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Editorial

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Background

Professor Mona Siddiqui, in her engaging autobiography – *My Way: A Muslim Woman's Journey* (2015) – reminds us that apart from a handful of works, classical Islam did not produce systematic treatises on ethics, since the subject was subsumed under law. Such revered pre-modern legal texts, were innocent of the global vocabulary of the modern age, whether liberalism, human rights or democratic pluralism. The anguished question for Muslims today is how to align such texts with contemporary contexts.

A hundred years ago, Muslim thinkers across the Muslim world, especially in India and Egypt, began to lay the intellectual foundation for the critical renewal of the Islamic tradition – variously described as critical traditionalism or reformism. However, in the last fifty years scholars seeking to build on such foundations have found themselves battling against two powerful currents. These are the omnipresence of repressive, authoritarian regimes, and the dehumanizing, reductionist impact of Islamist and Salafi/Wahhabi movements on intellectual life across the Muslim world.

The devastating impact of both phenomena has been documented in an outstanding work of critical traditionalism by the distinguished American scholar of Islamic law, Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl: *Reasoning with God, Reclaiming Sharia in the Modern Age* (2014). El Fadl documents how repressive regimes systematically close down institutional spaces where critical thinking occurs, brutally silencing critical thinkers.

El Fadl is scathing about the intellectual failures over half a century of Islamist and Salafi thought. The former became addicted to a self-congratulatory apologetics and anachronistic claims that Islam pioneered democracy, gender equality and human rights. This undercut the need to generate intellectually rigorous and self-critical scholarship. At the same time, with traditional scholarship thinned out

through government control, space was created for 'Wahhabism' – the term used by critics of the Salafi, pointing to its founder Muhammad b. Abdel Wahhab (1703-92).

El Fadl proceeds to analyse the character and reasons for the spread of Wahhabi Islam – not least Saudi petrol dollars – along with its supremacist and insular mindset, its literalism, rank intolerance of rationalism, Sufism, and Shi'ite Islam. In addition, non-Muslims are derided and demeaned. As a result of these multiple assaults, traditional Islam has been hollowed out.

El Fadl's book contains a moving account of how he breaks off his friendship with two leading Egyptian Sunni dignitaries: the current *shaykh* and rector of Azhar (the venerable centre of traditional, Sunni Islam in Cairo) and the chief mufti of Egypt, because both supported the military coup against a civilian government comprising a majority of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party. For El Fadl their action renders imperative the need to reclaim and restate the Islamic tradition so that it can no longer harbour despots and tyrants. This was the challenge *par excellence* for political thinking within Islamic legal jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which, scarred by the early civil wars following Muhammad's death, generally opted for political quietism.

Where Salafi Muslims postulate a golden age – that of the first three Muslim generations after the death of the prophet Muhammad (the *salaf*) – as an imagined, historical utopia, ripe for retrieval and reproduction in the modern world, Islamists, humiliated by their powerlessness vis a vis the West, reconfigure Islam as an ideology of nationalist defiance to the Western 'other'. This antagonism to the West frequently eclipses Islam's vocation as a moral vision given to humanity – a vision of Islam kept alive by some Sufi traditions. As a footnote to El Fadl's study, we might note that where Islamist met Wahhabi theology, the fruit of the resulting hybrid was not utopia but ISIS dystopia.

Wahhabi/Salafi Islam precedes western colonialism, but the intolerance of historic Islam's diversity it embodies is exacerbated by western intervention. The Muslim world emerged from colonialism with two parallel educational systems; one consisting of western colleges and universities which train the new elites, the other consisting of centres of traditional Islamic formation – *dar al 'ulum*/'seminaries' – which train the '*ulama*, Islam's religious scholars. With a few exceptions both embody different pedagogies, while alumni from both are suspicious and even contemptuous of the other.

Indeed, Islamism or political Islam appealed to the products of the modern state, such as journalists, engineers, and teachers in the expanding schooling system, who were impatient of the *‘ulama* for presiding over an Islamic tradition. They judged this tradition to have become fossilized and unable to respond to western ideologies, such as nationalism, communism, fascism and liberalism, which were flooding into the Muslim world in the 1920s and 1930s.

Professor Ebrahim Moosa, a South African scholar now teaching in America, researching his new book – *What is a Madrasa?* (2015) – returned to the Indian seminaries at which he had been trained three decades earlier, to ascertain whether they had begun to study any modern disciplines. His bleak conclusion was that across South Asia he could find no seminary that integrated modern science, social sciences and the humanities in conversation with the core traditional curriculum. This drew on a loathing of the West whose knowledge traditions were viewed as poisonous.

Islam in Britain today

This brief *tour d’horizon* of influential trends in contemporary Islam provides a necessary context for the essays which follow. British Muslims, now in the third and even fourth generation, are not immune from the turmoil of much of the Muslim world, especially since some 70 per cent have roots in South Asia. Here, the different generations navigate relations across three distinct religious and social worlds: traditional Islam imported from their relatives’ homeland; expressions of Islam drawn from across the wider Muslim world – the *umma* [‘community’] – now accessible at a click of a mouse; and Britain itself, where among a new generation of graduates and professionals, many are seeking new and expansive readings of Islam to connect with their lived experience.

It is possible to capture in three words the situation facing British Muslims: crisis, candour and context. Crises within any minority community can engender candour and self-criticism, as well as defensiveness and denial. In the following essays we quarry from a rich vein of constructive self-criticism which has emerged within the last decade. This trend is evidenced in an innovative quarterly journal, *Critical Muslim*, launched from London in 2012. El Fadl and Moosa’s work have been appreciatively reviewed within its pages.

Many of the hopeful developments documented in this issue of

Crucible concern the need to contextualize Islam in Britain. Inevitably, when Muslim migrants first began to arrive in large numbers from the 1960s to fill post-war labour, shortages in textiles, foundries and transport, their Islam was embedded in the ethnic cultures they had brought with them. For the first generation of Muslim migrants, most of whom came from rural areas of South Asia, culture, religion and ethnicity were unselfconsciously conflated. For their children and grandchildren this would no longer do, as they faced questions from friends, neighbours and colleagues at work. This has forced them to become self-conscious and articulate. As questioning became more relentless and critical, post 9/11 and 7/7, they struggled to get adequate answers from their religious leaders – the *‘ulama*. This exposed systematic deficits in their religious formation with many either trained overseas or in ‘seminaries’ in Britain which were little more than satellites of the mother house overseas.

For this reason, there is much experimentation to ‘contextualise’ Islam in Britain. Two examples illustrate this. First, Dr Abdullah Sahin, a young Turkish scholar who has written one of the few seminal works on Islam written by a Muslim scholar in the UK and which undergirds a pioneering M.Ed in Islamic education he has developed at Warwick University. His *New Directions in Islamic Education* (2014) is based on his direct experience of Islamic education in Turkey and his research in Britain and Kuwait.

Sahin analyses with forensic rigour a shared crisis in religious formation across the Muslim world which renders its practitioners incapable of enabling a dialogue with the Islamic past or contemporary realities. At the heart of the problem is a style of Islamic formation characterized as an instruction-centred and rigid inculcation process, which largely ignores the personal agency of the learner. His research in three Birmingham upper schools was focused on how young sixth form Muslim students interpreted and sought meaning in their religion.

His research demonstrates that their religious identity is constructed along two axes of commitment and exploration which generated a three-fold typology of religious identities: a diffuse mode, where neither commitment or exploration is present; a *foreclosed* mode, where a strong commitment is unaccompanied by exploration; and an *exploratory* mode where there is exploration without strong commitment. Sahin worried that if the *‘ulama* could not connect with the exploratory impulse, these students in time would become diffuse

or foreclosed. The foreclosed mode effectively blocks their personal development and hinders them from relating meaningfully to wider society.

This was the impulse which led Sahin to develop his M.Ed to provide the *'ulama* and other Muslim educators with the historical and contextual skills to make sense of the revered, pre-modern texts they studied and to enable a critical and constructive conversation with the best insights drawn from contemporary educational thinking. This is necessary because most of the *'ulama* on his M.Ed course are themselves 'foreclosed', given the nature of their own religious formation.

The role of women

The second example follows directly from Sahin's research: if most of those Sahin dubbed 'foreclosed' were male, most of those who were 'exploratory' were women. Here we might speak of a quiet revolution as educated, Muslim women are beginning to have a presence, voice and impact on public, civic and intellectual life. A majority of the Muslim MPs, 8 of 15, are now women. An increasing number of Muslim academics are female. The standard introduction to Islam in Britain and the best recent study entitled *Contemporary Issues in Islam* (2015) are both written by female, Muslim academics. Such women are increasingly drawing on the innovative and accessible, multi-lingual research commissioned and distributed by such international Muslim women's movements as Musawah ('equality' in Arabic) – musawah.org.

Such scholarship underwrites the work of Muslim women's activists such as the Muslim Women's Network for the UK (MWNUK) based in Birmingham. Its young South African director has herself done master's research on Islamic studies and gender and had copies of musawah's latest book for sale – *Men in Charge? Rethinking authority in Muslim legal tradition* (2015) – when I visited.

MWNUK are committed to gender equality and human rights, justified Islamically. They began work in 2003 and through advocacy and research provide independent advice to government departments on issues touching Muslim women and public policy; female voices traditionally rendered inaudible through government dependency on male-dominated, Muslim organizations. By 2016 they had some 700 members, individuals and organizations, encompassing academics,

students, voluntary sector employees; health professionals, experts in women's rights and migration issues, business women, local government employees, police officers and housewives. A majority were between 22 and 45 years old and 20 per cent were non-Muslims.

Their activities include a travelling exhibition showcasing successful Muslim women rolled out to schools and colleges; training courses to study classical Muslim jurisprudence, Qur'anic interpretation and contemporary Muslim scholarship which supports their local project work; helplines to deal with social problems around domestic violence, divorce and health issues. They recently threatened to lodge a formal complaint with the Charity Commission to investigate why all 39 trustees of Birmingham Central mosque are men, as well as writing to the leaders of both Conservative and Labour parties complaining that British Pakistani politicians systematically discriminate against women activists who want to become councillors and members of parliament.

Such organizations are developing an Islamic social ethics which bypasses the rigidities and entrenched inequalities of Islamic law. The main disappointment of this edition is that the Muslim woman invited to contribute a paper had to pull out at the last moment, leaving inadequate time to find a replacement. However, we do have one female contributor, the Revd Bonnie Evans-Hills, the St Albans diocesan inter-faith adviser, who has provided a moving reflection on inter-faith work as it involves women from a range of traditions, especially Christian and Muslim. Bonnie reminds us that in the present climate of anti-Muslim suspicion, it is often Muslim women who are particularly vulnerable.

New perspectives

The other three contributions illuminate and exemplify the emergence of an Islamic social ethics, as well as the significant resistance to it. Dilwar Hussain, academic and activist, is the chair of New Horizons, an Islamic reformist movement he helped to create. In his article, Dilwar outlines both the nature of the opposition to such reformist thinking, its continuing imperative, and Islamic resources which can be drawn upon to sustain it.

Dr Jonathan Chaplin, a specialist in Christian political thought but a relative newcomer to the study of Islam, develops an attractive proposal for such an exchange: a 'theology of democratic pluralism'

which he contrasts with two other current models, public secularism or a neo-Christendom position. He also hazards a few comments on the prospects for an Islamic democratic pluralism.

Finally, Dr Sahin, whose important research we have already touched upon, makes clear the complex factors that need to be addressed, if Muslims in Britain and Europe are to develop Islamic expressions of being British/European, and British articulations of Islam. He also outlines the shape this might take with regard to a theology of human dignity, an urgent desideratum for contemporary Islam.

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