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Foreword

Modern Muslims face a Herculean task. Those who seek to embed their religious tradition, especially their ethical and ritual practices within a framework of their lived experience, face numerous challenges. The very idea of crafting a new interpretative framework commensurable with their lived experience while simultaneously sustaining continuity with the past is an unenviable task and some would say borders on the arrogant.

The pre-partition Indian poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal described the task facing the modern Muslim as 'immense' but insisted that one

> has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past . . . The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge, even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us.[1]

They say the light of any poet is contradiction and so Iqbal in another breath pushes back against modernization, especially western modernity. He also wrote:

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> I fear this cry for modernism[2]
> Is only a ruse to make the East imitate the Franks [the West].[3]

Iqbal sought a modernity that was anchored in a unique sense of Muslim selfhood, not one born out of the imperatives of imitation, especially not aping western modernity. Preceding the verses where he voiced skepticism of modernity, he explains his preference clearly:

> He who creates in this world of Becoming
> Time revolves around him in all ages.
> Don't spoil your *khudi* through imitation of others.
> Protect it, for it is of incomparable worth.[4]

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Here Iqbal favors the idea of authentic selfhood (*khudi*), a sentiment which many Muslim activists and reformers from the nineteenth century to the present continue to agonize over. But what does authentic selfhood mean today? Authenticity might have been an apt response during colonial times, but does it still demand our allegiance in an age of cosmopolitanism and globalization?

Often the interpretative agenda of rethinking and reinterpreting Islam to which Iqbal added his voice elicits multiple responses. They range from support to outright rejection and a myriad of positions in between. Agonism, a sense of a strenuous struggle and one of perpetual combat, is the overwhelming emotional and mental condition. And yet, the reinterpretation of tradition is imperative in order for tradition to deliver on its moral promise.

Adis Duderija, in this collection of essays, works hard to provide the contours of stimulating debates among scholars who are broadly working in a spirit of what is called progressive Islam. In this collection, several key figures and their work is reviewed in helpful fashion, including my work in trying to conceptualize and rework tradition with attention to tradition and history. As the author of this foreword, I have the advantage over my colleagues in that I received a bonus opportunity to state some of my views! It is a token of Duderija's trust and friendship to allow me to offer some comments.

One of the most challenging aspects of Muslim life in the modern world is the attempt to configure the ethical practices from the moral values of Islam. In a world where the past becomes increasingly illegible due to the rupture of tradition, combined with growing technological prowess that radically alters the lifeworld as we know it, to grasp this ethical nettle becomes ever more daunting. Yet, few would quarrel about the need to reach the ethical; but there is substantial disagreement on how to conceptualize the ethical.

Alija Ali Izetbegovic, the late president of Bosnia, was deeply concerned with the question of religion and morality. In his book-length meditative essay, *Islam Between East and West*, Izetbegovic spent a considerable amount of time to understand the nature of one's moral life. For him, morality, like art and religion, at the philosophical and theological are on the same "genealogical branch" that "springs from the act of creation".[5] Izetbegovic opposed the idea that morality was based on progress and harmony with nature.[6] The essence of piety and morality, in Izetbegovic's view, was like that of art; in short, it was "inscrutable".[7] This perspective of inscrutability is not entirely absent from a traditional or orthodox Islamic perspective claiming that we do not entirely understand the divine wisdom behind moral imperatives. It surely also has a Kantian resonance.

For Izetbegovic, morality lays stress on the good and on freedom.[8] Yet, for the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abdullah Daraz, the moral imperative derived from the Qur'ān was to be reflective and contemplative.[9] Daraz identified four moral imperatives, namely duty, responsibility, deserts, and

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intentionality or motive. Why one should abide by these moral imperatives, according to Izebegovitch, is inscrutable and beyond an understanding of human interest.

Now, if morals are the habits of the heart in order to measure right and wrong, then it would make sense if they were inscrutable. Authors of Islamic morals talked about the formation of the interiority of the human person. Instead of talking about individual moral traits, they thought more broadly in terms of an ensemble of dispositions, temperaments, and intrinsic impulses that constituted one's moral character. The legendary Ghazali, for instance, described *khuluq* (morals) as the firm "disposition that enables actions to occur spontaneously without the need to reflect and deliberation".[10] When such acts are praiseworthy and conform to the demands of reason and revelation (*shar'*), then they are designated as 'merit-worthy morals' and, when they fail the test of rectitude, they are deemed to be 'wicked morals'. Furthermore, most Muslim authors discuss morals as the formation of the self and the purification of the interior (*batin*). A well-formed inner life, it is believed, will correspond to an equally compelling exterior performance of the body and limbs, meaning conduct. In the past, various philosophers, moralists, mystics, and poets deployed technologies to finesse that moral architecture of the self. Some of the behaviors that tutored the inner life were to adopt habits of self-restraint, especially to moderate between knowledge, passion, desire, and justice.

Moral and spiritual designs of the self correspond to the cosmologies and worldview of every epoch. So what is the moral architecture that constitutes the modern Muslim self from a spiritual and moral perspective? These narratives are always already there in the lived experiences of contemporary Muslims, but they might not conform to the requirements imposed by Muslim orthodoxy. In fact, one can say with confidence that anachronism is the major hallmark of the advocacy of orthodoxy for the modern Muslim self. Both the orthodox language and the scope of how to shape the inner life require redressing. Muslims who view themselves to be at the interstices of the orthodox and the modern, perhaps critical traditionalists such as myself, or progressives such as Duderija and others, have the task to continue to contribute and finesse that narrative of self through their various writings, practices, and advocacy.

In fact, progressive Muslims have made it their goal to address the moral and ethical gap that exists between Islam as an inherited tradition and whatever its appropriate manifestation ought to be in the present. As such, it is a constructivist agenda. As an endeavor, it is bound to be a work-in-progress, an ongoing debate in knowledge and not a finished product. Not to view it as a discursive project would be the undoing of this desirable endeavor. And to be vigilant of the various political pitfalls and co-optations is equally important in the project of progressive Islam. Hence, self-critique and self-reflexivity as to what one does and why one does certain tasks are all equally laudable aspirations.

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As a discursive tradition, ethics, as opposed to morals, as the practices by which we reach the moral values we seek, cannot be beyond reason and rationality. Ethics then falls in the realm of the political; namely, power, interests, and the varieties of reasons and rationalities that drive the multiplicity of ethical projects. In short, they are constituted within knowledge debates as to what are the best paths and means to reach certain moral goals; hence we say ethics is a discursive practice. Apart from ritual practices (*'ibadat*) that are largely inscrutable and linked to preexisting practices and devotional myths since the dawn of time, the founding template for Islam's ethical practices are very much based on the customary practices of seventh-century Arabia. For centuries Muslim jurists have done extraordinary work to adapt and accommodate many of the ethical practices known as *fiqh*, often translated as "law" but most of it consists of ethical rules. However, *fiqh* as an ethical practice or a legal rule is also contextual. Unfortunately, over the centuries, *fiqh* has erroneously become identical to the moral rules.

But as a discursive practice, *fiqh* as ethics acquires new rationalities in different times and phases of human experience. Some inherited *fiqh* practices addressing non-ritual practices, known as *mu'amalat* (social transactions), we have to concede had largely become anachronistic in the present age, especially those rules pertaining to gender, sexuality, human relations in a cosmopolitan world, and post-religious empires, among other reasons. For this reason, new *fiqh* rules corresponding to freshly articulated moral imperatives ought to be devised. For even moral imperatives need to periodically be revisited to give it the appropriate tone and articulation so that it speaks to the human self in every age. The moral imperatives are those very subtle elements that lead to the beautification of the interior. The description of that interior gets narrated and re-narrated by the myriads of moral traditions both within Islam and the experiences of humankind outside of Islam.

For many lay Muslims, activists, and scholars, the discourses of the 'purposes of the Shari'a' (*maqaṣid al-Shari'a*) has come as a major relief to replace the canonical *fiqh* rules controlled by Muslim orthodoxy, especially the ulama. Yet, we need to concede that these 'purposes of the Shari'a' represent the 'interests' of a religio-political community of Muslims who wish to preserve religion, life, intellect, property, and family. How this community or transnational polity is even defined is hard to gauge, but it exists in loose terms. These interests nevertheless are not moral imperatives.

One also has to bear in mind that the 'purposes of the Shari'a' discourse is a transitional conversation and serves as a form of band-aid hopefully leading to something more aspirational in terms of Muslim ethics. For now purposes of the Shari'a discourses are helpful up to a point. A set of activities from a robust conversation, theorization, and reflection on Muslim ethics are all still awaited aspects of the emergent progressive Islam discourse. Whether one calls it progressive Islam, critical Islam, or critical traditionalism, they are far from being established intellectual discourses and in all

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honesty they are at their mere infancy. Painstaking work awaits those who wish to establish pathways to future thinking.

What is doubtless is that the critique of outdated orthodox paradigms of interpretation requires viable alternatives. Beginning with a critique ought to lead to alternative paradigms. Often progressive Islam is merely a form of selective reading of scripture and a scripturalist approach to topics such as gender, environment, or, for that matter, politics. Adis Duderija has done some excellent work in trying to rethink the hermeneutics of the prophetic tradition. But scholarly labor in order to foster a robust and sophisticated progressive discursive tradition is what is most needed. Questions such as the meaning of God in a post-Darwinian world, the meaning of scripture, namely, both the Qur'an and hadith, and their role in norm-making in conversation with historical change, philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences as we know it point to the large task awaiting.

Muslim progressives require an understanding of the place of the inherited tradition in history and how it played a variety of roles. How does the meaning of past events change depending on one's place in a historical continuum? Why were theological doctrines such as the Satanic Verses, as the late Shahab Ahmed pointed out, once acceptable but later dogma decreed this belief to be heresy? Once the doctrine to say that the Qur'an was 'created' in time was a perfectly acceptable teaching for some Muslims to hold, but later adherence to such a view carried a death penalty in the official Qadiri creed in the eleventh century.

Acquiring a deep sense of how the Islamic tradition, its faith claims, and its practices navigated the shoals of time is a pre-requisite for its reinterpretation. Furthermore one has to transmit this historical literacy within lived communities in order to foster pluralism and diversity. This could have the plausible outcome for contemporary audiences to be in a position to recognize the cachet of new interpretations of Islam. They will have to come to grips with the fact that aspects of their practice might not resemble that of their predecessors in the past and that it was acceptable to do so. It is important for people to have a compelling explanation why in some aspects they no longer believe or perform as their forebears did.

Countering the power of orthodoxy is possibly the biggest challenge for progressive Islamic thought. Orthodoxy is formidable given its historical reach and its power to intimidate even its adversaries. It will require the effort of generations to weaken or dislodge the power of this orthodoxy or alter the terms of the debate of its epistemological formation and power constellations. But this can only be done if progressive thinkers engage the canons of Islamic orthodoxy and make available not only the multiple histories of Islam but also construct alternative interpretations. This, I dare say, is going to be an uphill battle.

Some insiders would insist that one leave the inherited tradition and its practices unmolested. Especially, in an age of secularity and moral relativism, they argue, tradition and orthodoxy offer the secure harbor of certainty. And

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some muscular defenders of Muslim orthodoxy and advocates of orthodox practices would come close to insisting that contemporary Muslims must refashion their present social and political contexts in order to render it hospitable for their version of an unreformed tradition to be practiced. The last mentioned is often a feature of ultra orthodoxy; these are life worlds at which some secular observers uncritically bow in awe and admiration, as well as mistake it for unblemished truth. Apart from pietist groups, extreme militant and authoritarian groups too espouse such ideal worldviews in an absolutist fashion. Pietist groups patronizingly view those who do not meet their ethical standards or forms of practice as fallen, while militants anathematize their rivals and often do worse. The common line of resistance to arguments challenging tradition-bound morals and ethics is to claim that interference with a divine and prophetically inspired tradition is nothing less than heresy.

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More politically minded critiques directed at advocates of an activist engagement with tradition ('tradition activism' like 'judicial activism'), although I prefer critical traditionalism, is to dismiss the work of progressives as nothing less than attempts to secularize and modernize Islamic sensibilities in order to ultimately reduce Islam to the demands of the present. Synoptic as this summation might be, it does capture the fault lines of the debate.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood, in an essay lacking nuance, attempted to discredit efforts at rethinking religious thought as nothing but attempts to frame Islam within a despised modality of liberalism or worse within a hermeneutics of American empire.[11] Yet, opponents of rethinking religious thought in Islam offer no alternative approaches in order for faith communities to exit out of the narrow and anachronistic practices that do not resonate with the lived experiences of Muslims today. Critics of interpretative reform, such as Mahmood, often unwittingly reinforce practices and teachings that are demeaning to human dignity by their shrill political indictments of activists and scholars who strive to find Islamic teachings that are consistent with Islam's ethical interpretations and in the light of their faith commitments.[12] Critics of Islamic reform as use it as a pretext to prosecute anti-liberal political struggles in which Islam and Muslims are the ciphers for such meta-debates. These occur at a distance from the daily struggles of ordinary Muslims who have to suffer large and small humiliations in their day-to-day religious practices against establishment political and religious authorities. These Muslims do not need saving by liberal or anti-liberal discourses; they are saving themselves in their life-and-death struggles of oppressive regimes from Iran's ayatollahs to the establishment clerics of al-Azhar and the Salafi ideologues of Saudi Arabia whose scripts have gone viral. Apart from the suffering of Muslim women, which should not be politicized or demeaned under the weight of patriarchal interpretations of Muslim morality, there are numerous other issues that need attention. These

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include the anachronistic interpretations of a range of Muslim orthodox advocates who validate slavery and other demeaning theological practices meant for another time in history. Or take for instance the practices centred on free speech and human rights, the religiously sanctioned penalties for alleged acts of blasphemy to other draconian laws justified under Shari'a governance that dehumanizes. For progressive Muslims living in a globalizing world by the lights of their faith, these are real dilemmas for which there are no easy answers, except that the struggle for human dignity continues. Sandwiched between powerful globalizing discourses of liberalism and secularism themselves not unfree from their own violence on the one hand, and runaway brutalities in the name of varieties of Muslim orthodoxies on the other, Muslim progressives are caught in this intersecting vortex. Yet this vortex is precisely the place to be in and to engage in the real struggle for ideas, politics, and practice. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian thinker, fully understood that the intellect allowed for a certain kind of pessimism to set in when one ponders the enormity of any task that lies ahead. But Gramsci also grasped that the reach of the human will could overcome this pessimism. Hence his much-repeated statement: "Pessimism of the spirit; optimism of the will". But Gramsci also had no time for those who were indifferent. Therefore he said: "I hate the indifferent. I believe that living means taking sides. Those who really live cannot help being a citizen and a partisan. Indifference and apathy are parasitism, perversion, not life. That is why I hate the indifferent".

Adis Duderija's essays on progressive Islam in this collection defy indifference. Many individuals and collectivities of people working towards an ethical interpretation of Islam display the optimism of the will, the confidence that a better way of doing things is possible within Islam.

Ebrahim Moosa

Notes

1 Iqbal, Muhammad. *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, edited by M. Saeed Sheikh, 4th ed. (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1999), 78.
2 Muhammad Iqbal, *Āsān Kulliyāt-I Iqbāl* (Islamabad: Alhamra Publishing, 2000), 798.
3 Muhammad Sir Iqbal, *The Rod of Moses: Versified English Translation of Iqbal's Zarb-I Kalīm*, translated by Syed Akbar Ali Shah (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1983), 335.
4 Ibid.
5 'Alija 'Ali Izetbegovic, *Islam between East and West* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust Publications, 1984), 64.
6 Ibid., 98–99.
7 Ibid., 68.
8 Ibid., 69.
9 Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Darāz, *Ḥawla Risālat Dustūr Al-Akhlāq Fī Al-Qur'ān*, edited by Aḥmad Muṣṭafá Faḍlīyah and al-Sayyid Muḥammad Badawī, al-Ṭab'ah, 1st ed. (al-Qāhirah: Dar al-Qalam, 2005).

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10 Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā 'Ulūm Al-Dīn*, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al- 'Ilmīya, 1421/2001).
11 Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation", *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006), 323–347.
12 Rochelle Terman, "Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique." *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 2 (2015), 77–102.

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