



RELIGION

American Muslims: Reformers v. Revivalists

Dissenting groups who want a more Jeffersonian Islam are emerging, but their numbers are small.

by Neil Munro

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The Islamic Society of North America and its affiliated groups, which have a fundamentalist and revivalist bent, are the dominant force among American Muslims. Dissenting groups of modernizers who want a more Jeffersonian Islam are emerging, but their numbers are small.

They are small, nascent, poorly funded, and greatly overshadowed by bigger, richer Islamic groups, but several associations of Muslims in the United States are trying hard to Westernize Islam in America. They want Islam in the United States to be more modern, tolerant, and liberal; they believe in the equality of women and in human rights. But their progress is constrained by traditional Islamic theology, and their influence is curbed by competition from better-funded and more media-savvy Islamist revival groups.

"I'm proud of my faith," said Zuhdi Jasser, Syrian-born president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, a group based in Phoenix. "We want to help rescue [American] Islam from the theocrats" by using reason to reinterpret Koranic scripture. He and his allies also want to distance the mosque from the state. "We're looking at a kind of Jeffersonian Islam" that incorporates the ideas of such classical liberal thinkers as John Locke, Jasser said.

The Koran permits and encourages reformist reinterpretation of ancient scripture, says Irshad Manji, a Canadian-born writer and the director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University who said she was asked to leave her childhood mosque in Canada after one too many arguments with the imam. The underappreciated Islamic doctrine of *ijtihad* -- which has an etymology similar to jihad, or "struggle" -- "absolutely encourages us to engage in debate, dissent, interpretation, and reinterpretation," she said, adding that young Muslims are already using it to reconcile Islamic texts with American freedoms.

On the other side of the spectrum is the Islamist network of revivalists. This is centered in the Islamic Society of North America and its associated groups, mosques, ethnic subgroups, university student associations, overseas supporters, and lobbying groups that have organized to expand the domestic political clout of immigrant Muslim groups, chiefly Arabs. It is similar to other ethnic groups in the United States that coalesced over time and organized to push their interests, albeit more religious ones.

Compared with this community, the reformers are small in number. Jasser's group has only 1,300 members, and its four employees are funded by philanthropists. "We struggle the same way all nonprofits struggle," said Jasser, a physician. Reformers say they are constricted by the traditional understanding of Islam among immigrants, most of whom come from countries that lack Western political traditions of free speech, gender equality, secular government, and personal autonomy.

Skeptics of Islam's ability to fit in Western culture say that the reformers' prospects of success are "about nil ... [because] their Islam is eccentric and invented and unlikely to catch on in a religious tradition that is so resistant to the idea of innovation that [it] is regarded as a heresy," said Robert Spencer, the widely read conservative editor of a blog called *Jihad Watch* and the author of many books critical of Islam, including *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*, published in 2006.

Other analysts are more optimistic. "Islam is whatever people think it is," said **C. Holland Taylor**, a former telecommunications executive who now helps the **LibForAll Foundation**, which supports moderate and progressives in Muslim-majority countries worldwide. In the past decade, Taylor has worked with liberal-minded Muslims -- including Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia's president from 1999 to 2001 -- to promote a tolerant form of Islam, often in the face of determined opposition from harder-line revivalist groups that are frequently funded by Arab states. The reform message can succeed among ordinary Muslims, Taylor said, because "people are longing to do this."

Numbers And Beliefs

Although surveys differ greatly, the available evidence suggests that about 2 million Muslims reside in the United States; two-thirds of them are immigrants. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey, done in association with Trinity College in Hartford, Conn., estimated a total of 1.3 million U.S. Muslims; a 2009 study by the Pew Research Center came up with an estimate of 2.5 million. Most American-born Muslims are African-Americans; many of them are members of the American Society of Muslims, which emerged from the Nation of Islam. Immigrant Muslims tend to gravitate to groups led by Arabs or by Pakistanis, Indians, or Indonesians. Jasser and other reformers estimate that one-third -- or 700,000 -- of Muslims in the United States are religiously observant.

An in-depth survey of Muslim Americans in 2007 by the Pew Research Center, separate from the 2009 estimate, found that 65 percent of Muslim Americans were foreign-born and 35 percent were native-born. Of the foreign-born, 24 percent came from Arab countries, 8 percent from Pakistan, 8 percent from Iran, and 10 percent from India or other South Asian nations other than Pakistan. African-Americans made up 20 percent of Muslim Americans. About 16 percent of respondents said they belong to the Shiite branch of Islam, the dominant sect in Iran; 50 percent said they were Sunnis, which is the majority sect of Islam; and the rest did not specify.

The 2007 Pew poll offered supporting evidence for both reformers and revivalists about how Islam might evolve in the U.S. Modernizers can take heart in these findings: 60 percent of Muslims said that there is more than one way to understand the Koran; 46 percent said that Muslims should adopt U.S. customs; 62 percent said that life is better for Muslim women in the United States than in other countries; and 49 percent said that mosques should not get involved in politics.

But revivalists can point to the 37 percent of poll respondents who said they are weekly attendees at mosque; the 40 percent who reported that they pray five times a day; the 50 percent who say that the

Koran is a word-for-word dictation from Allah; and the 33 percent who say that there is only one way to understand those divine words. Also, 8 percent of U.S. Muslims said that suicide bombing “to defend Islam” is “sometimes” or “often” justified. Still, that is half the level of support for suicide bombings found among Muslims in the United Kingdom and less than a third of the support from Muslims in Jordan.

Muslims in America tend to favor more government intervention in morality than other religious groups do. In the 2007 Pew poll, 59 percent of American Muslims said that government should do more to protect morality. In contrast, Pew’s 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, which questioned Americans of various religions, showed that just 40 percent of all respondents said that government should do more to protect morality, including 50 percent of white evangelicals and 43 percent of Catholics. On the issue of homosexuality, the 2007 Pew poll of Muslims showed that 61 percent agreed that society should discourage homosexuality. The survey of all Americans showed that 50 percent of respondents agreed that society should do more to discourage homosexuality, including 64 percent of white evangelicals and 30 percent of Catholics.

The New Reformers

The reform-minded Muslim groups are pursuing multiple approaches to win over American Muslims. The American Islamic Forum for Democracy has launched a media campaign to persuade Muslims that Koranic texts can be reconciled with personal liberty. The goal, Jasser said, is to help moderate Muslims counter the Islamists’ advocacy for sharia, or Islamic law, which would extend strict religious observance to all corners of life, including diet, criminal justice, government policy, and the relations between men and women.

Reform can succeed if advocates use “critical thinking and bring some [scriptural] support for what you are saying,” said Zainab al-Suwaij, the executive director of the Washington-based American Islamic Congress, a nonprofit civil-rights group founded after 9/11 to promote tolerance and the exchange of ideas among Muslims and non-Muslims. The group, which has 4,000 members, is allied with Jasser’s movement and portrays itself as “passionate about moderation.” The organization’s priorities include sexual equality, opposition to terrorism, and support for free speech. “There is no way that Muslims can move away from sharia [regarding] the way you pray, pay dues, [or] fast,” but there are texts that support the separation of Muslim jurisprudence from courts of law or government, al-Suwaij said.

Winning over Muslims to that view will be very difficult, she admits, because many American based imams, or prayer leaders, support the use of sharia in government, and because many Muslim immigrants lack a term to describe a purely religious, nonpolitical interpretation of sharia. Mainstream Islamic texts endorse the extension of sharia into government and mandate discrimination against women, said al-Suwaij, whose writings try to help Muslim women use Islamic texts to argue for sexual equality and the separation of mosque and state. The Islamic texts she cites come from the Koran; the Hadith, which are stories of Mohammad’s words and decisions; and near-contemporaneous biographies of the prophet.

Reformers need to go around the many Islamist imams, Jasser said, to show rank-and-file Muslims how their Islamic texts can accord equality to men and women, distance religious strictures from public lawmaking, disavow violence, and support personal freedom. Making that case is easier in the United States than in Muslim countries, he said, because “America does have within it an ideology and Constitution that protects religious freedom, that advocates reason and freedom without threatening the

personal orthodoxy of religion or the public display of religion.” Jasser says that 70 percent of U.S. Muslims welcome this reformist message.

Many young Muslims are eager to reinterpret their faith, Manji said, but are under intense social pressure from their extended families, friends, and imams to conform. Moreover, many Muslim immigrants have internalized Arab tribal notions of group shame, in which an individual’s rejection of traditional beliefs inflicts humiliation on the person’s entire network of family and friends, Manji said.

The Internet is helping Islamic reformers both in the U.S. and abroad reach a larger audience, she added. Internet users have downloaded 1.2 million Arab-language copies of Manji’s 2003 book, *The Trouble With Islam Today: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith*. Of course, Islamists who favor religious rule also use the Internet to push their message, she said, but “we *ijtihadis*, we reform-minded, can be at least as savvy.”

This high-tech personal outreach complements a new generation of global television preachers who are increasingly popular among younger and educated Muslims trying to reconcile Islamic teachings with their daily lives. These TV imams, such as Amr Khaled, an Egyptian, generally avoid highly political issues and offer a reformed Islam to global audiences influenced by Western notions of gender equality and personal freedom.

Can Islam Be Adaptable?

Jasser, Manji, and other U.S. reformers keep their distance from outspoken Muslim apostates such as former Dutch legislator Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who reject the religion outright and argue that Islam undermines freedom, democracy, and modernity. These public apostates play a limited role in the reform debate, Jasser says, in part because their blunt messages alienate most Muslims, but also because modernizers fear that any association with the defectors would invite attacks from Islamists. Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born writer, was given bodyguards by the Dutch government and then moved to the United States after her colleague, the filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, was shot to death and nearly decapitated by a radical Muslim in Amsterdam in 2004. Van Gogh and Ali had made a film, *Submission*, that is critical of radical Islam’s treatment of women.

The reformers can win, Taylor of the **LibForAll Foundation** says, because Islam has no figure comparable to the Roman Catholic pope to ultimately determine what is orthodox, and because Islamic texts are so ambiguous that ordinary Muslims can follow their preferred interpretation. Islam is not more “‘bound to the book’ than Christianity,” he said. But in the end, he acknowledged, reformers must have sufficient funds to push their message past the well-organized, very determined, and professionally led Islamist groups.

Spencer and others remain skeptical that reformers will succeed in changing Islam. The modernizers are asking their fellow Muslims to reject core features of the faith, Spencer said, including beliefs that Muhammad is the model of perfect behavior and that the Koran is the flawless, unchangeable, transcribed word of God. Plus they are asking Muslims to abandon long-established precedents in Islamic law that stretch back 1,000 years.

This religious inflexibility contrasts with Christianity, Spencer contended. Christianity has undergone several wrenching changes, including the transition from an outlawed sect to a state religion in the fourth century; the bloody Reformation that began in the 1500s during which myriad Protestants broke away

from the Roman Catholic Church; and mainstream Christians' accommodation to the discoveries of science, such as evolution. Spencer argues that Christianity is more flexible than Islam; although both Christians and Muslims regard their scriptures as the immutable word of God, he said, Christianity acknowledges that its Scripture was recorded by humans, whereas Islam does not.

Moreover, Spencer asserted that the U.S.-based Muslim reformers are far less influential than the revivalist Islamist groups or the many foreign imams who provide the sermons in most U.S. mosques. The majority of the approximately 1,200 U.S. mosques are owned or affiliated with the North American Islamic Trust. The group is closely aligned with the Islamic Society of North America, which espouses a traditionalist view of Islam that is heavily infused with Arab culture, he said.

The vast majority of American mosques are run by credentialed Sunni imams, most of whom were trained in Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, and receive continued funding and support from Islamist donors, Jasser said. Zeyno Baran, a Turkish-born senior fellow at the Hudson Institute who specializes in Eurasian affairs, said that these groups "were able to take control of mosques in America because they were able to buy them."

The Dominant Revivalists

The Islamic revivalists, or Islamists, have a very different vision for the reform of Islam -- and of Islam's role in the United States -- than do Jasser, Manji, and other modernizers. They hold a fundamentalist view of Islam that champions original texts and opposes assimilation into Western society.

"We are going back mostly to the sources itself," such as the Koran and the Hadith, the agreed-upon stories from Mohammad's contemporaries about his actions and statements between 610 and 632, said Zainab Alwani, an adjunct professor of Islamic studies at Northern Virginia Community College. She is the first woman to serve on the Fiqh Council of North America, an association of Muslims who offer religious rulings and interpretation of Islamic laws to adherents in North America. This return to the fundamentals requires believers to distinguish scripture from outmoded Arab cultural practices, she said, and for believers in the West to practice their religion while still prospering in a country that does not incorporate Islamic rules into civil law.

Spencer and other critics assert that Islamic texts are too entwined with Arab culture and too retrograde to ever fit into a modern Western society. Leading Islamists, such as Tariq Ramadan, the influential European-based revivalist, hope that a return to the Islamic texts will help Muslims maintain their original religion and communal solidarity while still living and prospering in the United States and Europe.

"By tolerating the intolerance of Islamists, governments are hurting the long-term integration of Muslims." --Zeyno Baran, the Hudson Institute

"Reform, to me, is trying to embrace the universal values of Islam and apply them in your own social, cultural context," said Louay Safi, a veteran activist who recently served as a spokesman for the Islamic Society of North America. Some U.S. mosques, for example, are reforming practices that have traditionally required women to be in a separate room during prayer, Safi said. One of the progressive mosques in Sterling, Va., for example, allows women and men to pray on separate sides of the main

room. Men and women can't commingle during prayer, Safi said, because Muslim prayer requires that "people touch shoulders; they pray and prostrate; there is a lot of physical activities."

Ingrid Mattson, the Islamic Society of North America's Canadian-born president, said that Muslim immigrants bring with them to the United States "certain cultural practices that are helpful and can support positive religious values, like, for example, respect for elders, or putting a lot of importance on families." But "there are some things that are in contradiction to Islamic principles and values," she added, such as treating women and men unequally. Mattson, whose group is at the center of the revivalist camp, nevertheless says that some traditions in Islam need to be changed. In the United States, Muslim communities are so diverse that some imams are helping to ease the traditional restrictions on women, even as others -- including U.S.-born and U.S.-trained imams -- are trying to reinforce those restrictions, said Mattson, whose term as president expires this winter. "The priority has to be well-trained imams who have the traditional [religious] skills to satisfy the communities ... but don't take us back to the Middle Ages," she said.

The modernizers point out, however, that the revivalists' emphasis on the original texts limits their ability to modernize Islam and its cultural practices that are reprehensible in the West. In confronting the issue of domestic violence among immigrants, Alwani said, "most of the imams, most of the scholars, work with the mainstream in America, with social services and nonprofit organizations to help people understand what is domestic violence, what it means to the family [and] what is to be understood through the Islamic texts. No one can say the prophet hit or beat or insulted any of his wives or his daughters or men, so you have a strong [theological] argument you can stand against anyone."

Yet this argument doesn't square with a strict reading of Islamic texts, Spencer and other analysts say. Chapter 4, Verse 34 of the Koran outlines possible punishments for disobedient wives; the final stage is physical punishment. And the Hadith include a story from Mohammad's youngest wife, Aisha, in which she relates that Muhammad "struck me on the chest which caused me pain."

A Bigger Network

It's no surprise that the revivalist groups that identify with Mattson's Islamic Society of North America have far more influence among Muslims than the reformers clustered around Jasser and Manji. The revivalist camp has a larger network, more money, greater access to the media, and more influence in the mosques.

For example, the Muslim American Society, a 501(c)(3) organization that does grassroots community work; the Islamic Society of North America; the Fiqh Council; and the North American Islamic Trust all share a common organizational parent--the Muslim Students Association. The association was formed in 1963 by supporters of the most influential Islamist revivalist political movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, also known as the Ikhwan, or "the engineers."

Hassan al-Banna formed the brotherhood in 1928 in Egypt to spread a revivalist Islam to Arab and Western countries using a nonviolent strategy of winning government power through grassroots political activity. The brotherhood, which combines revivalist Islam and Arab sympathies with modern technology, organization, and communications, includes many university-educated professionals. It is hostile to Al Qaeda's aggressive strategy of seizing power through violence, to the Arab secular dictatorships, and to the existence of a democratic, Jewish-dominated Israel. It also opposes dominance of secular law over sharia.

The brotherhood is based in Egypt, but it has many allies and affiliates in other countries--among them the Muslim Students Association in North America and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The group benefits from many wealthy Arab donors and a strong presence on television and the Internet. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is the most popular cleric on Al Jazeera TV, is widely described as the brotherhood's leading cleric.

The Muslim Students Association, in turn, has given birth to many other revivalist groups, including advocacy coalitions, publishing companies, think tanks, and foreign-aid organizations that often share leadership and co-sponsor public events.

The Islamic Society of North America's mission and belief statement, posted online, says that it "is not now nor has it ever been subject to the control of any other domestic or international organizations including the Muslim Brotherhood." Mattson, too, disavowed any connection between the society and the brotherhood. "I really feel they aren't very important in this country," she said.

The brotherhood is nevertheless the largest network of revivalists, according to Hadia Mubarak, who was the first female head of the Muslim American Society, formed in 1993. "Definitely, they influence Muslims both in the West and the Muslim world," she said, "but you can't say [that any single] person totally represents the Ikhwan's ideology."

Jasser of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, the Hudson Institute's Baran, and other modernizers reject the kind of Islamist advocacy that they say the Muslim Students Association and its network of affiliates promote. Baran said that over the past few decades, the well-funded and well-organized Islamists have used the *ijtihad* technique to impose a "backwards reform" on the moderate form of Islam that modernizers say had previously governed major Arab cities. This was possible, said Baran, the author of *The Other Muslims: Moderate and Secular*, published in March, because, "depending on what you highlight in the Koran, you can find endorsement of violence ... [including] 'Kill the Jews wherever you find them.'"

Ani Zonneveld, the founder of Muslims for Progressive Values, said that radical Islamists have built their ideology by selectively emphasizing the more-violent stories, including unreliable tales, about Mohammad's early behavior as a warlord. Her Los Angeles-based organization advocates for social justice, human rights, and tolerant understandings of Islam. The Koran should be recomposed so that the unreliable texts are removed and later, more-tolerant verses are emphasized, she said, adding, "Everyone has their own spiritual path to the same God."

Safi, in response, dismisses Jasser and his reformist allies. They "have decided to go out of the community and become outside critics," he said. "To be honest with you -- I'm not questioning their motivation -- it is more lucrative to go outside and start criticizing Muslims worldwide. They can sell their books.... that's what a diverse and pluralist society is about. We haven't criticized them."

Marriage And Polygamy

The reformers and some Islamist revivalists do, in fact, share some common ground.

Many educated Muslim professionals are embarrassed by the traditional practice in Muslim-majority countries of forcing young girls to marry even before puberty. Ramadan, the leading European Islamist, was asked at an April event at Georgetown University whether he supports this traditional practice. He responded that Muslim law puts the age of adulthood at 18, and that women should not marry until they are adults.

Still, child marriage is widely accepted in the Muslim world, supported by Islamic teachings, including the example of Mohammad, who married a 6-year-old girl but waited to consummate the marriage until she was 9. In oil-rich Saudi Arabia and dirt-poor Yemen, with a combined population of 50 million, imams are opposing current proposals to raise the minimum marriage ages. In Indonesia, where civil law says that a girl cannot marry until 16, the leading Islamic clerics recently declared that sharia law points to no age limit for Muslim marriage, but they asked parents in the nation of 227 million people to delay marriages until their children reach puberty. In May, the Saudi government announced that new marriage documents must state the bride's age and suggested that marriages of girls younger than 17 would not be approved.

Polygamy is another sensitive issue for Muslims in the West. Although the Koran permits polygamy, Jasser says, and "we believe those are the words of God," he contends that polygamy should be interpreted as an outdated institution. Many leading revivalists endorse the practice, however. Jamal Badawi, an Egyptian-born Canadian lecturer and author, and a board member of the Fiqh Council, says that polygamy can be a useful institution when widows and children lack the means to support themselves. "The highest authority is the Koran -- this is the word of God verbatim released by God to his last prophet ... [and in it, polygamy] is not something that is encouraged, but it is permitted," Badawi said. Ramadan also approves of polygamy, but says that a woman can include a bar against polygamy in her marriage contract.

The Reform Agenda

The reformers say they're frustrated by the Islamist revivalists' clout. "Political Islam has its tentacles and ideology spread through the world, and in the United States [it] has been manifested by many groups that are offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood," Jasser said. In contrast, modernist Muslims are poorly organized, Zonneveld said. Modernizers blend into American life and don't have their own gathering places, such as Islamic centers, mosques, and immigrant neighborhoods, she said. The 2,000 members of Muslims for Progressive Values meet mainly on *Facebook* and other social-networking websites. "The revivalists definitely dominate the conversation in the media, and it's the media's fault because [reporters go] to the most visible organizations" and dismiss progressive Muslims as inauthentic, she said. "It's very exasperating for people like us, who are trying to present Islam as modern, and not in conflict with other religions or with democracy ... [and] are not into sharia law, which has no place in America."

Jasser says that the U.S. government should cut off contacts with the Islamist groups and advocates, such as the Islamic Society of North America and Tariq Ramadan, and provide no support for the Muslim Brotherhood's political message. "That's what needs to be broken" before liberal Islam can prosper, he said. Washington should also limit the immigration of foreign imams facilitated by the North American Islamic Trust because it hinders the training and employment of U.S.-born, reform-minded imams, Jasser contended.

U.S. officials should promote liberal values among immigrants, the reformers say. Manji urges the United States to follow Canada's recent example. In November, Ottawa released a guide for immigrants titled

“Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Canadian Citizenship.” It declares, “In Canada, men and women are equal under the law.... Canada’s openness and generosity do not extend to barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, ‘honor killings,’ female genital mutilation, or other gender-based violence. Those guilty of these crimes are severely punished under Canada’s criminal laws.”

Manji said, “There needs to be a more explicit social contract between Muslim immigrants and the government about what is expected when you step on U.S. soil ... [because] there are certain values for which we need buy-in to protect each other’s freedom.”

These kinds of conflicts over values were recently highlighted in an Ohio case involving Fathima Rifqa Bary, a 17-year-old girl whose parents came from Sri Lanka. A high school cheerleader, Bary secretly converted to Christianity at 16 and then fled to Florida, saying that her father had threatened her life for leaving Islam. Her parents, in cooperation with their local imam and Muslim legal advocates, filed lawsuits in Florida and Ohio seeking her forced return. Police investigators in Ohio said they did not believe her life was in danger, and she was returned to the state; but she remains under state care until she turns 18 next month.

Many Muslim organizations wanted the girl returned to her parents, according to al-Suwaij of the reformist American Islamic Congress, in part because “they feel she is breaking the faith.” Many conservative Christian groups, in contrast, took up her cause as an example of the collision of Islam and Western mores.

“The more these cases become known, and Muslims see they can get help and won’t be sent back to their families, more people will be encouraged to speak,” Baran said. “There are more people like us, and there will be more if there is political and financial support” for real reform. “By tolerating the intolerance of Islamists,” she said, Western “governments are hurting the long-term integration of Muslims.”

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