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CRITICAL-PROGRESSIVE MUSLIM THOUGHT: REFLECTIONS ON ITS POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS
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Many of the contemporary political conflicts in Muslim-majority countries are said to pit modern secularists against the “backward” Islamists. However, an important stream of contemporary Muslim thought—which I here term critical-progressive Muslim thought—refuses to accept either a hegemony of Western secularism or a hegemony of Islamist fundamentalism. The aim of this article is to introduce some of these critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists and their thought. I will examine how they are reinterpreting the normative teachings of the Muslim worldview and developing a distinctive third-way approach. And I will discuss some of the key political and policy ramifications, with special reference to religious freedom.

In order to gain an accurate understanding of the relationship between politics and critical-progressive Muslim thought, I will first elaborate on some pertinent aspects of the nature of Muslim religious discourse. The primary sources of the Muslim weltanschuung, the Qur’an and Sunna, communicate public morality at a faith-emotional level with a purpose of creating and establishing a “just” socio-moral, legal, and political order (Souaiaia 2008). Muslim religious discourse creates an organic link between what in mainstream Western political/legal thought would be termed as the “religious” and the “secular” realms, the former coming under the exclusive domain of the private and the latter under the public. The Muslim worldview engenders a coalescing of morality and ethics and the fusion of religious and political domains. The religious, therefore, permeates through the social, cultural, legal, political, and economic spheres, thereby motivating, guiding, and directing behavior of Muslims and cultivating a law-abiding citizenry. As such, the religious expressions and motivations of Muslims are inseparable from their social, cultural, and political values. This implies that any meaningful and enduring political and social changes within Islam will need to be conceptualized and implemented in a way that Muslims themselves find religiously legitimate and sensitive.

Importantly, Muslim religious discourse hermeneutically and historically privileges the

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early generations of the Muslim religion, which is considered the “sacred time” of the prophetic-revelatory event. This privileging of Islam’s founding era has found its expression in the concept of Salafism (or following in the footsteps of the salaf us salih). In Salafism, one’s authenticity can only be established on the basis of the parameters that existed in the socio-cultural and broader intellectual conditions present at the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community. Salafi-embedded political ideology is based upon the imitation of the early models of the Muslim caliphate. It is hostile toward any modern theories that are seen as lacking an epistemic root in a pre-modern Muslim tradition. For instance, feminism, democracy, and contemporary human rights discourses—including religious freedom as a religious innovation from the West polluting the minds of Muslims. This political theory is justified by employing the medieval epistemology found in Muslim jurisprudential works such as Dar al-Islām (Abode of Islam), Dar al-Kufr (Abode of Disbelief), and Dar al-Harb (Abode of War) (Duderija 2011). As such, any project of rethinking or reinterpreting the Muslim tradition, to be accepted widely among Muslim adherents, ought to be seen as being ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically “authentic,” i.e. hermeneutically linked to this sacred time.

In modern times, the interpretive authority of traditionally educated Muslim scholars has been seriously disrupted and contested by a range of actors. In part due to globalization, this process has gained more momentum over the last two decades with the establishment and increased activity of transnational Muslim networks. The emerging transnational Muslim public sphere facilitates dialogical engagement, the creation of new discursive communities, and new political spaces and identities drawing on the universal principle of the Muslim ummah (Sharify-Funk 2008). Additionally, this public sphere “fulfils a crucial political function insofar as it offers a discursive space in which Muslims can articulate their normative claims (i.e. ‘Islam’) from a multiplicity of subject positions” (Mandaville 2001, 186). Importantly, these transnational Muslim networks also promote a more inclusive, pluralist, vibrant civil society which rejects false essentialisms, defines an authentic identity, and maximizes the engagement and participation of the individual, especially of Muslim women (Sharify-Funk 2008).

Among the most important actors in this emergent phenomenon of transnational interpretive activity are critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists. These scholar-activists engage in textual or hermeneutic activism which entails a “multiple critique,” i.e. they simultaneously challenge both (1) “fundamentalist” Muslim hegemonic discourse on issues such as modernity, human rights, gender, justice, and democracy, and (2) mainstream Western socio-political and legal theories, and certain secular Enlightenment assumptions that underpin them. I shall return to this point in more detail below.

There is an organic link between the political and the hermeneutical in critical-progressive Muslim thought. This has given rise to the notion of “social hermeneutics,” which is a highly participatory political endeavor enabling critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists to seek socio-political change within a faith-based framework (Sharify-Funk 2008). For these actors, being engaged in social hermeneutics implies that religious knowledge can act as a basis for social transformation, revolution, and collective political activism. Importantly, recent scholarship has found that different interpretations of the religious tradition stemming from particular hermeneutical heuristics have real consequences for social practice and a politics of meaning. Consider, for example, remarks by Sharify-Funk (2008, 22) on critical-progressive Muslim thought on the social roles of women:

By analyzing hermeneutical methods for the analysis of textual interpretation as well as cultural analysis of the norms defining social roles for women, I found that: (1) different interpretations lead interpreters to different conclusions concerning the normative implications of foundational
texts; (2) these divergent processes of interpretation and norm generation have real consequences for social practice towards Muslim women, connecting cultural and religious discourse to a politics of meaning that engages individual intellectuals, activists, and society as a whole; and (3) reformist thinkers encourage Muslims to reformulate their understandings of early and medieval Islam, extract essential Muslim values, principles, and goals from the root sources, and move beyond legalistic deduction towards a more integrated, systematic, and reflective methodology. To act constructively in the modern world, reformists beseech Muslims to re-evaluate their intellectual heritage and seek different ways of applying Muslim precepts in order to increase gender justice in all spheres of life (intellectually, socially, politically, economically, etc.)

Indeed, critical-progressive Muslim thought insists on and is emblematic of the intimate relationship and interconnectedness of hermeneutical and political questions. Critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists are articulating new concepts and paradigms in both domestic and international politics. They “play a key role in developing critical awareness as well as actively engaging in the formation of political and ideological consensus” (Sharify-Funk 2005, 18).

Who are these Muslim scholar-activists? How exactly are they rethinking the Muslim tradition and what are the broader discursive parameters within which their thought is situated? The task of the next section of this article is to provide answers to these questions.

Critical-Progressive Muslim Scholar-Activists: Contemporary Voices in Historical Context

The proponents of critical-progressive Muslim thought can be found in both Muslim-majority (e.g. Indonesia, Morocco, Tunisia, Bosnia, and Iran) and Muslim-minority contexts (e.g. South Africa, Western Europe, and North America). They include personalities such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, Professor of Muslim Law at University of California Los Angeles; Farid Esack, a South African theologian, professor of Islam, and a social activist at the University of Johannesburg; professor Omid Safi from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Hasan Hanafi, professor of Philosophy at Cairo University in Egypt; the late Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), professor of Islam and Humanism at the University of Humanistics in Utrecht, The Netherlands; A. K. Sorouch, a prominent Iranian scholar and intellectual; F. A. Noor, a political scientist and human rights activist in Malaysia; the late Nurckolish Majid (d. 2005), a prominent Muslim thinker and intellectual in Indonesia; Ali Ashgar Engineer, a rights activist and Muslim scholar in India; Enes Karic, professor of Muslim Studies at the Faculty of Muslim Sciences in Sarajevo, Bosnia; professor Abdul Qadir Tayoub and Sadiya Shaikh, lecturers of Muslim Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa; Hashim Kamali, a long-time professor of Muslim Law at the International Muslim University in Malaysia who was born in Afghanistan; KeciaAli, an associate professor of Religion at Boston University; Asma Barlas, professor of Politics and Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity in Ithaca; Amina Wadud, Professor of Muslim Studies at the Virginia Commonwealth University; Dr Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a legal anthropologist; Mohsen Kadivar, a former Iranian philosopher and cleric, and currently a visiting professor of Islamic Studies based at Duke University; Saba Mahmood, an associate professor of Social Cultural Anthropology at the University of California Berkeley; and many others. Many obtained their graduate and post-graduate qualifications from Western institutions. In some cases, they have also received traditional training in the Muslim sciences.

Critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists, as part of their social hermeneutics, are rethinking both the theological and ethico-legal dimensions of the pre-modern Muslim religious sciences. Importantly, they do so within and not outside the faith-based framework, utilizing and adopting the language, concepts, theories, and sources of the pre-modern Muslim religious tradition. In what follows I briefly situate
critical-progressive Muslim thought in relation to their most recent intellectual predecessors. Fazrul (1979, 315–330) refers to these predecessors as classical modernists whose origins go back to the late 19th century (see also Moosa 2003, 117–120). The creed’s major proponents were authorities such as ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Al-Afghani (d. 1897), Rida (d. 1935), Al-Shawkani (d. 1834), and Al-San‘ani (d. 1810).

Critical-progressive Muslims consider that these reformers made the first steps in “advancing a synthesis between Muslim and modern Western values with the impulse stemming from within the Muslim tradition and culture itself as the integrating framework for modernity” (Tajifarouki 2004, 15), a feature that progressive Muslim thought aims to uphold and build on.

However, there are important differences between the two as noted by the critical-progressive Muslim scholars themselves. For example, Moosa (2003, 119), one of the most prominent intellectual theoreticians behind progressive Muslim thought, argues that modernity’s most precious gift of rationality to the classical modernists did not result in their embrace and the employment of the modern sources of knowledge. Critical-progressive Muslim thinkers argue that classical modernism was not an organized intellectual movement that developed a systematic methodology of interpretation of the Muslim tradition that could dislodge the firmly entrenched pre-modern ontology of traditional Islam. As such, critical-progressive Muslim thinkers hold that the classical modernists engaged in reform only in a segmented and diffused manner, and consider that the many problems the challenge of modernity brought were not addressed by classical modernists at the root level but only symptomatically (Soroush 2009, xv–xix). The method of knowledge employed by the classical modernists, furthermore, is regarded by critical-progressive Muslims as being largely ad hoc, reactive, and partial. Thus, critical-progressive Muslim thinkers believe that the solutions proffered by classical modernist thought were often very general, and were incompatible with the tradition itself. In the words of Bamyeh (2008, 565), classical modernists “assumed that the meaning of Islam was self-evident (or at least should be), and all one needed to do was simply learn the early traditions of the faith.” However, critical-progressive Muslims believe that the challenges that modernity presented to classical modernist thinkers often required significant rethinking of the pre-modern bodies of knowledge on which the edifice of traditional Islam stood.

Furthermore, the theoreticians behind critical-progressive Muslim thought maintain that the intellectual aspect of classical modernist thought was in essence a diffuse phenomenon of cultural revival brought to life by the painful experience of colonialism and its socio-political, economic, and cultural aftershocks. It was not a methodical and systematic attempt to, in a critical light, re-examine and, where deemed necessary, significantly reform the Muslim tradition from within.

In this context, Moosa (2003, 119) remarks:

With some exceptions, the critical light of modern knowledge developed in the humanities did not illuminate the Muslim modernists’ theories, as applied to the interpretation of scriptures, history, and society, [and to] the understanding of law and theology. What they [Muslim modernists] did not undertake or in some instances refused to undertake was to subject the entire corpus of historical Muslim learning to the critical gaze of the knowledge-making process (episteme) of modernity … They still felt that the pre-modern Muslim epistemology as rooted in dialectical theology (‘ilm al-kalaam) and legal theory (usul al-fiqh) was sufficiently tenacious, if not compatible with the best in modern epistemology.

Al-Azmeh (1998, 215) argues that such an approach did not seek to radically question ancient interpretations. The fact that it did not seek to historicize the canonical texts themselves made this approach in his view “furtive, hesitant, self-contradictory, and in many ways vulnerable to the fundamentalist attacks that have gathered force in the past two decades.”
Therefore, the Muslim intellectual legacy in the hands of these classical modernist scholars was not subject to the critical insight of the (post) modern episteme (Al-Azmeh 1998). Critical-progressive Muslims believe that they can overcome the shortcomings of classical modernist thought by engaging in a holistic and systematic reform of the inherited pre-modern Muslim tradition, addressing its root causes through “examining the interaction of theoretical underpinnings of ethical, theological, legal, social, and political problems.” Their objective is to provide a cohesive framework which would enable “methodical, logically harmonious, and rationally defendable solutions” (Soroush 2009, xix–xx).

Challenging Two Discursive and Political Hegemonies

In this section, I discuss how critical-progressive Muslim thought challenges two currently dominant discursive and political hegemonies. The first is the socio-political, economic, and philosophical underpinnings of the secular, post-Enlightenment view of modernity. The second is the pre-modern approaches to Muslim law, politics, and ethics. In the following section, I discuss the approach critical-progressive Muslim thought takes on the question of religious freedom in Muslim-majority societies as an example of its broader engagement with the concept of contemporary human rights discourses.

Critical-progressive Muslim thought is best characterized by a number of commitments, ideal values, and principles underpinning its weltanschauung. These include a strong commitment to social and gender justice, religious pluralism, and a belief in the inherent dignity of every human being as a carrier of God’s spirit. Omid Safi, one of the leading critical-progressive Muslim scholars, intimates that one pertinent and important feature of critical-progressive Muslim scholarship’s worldview is its critique of the dominant political, economic, and cultural forces responsible for the unjust status quo of a poor South and a rich North. Another delineating characteristic of critical-progressive Muslim thought outlined by Safi is that of the centrality of spirituality and the nurturing of interpersonal relationships based on Sufi ethicomoral philosophy, termed as Muslim humanism (Safi 2003). This stream of thought likewise resists classical Muslim scholarship’s reductionism, exclusivist interpretations founded on patriarchy, and lack of recognition of legitimate intellectual and religious dissent.

Critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists do not subscribe to commonly employed dichotomies such as that of tradition vs. modernity, secularism vs. religion, or the West vs. Islam (Duderija 2011). Instead, they engage in a multi-headed approach based on a simultaneous critique of the many communities and discourses in which they are situated. At the broadest level, critical-progressives mean to challenge, resist, and seek to overthrow the structures of injustice regardless of the ideational and historical origins (Safi 2003). “Clash of Civilizations” theory is also being strongly contested by critical-progressive Muslim scholarship through a formulation and an advancement of an indigenous modernity discourse and the culturally authentic and rooted critique of some traditional practices, especially those pertaining to gender justice and religious freedom for both Muslims and non-Muslims in the context of Muslim-majority societies.

In critical-progressive Muslim thought, “progress” is not conceptualized with a uniformly linear view of history/time in a sense of inevitability of change. Rather, it is framed in the realm of the possibility of change. Thus, critical-progressive Muslim thought is not premised on the “totalitarian narrative of progress driven by scientism [and] liberal capitalism” or on any “deterministic or apocalyptic theory of progress”
embedded in the larger framework of singular modernity (Moosa 2003, 118–119). Moosa (2003, 118–120) employs the concept of “progress” in a sense of something that is “fortuitous, rather than inevitable, hold[ing] the promise that change might occur in diverse and multiple forms.”

The Muslim religious tradition is seen as operating on a human epistemological plane, being able to accommodate a number of competing interpretations all of which are regarded as being constitutive of it but not necessarily equally hermeneutically legitimate (Duderija 2011). Tradition, according to this view, is like a rich dense tapestry consisting of many interlacing or at times parallel running threads all of which put together give the tapestry its unique design. Thus, critical-progressive Muslim thought shuns what it considers to be essentialist and reductionist errors prominent in apologetic and puritan forms of the Muslim tradition. Serious engagement with the inherited Muslim tradition with a willingness to cast it in critical light is one of the important features of critical-progressive Muslim scholars’ thought. The question of authenticity (asala) and religious heritage (turath) is not constructed along the lines of literal clinging to the past but through a creative, historical, critical comprehension of it; through transcending it in a new process of creation; through letting the past remain past so that it may not compete with the present and the future; and through a new assimilation of it from the perspectives of the present and the future (Boulatta 1990, 16).

The “criticality” of critical-progressive Muslim thought, as argued by Zine (2008, 51), is exactly this discursive space which is attentive to the ways in which faith-centered people can identify, counter, and resist [religious supremacy], racism, classism, and sexism from a spiritually centered space, as well as to the ways in which extremist or fundamentalist religious dogmas can become complicit in these constructions and in the structures and circumstances that sustain them.

On the one hand, critical-progressive Muslims challenge the Orientalist and colonialist discourses that seek to justify Western domination of Muslim societies by painting a picture of an Islam which is immutable, undemocratic, strongly authoritarian, misogynist, and incapable of internal critical thought. On the other hand, they fight against real problems in many historically Muslim countries, such as discriminatory interpretations of gender relations, lack of genuine legal and political reforms, and lack of basic religious freedoms for all (Zine 2008, 27). This context demands that critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists defend the Muslim tradition against secular hegemonic discourses while at the same time maintain a posture of internal criticism in order to achieve the political goal of a more just, free, and egalitarian society.

Importantly, critical-progressive Muslim scholarship contests and questions the validity of mainstream Western-centric meta-narratives which, underpinned by classical modernity and its Age of Enlightenment values and worldview, seek to universalize the historical trajectories of Western historical experience and Western modernity. These meta-narratives include ideas such as universal, secular, and objective reason as well as objective truth. Critical-progressive Muslim thought, on the other hand, subscribes to what the political scientist Benhabib (1992) would describe as a form of moderate post-modernism, where truth is sought in a dialectical relationship between revelation and reason, and the socio-historical context in which both are embedded.

Critical-progressive Muslim scholars’ understanding of modernity is based upon a cultural theory of modernity according to which modernity unfolds within a specific cultural (or civilizational) context having different starting points and leading to potentially different, multiple alternative (Muslim) modernities (Sajoo 2008). In this context, the words of Esack (2006, 127) are instructive:

Here we [progressive Muslims] are not merely attempting to break the monopoly
of the West in the production of the discourses of modernity. We also attempt to reclaim modernist discourses of feminism and socio-economic justice, restating them in Muslim terms. We are simultaneously engaged in the task of articulating interpretative traditions within Islam that embody these values, thus challenging the notion that modernity is distinctly a Western project.

Western discourses of modernity originating from the “Empire’s” center, the United States, are viewed by critical-progressive Muslim scholars with great deal of suspicion, because they are seen as often functioning as a “Trojan Horse of recolonization” (Esack 2006; Mahmood 2006). This is primarily so because the “Empire” is considered not to be living up to its own ethico-moral standards, but rather acting in accordance with its foreign policy and national interest priorities. These interests often clash with moral standards, especially (but not only) in relation to issues directly affecting Muslims (Esack 2006). Significantly, critical-progressive Muslim thought offers an alternative (to the West largely unknown) form of consciously “political” Islamism that is not only anti-fundamentalist and anti-terrorist, but is also a powerful source of critical debate in the struggle against undemocratic imposition of a new world order by the United States, and against the economic and ecological violence of neoliberalism, the fundamentalist orthodoxies of which fuel the growing divide between the rich and the poor. (Buck-Morss 2003, 49)

Importantly, progressive Muslims’ weltanschauung is inspired and to varying extents shared by other spiritual and political movements, including those associated with liberation theology, secular humanism, and social and gender justice-based movements in Latin America, the United States, and Europe, and embodied in the works and philosophy of thinkers such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Martin Luther King Jr, Edward Said, and Noam Chomsky, to name but a few. Moreover, critical-progressive Muslim scholars, especially those of the female gender, are dislodging the epistemic privilege enjoyed by traditionally educated, exclusively male, religious scholars, and clergy, and are thereby shifting the locus of authority and normativity in Muslim discourses.

This interpretative activity of critical-progressive Muslim scholarship and the broader epistemological and ontological dimensions on which it stands also challenge mainstream Western social theory and political thought on a number of grounds. First, with the focus on religious freedom, gender justice, and the reform of personal status laws as the main pillars of both their scholarship and activism, critical-progressive Muslim scholars subscribe to the concept that the “private is political”, which traces its origins in feminist discourses. Therefore, critical-progressive Muslim thought brings issues of gender justice and religious freedom to the forefront of Muslim politics. Furthermore, it simultaneously challenges the often elitist and authoritarian secular currents which, prior to the recent Arab Spring events, held the political and economic power in many Muslim-majority contexts.

Second, they are keenly aware that their scholarship and activism can be exploited to serve the political causes of those whose political agendas can be described as neo-imperialist or neo-colonialist (Esack 2006). This is particularly so in relation to some of the contemporary Western attempts to re-think, reshape, and reform the Muslim tradition for Muslims—on politically charged concepts such as the nature and function of scriptures, secularism, democracy, women’s rights, and the role of religion in the public sphere in the context of the modern nation-state—and make it compatible with liberal political thought and the theoretical and philosophical assumptions underpinning it. The relevant literature refers to this process as securitization of Islam (Cesari 2009). According to Bosco (2010, 1):

a common feature of the securitization of Islam is the summoning of an authentic, apolitical essence to Islam according to which political forms of Islam are radical.
perversions of the religion’s true essence, mere ideologies, or cynical manipulations of religious language for pathological ends. The ultimate purpose of the securitization of Islam is to reprogram the relationship between Islam and politics on the West’s own terms and for its own security.

Critical-progressive Muslim scholar-activists are at pains to disassociate themselves from these discourses.

The critical-progressive Muslim thinkers employ critical, constructivist, feminist, post-colonial, and post-modern approaches, which they believe are the most fruitful philosophical and theoretical frameworks for understanding the complex worldviews and experiences of Muslim societies and individual Muslims themselves. They take into account the current immense military, political, economic, cultural, and discursive power imbalances between the West and the Muslim-majority world, while also seeking a genuine synthesis between the two based on civilizational symmetry and respect founded on a shared system of (religious) ethics.

To move our discussion from the theoretical level to more practical issues, let us examine an example of critical-progressive scholarship in action in relation to the question of religious freedom.

Critical-Progressive Thought and Religious Freedom

There is a considerable literature documenting egregious violations of religious freedom in Muslim-majority societies, including the death penalty for apostasy. Critical-progressive Muslims’ engagement with and their strong defense of religious freedom is often couched in relation to their broader discussions of the compatibility (or otherwise) between Islam and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to a lesser extent democracy and secularism (or more specifically, the rights of non-Muslim citizens in a state ruled by Muslim law). Consistent with their worldview and the approach to the Muslim tradition and modernity discussed above, and fully cognizant of the problematic nature of presenting simplistic and apologetic arguments either in favor or against the compatibility of “Islam” and the Universal Declaration, critical-progressive Muslims call for a historically informed discussion of the issues. Here is one example of such an approach (Senturk 2005, 28):

Without putting the issue [of human rights] into an historical and sociological perspective, the confusion on and deprivation of human rights cannot be understood and solved in the Muslim world. Nor can the human rights dependency, on the part of Muslims who believe in human rights, be overcome without linking the chain of memory to the past cultural reservoir. Human rights discourse in the Muslim world needs philosophical, moral, and historical roots to grow on, gain strength, and bear fruits. Otherwise, its defenders will remain dependent on the Western discourse and consequently will get easily dismissed by the conservative population, traditional Ulama, and the authoritarian rulers. The power of precedence, on the theoretical and historical levels, must be put in use in justifying human rights in Islam today.

A number of critical-progressive scholars have strongly criticized the lack of religious freedom in Muslim-majority societies, and have argued that the Qur’ an and Sunna embody ontological values and ethical principles which are in harmony with the concepts of the Universal Declaration, including its religious freedom dimension. In this context, the following words of Sachedina (2009, 52) are pertinent: “[I]t is the investigation of the ethical underpinnings of the revealed texts that can usher in the necessary reform of these laws to meet the universal standards recognized in human rights norms.”

Apart from Sachedina, other critical-progressive scholars such as Saeed and Saeed (2004), Kamali (1999), Abou El Fadl (2009), An Na’ im (2010), Kadivar (2009), and Al Jabri (2008), to name but the most prominent few, have voiced similar views. They have done so both on the basis of scriptural reasoning and on
the basis of tracing and identifying historical antecedents of contemporary human rights norms, including religious freedom, from examples in Muslim history. Saeed and Saeed (2004) in their extensive study of the pre-modern Muslim laws on apostasy, apart from building a very strong case for religious freedom on the basis of relevant textual evidence from the Qur’an and Sunna, have argued systematically that the emerging and formulation of the pre-modern apostasy laws were intimately linked with the chaotic socio-political context and the intra-Muslim intolerance that characterized much of the early formative period of Muslim thought. They have also highlighted the high degree of fluidity and diversity in understanding what constituted apostasy among pre-modern Muslim jurists (Saeed and Saeed 2004, 167). Examples of religious freedom precedents in Muslim history include: well-known historical documents such as the Constitution of Medina; the Prophet’s pact with the Christians of Najran (i.e. the Prophet Muhammad granting a Charter of Privileges to the monks of St. Catherine Monastery in Mt. Sinai); the Pact of Umar with the Christians of Syria; the Muslim jurists’ principle in matters related to heresy, according to which they repeatedly argued that it is better to let a thousand heretics go free than to punish a single sincere Muslim wrongfully (Abou El Fadl 2009); and the doctrine of universal individual-based human rights as developed by mainly Hanafi jurists according to which each individual enjoys universal and unconditional rights granted to him/her on a permanent and equal basis, by the very virtue of being a human, a right which cannot be taken away by any authority (Senturk 2005).

Broadly speaking, as noted by Mokhtari (2004) in the context of reformist-minded jurists in Iran, the arguments being formulated by critical-progressive Muslim scholars that are employed in favor of religious freedom in Muslim-majority contexts are based on the following principles:

1. Islam and the Universal Declaration, including its commitment to freedom of religion, are not mutually exclusive categories, hence are not inherently incompatible.
2. The essence and most fundamental principles of Islam are grounded in notions of respect for human dignity and human rights which include the freedom of religion.
3. Muslim law should be interpreted in accordance with the exigencies of time, place, and context in any given society, and Muslim jurisprudence must be dynamic not static.
4. Jurisprudence is not synonymous with shari’a, instead shari’a should be defined more broadly and holistically as a form of religious ethics and morality.
5. The relationship between the individual and God is direct, therefore no external agent has the legal or moral authority to impose any restrictions on the religious freedom of individuals, such as punishments for apostasy and conversion from Islam.
6. Any (this-worldly) punishment for apostasy is completely contrary to both the letter and underlying spirit, objectives, values, and ethics embodied in the Qur’an and Sunna.

Therefore, in critical-progressive Muslim thought, Muslim law and theories of Muslim government are informed by and interpreted in line with contemporary thought and knowledge, including the Universal Declaration and norms pertaining to religious freedom. These interpretations of the Muslim tradition are not only conceptualized as feasible interpretations of the turath but are also considered to enjoy greater religiously normative justification than illiberal interpretations, as they are seen to be in harmony with the moral and ethical foundations underpinning the Qur’an and Sunna.

Conclusion

Through an integration of dialogical politics and Muslim “social hermeneutics” to achieve a just society, the proponents of critical-progressive Muslim hermeneutics are rethinking many aspects of the pre-modern Muslim
tradition. Thereby, they employ a politics of hermeneutics to engender a liberatory and progressive interpretation of sacred texts. This builds a new discursive field challenging the long-entrenched reductionist discursive and political hegemonic forces and ideas stemming from both the Western and the Muslim-majority world. Critical-progressive Muslim hermeneutics is forging a discursive path which has great potential to shift and transform these dynamics onto a new plane of a genuine and balanced cross-civilizational dialogue, with the promise of a mutual transformation for all concerned based on a shared system of (religious) ethics. One concrete example of the practical political ramifications of their thought is their robust support for religious freedom. On the basis of creative and novel interpretational models of the Qur’an and Sunna, which are informed by and inclusive of both classical and modern sources of knowledge, critical-progressive Muslims level a strong defense of religious freedom as an integral part of the normative Qur’an–Sunna teachings.

1. Apart from the legacy of colonialism, the intellectual hegemony, and supposed supremacy of post-Enlightenment thought, as well as tumultuous political, social, and economic upheavals of the second part of 20th century in the Middle East in particular, are all said to be threatening traditional interpretative scholarship.

2. Of course, generally speaking, increased literacy for Muslim women in particular and modern-day information technology have also been important in facilitating these processes. However, it should be kept in mind that the relationship between modern-day information technologies and the kind of religious discursive spaces they help bring about is a complex matter, and requires a nuanced analysis which is beyond the scope of this paper.

3. For details on how exactly they are accomplishing this task, see Duderija (2011).

4. See, for example, www.musawah.org

5. In this context, one only needs to read the various reports regularly issued by groups such as Human Rights Watch or the International Crises Group.

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