

Islamic Religious Reform Is an Institutional Need First

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Brief Analysis

A response to Hassan Ismaik's '*[In Defense of Islamic Religious Reform](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/islamic-religious-reform)*' (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/islamic-religious-reform>)”

Three parties in the Arab and Islamic worlds are engaged in a heated debate over the need for a renewal of religious discourse. The first party considers religious reform a necessity for objective reasons, notably as an antidote to [extremism and terrorism \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/eliminating-radicalism-in-arab-and-islamic-world-education-before-prison-an\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/eliminating-radicalism-in-arab-and-islamic-world-education-before-prison-an). While recognizing some validity in the call, the second party assesses it as insincere, laden with ulterior motives and hidden objectives, such as seeding discord among Muslims and frustrating their unity. The third party rejects the call as invalid a priori, with the assertion that Islam is perpetually relevant in its original form and is in no need of change. Deficiencies, according to this point of view, are not in the religion itself, but in its followers who ought to follow its commandments. In his article, Hasan Ismaik argues coherently in favor of the call for reform, placing his argument in the context of reason, balance, and moderation. In particular, Ismaik seeks to refute the rejection of the call for its presumed alignment with foreign interests. Ismaik's position may indeed be reflective of that of a plurality of Muslims, whose demand is high for a presentation of the faith compatible with their moral convictions and social mores. These are rooted in tolerance and mutual respect for differences, and based on an implicit recognition of the universal values of life, freedom, and dignity, as enshrined in international declarations and treaties.

Still, the call for religious reform faces a number of pertinent questions: Is religious reform possible? Is it needed? Would a premature push to implement it lead to counter-productive results? A more skeptical reading may note that the general shape of Islam in the 21st century, on the heels of an evolution initiated nearly 200 years ago, continues to diverge away from the potential for progressive reform. This reading carries no accusation that Islam as a whole is incapable of such reform. As correctly noted by Ismaik, religious expressions, Islamic and otherwise, are multiple and vary in place and time, in harshness and toleration, and in their adopted frameworks. Rather, the issue is that the topics of debate among the diverse Islamic schools of thought are articulated within the context of an implicit agreed-upon premise, perhaps often unconsciously adopted, that are novel in content but not in nomenclature. These premises contribute to the closing of the Islamic cognitive universe and deny the possibility of substantive reform. “Reform” is thus reduced to the abandonment or adoption of a certain practice or derivative idea. The

implicit premise with the most impact and consequence is the overstatement of the primacy of religion in the life of Muslims. It is a nearly unchallenged consensus among the proponents of the different religious views in the Arab and Islamic spheres that religion has a primary, principal, sometimes even an exclusive role in shaping the psychological, social, ethical, behavioral, and cognitive constitution for the individual and the collective in Muslim settings. Questioning this premise is often equated to apostasy; the supremacy of religion is thus not merely a premise, but also a taboo subject to be challenged.

Yet an empirical examination of Muslim communities, diachronically and synchronically, reveals instead wide variations. Religion is indeed an important component, but not necessarily the first, and certainly not the unique component of these communities. As such, the overemphasis on religion has amounted to a loss of focus on other necessary national productive functions, notably in the domains of the pure and applied sciences. While the contribution of most Muslim societies to hard science has receded, the designation of “scientist” (‘alim) in current Arabic usage has been reallocated to religious scholars—who have often ventured, with little display of modesty or due diligence, to give orations on scientific subjects well outside their expertise. Cosmology, biology, medicine, psychology, history, and geography are all subject to fact-scarce opinions. Is the Earth spherical or flat? According to some religious scholars, the evidence from the corpus is inconclusive, and both propositions are equally acceptable. This is merely one example of a trend. In seeking absolution from the accusation of scientific backwardness, many in the Arab and Muslim worlds lay the blame on Salafism. A doctrinal scholastic approach that favors ideological literalism, irredentism towards different religious orientations, and intellectual autarky, Salafism is accused of being responsible for the closing of the Islamic cognitive universe.

Critics of Salafism often invoke a renewed focus on Sufism—a frequent target of **Salafism** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/dueling-at-the-end-of-times>), which promotes spiritual ecstatic practices—as the means to re-open the Islamic cognitive space. Prominent Sufi figures from the past, notably those with world-wide renown, such as Ibn Arabi and Rumi, are mobilized to reinforce the claim that a return to the spirituality of Sufism may be the way to resist Salafi reductionism. The references to Ibn Arabi and Rumi are, however, both dissonant and anachronistic. Sufism today, in the same vein as Salafism, is a set of readings informed by its own continuous internal evolution, away from the philosophical contemplations of the past; it is not a reproduction of previous iterations of the stream of religious thought. In fact, today’s Sufism shares with Salafism the limitations of its cognitive universe. Would it possible to leverage Ibn Arabi and Rumi to regenerate a modern Islamic spiritual orientation? Maybe, but that would not be what Sufism is today, instead presenting a novel version that may claim affinity to the old and/or the current. No such version has so far materialized.

It is also important to emphasize that the decline of Sufism in many Islamic contexts was not caused by Salafism, even though Salafist movements continue to rage against their ecstatic nemesis. It was instead the result of developments internal to Sufism—notably the metastasis of individual meditative spiritual exercise to collective devotional praxis. External developments also played a role—most importantly the sapping of Sufism’s intellectual base through exposure to ideas of modernity. This process has unfolded over the past decades, even centuries. Sufism has responded and adapted to new needs at the expense of others, including those assumed as still prominent by reformers.

What is herein suggested is that the interaction of Islam with modernity—the “Enlightenment” rising from the West—has produced multiple modern Islamic forms. The more sustainable forms, however, are the ones with proclivity to harshness. This is, again, not due to the content and legacy of Islam, but to the historical and intellectual circumstances of the past two centuries. The aspect of Islamic scholarship that exhibited the most limitations and deficiencies in this modern era of facing and appropriating modernity is in the lack of critical consideration of epistemology, and the compensatory recourse to philological methods. These methods are presented sometimes as

revolutionary, subjecting some of the corpus to a text-critical and source-critical scrutiny. However, they almost completely exclude the foundational text of the Qur'an and the account of Divine revelation from any comparable scrutiny. When the late Egyptian theologian Nasr Abu Zayd dared touch that barrier in the 1990s, even with velvet gloves, he suffered a devastating reaction—excommunication, annulment of his marriage, and effective deportation. The result is that the only margin for “critical thinking” still available to institutional Islamic scholars is the “Qur'anist” debunking of Hadith—the record of the traditions attributed to Muhammad, the prophet of Islam—often phrased with a compensatory elevation of the Qur'anic text. This text is thus further immunized against any questioning that may arise in epistemological inquiry.

The exclusion of epistemology as a critical tool from the Islamic cognitive sphere limited its content to the transmitted religious corpus and reduced the potential for intellectual production to favor religious jurisprudence along strict subject boundaries and rules of analogy. This claim may appear at first sight arcane and granular, and thus irrelevant to the more comprehensive call for renewal and reform. It is not.

When the “Islamic State” group attacked Iraqi citizens of the Yazidi faith (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/arab-culture-and-the-yazidi-tragedy-context-and-accountability>)—killing their men, seizing their women and children, raping, enslaving, and trading in them, the collective of Islamic scholars failed to rise up to the gravity of the situation. Muslim citizens in Amman, Beirut, London, Jakarta, Rabat, and elsewhere expected the doctors of their religion, upon whom they rely for spiritual and moral guidance, to declare that these abhorrent misdeeds are not from Islam, the faith in their heart. The doctors of Islam failed these Muslims.

Islamic scholars did proclaim these crimes corrupt and hurtful to Islam. Some insisted that such practices, from which previous generations of Muslims had abstained, ought not be revived. Many Islamic scholars denounced the perpetrators as dissidents, as having gone astray, and condemned them for their disobedience towards religiously legitimate authorities. Yet none of these religious scholars publicly proclaimed that the murder of the innocent is prohibited, that enslavement is prohibited, that rape is prohibited, that human trafficking is prohibited, regardless of whether the victim is Muslim or not.

Herein lies the core of the problem with modern Islamic institutions

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-futile-quest-for-moderate-islam>). It is not that these Islamic scholars lack intellect or ethics—far from it. In the dominant forms of Islam today, however, their ironclad textual dependence prohibits them from providing satisfying vindication to Muslims eager to confirm the harmony of their religion with their values. Muslims are thus left facing the choice between the allegiance to a religion presented by some of its radical adherents as authorizing the killing, rape, and dispossession of disbelievers, or their deep conviction, now left unconfirmed, that their religion is the embodiment of moral values.

The Yazidi episode reveals that today's Islamic religious institution is incapable of the required reform. As a pre-requisite to satisfying the public demand to confirm the compatibility between the lived faith—in its ethical inclinations and tolerant expressions—and the referential scholastic form of the religion as it has developed into the 21st century, Islamic religious institutions need to engage in a revision, correction, re-direction, and re-balancing of its own evolutionary path—one that has reduced its sources of knowledge to a textual corpus, subject furthermore to drastic excisions, and has shrunken its cognitive universe to what can be derived from this diminished corpus.

Islamic history is replete with instances of similar points of reconsideration, resulting in successive transitions from one dominant form of the religion to another. The Islamic religious institution currently faces serious challenges underlining the imperative nature of a new moment of reconsideration. This process, however, cannot be achieved through a top-down resolution from an official authorized body, or through the pro-forma recommendations of a given conference, or through a rebranding in the desired direction—even though all such steps may be useful. The

reconsideration will instead be the painstaking result of years, maybe even decades, of research and debate centered on the critique of the previous phase and the discussion of the earlier putative forms of the religion. It will have to unfold along collaborative and adversarial lines, both within the religious institution and across the intellectual scene, with careful, meaningful incrementalism and away from political leverage. The urgency of the current situation may suggest to some that incrementalism is a feature that Islamic thought cannot afford. This is not the case: ignoring incrementalism would yield counter-productive results.

Were a novel form of scholastic Islam to be proclaimed today, featuring apparent compatibility with universal values, even as it would be lacking true textual support, it would certainly gain wide approval across the Islamic world—many Muslims are eagerly awaiting the emergence of such a movement. Yet this success would be ephemeral, and would suffer from continuous erosion due to radical critique. The propagation of the new form would in itself be a confirmation that universal values ought to be validated by a religious framework. The net result would thus be the lasting confirmation of the primacy, or even exclusiveness, of religious reference, and the dissipating compatibility of this reference with universal values. A further opportunity is thus accorded to radical thought to seek to influence.

This line of reasoning does not contradict Ismaik's [call for the renewal of religious discourse around reform](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-plea-for-moderate-islam) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-plea-for-moderate-islam>). It does however, lower the expectations that his call would yield positive results in the short term. Meanwhile, the need for intellectual reform to support social, political, and cultural growth in the Arab sphere and across the Islamic world is one of an immediate nature. There may be a silver lining in the gap between this immediate need and the ability of the religious institution to deliver. It reveals that the paternalism of the religious institution over society is neither unavoidable nor imperative.

Undoubtedly, religious institutions—Islamic, Christian, and other—remain an important referential framework for culture, behavior, faith, and ethics for their believers

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Iraq-Coronavirus-Religion-Sunni-Shia>). However, the past century has witnessed the confirmation and fresh emergence of other referential frameworks—social, communal, civil, as well as political. These collective frameworks, together with the religious institutions, amount to a bonding national order in each setting, itself integrated into a global one based on shared values and recognized rights. The reliance is on this order, as a totality, even when particular elements are lagging.

Most believers may intuitively realize that the failure of religious scholars to prohibit murder, enslavement, and rape is the product of a deficiency in the scholastic methods, not the religious essence. While hesitant to proclaim it, they are thus ahead of the religious institution. Most believers and non-believers alike may rely on their innate virtue to ascertain that the depravity of the “Islamic State” is evil, even if not denounced by the scholars, and would consider it to be criminal. Citizens, therefore, through civil action, are capable of shaping a shared framework of values and boundaries, even when the contribution of the religious institution is deficient.

In the debate between those who advocate the need for religious reform, those who maintain reservations by assessing it as driven by ulterior motives, and those who reject it as unnecessary, it may be useful to add a fourth party—one that proposes that religious reform, as worthy as it is, ought not be the first concern in seeking the rehabilitation of society and state in the face of looming challenges. The first imperative should instead be supporting citizens in their critical engagement of all referential frameworks and in developing and confirming their understanding that these frameworks are at their service as sovereign citizens. It may be time to transcend the model of the nation as a family, with paternalistic institutions patronizing citizens assumed to have little agency.

The renewal of religious discourse is, first and foremost, a need for the religious institution, before being a need for the citizenry. Achieving it would provide this institution with the means to maintain its relevance among other

national referential frameworks. The conditions for success here are that such a renewal be true in form to its content, and that it avoid the pitfall of an accelerated deployment that would ultimately fail to yield lasting results. ❖

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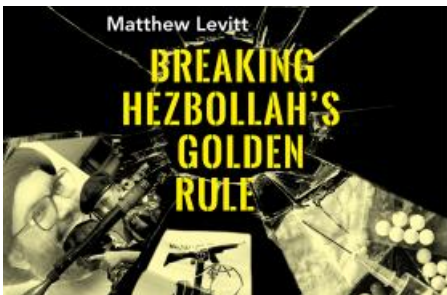
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