

Contemporary Islam

Dynamic, not Static

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Introduction

Few contemporary topics are more controversial than Islamic interpretation. In the West as well as in the Muslim world, interpreting Islam has become a virtual “cottage industry.” The ranks of interpreters are incredibly diverse, including terrorism experts, government policymakers, and journalists as well as religious studies scholars, political scientists, Muslim *‘alims* and religious fundamentalists of varied confessional backgrounds. Though traditional religious leaders would not recognize many interpreters’ views as authoritative, interest in how Islam is understood and practiced has expanded dramatically in recent years. Among Muslims as well as among non-Muslims, it seems that everyone has become a stakeholder in the future of Islam.

For most Westerners, tragic events such as 9/11 in Washington DC and New York City, 3/11 in Madrid, and 7/7 in London provide the context of relevance for interest in Islam. Why have a significant minority of Muslims accepted radical teachings? What are these teachings, and how can they be counteracted? Though many Muslims share these concerns about the misappropriation of Islamic symbolism, the stakes for believers are different, and higher. Committed Muslims cannot be interested in Islamic interpretation for instrumental reasons alone; they must also think seriously about issues of truthfulness and authenticity: How can Muslims remain true to the essential teachings of a 1400-year-old monotheistic tradition, while also enhancing their ability to engage the modern world and overcome experiences of marginalization and decline?

Whatever the context of our interest may be, there is one question that ought to precede all efforts to generalize about what Islam demands of those who adhere to it: *Whose* Islam? Just as there are many Christianities and Judaisms, so, too, are there many formulations of Islamic piety and politics that contend for the attention of Muslims, and that represent themselves as the only “authentic” perspective to those who do not declare themselves believers. Only clear recognition of Islam’s internal diversity can prevent gross distortions of contemporary Islamic realities, and provide a basis for exploration of more profound questions about how precepts of faith are translated into historical practices.

Whether we approach the subject of Islamic interpretation from “within” or “without,” accepting Islam’s internal diversity is the absolutely vital point of departure for approaching crucial questions about how Muslims can cope with worldly

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challenges constructively: What does it mean to be Muslim in the twentieth (CE)/fifteenth (CE) century? What can contemporary Islamic interpretation offer in response to issues such as political participation, democracy, human rights, terrorism, nonviolence, peacemaking, and intercultural dialogue? How can individual Muslims – who cannot look to a unified church for authoritative guidance – remain true to their individual responsibility for seeking the Muslim ideal? What role can Muslims outside of the Muslim world (Muslims in the Western societies) play in redefining the current discourse? What is the role of non-Muslims in discussions about the meaning of Islam? And perhaps most importantly, who is willing to come to the table? Such questions can only be answered in an intelligent and responsible manner if we recognize that – precepts of unity notwithstanding – Muslims are answering these questions in diverse ways. Among the many voices articulating visions for the future of Islam, those who are as committed to dialogue as they are to their own solutions merit special attention.

The Spirit of Alexandria

On October 4–5, 2003, a group of distinguished scholars of Islam gathered at the newly renovated Library of Alexandria in Egypt to explore these questions and challenge conventional wisdom about Islam. United by their uniformly distinguished credentials and by a common conviction that Islam demands a current progressive outlook on politics and history, these scholars sought to contribute to the formulation of new narratives.

The choice of venue was symbolic: The largest and greatest Hellenistic city in the ancient world, Alexandria has always been a cultural crossroads. Often a center of political power as well as a destination of those driven by intellectual curiosity, ancient Alexandria was a point of convergence for Greek, Roman, Jewish and Syrian culture that drew scholars from throughout the ancient world. Scholars proclaimed her Royal Library “a wonder to the world.” Though warfare and political turmoil resulted in the tragic loss of the original Library of Alexandria, Islamic and Western civilizations are deeply indebted to the knowledge that was preserved and transmitted there. The modern rebirth of the Library of Alexandria represents not only a retrospective effort to pay homage to Egypt’s universal city, but also a prospective affirmation of the best values that the library represented: openness, intellectual dynamism, and unity of knowledge and civilization.

Conference attendees were energized by the experience of discussing Islamic interpretation within this universal context – a context that affirmed Islam’s many centuries of conversation with diverse systems of knowledge from many different cultures. Although the scholars’ responses to these questions varied, their reflections were informed by a shared assumption that the ideals of Islam are emergent rather than static. Like other religions, Islam is not only an abstract set of theological propositions, but also a historical dynamic that finds expression in the lived experiences and circumstances of people. Understanding the practical and existential meaning of Islam, then, requires willingness to discover opportunities for creativity amidst the tensions that give rise to acts of interpretation. What was authentically

Islamic hundreds of years ago may not convey the spirit of Islam in today's specific circumstances; each generation of Muslims has an obligation to engage in earnest dialogue to understand and implement the values of their faith. The conference discussion asserted the idea that Muslims are obligated to continuously reexamine and reevaluate the impact of their changing environment (sociopolitical, economic, cultural, etc.) on the ways in which every Muslim views and lives his/her ideal and real Islam. This condition is a necessary step in the process of addressing the current decay in any Muslim society.

By reflecting on Islam in such terms, the scholars assembled in Alexandria found themselves in direct contradiction to a great deal of Western as well as Muslim conventional wisdom, which posits a fundamental incompatibility between Islamic and Western values. In the present context of conflict and insecurity (as viewed by many policy-makers in Western countries), it is easy to mistake the dominant narrative of Western-Islamic relations – a narrative that is being recounted by Muslims and Americans alike – for the only narrative. According to this story of confrontation, Western societies and Muslim societies share few common values, and are entrapped by an intensifying “clash of civilizations” with deep historical roots. In this “us versus them” story of conflict, opposition between contrary civilizations can only be resolved through the political defeat and cultural assimilation of one civilization by the other.

In both America and the Muslim world, this story is repeated by those who argue that the most important lessons for dealing with contemporary problems are to be found in historical analogies to epic struggles against implacable foes. Muslim militants, for example, proclaim that there is no difference between US and Israeli predominance in the Middle East and Crusader occupation of the Eastern Mediterranean between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. For their part, Western countries' pundits and members of the foreign policy community in Washington often invoke the “clash” thesis, usually before arriving at the conclusion that a World War II or Cold War analogy is more political: threats posed by extremist Islamic ideologies and terrorist networks demand responses such as those used to “roll back” fascism and communism. Whether told by Muslims or non-Muslims, especially by Americans and Europeans, however, such narratives of epic confrontation promote conflict escalation as the only viable strategic response to present difficulties.

As they challenged interpretations of Islamic values that posit irreconcilable conflict with the West, the scholars in Alexandria generally agreed that Islamic-Western relations have as much to do with politics as they do with cultural practices and religious interpretations. Many argued that Muslims share a significant cultural heritage with the West, and are capable of reconciling Islam with modernization and democratic values if given a chance by their political regimes and foreign forces to do so. Present difficulties in relations between Muslim and Western societies, they suggested, represent the tragic but not inescapable outcome of a complex historical process. Islam, as a set of theological beliefs, is capable of responding to the challenges of the modern world if given a chance to do so, especially by its gatekeepers. This is possible because Islamic civilization is not an “exceptional” case

among world cultures, uniquely predisposed to conflict or resistant to democracy. The human common denominators that unite the Islamic historical experience with the historical experiences of other world cultures are far more significant than the differences, and the problems of Muslims may be understood in terms that are similar to those used to explain challenges of political, cultural, and economic development faced by other peoples.

There is undoubtedly a strong historical basis for this view. Islam and the West are joined by common roots within the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic cultural continuum. Classical Islamic civilization grew to maturity in the Fertile Crescent – the birthplace of Western civilization – and was constructed out of Arab, Biblical, and Hellenic cultures. In Baghdad as well as in the distant cities of Muslim Spain, Islamic scholars often collaborated with Christians and Jews to translate, preserve, and enrich the legacy of classical Greek learning. Islamic civilization also cast a wider net by integrating Persian and Central Asian as well as Indian components within its cultural synthesis, becoming a bridge between East and West. Western thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, Roger Bacon, and Maimonides found great merit in the thought of Muslim philosophers such as Averroes and Avicenna – even as their Muslim contemporaries were rejecting what would become integral ideas of the Western Renaissance. Copernicus read heliocentric planetary theories in Arabic, and even Dante Alighieri is believed to have gained inspiration from Muslim thinkers such as Muhyi’iddin Ibn al-’Arabi. More recently, Ralph Waldo Emerson as well as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe found much to admire in the writings of Shamsuddin Hafez, a Muslim poet of Shiraz, Iran.

Theological Doctrine and Historical Dynamic

The fact that so much has been integrated within Islamic cultures indicates that Islam is not only a theological doctrine, but also a historical dynamic. As a historical dynamic, Islam was often a quite inclusive enterprise, embodying a spirit of encounter with the other. Just as it is impossible to understand classical Islamic civilization without reference to the dynamic roles played by non-Muslim minorities, so too is it misleading to formulate an understanding of Western civilization that excludes the contributions of Islam.

As many contributors to this volume have emphasized, affirming the richness and dynamism of historical Islam can provide a basis for new and constantly emerging Islamic syntheses that acknowledge essential theological affirmations that have remained constant throughout history. For example, doctrines concerning the unity of God, the prophethood of Muhammad, and the special nature of the Qur’an as a definitive summation of Abrahamic monotheism. At the same time Muslims, while noting discontinuities and divergences, have reached conclusions about the political and cultural implications of these beliefs. As many scholarly accounts have demonstrated, the cultural openness of Islamic culture often surpassed that of Europe during the Middle Ages and the early modern period. In Andalusia, the centuries of Muslim rule between the arrival of Abd al-Rahman in 711 and the fall of Granada in 1492 generated remarkable artistic and scholastic achievements through a symbiosis

of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian cultures, and provided the conduit through which Aristotelian philosophy returned to the European intellectual milieu. Though often criticized when compared with modern norms for political pluralism and citizenship rights, the *dhimmi* system of Muslim empires granted considerable cultural and religious rights to non-Muslim minorities.

Addressing diversity and pluralism has become a crucial aspect of most societies' attempts to adjust to the incredible changes (technological and sociocultural) that faced the world in the last century. Due to many factors, Muslim societies have struggled with great difficulties in constructively addressing these themes.

Among Muslims, puritanical tendencies compete with progressive and reformist trends supporting democratic change, as well as with more traditional patterns of faith and belief that have proven far more tolerant of religious and cultural diversity than is generally acknowledged. Ironically, those who claim to defend Islam by rejecting pluralism negate the "genius of Islamic civilization," which manifested greatness by harmonizing Islamic precepts with diverse intellectual and cultural influences.

Although Western scholars sometimes resort to a simplistic "good Muslim"/"bad Muslim" dichotomy, there is a growing literature that is providing useful guidance for distinguishing between "Islamic terrorism," a destructive and anti-pluralist reaction to perceived external threats, and Islam revivalism, a reformist (*islabi*) movement to revitalize the community from within. Where violent Islamic movements attribute the ills of Islamic civilization almost exclusively to foreign infiltration and internal diversity of opinion, Islamic revivalists accept responsibility for internal sources of malaise, and seek to adapt Islamic culture in ways that might help Muslims meet modern problems more effectively.

From this perspective, both the call for radical measures and the call for reforms in the Muslim world stems from deep feelings of powerlessness fostered by governmental corruption, autocracy, inequality, and subservience to foreign masters. The difference between the two groups is in their fundamental interpretation of the appropriate measures that should be used in addressing these problems. Reformists rely on values and sets of beliefs that give an equal space for the "other" to exist and live among Muslims, and assume internal responsibility regarding the dynamics and perpetuation of the policies of oppression and discrimination against the other in every Muslim society. The exclusivists play down the internal responsibility and place the blame on external forces, adopt conspiracy theory, and withdraw from the current world by declaring their intention to return to the fifth and sixth century Arab cultural practices disregarding at least a thousand years of Islamic civilization. Western actions that help to restore the sense of security by collaborating to correct shared problems and providing Muslims with a sense of political efficacy might inspire creative thought and action.

Identity without Identity Politics

While expressing generalized support for such conclusions, most of the scholars gathered in Alexandria also emphasized the importance of remaining mindful of

Islam's distinctiveness – a distinctiveness that can accommodate and live creatively with other cultures, particularly when relations are based on the principle of complementarity.

Creative coexistence, scholars affirmed, can only be achieved when prominent representatives of civilizations agree to renounce divisive and polarizing notions of cultural triumphalism. Triumphalism – the assertion by one culture of absolute superiority on all indices of progress and enlightenment – leads not only to hubris and destructive conflict, but also to a rejection of the most vital source of cultural dynamism: openness to what the “other” has to offer. No scope for learning remains; “foreign” cultures must be rejected and defeated. In contrast, a relationship between civilizations that accommodates and even values cultural differences provides an indispensable foundation for fostering mutual respect and enduring cooperation.

From this standpoint, the “clash of civilizations” reveals itself for what it really is: a “clash of symbols” in which complex belief systems are being reduced to politicized slogans and images in order to sustain certain hegemonic cultural and economic interests. Such symbols are also used to reject the Muslim or non-Muslim “other,” and to impose conformity upon populations who may or may not accept “Muslim” or “certain Western ideologies” as an exclusivist identity.

The damage that this form of identity politics wreaks upon rich cultural traditions is convincing many in Muslim societies and Westerner societies that their current estrangement is unsustainable. Since September 11th, many in these societies have become increasingly distrustful not only of each other, but also of the more humanistic and life-affirming values within their traditions. Simultaneously, many in Western societies are finding that they cannot retain a fully “Western” way of life without peaceful relations with Muslims (insofar as the term “Western” is intended to evoke themes of democracy and human rights).

This realization is echoed by those in the Muslim world who seek to transcend the exclusivist traditional “reflect or reject” framework for relations with the non-Muslims (especially Western societies), and who are actively seeking opportunities to preserve the integrity of their own Islamic convictions about human dignity, tolerance, and inclusivity in matters of faith and belief.

Though stories of confrontation and rivalry inform us of tensions that do in fact exist; nonetheless, they neglect the common ground shared by Islamic and Western cultures. Acting on common interests and values, however, will require a new approach to dealing with differences, founded upon a vision that will enable people in such communities (Muslim and Western) to achieve fuller engagement across the boundaries of culture and religion.

The scholars assembled in Alexandria also felt strongly that peace between Islamic and Western cultures is possible, and that it does not depend on cultural uniformity. They also made strong arguments for moving beyond reactionary attitudes and symbolic positions, toward genuine mutual knowledge. Retreating from the challenges of active engagement, they suggested, only serves to strengthen the position of exclusivists and militant fundamentalists in both communities.

In the modern world, retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group, be it Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu, is not only a denial of the rich diversity of

the contemporary cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations. Instead of retreating into deep subjectivity, we need to develop a process of communication capable of generating new insight. Such a process should involve active and open listening and a commitment to sustained dialogue. Thus creative mechanisms and channels of communication and interaction are needed to foster such relationships (instead of rushing to achieve immediate rewards, a quick end of conflict, or complete understanding). The new forms of interaction will seek to help each side understand how the other community expresses its basic concerns, while encouraging both sides to work together in the discovery and creation of shared meanings and priorities. This would challenge people in the Western and Muslim societies to better understand their own values and ideals as they learn to share them in new ways. Such forums should not be confined to theological dialogue but be applied to political, economic, social, and any form of interaction.

Because the present world affords no scope for authenticity in isolation or security through empire, Muslims and Westerners need to experience themselves "in relationship" rather than "out of relationship." Both sides must find meaning in the common tragedy of their estrangement as well as in the possibility of reconciliation. They must also reconsider their traditional ways of construing values in dichotomous terms – i.e., "individualism vs. community," "reason vs. passion," "science vs. faith," "materialism vs. spirituality," "efficiency vs. hospitality," "freedom to do vs. freedom to be." When cultures view these sets of values as polarities rather than as complementarities, they are more likely to find themselves locked into adversarial relationships with those who are perceived to have different priorities. Recognizing that seemingly opposed values can actually reinforce each other opens new possibilities both for intercultural relations and for full development of the human personality. In addition, the above set of values do not exist in a pure or totally polarized forms in any given Muslim or Western societies. Such values are distributed within and manifested in a range which allows more overlap between people in both Muslim and Western contexts. Thus through learning to view these cultural values in a dynamic, flexible, and complex rather than dichotomous way becomes a crucial awareness gained mainly through open and safe interaction between members of these societies. Violence and wars are excellent and fertile grounds for negating and preventing the emergence of such awareness.

An affirmative approach to relations between Islam and the West must underscore peace as a shared ideal of both civilizations, and draw attention to the ever-present possibility of choice. Muslims and Westerners share many similar ideals, and yet follow cultural traditions that formulate and apply these ideals in unique ways that are not fully commensurable. On the contrary, such ways are underlined by common basic human needs, such as security, recognition of identity, growth and development, etc.

Dominant scholars from the West, for example, have come to understand and define peace largely as an "absence" of particular conditions, while for contemporary Muslims the word peace has no real meaning unless it signifies a "presence." For many Muslims, peace signifies a presence of justice, self-determination, and social equilibrium or harmony. These, at least, are central tendencies of thought within

Western and Islamic cultures; differences in value articulation and formulation *within* civilizational discourses are every bit as significant as differences between civilizations. Asymmetric power relations between the Muslim and Western worlds exacerbate the implications of the different articulation and formulation of the civilizational discourses. Thus certain Western policies are viewed as more legitimate and even marketed for Muslims and the world as the “only proper” discourse. While discourse from an Islamic perspective becomes threatening and delegitimized, the same dynamic occurs when most of Western discourse and narrative is selectively presented to Muslim communities by its exclusivist interpreters.

Like the West, Islam possesses multiple paradigms of thought and action on matters pertaining to peace, and it is only by recognizing the internal diversity of civilizations that we will be able to construct narratives of intercultural peacemaking. Thus essentializing each other’s complex and diverse approaches to peace and war become a simple yet dangerous way of stereotyping and delegitimizing the other.

Both Islam and the West are truly between stories – between the stories of the past, and the story that they must now create together. All who identify with Islam and with the West can become coauthors of this new story. We are all heirs of the story of conflict. If we leave aside tired generalizations and seek to know one another, we can become the architects of a truly new order of cooperation. Muslims and Western people will not meet as rivals. Instead, Muslims will give the Western world the best of Islamic practices in exchange for receiving the best of the Western practices.

A Call for Fresh Thinking

As they sought to reframe problems in Western-Islamic relations, attendees at the Alexandria conference were by no means reluctant to call for fresh thinking on the part of Muslims. Troubled by what many perceived as a retreat from intellectual openness and dynamism in the Islamic world, they grappled with deeply important questions: How can Islam reclaim the best of its intellectual traditions, and revitalize them in a modern context? Can Muslims recover and build upon the spirit of intellectual openness that characterized Islamic civilization when it was at its historic zenith? This need for internal examination and self-reflection became a central focus for conversation once attendees asserted the importance of taking responsibility for the current state of Muslim societies. However unhelpful past Western policies may have been, Muslims should not further disempower themselves through a narrow focus on the misdeeds of others.

As many scholars have noted, the habit of viewing Islam ahistorically, as an *abstract theological doctrine*, has complicated efforts to understand how Islamic values can be applied to contemporary contexts. Static conceptions of Islam make it difficult for Muslims to respond creatively to new forms of knowledge and new cultural experiences. If Islam is understood as an abstract set of commandments that lack a meaningful relationship to specific historical contexts and experiences, Muslims are bound to face difficulties when seeking to discover how Islamic principles can be

applied to meet the challenges of contemporary societies. Rather than formulate creative yet substantively Islamic positions on issues like democracy, development, cultural diversity, and peace, Muslims will compete for an elusive “authenticity” and face inevitable intellectual fragmentation. Reformers will be denounced as “outcasts,” in accordance with an intellectual framework that devalues innovation and discourages impartial investigation of non-Islamic cultural experiences. Efforts to resolve contemporary social problems will be driven by simplistic ideological formulas (“Islam is the solution”) and post-colonial identity politics rather than by disciplined programs for human and social development. In other words, Muslims will remain trapped by a defensive, reactive attitude that some scholars associate with a broader “psychology of the oppressed.” Only by responding differently to these challenges can Muslims liberate their ways of thinking from self-defeating assumptions that perpetuate external domination and internal decay.

But how can Muslims respond differently as they confront the challenges of the modern world, while still preserving Islamic identity? Many of the conference participants concurred with the idea that Islam’s journey over the centuries reveals that it is not so much a static doctrine as a *historical dynamic* that finds expression in the *lived experiences and circumstances* of people. In other words, the history of Islam is a story of never-ending efforts on the part of Muslims to comprehend the ideals of the Qur’an, and then to transform their understandings into reality. In this dynamic process of interpretation and action, the ideals of Islam are emergent rather than static.

From a theological perspective, this approach suggests that every historical period and cultural milieu has drawn forth a different *synthesis* of Islamic commandments from the rich texts of Islamic faith and experience. Every generation in the Muslim world has developed a unique and yet integral Islamic synthesis which distinguishes that generation from previous ones. *Practicing Islam*, then, requires creative management of tensions between the real and the ideal, as well as between expectations and achievements. In the contemporary historical context, it requires that Muslims wrestle with challenging questions:

What is happening to the traditional synthesis of classical Islamic civilization as a result of changes and transformations in the world today – the challenge of modernity, the spread of literacy, the education of women, the emergence of more and more competing voices claiming Islamic legitimacy, the troubled relations of Muslim communities with the external world and with their own governments? What should Muslims aspire to preserve? What can they allow to change?

To what extent do emerging syntheses, such as those of revivalists and reformists, succeed in manifesting the historical legacy and unfolding ideals of Islam?

How can Muslims in the contemporary world find new meaning in their sacred texts?

What are the most important issues that *critical* Islamic thought must address?

What does it mean to apply Islamic ethics to today’s challenges?

How can Muslims project an Islamic vision that is *big enough* for the reality they are experiencing – a vision that is neither a superficial reflection of current Western norms nor a shortsighted rejection?

Where and how can Muslim scholars and practitioners expand their existing yet limited spaces for such open exchanges – spaces for self examination and internal dialogue?

Preview

The chapters in this volume are intended to stimulate further discussion of how a dynamic and contextually sensitive approach to Islamic faith and practice can facilitate the emergence of new Islamic syntheses that render faith meaningful in changing times. Readers of these essays will find that they address many of the most vitally important issues facing Muslims today with courage, insight, and intellectual integrity. They are required reading for all who seek insight into major problems in Islamic thought and in Islamic-Western relations.

The first section of this volume, entitled “The Many Voices of Islam: Cultivating Intellectual Pluralism,” explores diverse views of Islamic interpretation and the impact of these views on Muslim societies. Particular emphasis is placed on need for dialogue among Muslims who approach revealed scripture and legal structures in different ways, in accordance with diverse intellectual traditions, cultural contexts, and social challenges. Some of the questions explored by the authors were: How do approaches to interpretation differ among “traditionalists,” “reformists,” “renewalists,” and other types of contemporary Muslim thinkers? What are some of the potential benefits of dialogue among “competing” tendencies in Islamic thought? To what extent do problems faced by Islamic societies reflect a lack of synthesis within contemporary Islamic thought? On what grounds can Muslims affirm pluralistic approaches to interpretation? Should Muslims do more to support the principle of commonality in our multiplicity?

For Mustafa Ceric, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the process of interpreting Islam in a modern context requires an attitude of openness and rediscovery – an affirmation of pluralistic possibilities inherent not only in contemporary cultural encounters, but also in the text of the Qur’an itself. More specifically, Muslims can choose to define their own authenticity as emerging from a rediscovery and affirmation of – rather than a negation of – the other, or to imagine tradition and modernity as realities that can be reconciled with each other. They should not hesitate to imagine the essence or ideals of their religious tradition as emergent and potentially dynamic rather than as static and rooted in a distant historical reality.

Like Ceric, who defends the idea of cultural and intellectual pluralism through references to a dynamic core of Islamic principles, Recep Senturk also concerns himself with the challenge of discerning how traditional Islamic ideals relate to contemporary contexts and especially to the concept of universal human rights. He argues that the historical legacy of Islamic legal thought presents contemporary Muslims with two options as they define their values and norms: an exclusivist school of thought and an inclusivist position. In his view, the latter, inclusivist

approach provides the most viable and attractive option, because it proposes that all humans share basic rights regardless of religious or cultural background, and seeks to foster understanding through dialogical engagement rather than communalistic competition. Epistemologically as well as legally, the inclusive option demands a broad and participatory process in which members of estranged cultures rediscover their respective traditions and come to respect one another's deeper cultural values and motivations. While gaining access to empathetic understandings of other cultural systems, they also begin a process of broadening and reconstituting the cultural as well as intellectual foundations of their own identities: religiously, legally, and politically.

Where Senturk concerns himself with latent possibilities in Islamic normative discourse, A. Reza Sheikholeslami offers a sociological analysis of norms that are currently providing Muslim societies with a basis for communal cohesion. Gleaning from Durkheim's framework for studying religion as a social phenomenon, Sheikholeslami argues for new synthesis among those who study Islamic societies. In contrast to orientalist and "radical" syntheses that view Islamic societies alternately as frozen in time or as driven by hatred for outsiders, Sheikholeslami's preferred approach would focus on illuminating the bonds that hold Muslims together and the dynamics that move Muslims as members of a community. Rather than impose a misleading assumption of stasis on Islamic societies, this new synthesis would take into account sociocultural changes that have transformed Muslim world-views from other-worldly to this-worldly. For Sheikholeslami, sociological analysis is essential in efforts to demystify the character of Islamic societies and provide a basis for transcending "exceptionalist" perspectives that do a disservice both to Western academics and to the Muslims they purport to describe.

This section ends with a chapter by Meena Sharify-Funk in which she inquires into the origins and character of new Muslim discourses and self-critiques. Giving particular attention to problems inherent in conventional labels such as "modern" or "progressive" Islam, she argues that innovative tendencies in contemporary Islamic thought are best understood as manifestations of an emergent, transnational hermeneutic field that blends cultural influences in unexpected and sometimes unpredictable ways. Rather than transpose Western categories or posit continuities with more reactionary forms of "Islamism," Sharify-Funk represents contemporary Islam as a transboundary, pluralistic phenomenon characterized by constant renegotiations of sacred meaning.

The second section, "Applied Ethics of Political Participation," investigates the relationship between Islamic principles and political life, with particular attention to challenges of broadening participation in political processes, enhancing the accountability of governments to the governed, and promoting respect for both the dignity of individuals and the integrity of communities. Contributors discuss ways in which Muslims express both their political identity and their diverse interests with an Islamic vocabulary, seeking a cultural and not merely a technological future. Some questions addressed include: How can Islamic values promote accountable and participatory governance? What are the challenges facing Islamic societies that seek to democratize? What historical events and experiences have shaped contemporary

Muslim attitudes towards civil society and political participation? How could reform of political institutions in the Muslim world (e.g. democratization, accountability with respect to human rights) foster a stable social peace? How might Islamic values support the “flowering of the individual” in Muslim societies?

The first chapter in this section, by Armando Salvatore, provides a framework for exploring Islam’s role in modern Europe, with particular attention to Islam’s potential contributions to “public religion.” After examining major debates concerning secularism and the role of religion in political society, Salvatore concludes that – despite secularist doubts about religion’s impact – religions such as Islam can help to sustain political and cultural dialogue about the role of values in the public sphere.

Serif Mardin’s chapter offers another analysis of the interaction between secularity and religiosity, with particular reference to the politics of modernization in the Ottoman Empire. In the process, he seeks to elucidate the roots of ideological conflicts that beset contemporary Turkish society. Though his examination of symbiosis between an aggressive secularism and a reactive Islamism is limited to the Turkish case, his assertions about overlooked possibilities for ideological accommodation are relevant to the study of many contemporary Muslim societies.

In her analysis of hotly contested debates about the role of women in Islamic societies, Zainah Anwar provides an illustration of religio-political conflict. She argues that, though contemporary Muslim governments and Islamic movements have often used the “status of women” issue in ways that convert conservative sentiments into political capital, many opportunities for progressive civic activism exist. Civil society organizations such as Malaysia’s Sisters in Islam are actively contesting dominant tendencies, utilizing both the language of Islamic values and more cosmopolitan discourse on women’s rights.

Farid Esack’s chapter is concerned first and foremost with the challenge of developing a progressive Muslim ethic that effectively engages topics such as human rights and democracy without submissiveness to prevailing Western understandings. In Esack’s view, an authentically Islamic perspective cannot easily be reconciled with prevailing practices of economic globalization and the ethos of competitive and corporate individualism. Unlike conservative and reactive Islamic movements, however, a progressive Muslim political project would seek common cause with other global social movements for women’s rights and economic justice.

In the third section, entitled “Applied Ethics of Peace and Nonviolence in Islam,” contributors analyze strengths of the Islamic faith and practice which contribute to peacemaking, social justice, and global peace. Particular attention is given to principles, values, and traditions within Islam which support the resolution of deeply rooted conflicts with a minimum of violence and coercion. In addition, authors look at Islamic conceptions of peace and their similarities and differences *vis-à-vis* Western understandings. Some questions explored were: What is the Islamic standpoint on violence and its justification? Is nonviolence to be located solely within the domain of personal morality and individual self-training, or could it be applied to the collective needs of society (both Muslim and non-Muslim) and of governance? What are some examples of constructive, nonviolent, Islamic actions and movements? What are the most important Islamic resources for peacebuilding and

peacemaking? How can Islamic conceptions of social justice be applied for conflict prevention and resolution?

This section begins with Mohammed Abu-Nimer's investigation into the principles and practices of nonviolence found within Muslim traditions. Drawing upon the Qur'an and the Hadith literature, Abu-Nimer outlines the scriptural basis of Islamic values such as forgiveness, patience, equality, social solidarity, inclusivity, and pluralism. Abu-Nimer's chapter is followed by Nadia Mahmoud Mostafa's analysis of violence and nonviolence in Islam. Mostafa argues that a "middle view" is the most appropriate Islamic stance: while nonviolence is an important value, Islamic commitment to this value cannot and should not be absolute. In defense of this position, she outlines Western political practices that have been detrimental to Islamic values and interests.

Chaiwat Satha-Anand's contribution to this section proposes that Muslim nonviolent action can serve as a means for transforming terrorism. Despite obvious differences in method and outcome, nonviolent action and terrorism share two important similarities: both are based on an imperative to fight injustice in the world, and both presuppose willingness to die for a good cause. In making the case for nonviolent action, Satha-Anand argues for direct engagement with the rationales that are offered to justify terrorism. Muslims, he suggests, must not only condemn terrorism, but also offer rational and moral arguments for Muslim nonviolent action as an alternative political practice.

The final section, "Coexistence and Reconciliation: An Enduring Responsibility of the Muslim *Ummah*," examines the proposition that Islam transcends exclusive identification with either "East" or "West," and that Muslims can play a unique role in the world today – spiritually as well as culturally and politically – as a "Middle People." Contributions of Islamic values to reconciliation among cultures and to human solidarity receive special consideration. Some questions explored in this section include: How can an Islamic synthesis for today be derived from the diversity of Islamic interpretations and cultures? Can this synthesis establish common ground between Islam and the West without compromising core Islamic principles? How can the conception of Muslims as a "Middle People" be applied to efforts to resolve cultural and ideological conflicts within Islamic societies?

Mohammed Arkoun's chapter presents a multi-faceted critique of solipsistic tendencies both in Islamic thought and in political and social practice. He encourages Muslims to think the *unthinkable*, to transcend the impasse of what he calls "institutionalized ignorance" and to embrace the full range of intellectual and cultural resources that are openly available to Muslims in the modern world today. For Arkoun, Muslims cannot *disengage* or be *disembedded* from the modern construction of Islam: they cannot and should not create hermeneutic enclosures that bound interpretive experience to past "untouchable" discursive corpuses. Rather, Muslims need to live in creative *disclosure*: dynamic as well as transparent interactions within unlimited pluralistic spaces.

According to Arkoun, in order to think the *unthinkable* Muslims also need to understand processes that have bound themselves to "fixed" texts and contexts, and therefore to static conceptualizations and ideological "totalizations." Cognitive

errors associated with static thinking negate new cultural experiences and insist that contemporary realities can only be understood within a past frame of reference that forms a limiting cultural enclosure. In Arkoun's view, this "totalized" viewpoint (which claims comprehensiveness) results in dichotomous thinking, logocentrism, and the monopolization of Truth itself.

Azymardi Azra's chapter provides an exploration of cultural and political pluralism from the standpoint of the Southeast Asian Muslim experience. Focusing especially on the Indonesian context, he illustrates how Muslims have found bases in Islam for an ethos of moderation – a "Middle Path." In his view, this stance of moderation and pluralism can play an important role in a post-9/11 world.

Whereas the traditional hermeneutical approach directs all attention to the authoritative text while ignoring questions about *who* is interpreting and under what circumstances, Asma Barlas's chapter seeks to balance the claims of the text with consideration of the needs and existential circumstances of Muslim interpreters. Like many of her colleagues, she focuses on the interaction among text, interpreter, and context. Gleaning from such contemporary Muslim thinkers as Suroosh Irfani, Barlas calls for reflexive contextual understanding of one's place in the world. By understanding oneself through self-reflexivity, one becomes able to comprehend how others see and experience the world as well. Becoming conscious of one's own contextual relativity, she argues, is a basis for understanding how Islam's universalism is filtered and experienced within particular cultural and historical contexts. This awareness of unity and diversity within Islam, Barlas suggests, is an essential foundation of coexistence.

Taken together, the essays in this volume offer fresh resources for confronting one of the greatest challenges facing Muslim believers in the contemporary world: the challenge of making Islam a dynamic and living reality. Our intent in convening the two-day Alexandria conference was to create a space within which scholars could reflect deeply upon this challenge, opening space for new thinking about Islam – from within Islam, as well as from within a context of relationship to the world outside Islam. A key goal was to spur creative thinking about how present generations of Muslims can reconcile Islamic ideals with their social and political experiences, drawing new inspiration for troubled times. It is our hope that readers will seek to join this conversation, and add their own voices to those assembled here.