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TRANSITIONS IN THE “PROGRESS” OF CIVILIZATION: THEORIZING HISTORY, PRACTICE, AND TRADITION

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Life changes fast.
Life changes in an instant.
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.
The question of self-pity . . .
You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that. No eye is on the sparrow but he did tell me that.

—Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Clever people are not credited with their follies: what a deprivation of human rights!

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

INTRODUCTION

Those who think that “progressive” Islam is a ready-made ideology or an off-the-shelf creed, movement, or pack of doctrines will be sorely disappointed. It is not even a carefully calibrated theory or interpretation of Muslim law, theology, ethics, and politics. Neither is it a school of thought. Instead, I would argue that progressive Islam is a wish-list, a desire, and, if at all something, then it is literally, accumulated action, as the word “progress” in the phrase “a work-in progress” suggests. At best it is a practice.

Another way of putting it is to say that progressive Islam is a posture: an attitude. What kind of attitude? Here lies the rub. To say *what* that attitude is, to give it content or even to be as bold as to say what it is *not*, is to sound like the high priestess or gatekeeper for “progressive Islam.” It is best not to invite such recriminations.

Yet, persons who are tightly or lightly associated with what is broadly identified as “progressive Islam” will propose different practices and accompanying methodologies to verify and justify the content of the ethical propositions, philosophical visions, and contestations of history they hold. All this disagreement and difference is perfectly healthy for creative thinking in Muslim thought, especially ethical thought. What would certainly signal the death-knell for progressive Muslim thought is if there were to emerge a single voice, a unifying institution, a exclusive guild or association of scholars and practitioners who monopolized the epithet “progressive” and dictated its operations, debated its values and determined its content, like an orthodox. If so, then the ship of progressive Islam leaves port badly listing.

What goes by the broad rubric of progressive Islam takes many forms. In some places it is the life and death struggles of people who are trying to make sense of the intensities of life whether in repressive patriarchal contexts, in the grips of rampant poverty, famine, and war, or in the midst of disease of pandemic proportions. In more favorable conditions, there too similar challenges await, albeit disguised by affluence and enviable certainty. Relying on their multiple traditions and the resources of transnational civilizations, many Muslims are trying to find meaning for their lives. In ways not yet clearly articulated these individuals and communities are the lifeblood of what I would call progressive Islam. Detailed ethnographies of such communities and the substance of their struggles are documented elsewhere in this volume. In this reflection, I prefer to outline some key concepts and ideas that emerged during my journey and discovery of how to critically engage the Muslim knowledge traditions. As it will forever remain a work-in-progress, I have more questions than answers; some of my observations will come by way of points of clarification and caveats. What might appear to be answers and exhortations, despite their vehemence, I would urge my reader to regard as tentative.

How does one develop a critical approach to tradition? If past experiences became the social laboratory for the making of tradition, why cannot our current experiences as Muslims become the threads to manufacture the garment of tradition? While there is no sensible and intelligent way to know how a revitalized tradition would unfold, the search for emergent knowledge and ethics has to continue energetically. Intellectuals and activists all have a responsibility to recast the knowledge of tradition and thus tradition in light of their contemporary experiences.

WHAT IS IN A NAME?

A great deal is both revealed and repressed in a name. The term “progressive” used to designate a loosely knit group of activists and thinkers advocating a different narrative of Islam compared to the dominant one is to

be sure an oppositional term. In fact, for this author, the term “progressive” is itself a source of discomfort for reasons to be explained later, but I continue to employ it with caveats for the lack of a better substitute. As some French philosophers have helpfully suggested, one can use the term under “erasure.”

Progressives differ in significant ways from the dominant orthodoxies of Islamic revivalism and traditionalism in their respective methodologies and ideologies. At least, I view myself in a complex relation to the intellectual heritage and multiple cultural formations in which Muslims lived and prospered, flourished and failed, as well as changed and stabilized. One of the major points of departure for progressives is the heightened and surplus freight of ideology evident in the interpretations propounded by representatives of Islamic revivalism, such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt or the Jamat-e Islami of India and Pakistan to the orthodox seminaries of Al-Azhar in Egypt, the Deobandi, Barelwi, and Ahle Hadith schools of India and Pakistan, the schools of Najaf in Iraq, Qum in Iran, and the varieties of puritan (*salafi*) tendencies in the Gulf region and elsewhere, to mention but a prominent few. Each of these groups also have a global presence, as well as representation in Europe and North America where Muslim minorities are on the rise.

To be sure, just as progressives cannot artificially be made to look alike (homogenized), so too it would be wrong to portray contending views to be uniform. However, for the purpose of characterization, but not defamation, I am compelled to resort to a certain strategic essentialism to describe how my views by way of general brushstrokes differ from those of my opponents. A more careful and technically nuanced comparison belongs to another genre of writing and cannot be composed in the brevity of the space and scope allotted here. The assertion that at least some individuals affiliated with the above-mentioned tendencies, vague as it might sound, would endorse certain aspects of progressive methodology and practice while refraining from doing so with respect to other aspects remains true. This observation should put paid to any illusion that progressive viewpoints are solely the preserve of scholars in the North American academy.

Hence, when I allege that some viewpoints held by Muslim groups are ideological, it is animated by some very specific concerns. Perpetuating an inhibiting cultural inheritance suggests a denial of the obvious facts of the world and the absence of common sense. In a nutshell I would say that the major differences between Muslim progressives and their critics would be that the latter are either wedded to dated methodologies or committed to doctrines and interpretations that have lost their rationales and relevance over time. On the other hand, progressives are also painfully aware that to uncritically succumb to every fact and fad also makes little sense, since it results in a Panglossian option of being unwaveringly and unrealistically optimistic about everything in the modern style.

Many find the term “progressive” to be exclusionary. In other words, does it imply that if one does not subscribe to a progressive agenda that one is by default adhering to a retrograde agenda? In my view such an inference is a flawed one. Any definition can be deployed in both an affirmative and a negative manner. To say that one is black, is a statement that primarily affirms one’s black identity and does not necessarily imply the negation of white identity. However, what such a claim does propose is to signal a difference in identities. Similarly, to say that one is American or Indian does not mean that one necessarily despises Canadians or Pakistanis. What such a label affirms is a package of loyalties and commitments, which in some rare instances, especially during conflict, might turn out to be badge of hostility and exclusion.

Another shorthand way to describe my intellectual approach would be to designate it as critical traditionalism, for reasons that will hopefully become clear later. But someone could make the point that in the very act of naming, one is implying that others are just the opposite: uncritical traditionalists. In reality one is trying to assert the element that distinguishes one’s intellectual agenda from those of others. What is distinctive in my work is to engage with tradition critically: to constantly interrogate tradition and strive to ask productive questions.

AMBIVALENCE OF PROGRESS

If some are drawn to the term “progress” then others are recoiled by its echo. Those who buy into a Hegelian worldview imagine that history is moving toward some clearly defined and concrete end. For believers of this stripe, any change is productive and clearly directed toward a wholesome “progress.” Epitomizing this viewpoint is Francis Fukuyama in his controversial book, *The End of History and the Last Man*.¹ For Fukuyama, philosophers of old have held that history has an end, not as events, occurrences, and happenings, but as something more deeply philosophical and profound. In this view “history” means a single, coherent, evolutionary process that takes into account the experiences of all peoples over all times. As an evolutionary process, if not a program, Fukuyama believes that history is neither random nor unintelligible. Societies develop with coherence from tribal ones based on slavery and subsistence agricultures to theocracies, aristocracies to culminate in liberal democracies driven by technology-rich capitalism. All this is the result of “progress” in history.

In Fukuyama’s view we have reached such a pinnacle of progress that the principles and institutions underlying liberal democratic societies will no longer be in need of alteration or have to be changed. The evolution of history has determined for us what we should behold as the ideal institutions: not communism but capitalism; not socialism but liberal democracy;

and definitely, no imponderable third way. In his determination to prove the salvific benefits of liberal democratic progress, Fukuyama drifts into the morally unsettling and theologically Christian territory of eschatology that produces utopia and messianism.

However, there is something deeply troubling and unquestioned in such a conception of progress. Progress becomes hubristic when it only emphasizes the mastery of nature but does not recognize the retrogression of society. Such a vision of progress, notes the German thinker Walter Benjamin, displays the technocratic features that was a hallmark of fascism and other kinds of authoritarian societies. Lots of unsavory movements have in the name of progress been treated as historical norms when in fact they were aberrations. Yoked to the tyranny of unchanging principles is a notion of secular progress that is as fundamentalist in its posture as its religiously inspired counterparts.

This view of progress was inspired by certain biblical themes of an apocalyptic end and driven by a mechanistic view to create a New Jerusalem. In numerous apocalyptic writings, Ernest Lee Tuveson comments, history was endowed with a plot and encompassed a narrative of what happened before and what was expected to come. Building on the Hebraic tradition, Christian thinkers and pioneers adapted the moral narratives of the Bible to their own special interpretations of the divine.² Later, Protestant attitudes implicitly held that history moves by divinely preordained and revealed stages to the solution of human dilemmas. Gradually this attitude also infected the philosophies of modernity, coming to dominate modern theories of history and science despite a plethora of opposing voices. Notable among these opposing voices were the Romantic thinkers, among them Herder and also T.S. Eliot who did not accept the inevitability of progress as many others conceded. While everyone accepts that the notion of change is the essence of life, the disagreement is about something much more subtle but is pregnant with significant consequences.

What distinguishes a modernist from someone who is less enamored by everything modern is this: the modernist à la Fukuyama believes in the *inevitability* of progress while the opposing view would, sometimes grudgingly, concede to the *possibility* of change or progress. Progress as fortuitous, rather than as inevitable, holds the promise that change might occur in diverse and multiple forms, not the totalitarian narrative of progress driven by scientism and liberal capitalism. The deterministic or apocalyptic theory of progress locks everyone in a Weberian iron cage or in a suffocating straitjacket of a singular modernity. Ignoring this subtlety can produce some of the most irreconcilable dilemmas and offer nonoptions forcing one to choose between science versus religion, rationality versus faith, and progress versus tradition.

Many Muslim thinkers unfortunately have purchased into the inevitability of progress thesis without thinking through its implications. Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the poet and thinker of India, also inadvertently stumbled

into some of these thorny patches. He redeemed himself with his poetry that gushed with romanticism and stirrings of the emotive self. For Iqbal's poetry differed greatly with his occasional reflections on scientific modernity that were secreted into his philosophy.

LOCATION OF WORK

In intellectual work, as in real estate, location is everything. In what context or environment one is located will to a large extent identify one's primary audience. The question of audience is a critical element in all interpretive and revisionist projects. Since progressive Islam is not only a theoretical enterprise but is also closely related to practice, location, and audience, these concerns are in many ways decisive. The loose alliance of scholars who today write about progressive Islam in North America hail from different backgrounds and contexts. Some are North American-born or naturalized citizens whose base communities are unmistakably North American. Others, in turn, work in the United States but whose primary social laboratory are communities in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East.

Part of the challenge to grasp the trajectory of progressive Islam is to comprehend the journeys that many individuals associated with this very undefined trend have undertaken through scholarship and activism. In my case, my formative work was done in South Africa and what follows is admittedly a highly truncated slice of a much more complex and detailed narrative. The selective nature of this narrative is to highlight some critical elements of the progressive Muslim struggle in the South African context.

As graduates of the seminaries or *madrasas* of India, Pakistan, and other regions of the Muslim world, several of my contemporaries like myself returned to our native land in the 1980s only to encounter a cauldron of political conflict and social injustice perpetrated by the system of apartheid. Young and inexperienced, we were yet determined to engage in the liberation struggle from an Islamic moral perspective. After all, Islamic discourse was what we knew best and to which our identities were intimately but also complexly related. While several secular organizations were available from which we could participate in the struggle for liberation, many of us also recognized the need to mobilize our communities in the language that they understood best: the language of faith and tradition.

As aspiring scholars and clerics we were convinced that Islam embodied a message of justice, equality, and freedom, a teaching we needed to internalize and practice programmatically. Our primary audience was the minority Muslim community of South Africa whom we had to remind of their moral duty and responsibility to regard legalized racial discrimination as a violation of human dignity and as sinful as if one were complicit in terms of Muslim ethics. While a section of the Muslim community was willing to embrace

this message, a larger group was content to go along with the quietist and accomodationist posture that the overwhelming majority of Muslim clerical associations had adopted by tolerating apartheid’s horrors.

It was no doubt an uphill battle to persuade many individuals and the leadership in the ulama community that they erroneously deemed certain doctrines to be part of tradition, such as requiring people to obey an oppressive state. Our exigencies required that such doctrines be reviewed. Most Muslim clerics saw it as their primary duty to defend their narrow sectarian and religious interests since they did not feel any obligation to make sacrifices on behalf of a largely non-Muslim and black majority, yoked and dehumanized by decades of legalized segregationist policies and systematic violence. Needless to say, consciously and unconsciously many nonblack communities in South Africa, Muslims included, had also internalized the structural racism of the society which blinded them to the realities of an oppressive state and caused them to ignore the ethical calling of justice demanded by their faith.

For the Muslim progressives this state of affairs required a mini-revolution in traditional juridical ethics (*fiqh*) and theology (*kalam*). The need was to ensure that Muslim ethical deliberations abandoned sectarian interests and developed a humanist and inclusivist vision that embraced all human beings irrespective of color, creed, and race. This meant going against the grain of a very strong exclusivist tradition dating back to the days of Muslim empire.

What made matters a little bit easier was the visibility of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. This revolutionary message empowered disenfranchised people around the world with the promise of emancipation from authoritarian regimes and dictatorships supported by the major powers. Just as the United States was a major backer of the dethroned Pahlavi dictatorship in Iran, it also for a considerable time supported the minority white and apartheid government in Pretoria as a Cold War ally. Furthermore, around the 1980s, Muslim groups in different parts of the majority Muslim areas were also battling authoritarian governments. Solidarity with such liberatory and revolutionary movements, of course, inspired us in South Africa.

But it also dawned upon us that a progressive agenda in South Africa would be radically different from the kinds of developments occurring in Egypt, Iran, Sudan, or Pakistan. In those countries the emphasis was on the application of a full-blooded notion of Shari’a, the content of which produced bloody consequences and shocking miscarriages of justice. In South Africa our search was for a Shari’a that took into account our realities that were at once very different from those of Muslims in majority contexts.

Often we found voices located on the margins of the Muslim intellectual traditions: particularly attractive were those messages, ideas, and concepts that had resonance with our experiences. For instance, the mainstream and

canonized tradition forbade alliances with non-Muslims and harbored suspicions about our associations with Jews and Christians, given a long and unsavory history of political hostilities with these communities over centuries dating back to nascent Islam in Arabia and the Crusades. Over time these attitudes crystallized into a virtual separatist Muslim theology that at least in theory kept associations with Jews and Christians to a minimum save for some notable exceptions in Muslim Spain. In addition, narrow juridical interpretations devalued the role of women in public life and politics.

Large chunks of this inherited tradition were unhelpful to our context, leaving activists agonizing over the psychological barriers such teachings produced. Many clerics and opponents of the progressive Muslim political cause repeated the authoritative readings that they had dredged from texts in order to discredit our meager new readings. Since only scant and selected authorities—past and present—in the tradition offered any kind of help to our context, our liberation theology and juridical ethics had to rely on new readings of the Qur'an and selections from the prophetic tradition. In his noted text *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Farid Esack carefully documents the outlines of our ethical struggles and demonstrates how we retrieved the messages of liberation and pluralism from the narratives of the Qur'an. In the frighteningly repressive political climate and life and death struggles that characterized South Africa, it was comforting to read that God was on the side of the oppressed and righteous who were patiently and justly steadfast in God's cause.³

During the 1980s we hardly had the luxury to think through the complicated issues of Muslim ethics in a systematic and theoretically rigorous manner. The Muslim equivalents to theorists such as Marx, Engels, and Lenin were the writings of Qutb, Mawdudi, and Khomeini: the latter were rhetorically persuasive but intellectually limiting, if not at times castrating.

Given the exigencies of the struggle we were instantly required to produce reliable ethical positions on a host of issues. In hindsight, our writings were humane in their vision, but thin in intellectual depth; strong on polemics but weak on politics. Critical re-readings of the tradition in a systematic manner that would enable us to theorize our lived experiences in the tradition were a luxury and in short supply at the time.

What awaits those engaged in progressive Muslim discourses in the heat of crisis is to partake in critical reflection on those experiences. Many lessons are to be learned and an equal number had to be unlearned. High priority should be given to theorizing these experiences and practices. This is a task that a range of Muslim progressives needs to accomplish with the hope that our efforts from the geographical margins, as well as the edges of intellectual power vis-à-vis the prevailing orthodoxies, could foster new debates and diversify the tradition.

PROGRESSIVE TRADITION?

Progress is Janus-faced: it has opposing sides to it. Progress also signifies a particular relation to history; that history has an end (*telos*) and a predetermined goal. In a more benign way progress could mean advances in knowledge and the acquisition of some abilities and the loss of others, without making this contingent on the philosophy of history. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin meditates on the painting of the Swiss painter, Paul Klee (d. 1940), called the *Angelus Novus*. The image of the angel is for Benjamin the beguiling image of the angel of history. Here Benjamin’s caution and deep ambivalence toward historicism surfaces strongly, for in his view the adherents of historicism, like Fukuyama, tend to empathize with the victors in history.

What intrigues Benjamin in the Klee painting is *how* the angel flies: his wings are spread but his face is turned towards the past. The wings of the angel cannot close because they are kept open by a violent storm from Paradise that propels him into the future. With a strong dose of irony, Benjamin comments: “This storm is what we call progress.”⁴

At the very time when the helpless angel of history is pushed into the future by the storm of progress from Paradise, he heroically and against the odds resists the storm by turning his face towards the past. The turning back is suggestive of history and tradition, both of which Benjamin believes will restrain a hubristic and a runaway idea of progress.

In order to avoid the negative sense of the word “progress,” says Benjamin, one needs to resist some senses of the word.⁵ To understand “progress” as involving the transformation of the entirety of humankind is a hubristic posture, to say the least. Yes, indeed, one can acknowledge human advances in ability and knowledge. But to view progress as meaning the infinite perfectibility of humankind in competition with nature sits oddly with the notions of humility and balance advocated in Muslim ethical discourse. Of course, the struggle to reach moral and spiritual perfection is at the very core of Muslim ethical teaching but is very different to a historicist notion of perfection.

For some progressives knowledge of the tradition is important. I do not advocate that one should view knowledge of the tradition as sacred and unchanging; rather, it is subject to interrogation, correction, and advancement. For the upshot of all knowledge is not that it should be adored and worshipped but that it must be put to use and result in ethical practice. Therefore, the major question, if not the most challenging one that arises is whether a practice has to perpetually resemble its origin. The answer to this rhetorical question is not easily soluble: the answer is negotiated in the tradition, the state of *what* one is, and more importantly, *how* one exists.

One thing is for sure: tradition is definitely not a collection of texts. That would be only one source of knowledge of the tradition. Tradition is a state

of mind and a set of embodied practices. As practice, tradition undoubtedly has authority and operates by certain rules of the game. Tradition, to use the felicitous words of Pierre Bourdieu, is what the body learned or what was “learned by body”; it is not something one acquires like knowledge, but *what* one is.⁶ Put differently, one could say that tradition is the self-intelligibility of the past in the present; a continuously evolving and mutating intelligibility or state of being. One could also say that tradition has everything to do with one’s subjectivity.

The critical element, in order to be a person of tradition, is to have a historical sense “not only of the pastness of the past,” as T.S. Eliot noted, “but of its presence.”⁷ The notion of tradition implies more than an awareness of the temporal and the timeless. To be a person of tradition one must conceive of the temporal and timeless together; one must acutely become aware of one’s place in time and of one’s own contemporaneity. Instead of living in the present, a writer or thinker who engages with tradition lives in the “present moment of the past” and shows an awareness, in Eliot’s words, “not of what is dead, but of what is already living.” Since tradition in Islam is so much about practices, it is then those practices that are learned by the body. Tradition, like the body, does not memorize the past but “enacts the past, bringing it back to life.”⁸

Tradition is unlike palingenesis where certain organisms only reproduce their ancestral characters without modification. Rather tradition works more like kenogenesis: it describes how in biology an organism derives features from the immediate environment in order to modify the hereditary development of a germ or organism.

If tradition has fallen into disrepute, it is because some who claim to be traditionalist practitioners think of tradition, not as dynamic practices, but rather confuse the knowledge of the tradition with tradition itself. From such a perspective, tradition is reduced to a set of memories. Under trying and negative circumstances, these memories give rise to self-pitying nostalgia. Since some representatives of contemporary Muslim orthodoxy happily confuse knowledge with tradition, they err in imagining tradition to be immune to environmental influences. Hence, seminal figures and agents in the history of tradition are turned into unique and idealized personalities in an almost mythical past. In this scheme, history is elevated to mythology and the human beings who authored tradition are turned into hagiographical figures, beyond the scrutiny of historical evidence. It is this excessive reverence for the past, in my view, that in fact paralyzes dogmatic traditionalists. Paradoxically, what happens within the ostensible centers of traditionalism is that time is flattened and homogenized. Unfortunately, time loses its density and complex nature and is reduced to a secular version with a superficial overlay of piety.

One of the hallmarks of the ideology of progress, one that violently militates against notions of tradition, is that it considers and imagines time as being homogenous and empty. Subtly, such a notion of time eradicates

difference: differences between people and in human experiences. In turn, it inspires the fantasy of a utopian historical process driving all nations toward the secular and hurtling toward an undifferentiated modernity. What differentiates the modern style—for that is what modernity really is, a style rather than a rupture—as opposed to its predecessors is the fundamental shift in the notion of time, which is antithetical to persons of tradition.

In the imagination of modernity, Reinhart Koselleck tells us, “Time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place, it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history no longer occurs in, but through time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right.”⁹ By dynamic he means that time is credited with creative force, not with will and desire. And, in order to continuously create and re-create this dynamism, time must become singular and homogenous. In other words, time is no longer the vehicle in which history occurred, but rather time has become the driver who is on autopilot. All the passengers in the vehicle are completely at the driver’s mercy. The passengers have no will to decide which cars, makes, or models they will drive since the driver cannot take instructions for he is a factory-made automaton! Where conceptions of time were once shaped by the specificities of distinct environments, rhythms, and rituals, now these are eroded.

On this front Muslim progressives must be extremely cautious. If there is a wish to engage knowledge of tradition, one should resist the desire to reduce traditions to “things,” or a “single” interpretation, and deem tradition as only “one” practice. While certain forms of dogmatic traditionalism often portray themselves as the singular and authentic voices of Islam, a more careful investigation of Muslim knowledge traditions would often show that the very issues in question have been debated, contested, and disagreed upon and hence, less authoritarian. However, when tradition itself is imagined as a kind of prefabricated design of being then it is a sure sign of traditionalists gone berserk, obsessed with power but paradoxically also dressed in the imperial garb of the modern. This is what I would call designer traditionalism.

Progressives should heed the caution of Michel Serres and his student Bruno Latour and not fall prey to something we all fall prey to from time to time: the issue of period-dating. Seventeenth century intellectual thought (a product of critique-thinking) artificially separated the modern from the premodern.¹⁰ Early science and capitalism, Latour points out, needed to engage in a reductionist philosophy in order to constitute reality into a nature-culture division with the view to accelerate technological-scientific advances. Making such arbitrary divisions in a “work of purification” was now indefensible. It arbitrarily splits objects from subjects and separates nature/earth from human/science. Ironically, this valuable insight itself assaults the term “progress,” for progress facilitates the false separation since it assumes that its opposite is static. (I have already explained that I use the term under protest.)

A great responsibility rests on the shoulders of progressives to revive tradition in all its vibrancy, intelligibility, and diversity. One might have to avoid the error made by some Christian and Jewish thinkers and schools of thought who uncritically bought into the inevitability thesis of progress.

Here I wish to offer the view that one should begin to aspire to the *possibility* of progress by engaging the knowledge of tradition without marginalizing it or neglecting its wisdom. Indeed, most people who think of themselves as traditionalists might be surprised to learn that every enactment of tradition also involves a critique. A progressive intellectual posture involves a critical interrogation of the conveyorbelt of tradition, namely texts, practices, and histories, by posing a series of questions to the inherited knowledges of the tradition. In other words, a critical Muslim or a progressive Muslim is also engaged in critical traditionalism. Critique of tradition is not to debunk tradition, but it is rather an introspection of what one is: a continuous questioning of one's being. Recall that I earlier said that tradition is all about what one is: it is more than identity, more than texts and practices, more than history. It is all that, plus more: the additional element remains undefined, but it involves all those things that make one feel that you belong.

TRANSITIONS, NOT CONCLUSIONS: KNOWLEDGES IN THE *DIHLIZ* (INTERSTICE)

Throughout this chapter I have not discussed the specifics as to what the content of anything conceivably called progressive Islam should look like. That was intentional. Rather, I reflected on my experiences in encountering the knowledge of tradition and tried to provide some “after the fact” theoretical reflections and self-critique. There is a reason why I am reluctant to be prescriptive about content. If the progressive movement is going to be prescriptive, then it is going to end up in a one-size fits all version of progressive Islam with predictable disasters in tow. Once one advocates a specific content for progressive Islam, then it becomes an institution with ideological interests that will cauterize its dynamism. And, from a practical point of view if progressives are going to take upon themselves the institutional representation, they take on a burden greater than they can bear. One can hardly forecast all scenarios and contexts in one country or region, let alone do advocacy for a global audience. Rather, I view the momentum toward progressive Islam to be a catalyst for other existing tendencies in Islam, not as a replacement. In fact, progressives must engage and challenge the existing practices and interpretations as members of those communities and not as a separate church or tendency whose credentials are questioned because of a certain aloofness from the larger communities. This is the hard and more challenging part of being an advocate of progressive Islam since it is easy to preach and work with like-minded people. The challenge is to

engage people with whom one disagrees. Second, I fear that once progressive practices of Islam are institutionalized and imposed from the top, it will have a number of deleterious effects. Like the well-intentioned labors of Muslim modernists a century ago, progressive Muslims run the risk of becoming servants of power. The state-driven modernizing of Islam has turned Muslim modernists into partners and servants of the most brutal authoritarian regimes from Egypt to Pakistan, and from Tunisia to Indonesia. Muslim progressives might have to consider the value of entering the democratic base of their societies rather than placating elites. Needless to say, this is much easier said than done and a great deal more thought has to be invested to configure the most effective strategies. Third, Muslim progressives must avoid running the risk of appearing to confect some version of a civilizing mission for Muslims. Showing vigilance for the designs of power to co-opt progressives for Neo-conservative, imperialist, or nationalist projects, be they Islamic or non-Islamic is a first step. Continuous self-critique and debate will help us avoid repeating the missteps that our well-meaning predecessors committed.

Critical or progressive approaches to the practice of Islam, especially questions directed at the knowledge traditions together with their relevant answers, are determined by specific contexts. In fact, the context is an undeniable part of the question of practice; it imprints itself on the tradition. To provide prescriptive answers from outside that specific context would be a colonizing posture to be avoided at all costs. Yet, it is an altogether different matter if people in one context wish to learn from the experiences of another context in order not to reinvent the wheel in analogous issues. In such a case, when people do accept the insights derived from another experience, then they do so voluntarily without dictation from outside and they own the idea and practice as their own.

By allowing the interpretation and practice of Islam to be context-driven one also ensures a robust diversity and pluralism. But more importantly, it takes the experiences of each context seriously. While the idea and practice of Islam were inspired by nonhistorical impulses of prophecy and revelation, everything after that initial moment occurs in the full light of history. For this reason it is imperative that Islamic norms be informed by peoples’ historical experiences. Thus, if interfaith dialogue and solidarity, and gender justice were burning issues in the South Africa of the 1980s, to cite one example, then it does not mean that these would be the same priorities in the twenty-first century. Hypothetically, Muslims in Egypt may well deem political pluralism and justice to be their urgent priorities, while in America women’s access to mosques and the right to religious leadership might be regarded as urgent.

Often practices and experiences are not driven by clear-cut theories and policies that are applied in sanitized environments. To the contrary, practices are produced in much messier contexts and contingent circumstances. In recounting the experiences of Muslim progressives in South Africa,

I observed that theoretical reflection was a luxury and more often than not, practical necessity, common sense, and ethical vision coupled with a certain pragmatism informed our practices in that specific theater of struggle. Theory usually occurs after practice, just like the disciplines of legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) and the theory of theology (*usul al-din* or *ʿilm al-kalam*) emerged as theoretical reflections after the practice of law, ethics and speculative theology had been in vogue for some time.

Theory is necessary for several reasons. One of the more obvious needs for theory is to provide some intellectual coherence and social intelligibility to existing practices. Theory has the ability to finesse and sharpen the rationales underlying practices and also to refine practices. And, theory makes complicated ideas and experiences accessible and digestible for pedagogical ends. Universality of ideas and practices combined with the brevity of abstraction facilitates easy transmission from one context to another. Evidently, the plurality of theories inherited from the past and those manufactured in the present constitute tangible evidence of the different Muslim experiences that need to be sustained at all costs if one wishes to avoid totalitarian outcomes in religious thought.

A plurality of experiences is borne due to differences in knowledge. The fallibility of human knowledge is made manifest in the inescapable diversity and hybridity of knowledge. Fallibility is an imperfection but a necessary one that makes the search for knowledge imperative. No wonder that some of the best exemplars of the Islamic tradition starting from the Prophet, the Companions to later figures like Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), Abu al-Walid Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE), Muhyi al-Din Ibn Arabi (d. 1240 CE) made a virtue of intellectual promiscuity. Ghazali demonstrated this diversity in his monumental writings, pressing the value of in-between space (*dibliz*) of daily living and reflection.¹¹ The spatial metaphor of a threshold or portal, a *dibliz*—an intermediate portal separating the Persian home from its exterior—is also a productive dialogical space. From Ghazali and countless others we learn how intellectual productivity was enhanced at the interstices of cultures. Ghazali imagined and theorized all thought and practice to be a continuous dialogical movement between the inner and the outer; the esoteric and the exoteric; body and spirit in a productive fashion. He did not configure the dialogic in a simplistic binary relation but imagined these to be the polarities of a force field.

Suspended within this force field was the subject diligently tending to the needs of both matter and spirit. Underlying all our critical activity is a complex hybridity and fuzziness, despite our every pretension to smooth it out. And while over the longer duration we can sometimes observe dramatic shifts in knowledge, on most occasions we pass through transitions, creases, and folds in knowledge and time.

The perpetual quest is to seek emergent knowledge arising out of our struggles and transitions for alternative futures. We do know one thing

taught by experience: that the dominant paradigms need to be continuously contested with alternative ways of knowing, different types of knowledge and models for society building. The future, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos pointed out, has become a personal question for us, a question of life and death.¹² In order to pursue such futures we also need to resort to the past not as a ready-made solution, but as a creative problem susceptible to opening up new possibilities. “Certainly we need history,” Nietzsche wrote. “But our need for history is quite different from that of the spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge,” he continued, adding: “. . .[W]e require history for life and action, not for the smug avoiding of life and action, or even to whitewash a selfish life and cowardly, bad acts.”¹³

Both Ghazali and Ibn Arabi, just like Nietzsche later, were compelled to reread the past as a prophecy that would change the present. Unfortunately, too many thinkers have understood the progress of civilization in stoutly economic terms linking the division of labor to the development of society. It may well be part of the truth, but certainly not the whole of the truth. But it is the prophetic activity dedicated to life that we seek in its intensities. A life premised on balance and distribution is necessary in order to avoid the nihilistic end that beckons without it. The progress we make in giving shape to that prophetic spirit—a life of practice and will to power—opens up the *possibilities* of new histories, not their inevitability and least of all the end of history, which is in reality a disguised theology of eschatology unique to a certain Christian worldview, but not necessarily shared by all. It is precisely because of the possibility of history and the will to power that Fukuyama’s end of history prophecy, now running aground in the ruins of Mesopotamia and the Hindu Kush mountains as well as in the ashes of the World Trade Center in New York, proves that he was so grotesquely wrong. The neoconservatives and liberal capitalists who are riding the crest of history for now are confident about the inevitability of progress. But will their terminus also signal the crash of civilization? For those who view history as a continuous struggle, a gift carrying the possibilities of progress, the cultivation of civilization remains inviting and utterly tempting.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, U.K.: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).

2. Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: A Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1949), 5.

3. Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism: Towards an Islamic Perspective of Inter-Religious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford, U.K.: Oneworld Publications, 1997).

4. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 257–258.
5. *Ibid.*, 260–261.
6. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 73.
7. T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, U.K.: Faber & Faber, 1975), 38.
8. Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*.
9. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, U.K.: The MIT Press, 1985), 246.
10. Donald Wesling, "Michael Serres, Bruno Latour, and the Edges of Historical Periods," *CLIO: Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History* 26, no. 2 (1997): 200.
11. Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
12. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Toward a New Common Sense: Law, Science and Politics in the Paradigmatic Transition* (New York and London, U.K.: Routledge, 1995).
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980), 7.
14. Ahmet Karamustafa, "Islam: A Civilizational Project in Progress," in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford, U.K.: Oneworld, 2003).