The future of liberal Islam

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The forerunners of liberal Islam present attitudes similar to liberal currents in other cultures and demonstrate their tendency to benefit from reforms and a freer society. Liberal Islam pays special attention to keeping religion separate from politics, promoting democracy and multi-party politics, providing religious and cultural tolerance, preserving women’s rights, freedom of thought and expression, internalizing human rights and enhancing political participation. Liberal Islam is now silent, but with a likely mainstream development within the Islamic world in the near future, it may become one of the main movements within Islam. What constitutes liberal Islam is the evolution of a number of different factors that combined in a specific context and these factors, among others, are the socio-cultural structure of the regional societies, interpretation of Islamic teachings and daily practices of religious faith. In addition, a number of recent developments contributed to this trend: the rise of secular education, the increasing use of international communication and travel opportunities, and the failure of dogmatic interpretations of Islam.

Liberal Islam represents a tendency in the Islamic world that considers Islam, mostly, as a personal matter and not as a dominating force in public life. Islamic civilization is no different from others and shares the common characteristic of not being monolithic in political and cultural terms. Although there is a clear preference to establish an Islamic leviathan in different Muslim majority states, liberal Islamist interpretation denies that this idea is supported by the Quran and the Sunnah. Liberal Islam presumes that only a small part of Islamic teaching deals with state affairs, while the overwhelming majority of the ethical codes directly address people’s experience of religion and personal conduct of faith. This position also reflects the acceptance of the availability of different readings and interpretations of Islamic teaching.

Muslim societies’ political experiences in their own contexts create a demand for a pluralist and democratic state, and the fact that they live under authoritarian regimes in most of the Muslim majority states prevents discussions of the compatibility of democracy with Islam, while bringing the demand for democracy to the
fore. In this search for democracy, the catchwords are not “Islamist party” or “Islamic state” but those of “diversity” and “freedom.” Liberal Islamists do not consider religion in the public sphere as illegitimate, but do not subscribe to the idea of an Islamic state since it fails to draw required lessons from the past. They believe in a separation of powers and checks and balances that will restrict any monopolizing authoritarian bosses, whether in religious or any other contexts. In this way, they will also protect their faith from falling into manipulative or misdirecting hands. The success of liberal Islam will not depend on building a discursive framework or exclusively elite tendencies, but mainly on the delicate balances of state and society, political culture and socio-economic structure in various parts of the Islamic world. In this sense, the liberal Islamic current in Turkey that I will be discussing in the remainder of this article is interesting, and it is also a clear example of the adaptation of Islam to a local context in a way that challenges Muslim stereotypes.

The community that has developed under the influence of Fethullah Gülen, a prominent religious leader in Turkey, simultaneously has Islamic, nationalist, liberal, and modern characteristics. Its ability to reconcile traditional Islamic values with modern life and science has won a large, receptive audience. In comparison to so-called “fundamentalist” Islamic groups, Gülen’s movement’s views on Islam are liberal and tolerant of non-Islamic lifestyles. However, this approach may be the result of the long-term, specific experience of Anatolian people and the unique historical dynamics of Turkish socio-cultural life. For example, the movement is influenced by the Turkish local adaptation of the universal Islam and Nur (Light) movement that developed around the writings of Said Nursi.

The main premise of Turkish interpretation of Islam is moderation. Since people of Turkish origin first accepted Islam, they perceived and practiced it under the influence of Sufi ideas. Sufi-oriented Islamic movements kept a certain distance from the politics of their times in contrast to other Islamic movements. For example, the Shiites or Kharijites defined themselves according to an imagined other (those who do not support the truth) and became associated with specific political stances concerning the proper nature of the state and who should hold power. Sufi tradition, however, has described itself as being based on the philosophy that all creatures should be loved as God’s physical reflection and objects of the Creator’s own love. There is no place for enemies or “others” in this system.

Islam in Turkish political history, during the reigns of both the Seljuks and the Ottomans, remained under the state’s guidance as a personal matter. The dominant belief was that a truly religious sultan would govern the state according to the principles of justice, equality, and piety. This approach of keeping religion apart from worldly affairs led to a collective memory that regarded Islam as a flexible and tolerant belief system. Thus, it was assumed that religious institutions should adopt flexible attitudes toward the changing situations of their times. In the

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1 This part has been largely drawn from my extensive research and interviews on this community. For a more detailed analysis, see “Turkish Islam’s Moderate Face,” Middle East Quarterly, 1998.
Ottoman era, there was never a full-fledged theocratic system. While the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) were applied in the private sphere, public life was regulated according to customary law formulated under the authority of the state. This aspect of the Ottoman political system made religion’s role less rigid. Moreover, the empire accepted that it would be a multi-religious state, in which Christian and Jewish subjects would continue to be governed by their own laws.

Another influence on Gülen’s movement was the Nur (Light) movement (also known as the Risale-i Nur movement). The movement was organized around Said Nursi (1877–1961), a prominent religious authority, and his writings, the Risale-i Nur (Letters of Light). The Risale-i Nur is respected by religious moderates because of its emphasis on the links between Islam and reason, science, and modernity. It also rejects the idea that a clash between the “East” and “West” is either necessary or desirable and advocates the use of reason and in issues related to Islamic belief.

Gülen points out that most Islamic regulations concern people’s private lives and that only a small portion of them concern the state and government. These latter provisions need not be enforced because religion is a private matter, and its requirements should not be imposed on anyone. He looks at Islamic regulations bearing directly on the government—such as those related to taxation and warfare—in the context of contemporary realities. Concluding that the democratic form of government is the best choice, Gülen is very critical of the authoritarian regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia. He accepts that the idea of republicanism is very much in accord with the idea of “consultation” discussed in Islamic sources. Moreover, he fears that an authoritarian regime would impose strict control on differing ideas.

Gülen holds that the Anatolian people’s interpretations and experiences of Islam are different from those of others, especially the Arabs. He writes of an “Anatolian Islam” based on tolerance and excluding harsh restrictions or fanaticism and frequently emphasizes that there should be freedom of worship and thought in Turkey. He proposes two keys to provide peace in society—tolerance and dialogue. “We can build confidence and peace in this country if we treat each other with tolerance.” [1] In his view, “no one should condemn another for being a member of a religion or scold him for being an atheist.” [2] On the question of women’s rights, Gülen has progressive views. He believes that the veiling of women is a detail in Islam, and that “no one should suppress the progress of women through the clothes they wear.” Gülen also states that, “no one should be subject to criticism for his or her clothing or thoughts.” [2] Furthermore, he says, “women can become administrators,” contradicting the views of most Islamic intellectuals.

His ideas about tolerance and dialogue are not restricted to Muslims but also extend to Christians and Jews. Gülen met twice with Patriarch Bartholomeos, head of the Greek Orthodox Fener Patriarchate in Istanbul, and has also met several times with Christian and Jewish religious leaders to promote inter-religious dialogue. In February 1998, for example, he visited the Pope in Rome and received a visiting chief rabbi from Israel. Moreover, Gülen wishes to merge Islam into the international economic and political systems, and supports Turkey’s bid for mem-
bership in the European Union. Gülen’s was one of the first Muslim voices, within 24 h of the terrorist attacks, heard in condemnation of the terrorist acts committed on 11 September 2001. He argued that those involved in terrorist activities have simply misunderstood and misinterpreted Islam. He added that Islam has nothing to do with terrorism and a 100 years of intellectual accumulation prevent any Muslim from being a terrorist if Islamic teaching has been understood correctly. [3]

Liberal Islam is not unique to the Turkish case and there is a burgeoning number of similar movements all around the Islamic world and among Muslims that live in non-Muslim majority states. The future of liberal Islam will largely depend upon the degree of pluralism and differentiation in their own context and a careful policy line adapted in international politics toward them. The September 11 events fostered the idea of the failure of regimes, which strictly follow so-called Islamic dogma and understandings, and this is likely to strengthen liberal Islamic movements. The international attempts to further democratization and provide the rule of law in Muslim countries would directly serve the development of liberal Islam. The rise of liberal Islam is in association with the spirit of the time and is likely to continue in the coming years.

References


The Pagan revival and its prospects

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Abstract

In this article, the author surveys the history of Neo-Paganism from the Romantic movement to the 20th-century revival of Witchcraft, Druidism, Asatru and other forms of Pagan religion. He then discusses the future prospects of Paganism, examining various social and cultural factors that work in its favour and others that work against it. He concludes that Paganism will be one of the religions of the future, although probably not the dominant one.

The Pagan writer Frederic Lamond, a long-standing member of the Neo-Witchcraft movement or Wicca, is fond of recounting the following story. Back in the