafi founding fathers: an in-depth reform of Islam, to shake this culture out of its torpor and bring it into the modern world. But such a reform, say these intellectuals, would also counteract the deleterious effects of radical Islam. To achieve this dual aim, three preconditions must be met.

First, Islamic heritage should be contextualised, that is, explained and interpreted in terms of the times and places in which it was produced. Following in the footsteps of Taha Hussein and Ahmad Amin, these intellectuals undertook broad and systematic studies of the evolution of law, political and social history, *hadith* and philosophy. These studies produced rich evidence that Islam has been constantly evolving in response to changing circumstances, and that it has encompassed a myriad of variations according to time and place, while maintaining allegiance to a core prophetic message (itself not devoid of stages of internal development and even contradictions). Liberals are convinced that findings to date

amply justify a recourse to free, flexible *ijtihad*, seeking pluralistic solutions – not uniform ones, as desired by the radicals – for the variety of situations obtaining in the Islamic world today. Such a broad minded, open-ended *ijtihad* should rely, as far as possible, upon Islam's rich heritage of solutions and devices. Making use of this heritage will serve to ensure that cultural identity is not lost during the process of reform and revitalisation – as both radicals and traditionalists fear. Every generation has the right and duty to make Islam evolve, as was the case in the early days of the Salaf, from the seventh to the ninth century.

Second, Islam should join world civilisation, interact with it and borrow whatever it needs, subject to the cultural filters mentioned above. There is no unbridgeable chasm separating Islam from the more modernised countries, which include not only the West and Russia, but also Japan, South Korea and Malaysia – the latter three being particularly edifying examples of non-European countries achieving modernisation without loss of cultural identity. The radical bogeyman of a worldwide or Western conspiracy to culturally invade Islamic space simply does not exist. By all means, foreign political and economic domination should be opposed – but not foreign cultures. In a world of osmotic media borders, a degree of cultural globalisation is a given. The challenge is how to make globalisation work in favour of an Islamic variation of modernity. What is needed is not slavish imitation of the West, but rather, a selective appropriation of its cultural fare: integration not assimilation; joining the world, to which Muslims have a lot to offer, without being swallowed by it.

Third, Islam has very little to offer in the realm of politics, despite the political obsession of radicals. The state of Muhammad was prophetic, hence unique; not a model for future emulation. After Muhammad's death, political history was shaped by circumstances created by, among other factors, the conquests, the interplay of personal ambitions, the ethnic composition of the armies and economic development (notably, the transition from nomad to urban polity). Islamic thinkers had very little to offer by way of political doctrine. Islamic law had little to say on constitutional matters. Political practice was mostly authoritarian if not despotic. An Islamic state is a mirage, a figment of the radicals' imagination. So is their slogan 'application of the *sharia*'; for not only is the *sharia* not uniform, it also has little to say on economics, certainly not in their present sophisticated version. Its real strength is in matters of ritual and personal status, which do require renovation (for example, on the status of women, which evolved even under the Prophet). The real focus of political reform should be democracy, human and civil rights, tolerance, transparency and accountability in government. This is not to say that there is a specific Islamic precedent. The liberals doubt whether the *shura* (election of the caliph by the notables) can really be

deemed a historical justification, let alone a model, for democracy, as radicals and traditionalists claim. This is an area where transcending Islamic heritage is called for. Free debate and popular sovereignty are the *sine qua non* for the revitalisation of society and culture. If Islamic heritage has anything to offer in this respect, it is the form of a history lesson: Islamic decline has always been closely associated with the rise of despotism. Moreover, democracy is congruent with the Islamic value of human dignity.

Liberal Islam has come a long way towards developing a coherent and relevant doctrine. So why are its thinkers so downcast? 'We're nothing but a bunch of dissidents writing on water', said Husayn Ahmad Amin.⁷ And Abd al-Majid Charfi concurred, in another such interview: 'We are always beleaguered; able sometimes to conduct a debate in the public sphere in Paris, but not in Tunis'. Sympathisers of the liberal cause are similarly disenchanted, as one can judge from articles in the Cairo book review monthly *Wujuhah Nazar*.⁸

Beleaguered they are, above all, by their arch-rivals, the radicals. Faraj Foda was assassinated in 1992 by the Jama'a Islamiyya. Soon after, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Najib Mahfuz, a strong supporter of the liberals, was stabbed and seriously wounded by a Jama'a militant. Ashmawi was subject to death threats from the Jihad group and had to be barricaded in his flat for months under a government security detail. When, in 1989, Qimni published his trail-blazing book *Al-Hizb Al-Hashemi*, where he ventured into a hitherto taboo area, the life of the Prophet (he interpreted the Prophet's struggle with Mecca in terms of power politics), a leading Islamist spokesman dubbed him 'the Arab Salman Rushdie'.⁹ His later books, and those of his associate Khalil Abd al-Karim, who died recently, incurred radical ire for employing their vast erudition in a liberal reading of Islamic heritage.¹⁰ The Azharite Ulama Front strived to have them banned (and failed on a technicality), as it likewise later called for firing female scholar Amina al-Nasir, their acolyte, from her university job. The radical sheikh Yusuf al-Badri lodged the complaint against Abu Zayd and thus launched the proceedings which led ultimately to his going into exile.

Nor do the liberals enjoy official support, unless they are under a clear and present terrorist threat – and even then, not always efficiently. After all, it was two court judgements that condemned Abu Zayd for apostasy. Semi-official censorship has driven Tunisian liberals to publish their books in Casablanca and Paris. Human-rights activists such as Charfi in particular suffered from state oppression. And when the Abu Zayd and later, the Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim affairs broke out, it was the religious weekly of the Egyptian

*Democracy is
congruent
with the
Islamic value
of human
dignity*

ruling party which wholly supported their conviction. The pressure had a notable muzzling effect, with the exception of Ashmawi, on whom this pressure had the opposite effect, pushing him from a prudent style, as befits a judge, towards assertive polemics.¹¹ Most liberals tended to buckle under duress. Hanafi explained to the present writer that Abu Zayd brought the calamity upon himself out of sheer obstinacy. He, Hanafi, had advised him not to include his controversial publications on the Koran and Islamic myths in the list presented for his university promotion. Abu Zayd refused. The radical sheikh Yusuf Badri got wind of the affair, lodged his complaint, and the rest is history. Hanafi in fact developed in his writings a cautious, circumlocutory style, designed to not challenge the radicals, but this comes at a price: obfuscating the liberal message. The same is true of Ridwan al-Sayyid, master of an abstract, somewhat pedantic style, who never debates directly with the radicals (in his case, the Sunni Jama'a Islamiyya and the Shi'ite Hizbollah), let alone offends them.

Many liberal writers outside Islamic lands, who are not subject to such pressures, similarly dilute their message. A case in point is Islamic scholar and liberal thinker Mohammad Arkoun, an Algerian living in France who has perfected an abstruse and rather pompous prose, sidestepping any polemic against the radicals. He claims he had to operate in such a manner out of fear for the safety of his relatives in Algiers. And indeed very few of the liberals anywhere rallied to support Abu Zayd during his ordeal. In a telling episode in 1996, Qimni appeared on a TV discussion programme (on an Arabic international commercial satellite channel – government TV does not air such contentious material) with fellow liberal Kamal Abu Majd. To Qimni's surprise, Abu Majd justified the condemnation of Abu Zayd on the narrow technical grounds that he was guilty in terms of the *hisba* (control of public morality), under which the affair was tried. However, he dissociated himself from the views of the radical sheikhs that Abu Zayd was guilty of apostasy.¹² No wonder few liberals were active in the defence of Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim, the human-rights activist condemned to seven years in jail for working for fairer elections and for publishing unflattering reports about discrimination against Copts.¹³

Another, perhaps more important self-inflicted wound suffered by liberal Islam is its elitism and lack of organisational skills – the latter being an area in which the radicals excel. Very few liberal spokesmen have the communication abilities to propagate their message effectively. This weakness is especially evident in audio-visual narrowcasting. Of the four hundred or so known 'tape-cassette preachers', none are liberal. The majority are radical, a minority traditionalist. While Amin and Qimni have stellar journalistic and literary qualities, being in demand as columnists for publications such as *Ruz Al-Yusuf*, *Sutur* and *Al-Qahira*, others are mediocre

writers or scholars who publish mostly in learned journals. Rarely does one find a liberal scholar on TV. Few TV historical series are inspired by liberal ideas; a major exception was one on the life of Qasim Amin, an early proponent of women's rights, which was shown in Egypt during Ramadan 2002. Moreover, none of the liberals, at the higher or middle ranks, has organisational abilities and thus their grassroots presence is very thin. No wonder the liberals' mood is bleak. Their chances of becoming a significant opposition force are not promising. The radicals win not just by dint of skill and effort, but *faute de combattants*.

The exception and the rule

The situation is different in one Islamic country: Indonesia. In the June 1999 elections, the first democratic contest held since the fall of Suharto, Islamist parties calling for application of the *sharia* won 16%. They were overtaken, however, by the so-called 'pluralist Muslim' parties, which won 22%. These pluralist parties proclaim allegiance to the state's ideology, or civil religion, of Pancasila. Although they use Islamic symbols, they accept a de facto separation of state and religion. (President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle [PDI-P], a secular-nationalist grouping, won a plurality of 34%).

In Indonesia, Islamic radicals do not hold sway. In August 2002, the upper house of parliament rejected by a large majority the Islamist radicals' proposal to amend the constitution and implement the *sharia* for the 88% of Indonesians who are Muslims. The parliamentary majority was made up of PDI-P and pluralist Muslims and enjoyed the strong support of the two largest Muslim education-cum-welfare organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah.

During the early years of independence, there was debate between Islamists and the *kebangsaan* (national-secularist) movements about the adoption of the *sharia*. The *kebangsaan* won and the state adopted an ideology dedicated to 'unity in diversity' and religious pluralism. This was seen as the sole means of holding together a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. Pancasila respects all five religions of Indonesia, giving none preferential treatment. Suharto worked hard to inculcate this ideology, to fight the Marxist left as well as extremist Muslims. In the mid-1980s, all mass civil society groupings were required to recognise Pancasila as the 'sole foundation' of the Indonesian state. Islamist movements did survive, but mostly as a semi-underground.

While the left was physically eliminated, antagonism between the regime and the Islamists endured. It was in this context that a cultural-political trend arose during the 1970s that offered an Islam-oriented alternative. It was moulded by a new generation of intellectuals calling

themselves Neo-Modernist, in reference to the thinking of Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani liberal who tried and failed to shape the legislative policy of the ruler, Ayyub Khan, and was forced into exile in the US. (The foremost thinker of this group, Nurcholish Madjid, wrote his dissertation at the University of Chicago under Rahman).

The prime concerns of the neo-modernists were the demands of modernity and the particularities of Indonesia. To that end, they argued for what they dubbed 'contextualised *ijtihad*', meaning legal reasoning sensitive to the time and place in which the religious texts they treat were created. Moreover, they claim that the very nature of Islam opposes the intermingling of divine values with the profane domain of politics. Islam does not need to regulate every aspect of life; its role is to provide moral guidelines. No particular type of regime is required by Islam; hence, Islamisation should be a cultural process within civil society. Consequently, the student groups gravitating around these young intellectuals accepted without reservation the Pancasila ideology and its political implications, especially with regard to the non-sectarian and harmonious relations between the various faiths, in the interests of national unity. What began as an elite phenomenon soon gained wide following among the educated young and greatly influenced the moderate Islamic parties which gained ground after the fall of Suharto, culminating in their electoral success in 1999.

This achievement is due, in part, to the personality of its intellectuals: N. Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, Harun Nasution, Munwir Syazali and Ahmad Wahib. The movement's ideas also fitted the nation-state ideals unique to Indonesia among Muslim countries: its traditions of pluralism, tolerance and social harmony. The movement's commitment to democracy and human rights during the Suharto years served it well after his fall in 1998. Yet no less significant, since the late 1980s, was the role neo-modernism played in revitalising civil society through its development of education and welfare NGOs, often taking up tasks the regime was unable to undertake successfully. Abdurrahman Wahid, leader of the religious mass organisation Nahdlatul Ulama and later, the first democratically elected president, was part of the neo-modernist trend and played a role in creating the new NGOs. These NGOs, together with the Muhammadiyah, the other major mainstream religious movement, played a crucial role in the agitation that led to Suharto's fall.

Last but not least, one must note the particular pluralism of Indonesian Islam. Two-thirds of Muslims are *abangan*, or syncretic, while only a third are *santri*, devout (Sunni) orthodox. The latter tend not to question the Islamic credentials of the former, so as to keep social peace. Application of the *sharia* endangers this delicate balance. Most of the syncretic Muslims

usually vote for Megawati. In recent years, though, the Islamic cultural resurgence embodied by Nahdlatul Ulama and other groups has converted many syncretics into *santri*. The new converts tend to be attracted by the neo-modernist version of the orthodoxy.

Indonesian circumstances are unique; the success of liberal Islam in this country is, quite simply, exceptional. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, the particular conditions of Indonesia do not exist. The regimes have a unitary-populist, if not plainly tyrannical outlook; the religious tradition is not pluralistic; and liberals lack communicating and organising skills. The liberal message in the Middle East and North Africa is as learned and sophisticated as that in Indonesia, yet it is a voice calling in the desert. The clash within Islam thus pits the radicals against the powers-that-be. And this, sadly, is the only struggle that counts.

Notes

- ¹ O. Roy, *L'islam mondialisé* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); G. Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail Of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- ² See the article by a major radical Muslim thinker, Munir Shafiq in *Al-Hayat* (London), 20 October 2002, and the secret correspondence between Ayman al-Zawahiri and Jihad activists in Egypt, published in *Al-Wasat* (London), 10 June, 2002. See also Zawahiri's memoirs published in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* (London), 2–9 December 2001.
- ³ See author's chapter 'The Culture of the Enclave', in M. M. Marty and R.S. Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1995).
- ⁴ See, for instance, on Algeria the study by D. Djerbal, 'Systeme educatif et société civile ... dans l'Algérie des années 1980–1990', paper presented to the workshop of Turk Siyasi Ilimler Dernegi, Istanbul, May 1997.
- ⁵ Conversion from Islam to another religion is punishable by death according to the *sharia*.
- ⁶ *Cairo Times*, 12–18 September 2002.
- ⁷ Interview with author.
- ⁸ Article by Muhammad Hilmi Mahumud in *Wujuhat Nazar*, April 2002.
One should note that Foda wasn't the only liberal Islamic martyr. Muhammad Taha, who called for a return to the non-political Islam of Muhammad in Mecca (prior to the *Hijra*) was executed by Numeiri in Sudan in 1985.
- ⁹ F. Huwaydi in *Al-Ahram*, 23 March 1989.
- ¹⁰ Qimni, *Hurub Dawlat Al-Rasu* (Cairo: Dar Sina, 1993); *Abd Al-Karim, Dawlat Yathrib* (Cairo: Dar Sina, 1999); *Al-Judhur Al-Ta'rikhiyya Lil-Shari'a Al-Islamiyya* (Cairo: Dar Sina, 1990).
- ¹¹ See his articles in *Ruz Al-Yusuf*, 5 January, 1 June, 8 June 2002, and his book *Hijab al-Mar'ah* (Cairo: Ruz al-Yusuf, 2002).
- ¹² Full transcript of the debate in his book *Al-Su'al Al-Akhir* (Cairo: Ruz al-Yusuf, 1998), p. 109.
- ¹³ See the list of signatories in favour of Ibrahim in *Al-Usubu* (Cairo), 7 October 2002.