

WAKING UP TO PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS

ISLAM HAS A PROGRESSIVE TRADITION THAT IS AS OLD AS THE RELIGION ITSELF, BUT AS NAZIM BAKSH ARGUES, YOU ARE NOT LIKELY TO FIND IT REFLECTED AT MUSLIMWAKEUP.COM

In the last few months Muslims living in the West have woken up to a rather daft assembly of Muslim men and women calling themselves the *Progressive Muslim Union of North America* (PMU).

Their literati are Amina Wadud-Muhsin, author of *Quran and Woman*; Akbar S. Ahmed, the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies and professor of International Relations at American University in Washington; and Omid Safi, editor of PMU's pre-script *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, an anthology of essays reflecting the core ideas of the Progressives.

Farid Esack, crowned with the moniker *Funky Maulana* and Khaled Abou el Fadl, the grand mufti himself of beauty, love and tolerance (except when it comes to invading foreign countries) articulate the philosophy of the Progressives but choose to remain outside the PMU's structure.

The Progressives have a number of talented writers and activists in their congregation such as Tarek Fatah, Ahmad Nassef, Sarah Eltantawi, Hussein Ibish, Mohja Kahf, and Naeem Mohaiemen. In their ranks you will find devoted secularists, peace and justice advocates, feminists vocal on gender equality, those whose sole goal in life is to "hug a Jew," and many whose mission is to bring about the acceptance and integration of gays and lesbians into the Muslim community. With this impressive line-up it is not surprising that Harvard University Pluralism Project has agreed to fund PMU's first major conference scheduled for March 2005.

PMU ideologues often promote each other's work and do an excellent job shining the torch of attention on themselves. They are mostly young second and third generation Muslims schooled in the social sciences. This new cadre of reformers claim to know very little about Islamic law, theology or mysticism, but they are deeply familiar with the writings of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jurgen Habermas.

It is not surprising that the Progressives now find themselves in a nasty confrontation with their parent's generation, the entrenched vanguard whom for the last three decades built mosques and installed imported *imams*, established centers and fraternities such as the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America, and the Muslim American Society.

The Progressives gained new life after the attacks of September 11, 2001 advocating a grand project aimed at reconciling the Islamic tradition, and its rich and textured heritage, with the modern world. They say they aim to revive the "plural" and "tolerant" tradition of Islam which has been buried under the debris of literal and dogmatic approaches to the faith. Plural Islam for the Progressives is the freedom to borrow and adopt wholesale or

modify practices from other faith cultures and label it Islamic. Tolerance means anyone who says he is a Muslim must be a Muslim, and everyone should embrace him even if he says he is gay and proud.

The cabal of Progressive Muslims is a reactionary group. They are reacting to the tight leash of the law that the extremists have lassoed around the necks of Muslims for the better half of the last century. They argue, and rightfully so, that the law was not meant to be worshipped. And they are quick to reassure others that they are not calling for a reduction of the Islamic legal tradition, only its reinterpretation - prying open the tightly shut doors of *ijtihad*.

Progressive Muslims argue that the Prophet Muhammad was no more than an interpreter of the Quran and therefore, nothing can be wrong with Muslims today, qualified or not, who act upon the same interpretive authority he had.

The Progressives are determined to wrestle control of the interpretive process away from the *ulema*, the men and women most qualified to interpret the sacred texts. It is true that the *ulema* historically have made mistakes and in some cases their excesses in interpretation have caused juristic tension within the community of the learned. But not only were their mistakes caught and corrected by their peers, extremes in interpretation of sacred texts were tempered by conscientious objections from individual scholars and these opinions have been preserved and are still valid today.

Unfortunately, the Progressives' attempt to reinterpret sacred texts - much like an ice sculptor trying to do the job of a brain surgeon - will result in a religion with no legal boundaries. Progressives would have us believe that prayer, the mandatory giving of alms fasting and the pilgrimage - the pillars of Islam and mandatory forms of worship - are all matters of personal choice. Worship God as you please, they say.

The uniformity of worship is one of Islam's many strengths in a world when form, meant to hold the content of our worship of God intact, is quickly melting away among those who share the Abrahamic tradition. If you were to visit the one standing mosque left in Banda Aceh or a small wooden mosque in the hinterland of South America, you can almost guarantee that the *adhan* and the outward form of the prayer will be relatively the same. In Suriname you are not likely to find a rendition of the *adhan* done to the rhythm of steel band and Soca music.

Aware that the zeal to bring about reform without sound knowledge is a slippery slope, Kecia Ali, a research associate in the Women's Program in Religious Studies at Harvard Divinity School, and a founding member of PMU, cautions that by opening the Quran to alternative interpretations, Progressive Muslims are not challenging the authority of the Quran.

However, in a recent lecture in Toronto, Amina Wadud-

Muhsin, member of PMU's advisory board, did exactly that. She was quoted as saying she "did not agree with the Quran." It didn't matter to her audience what she disagreed with, half of them walked out, prayed *Asr salah* and left the hall. Chastising them in a rant he submitted to *muslimwakeup.com*, Tarek Fatah, spin doctor extraordinaire and a member of PMU's Board of Directors, said that Amina "declared that she could not intellectually or spiritually accept some things in the Qur'an. For example, some of the *hudud* punishments like the cutting of hands or the permission to beat one's wife. She made it clear that she was denying neither the religion nor the revelation. 'It is the Qur'an,' she said, 'that gives me the means to say no to the Qur'an.'"

What exactly does it mean to "say no to the Quran"? If Amina Wadud wished to say that she believes the punishment of chopping off the hands of the thief is pre-modern and that incarceration is preferable and that men should not use one word in a single verse of the Quran to justify hitting their wives, then by all means, please say so. You are apt to discover that a great number of Muslims will find no objections with your opinions. But to say you "don't agree with the Quran" or you have the right to say "no to the Quran" is to expect Muslims to object, especially if you are claiming to speak from within the Islamic tradition.

One of the major gripes of the Progressive is the way in which Muslim women are treated in predominantly Muslim societies and by men in our male dominated mosques and centres. There is no way around the table on this and for being passionate about the issue we must credit the Progressives. But their solution is strange.

At the Noor Centre in Toronto where Amina Wadud was invited to speak, this problem is addressed by making women pray side by side with men divided only by an imaginary line down the middle. If Muslim women truly believe, as the Quran clearly states, that God deems them equal to men in His estimation, and if it matters so much where they stand when they worship Him, why not adopt the way of Muslims in China and establish women's only mosques with women only *imams*?

The Progressives are determined to bring about a process of cultural redefinition and they promise to do so by challenging what has so far passed for cultural authenticity. The majority among the first generation who migrated to North America, realised that a wholesale importation of back home cultural practices was not going to fly and in the last several years, they have been opening up to the possibility of a new Islamic cultural identity located in the matrix of old loyalties and new realities.

While they were busy trying to figure it out along came the Progressives, largely the privileged sons and daughters of an Arab and South Asian elite at home in the totem towers of worldly power and material wealth. These young upstarts are making haste, not in an attempt to reconcile faith to a secular ethic, but rather to bend, twist and subject faith to the secular. This is a dangerous project and whenever it has popped up its ugly head historically, the result has been the dismantling of not only the outer form, but the inner yoke of the religion, leading to something this *ummah* has refused to accept as Islam.

The first generation feared that a wrong turn on the two way passage of faith in a secular society could lead to the melting away of the religion. They didn't want to be in a position where they would have to tell their relatives back home that they had migrated to the West for better jobs and income only to lose their *deen*.

With the Progressives you get the distinct impression that their approach to Islam is a "no-Islam" Islam. It is the unravelling of the Islamic fabric. They would have you believe that the Prophet

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Muhammad was a Progressive. This, however, requires many important qualifications.

The Quranic understanding is that human life is moving in the direction of its own inevitable collapse and the role of the Prophet was to interrupt the decline by inviting people to govern their lives in the shade of Divine guidance. Thus, his progress was a renewal of the Divine teachings and, because he was the final Prophet, their perfect completion.

As time pushes us further away from his blessed era the light of divine bliss diminishes. He, peace and blessings be upon him, said that "the best of my people are my generation, then those that come after them; then those that come after." The Quran says of the spiritual elites that there will be "many among the earlier generations, few in the later generations." In other words, any era after his is a dystopia because his community came the closest to achieving a state of utopia.

At least 17 times a day, a Muslim pleads for progress when he prays, "Lead us unto the straight path." This is the path of *barakah* that springs from a renewal - *tajdid* - of the way of the Prophet, his companions and those that followed in their footsteps.

Any movement, artistic or scholarly, whether an idea or a book, that lures people away from the principles of Divine guidance embodied in the Prophetic era, is degeneration - a regression, not progression. Anyone who wishes to "progress" must in principle reject the stranglehold of this world and embrace the light of Divine Majesty. Even Jesus, blessed be his soul, said, "be not conformed to the world."

Progress from within the Islamic tradition is not a green light to surf the waves of modernity on bloated egos, giving up the legacy of our intellectual and spiritual tradition, but a commitment to withstand the intellectual, political and spiritual tsunamis hurled at us with our faith in God and our identity as His servants intact.

Dr Martin Lings reminded us of something similar forty years ago in a speech given in Arabic at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. In it he warned:

"In the eyes of the champions of this 'renaissance' that we are now supposed to be enjoying, what is to be 'strongly discouraged' (*makruh*) is everything that is left of the Islamic civilisation in the way of customs (*sunnah*) such as wearing the turban and not shaving off the beard, whereas what is 'strongly recommended' (*mandub*) is everything that comes from the West... The result is that the rising generation is more ignorant of the practices of the Messenger of God, and more cut off from those practices, than any generation that has come into existence since the dawn of Islam. How then shall we augur well of the present situation? And how shall we not shrink from the word 'renaissance' as from an evil omen? All this was foreseen by the Prophet. He said, 'You will follow the ways of those that were before you span for span and cubit for cubit until if they went down into the hole of a poisonous reptile you will follow them down.' That descent is now taking place; and it is called development and progress." ■