

## *Editorial*

One of the paradoxes facing conservative Muslims in North America is that while their apologetic literature stresses “Islam as justice” – that justice is the paradigmatic Qur’anic virtue after piety – in the eyes of the general public the progressive Muslims have claimed the mantle of justice. This is a shame, since conservative or traditional Muslims are held to be generally unjust, whereas, as followers of Islam’s traditional teachings, they ought to be at the forefront of the struggle for social and economic justice. There are two dimensions to this perception: one is externally generated and constitutes a very real threat to North America’s Muslims; the second one is internally generated and constitutes a significant barrier to Islam’s positive reception by North American society.

It is not an original statement to note that Islam’s general public image is bad. Many scholars, among them Edward Said, Karim Karim, and Jack Shaheen, have demonstrated time and again how the western legacy of Orientalism moved out of the academy and into the secular media with the rise of the film and print media industries. Such post-9/11 experts as Mahmoud Hamdani have noted the refining of this image into a “good Muslim”/“bad Muslim” dichotomy. The secular or “moderate” Muslims receive the accolade of the “good Muslims,” while traditional and conservative Muslims are the “bad Muslims.” Efforts by Daniel Pipes and other neo-conservative writers to ensure that the general public and policy makers do not distinguish between moderate conservatives and those who endorse violence to achieve their goals have, unfortunately, been very successful.

The Clarion Fund’s mass mailing of the DVD “Radical Obsession” to 28 million households in September 2008 clarifies the enormous power behind such neo-conservative goals. “Radical Obsession,” which purports to be only about jihadism, manages through its imagery to connect all Muslims to violence. An excellently executed piece of propaganda, it will likely have the desired goal: creating fear in the general public’s mind about conservative Muslims. (Secular and progressive Muslims will also suffer in the long run, as the general public will not be able to distinguish between a secular and a non-secular Muslim, which is why the support voiced by some of these Muslims vis-à-vis the DVD is disappointing, to say the least.)<sup>1</sup>

Conservative Muslims have an uphill battle to demonstrate their commitment to justice: North Americans are pre-programmed by Orientalism’s long history and thus are predisposed to think the worst of Muslims. When seeking to address injustice in the Muslim community, media professionals tend to seek out secular or progressive Muslims for comment. Since North Americans generally have a high regard for someone who is perceived as fighting for justice, these Muslims are

admired for their attempts to stand up for what is right, often against real or assumed community disapproval.

This dichotomy in media representation is undoubtedly partly manufactured, since it makes good copy to build on the stock theme of “conservative Muslim” equals “bad Muslim.” I exist in Toronto journalists’ rolodexes as a “conservative” Muslim and am often called upon to represent that point of view. A reporter once contacted me to get the “conservative” reaction to the launch of a new Muslim women’s magazine that was “scandalously” not featuring women in headscarves on its cover. I said that given the negative imagery about Islam these days, any magazine that gave a positive identity to young Muslim girls was to be welcomed. The reporter, who was disappointed with my reaction, said that the other conservative Muslims she had contacted were, in essence, saying the same or similar things. She asked me if I could give her a contact for someone else. Clearly, she was looking for the “conservatives condemn new magazine” voice and was having trouble finding it. No doubt if she dug hard enough she would have found some imam somewhere to provide the condemnation. But her real story was that in spite of differences, conservatives were welcoming the new magazine. We were not quoting what she wanted, and so we were left out of her story.

Media manipulation, however, is not the entire story. In fact, the conservative Muslim community does bear some of the responsibility for this “good Muslim”/“bad Muslim” dichotomy. This is the internal dimension referred to above. I say this because while promoting justice as Islam’s pre-eminent virtue, conservative Muslims are not readily seen as addressing issues of injustice within their own communities. When they complain of injustice, it is usually western injustice against Muslims.

In 1994, a few months after embracing Islam, I tried to organize a rally opposing the Taliban’s denial of education to women. Conservative Muslims whom I consulted actually resisted my efforts for one of two reasons: yes, the Taliban should not be doing this, but we should not oppose our Muslim brothers; or yes, the Taliban should not be doing this, but we should not expose our “dirty laundry” in the hostile and anti-Islam West. Rather, in the name of solidarity, we should shore up support for the Taliban and “defend” Islam. The girls’ lack of access to education, their denial of an Islamic right, and the dire consequences for a society with a population of ignorant women was swept under the carpet in these broader concerns.

This kind of response has been echoed in a myriad of ways over the last decade. When scurrilous newspaper articles highlight an injustice faced by Muslim women worldwide, Muslims are rightly angry because most of the articles lay the blame at the feet of “Islam.” They rightly grumble about media misrepresentation. But for many conservatives, the public anger stops there and goes no further. What of the incident that prompted the media piece in the first place? Where are the rallies and demonstrations? Why is there no rally against the incident, but only against the messengers? By contrast, it is fairly easy to organize a decent turn-out for a rally condemning Canadian or American foreign policy.

It is a human foible to point out another individual's faults with ease while avoid looking at one's own faults. The conservative Muslim community, however, should be courageous enough to address more publicly the injustices found within its own community. The argument that "dirty laundry" must not be washed in public may once have been true (I am not so sure), but in a post-9/11 environment the equation is different: hostile external forces are able to convince many uninformed members of the general public that Islam is unsalutary because the latter are not aware of any social justice efforts undertaken by conservative Muslims. Such silence leads others to assume complicity in (or approval of) the injustice.<sup>2</sup> Certainly those efforts are there, and certainly the conservative community discusses injustices. Unfortunately, it has miscalculated the effect of not having members of the general public see them addressing these issues.

Since 9/11, the conservative Muslim leadership has come to understand the responsibility of Muslims to do better outreach in order to demonstrate the humanity and ordinariness of Canadian or American Muslims. For example, in 2004 CAIR launched a nationwide "I am an American Muslim" campaign, which sought to highlight that Muslims in the United States are just like any other ordinary American. ICNA launched a series of billboards in the New York City subway to reach out to the subway riders with a positive message about Islam. ISNA created a new Office for Interfaith and Community Alliances in May 2007, to "help break down barriers of mistrust and misunderstanding, and help form genuine partnerships of faith and ethics" ([www.isna.net/Interfaith/pages/IOICA-Staff.aspx](http://www.isna.net/Interfaith/pages/IOICA-Staff.aspx)). The flagship magazines of ISNA and ICNA tackle issues inside the community, such as domestic violence, racism, and poverty. But much more needs to be done to discuss these issues outside the "safe" zone of the insider circles. The general public needs to see the community actually working to implement the lofty ideals that it writes and speaks about at conferences ... words being translated into action.

In addition, a greater effort should be made to emphasize these points to the laity. For example, conservative Muslims rarely applaud the efforts of secular or progressive Muslims to obtain social justice inside the community; instead, they are often criticized as being "westernized" or not "true Muslims." Female activists seeking to help wives who are being abused by their husbands or seeking divorce can receive death threats from fellow Muslims. As if murder is not *úarġm*, but helping a woman get a divorce from an abusive husband is!

Secular Muslims should stop their anti-Islamist campaign and try to come to some sort of *modus vivendi* with conservative Muslims, one that respects the conservatives' understanding of Islam (even while disagreeing), since their voice currently serves not as a positive catalyst for reform in the community, but rather as a disservice to their co-religionists (and ultimately to all Muslims), by the way it plays into the neoconservative agenda. Due to this, policymakers are less inclined to accommodate conservative Muslims who are seeking to live their lives according to their beliefs in North America. For example, instead of supporting a young Muslim woman's right to wear the headscarf while playing soccer, the leaders of the Muslim

Canadian Congress opposed it on the grounds that wearing it was not mandated in the Qur'an).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, a media less inclined to seek out conservative voices for shock value and to focus on Muslims who work tirelessly for positive social change in their community is also required in order for the general public to have a better appreciation of conservative Muslims' successful relationship to issues of justice.

This issue of AJISS opens with Abdul-Samad Abdullah's "Intertext and Allusion in the Qur'anic Presentation of the Story of Noah." This article argues that the repetitions in the Qur'anic story of Noah (Nuh, peace be upon him) do not reflect incoherence in the Qur'an, as is often argued by western commentators, but rather serve an important function in the unity of the Qur'anic message. Each *surah* has stylistic needs that shape how Noah's story is told, but these are variations on a theme, not a disjointed medley. Abdullah's article is a very important contribution to the Qur'anic studies literature, as it anchors the study of the Qur'an from Muslim perspective rather than a Eurocentric use of categories and analysis. This helps reveal the Qur'an's attractiveness and appeal to a non-Arabic ear, which can be deaf to its beauty and message.

The next article is Israr Ahmad Khan's "Amin Ahsan Islahi: An Introduction to His *Tafsir* Methodology." An Indian scholar who sought to establish an innovative *tafsir* methodology based upon the Qur'an's coherence, he developed an innovative approach that differed from the earlier scholars' preference for "abrogation" when faced with apparently conflicting verses. Islahi sought to tie together all of a *surah*'s verses to convey "a unity of meaning" that leads to a "unity of thought." In some ways, his work foreshadows feminist attempts at hermeneutic interpretations of the Qur'an that seek a coherence in Qur'anic visions of women's equality.

Abdul Azim Islahi's "The Monetary Thought of Two Sixteenth-Century Muslim Scholars" resonates particularly now. As we were preparing this issue, the world was hit with a credit crisis of huge proportions and some analysts were talking about the beginning of a new depression. There is evidence, however, that Islamic banks would weather the storm better than their western counterparts due to Shari'ah constraints against usury, excessive risk taking, and such investment instruments as derivatives.<sup>4</sup> While Islahi's study of al-Suyuti (d. 1506) and al-Tumurtashi (d. 1598), both of whom wrote about money, concludes that they introduced little by way of innovative thinking, it is instructive as regards how they recommended dealing with the financial crisis of their times, notably that the sovereign alone should mint money. At a time when the world economies are controlled by privately owned "central" banks, such recommendations are worth serious consideration.

Wesley Williams' study of a different thinker in a different context continues the theme of looking for new methods by which we can study the Qur'an: the relationship of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam to Ibn Hanbal and the classical Sunni exegetical tradition. In "Black Muslim Theology and the Classical Islamic Tradition: Possibilities of a Rapprochement," he argues that instead of considering Elijah Muhammad against an ahistorical schema of orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy, his

thinking should be placed alongside competing traditions that have existed throughout Islamic history. Williams argues that such a comparison will once again put Blackamericans in control of their identity production, a role that they lost when immigrant Muslims came to define “American Muslim.”

In a sad coincidence, Elijah Muhammad’s son and heir Warith Deen Muhammad passed away while this issue was being prepared. May Allah (swt) grant him peace and forgive his sins. We reprint with permission in our Forum section Azhar Usman’s tribute to WD Muhammad.

The last paper presents yet another innovative and original way to approach studying Islam, in this case how Islam relates to governance. Chaiwat Satha-Anand’s “The Ship And The Stranger: A Metaphorical Approach to Governance and Islam” discusses how metaphors can open the way to thinking of new solutions to recurrent problems of government. He provides new interpretations of two Islamic metaphors, the “stranger” and the “ship,” to show how Muslims might develop a pluralistic conception of governing.

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Finally, to end on a sad note. Dr. Mona M. Abul-Fadl, who worked closely with the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) during the late 1980s and 1990s, as director of its Western Thought Project and a lecturer at the Northern Virginia-based Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences (GSISS, now Cordoba University) passed away in September after a long battle with cancer. She was the wife of Dr. Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, a member of the board of IIIT. *Inna lillāhi wa inna ilayhi rājiʿūn*. We pray that Allah (swt) grant her rest in the grave and the highest level of *jannah*.

Born in Cairo, she received her doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London and went on to become a full professor at Cairo University, balancing her time between teaching there and at GSISS. She was also a Fulbright scholar at the Old Dominion University and an exchange scholar at the Center for Research and Study of Mediterranean Societies (CRESM) in Aix-en-Provence, France.

She published several books, among them *Introducing Islam from Within* (2008), *Toward Global Cultural Renewal* (1995), *Contrasting Epistemics: Tawūḥīd, Social Science and the Vocationist* (1994), *Where East Meets West: An Agenda for the Islamic Revival* (1991), *Cultural Parodies and Parodicing Cultures* (1991), *Islam and the Middle East: The Aesthetics of a Political Inquiry* (1990), *Paradigms in Political Science Revisited: Critical Options and Muslim Perspective* (1989), and *Achilles Heel in the Charybdis: A Treatise on Local Government in Egypt* (1983).

In addition, she was a member of the advisory board of Al-Hewar Center for Arab Culture and Dialog, an organization that seeks to bring about greater mutual understanding between the Arab-American community and American society at large, as well as an active participant in the Association for the Study of Women &

Civilization (Cairo). Abul-Fadl also and served as Zahira Abdin Chair for the Study of Women and Gender at GSISS and developed an extensive website on women's studies ([www.muslimwomenstudies.com](http://www.muslimwomenstudies.com)). She was laid to rest in Sterling, VA, on 24 September 2008.

## Endnotes

1. The President of the Muslim Canadian Congress, a secular Muslim organization, spoke at a public screening of this DVD, which was organized by AISH Toronto (Aish HaTorah International, a Jewish Educational Organisation) and Ezer Mizion (The Israel Health Support Organization).
2. Watch [www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g15Wk-1zNg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0g15Wk-1zNg), for a brief speech demonstrating that Muslims' silence over injustices is proof that Islam is an objectionable religion.
3. "Muslims are not required to cover up," *Globe and Mail*, 2 Dec. 2008, p. 4.
4. Faiza Saleh Ambah, "Islamic Banking: Steady in Shaky Times: Principles Based on Religious Law Insulate Industry From Worst of Financial Crisis," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Friday, 31 Oct. 2008, p. A-16.

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