Liberal Islam: A Source Book

By Charles Kurzman. Oxford University Press, 1998, 340pp.

Reviewing anthologies is not an easy task, for they typically include a large number of articles by different authors, and in this case also on six different themes. I shall therefore not even attempt to review or summarize the individual contributions, but focus on the author's rationale and his justification for considering this particular collection as representative of liberal Islam. The issues raised by the authors in this anthology, which seek to challenge many medieval and orthodox interpretations of Islam, will certainly be familiar to most of the readers of *AJISS*.

In this interesting book, Kurzman presents a fascinating conundrum to Muslim and orientalist scholars of Islam who seek to impose a monolithic and ahistorical character on Islam, and choose to either ignore or marginalize the continuity of difference in understanding and interpretation in the still developing corpus of Islamic thought. Kurzman presents an anthology of writings by a diverse group of contemporary Muslims that clearly demonstrate a concern for democracy, rights of women, freedom of thought, rights of minorities

and progress. Suggesting that these writings reflect liberal concerns, he claims that there is a streak of liberal thinking among contemporary Muslims, and taking cue from the Indian scholar Asaf Ali Asghar Fyzee, he calls it "liberal Islam."

Kurzman advances the intellectual justification for his project on two levels. On one level, he seeks to demonstrate the emerging diversity in Western scholarship of Islam and, on the other, he seeks to highlight the traditional diversity in Islamic thought and Muslim understanding of Islam. He recognizes that the orientalist view of Islam is the predominant paradigm in Western scholarship but argues that this is not the only view. Indeed he suggests that a small group of Western scholars are precipitating a paradigm shift in Islamic studies, focusing on liberal views of Islam and eschewing the orientalist obsession with radicalism and fundamentalism. It is to this emerging Western discourse that Kurzman seeks to contribute.

However, unlike his predecessors he does not wish to focus on the liberal ideas of Muslim thinkers. Rather he wishes to highlight the Islamic content of these ideas that resemble Western liberalism, although, and to his credit, he is clear that he is not trying to celebrate Muslims who echo Western ideas. Clearly Kurzman's project is highly ambitious as he is seeking to demonstrate that there are other voices on Islam in the West that seek the identity between Islam and the West, unlike the orientalist discourses which only harp on about the differences.

Kurzman concedes that Islamic discourses are diverse and have, in his view, demonstrated three tendencies. He labels the dominant discourse as "customary Islam" which is essentially the interpretation of Islam as advanced by the local 'ulama' and could be equated with the prevailing dominant practices in a given region. He recognizes that even "customary Islam" is diverse since it is usually a combination of essential Islamic principles which are global and its local manifestations which are colored by culture and local customs.

The second tradition, Kurzman argues, is "revivalist Islam" which is a trend that pays greater attention to the letter of the doctrine of Islam and to Arabic language, that undermines the customary practices which the revivalists deem as deviations, and challenges the political legitimacy of local governments as usurpers of God's sovereignty. Needless to say, Kurzman sees "revivalist Islam" as an antithesis to "customary Islam." Surprisingly, Kurzman is completely silent on the revivalists' opposition to the West and its political domination of Muslim lands, as well as on the strong focus on reinterpretations and ijtihad present in the discourse of "revivalist Islam." His analysis of "revivalist Islam" also ignores the customary character of *tajdīd* and *islāh*. Regrettably, his analysis of this important Islamic trend is superficial and colored by typi-

cal secular antipathy for the movement, and his definition of "revivalist Islam" is highly orientalist in character. This itself would undermine the acceptance of his arguments among Muslim readers because they would perhaps see his work as a subtler version of orientalism. Taking a cue from Kurzman himself, we could perhaps call this new Western discourse "liberal orientalism."

The third tradition, "liberal Islam," is the subject of this anthology. Kurzman's discussion of "liberal Islam" leaves one with interesting insights and the depth of his research, or rather search for liberal thought in Islamic discourses, is impressive. However, at times, one is left with a sense of unease when Kurzman groups those who oppose Islam and those who seek to reform it under the same label of "liberal Islam." For example, the well-known Marxist scholar Hassan Hanafi is presented as a liberal Islamic thinker. However, he does seem to recognize that there are secular Muslims whom he excludes from the membership of "liberal Islam."

As a Muslim, I personally find it unacceptable that Kurzman should underplay the distinction between those who oppose the implementation of the Shari'ah and those who seek to reform and reinterpret it. Such an oversight can only come from someone who does not take Islamic identity seriously. There is, from the point of view of *'aqīda*, a huge difference between claiming that the extant understanding of divine law needs reinterpretation and claiming that the divine law itself does not need to be followed. The success of liberal thinkers in the Muslim world depends on this crucial issue. Indeed, if the reformers themselves do not believe in Islam or practice it, any attempt to reformulate it by them will gain very little acceptance in the Muslim world. Moreover, Kurzman groups together extremely diverse individuals, such as Shah Waliullah, Hanafi, Ghannushi, Benazir Bhutto, and includes individuals like Afghani in the liberal fold, whereas most revivalists claim Afghani as one of their most prominent intellectual forerunners. Such lack of clarity in the identity of liberal Muslims reduces even the heuristic value of the concept.

Interestingly, Kurzman fails to note that the two important characteristics of Islamic liberalism, reason and appreciation of modernity, are equally valued by revivalists. He argues that the critique of *taqlīd* and the advocacy of ijtihad are the major philosophical/ methodological gambit of the liberals although this is true of the revivalists too. Indeed Mawdudi, Banna, Qutb and others have all called for ijtihad and the end of *taqlīd*. According to Kurzman, the three modes of liberal Islam are based on the view that Islamic liberals have on the Shari'ah. On a similar note, the author is aware of the idea of Islamic modernism but does little to discuss how the idea of liberal Islam differs from Islamic modernism.

Kurzman makes an interesting point when he equates *taqlīd* to authority and ijtihad to reason, although while the intellectual appeal of this equation is obvious, it remains problematic and misleading. First, it must be recognized that the practice of ijtihad is a form of *taqlīd* because the scholars who practice ijtihad are nevertheless refering to the views of the great scholars and jurists of the classical age. To employ reason when indulging in ijtihad therefore does not necessarily imply free thinking, but suggests specific methodologies and incorporates existing criteria for independent reasoning. Ijtihad is not an escape from the Islamic heritage but a revival of a less practiced tradition. Secondly, equating *taqlīd* to authority implies that many of the Muslim practices that are based on *taqlīd* are themselves devoid of reasoning. Yet, although it is true that someone who is imitating is not employing his/her reason, the actual principle that is being imitated may very well be based on concrete reasoning. Kurzman's dichotomy of authority and reason could appear attractive but it is dangerously misleading and almost demeaning of Islam's entire heritage. Indeed, just because past understandings of Islam have gained great authority and even become barriers to new thinking, does not mean that they are not based on reason. There seems to be a hidden assumption that new thinking would necessarily lead to conclusions corresponding to Western liberalism although new thinking could very well lead to old answers and positions. This assumption needs to be explored by both the so-called liberal Muslim thinkers and Western scholars, focusing on liberal Islam.

From a political perspective, Kurzman's project will certainly pay great dividends in encouraging dialogue between liberals in the West and liberal Muslims. There is no doubt that there is a "third discourse" emerging among Muslims everywhere, and it certainly could have many commonalities with Western liberalism. Kurzman's book takes an additional step towards identifying this discourse and some of its characteristic concerns. From an academic perspective it is also going to prove a success. Indeed its approach and the collection it carries will make it an important book for undergraduate courses on Islam and even on contemporary Muslim politics.

M. A. Muqtedar Khan
Managing Editor
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