

**September 11, Violence, and the Construction of a “Liberal Islam”
in the United States.**

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Interrogations around religion and violence are often linked to a “causal paradigm,” i.e. the assumption that religion, under certain conditions, *causes* violence. For one version of this paradigm, there is a constellation of elements within religious beliefs, apprehended by scholars of religion through scriptures and their interpretations, that leads to conflicts, wars, or to the use of violence because it instructs the believers to use violent means towards particular aims. Therefore, it should be sufficient to read the scriptures of a given religion and their interpretations by believers in order to determine if a religion “causes” violence. According to this approach, meaning, inscribed in a religious system of ideas, directly informs practices, and is the main explanation for the use of violence and the existence of conflicts. Texts are what produce persuasion, especially when they are religious texts, since they involve belief. Starting from these premises, scholarly and media debates have often revolved around the “meaning of Islam,” either as encouraging violence, or as being a foundation for peace. Some scholars see violence as directly inscribed in the Islamic texts, and have described this relationship through an explicit contrast with Western culture: Islam exemplifies a non democratic, non pluralistic culture. According to these scholars, its natural state of affairs is in great part defined by authoritarianism, and the only way in which Muslim citizens can “participate” politically is through the use of violence and regular uprisings. We find more or less significant

¹ I thank Elizabeth Kevern for her assistance with the research involved in this paper.

elements of these definitions in historian Bernard Lewis' interpretations of the "language of Islam," French political scientist Bertrand Badie's "*culture de l'émeute*" (culture of uprising), or in political scientist Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations."²

A different explanation for the causes of religious violence, in which contexts and social mediation intervene more conspicuously, argues that specific actors utilize the discourse of religion and religious language in particular contexts in order to mobilize individuals or groups into violent acts. In this alternate version of the "causal paradigm," the prime factor explaining violence is not necessarily ideological, but involves a series of non ideological variables that range from socio-economic dysfunctions (high rates of unemployment combined with high literacy is the most analyzed variable)³ to political problems such as foreign occupation or state repression:⁴ The emphasis is put on the process of mobilization itself, which is dependent on the context and circumstances. In this interpretation, meaning remains secondary, if not totally absent.⁵ Religion is seen as an instrument of mobilization, and its content appears as not necessarily relevant.⁶

² See Bernard Lewis *The Political Language of Islam*, The University of Chicago Press, 1988. Bertrand Badie, *Les Deux Etats*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, and Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993.

³ For an early and representative example of this approach, see Gilles Kepel, *Le prophète et le pharaon*, Paris, La découverte, 1984.

⁴ On foreign occupation as a variable explaining recourse to violence through suicide attacks, see for example, Robert Pape, *Dying to Win*, New York, Random House, 2005. On State repression, see François Burgat, *L'islamisme en Face*, Paris, La découverte, 2002.

⁵ For instance, numerous models of political mobilization ignore mechanisms of ideological persuasion. Charles Tilly's concept of "repertoires of action" tends to eliminate discourse analysis and does not reflect on the linkage between repertoires of action in mobilization practices on the one hand, and ideologies and discourses on the other hand. In the field of study of political mobilizations led by Islamist groups, it is only recently that the literature has brought together ideological persuasion and socio-economic variables to explain mobilization. See, for instance, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: religion, activism and political change in Egypt*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.

⁶ In the case of political Islam and of cases of mobilization into violence, it is often argued that political Islamists that have recourse to violence do so because of dysfunctions in the social fabric they live in: unemployment and failure of economic and political development would have led them to discontent,

However, if religious language is a tool for mobilization, why is it chosen, rather than another type of reference, to serve such an aim? In a political context in which actors compete to mobilize people, how is this religious language, as a medium for persuasion, produced, perceived and transformed? More specifically, how do we retrace the thread that links enunciation and dissemination of ideas on the one hand and violence on the other hand? Therefore, the question about the relation of religion and violence rather than being “does religion –or a specific religion- breed violence?” becomes: “how, and under what conditions is religious language used for violent mobilization?” This formulation converges with the interrogations outlined by the organizers of the conference: “if, how and why religion intersects with war and violence, and if there is something unique or different about religion that leads to particular patterns of conflict across time and space.” I would like to contribute to this question by thinking about the intersection of religious meaning and violence. I am interested in the complex politics of production and transformation of religious meaning, when this process is brought to public life by the emergence of a context ridden with violence. This paper deals with the case of the building of the image of Islam and Muslims in the United States in the post 9-11 political context. I analyze the effects of particular lines of reasoning about religion and violence, themselves variations on the “causal paradigm,” by state actors as well as by newly emerged Muslim public intellectuals. I am particularly interested in the repercussions of the uses of this causal paradigm, in a context infused with internal and external violence, on the self representation of a minority’s religion. The media and state discourses and debates on the existence of a relationship of causality between Islam and violence have simultaneously incited and constrained the development and definition in the public square of a version of the religion among Muslim American activists and intellectuals that has taken different names: from “moderate” to “liberal,” or “secular” and “progressive” Islam. I describe some of the ambiguous understandings by state actors of the violence of 9/11 “as a religious phenomenon” and the consequences of this

frustration and rebellion. Robert Pape, in particular has linked together suicide attacks and occupation, in *Dying to Win*, New York, Random House, 2005.

interpretation and its public dissemination on the making –and eventual fragmentation- of “liberal” trends among Muslim intellectuals in the United States. I argue that the publicly acceptable interpretation of religious meaning is transformed when a minority’s religion –or a specific religious interpretation within it- is characterized as an instrument of and a motive for violence. This characterization creates opportunities as well as constraints for the Muslim minority: it pushes some of them into a process of “reforming” and “mainstreaming” their religious language, a discursive and practical redefinition of Islam molded in the features of American liberalism. Hence, I reverse the “causal paradigm” through the analysis of the repercussions of violence on religious meaning, and I integrate the actor’s deciphering of the relationship between religious meaning and violence into the description of the consequences of violence on religious interpretation.

José Casanova had rightly written, at the end of the 1990s, that Islam was not a “public religion” in the United States.⁷ However, September 11 has modified Islam’s status: it has become a religion intensely discussed by Muslims and non Muslims in all types of media, in interfaith events, political speeches, etc... In other words, if one reuses the definition of the public sphere used by Casanova, it has become a “public religion” because it is an object of discussion as well as a religion whose public role and participation have become a point of contention. The context of post 9-11 America, notably the combination of specific modes of reasoning about Islam by state actors, and the administration’s involvement in old and new armed conflicts in the Muslim world, made this entry of Islam in the public square a tense, coercive, and thereby self limiting process. Casanova defined the “deprivatization” of modern religion as “the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation and redrawing of the boundaries [between “private” and “public,” or between morality and legality etc...].”⁸ The publicization of Islam in America after 9/11 is therefore, contrary to this description, to be apprehended as a

⁷ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 4-5

⁸ Casanova, 1994, p. 65-66.

process in which the secular state actively participates, even in a context where the “neutrality” of such a state vis-à-vis religion is a constitutional rule. This state’s intervention produces differences in the modes of de-privatization of different religions, creating different types of religious “publicness” within American society, contradicting the “undifferentiated” nature of Casanova’s public sphere. In the case of Islam, the state incites a liberal version of Islam to express itself publicly, which becomes molded as a “moderate” order of discourse, not because the public presence of fundamentalist expressions of Islam would be intrinsically in “contradiction” with the functioning of a democratic polity and would therefore not be legally allowed to express itself,⁹ but rather because contextual violence and state discursive interventions incites the makers of a public Islam to define the latter in a way that is not “threatening.”

1- Constructing “Two Islams.”

An important literature has described the stereotyping of Islam in the West and more specifically in the United States.¹⁰ Most of these works focus on media discourse: the written press, television, etc..., underlining the dissemination of caricatural perceptions of Muslims or of the Islamic world. This literature often denounces essentialism and homogeneity, but it also characterizes these images and perceptions of Islam and Muslims as homogeneous, as if all these representations came from a unique and uniform actor –often characterized as the “Western media,” or “the West.” They also often ignore the image produced by Muslims themselves and the ways in which they strive to represent (or not) their religion publicly. By paying more attention to the local (i.e. national) context where these images are produced, and to the different voices

⁹ Casanova precisely argues that fundamentalist versions of religion can be allowed in the public square – and might even contribute positively in public and political debates- if they restrain themselves to this domain and do not encroach on the state.

¹⁰ For instance, Kai Hafez, ed., *Islam and the West in the Mass Media. Fragmented Images in a Globalizing World*, Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2000. For a critique of homogeneous conceptions of the Western media, see Annabelle Sreberny, “Media, Muslims, and the Midde East: A Critical Review Essay,” *Political Communication*, 19: 273-280, 2002. See also, for instance, Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson, eds., *Muslims and the News Media*, New York, I.B. Tauris, 2006.

authorizing and articulating them, it is possible to understand the complexities and ambiguities in the way diverse public actors produce images of Islam.

In order to understand the publicized perception of Islam by the United States' state institutions, one should go as far back as the Iranian revolution. An extensive literature in International Relations has dealt with these representations of Islam¹¹ and has described how a rather negative image has tainted the perception of Islam by its political elite or larger society. In the 1990s, the end of the Cold War defined a turning point: it pushed the state to elaborate further its discourse about Islam and violence. This shifting moment also saw Islamist activists redefine the way in which they perceived the United States and gave it the status of the enemy.

In the 1980s, generally unable to succeed in their strategies of take over by force, Islamist movements using the strategy of violence started to weaken in their respective national contexts because of state repression and popular rejection. Those who were not imprisoned at home left their national mooring to join other fronts, more particularly transnational networks of opposition to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. After the occupation of Afghanistan by the USSR, the US administration put the CIA in charge of helping the Afghan *mujâhidîn* -united with foreign Muslim fighters- resist the Soviet occupation. This assistance's aim was to weaken the Red Army and to prevent further advances of the Soviet army in the region. The USSR troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 marked the end of the Cold War. For the Arab, Pakistani and Afghan fighters, the Soviet enemy had disappeared, and a new nemesis emerged under the traits of the United States. After the first Gulf War in 1991, the Americans, primary allies of Israel, had a military presence in Saudi Arabia, the cradle of Islam and the land of Mecca and Medina. For many of the *mujâhidîn*, American and Israeli occupation became the new objects of denunciation, and Saudi Arabia and Palestine the two major territories to liberate. However, this transformation of the enemy's identity was not unique to these *mujâhidîn*. In the 1990s, the American public perception of the Afghan

¹¹ For instance, Fawwaz Gerges, *America and Political Islam. Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?* New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

jihâdîs also changed from *freedom fighters*, to *terrorists*. Therefore, these shifts in the enemy's identity were simultaneously happening in both directions.

At the same time, American foreign policy makers elaborated a discourse that was echoing but simultaneously trying to qualify the clash of civilizations thesis. This discourse was elaborated to define how the United States was going to build its relationships with movements of political Islam that were becoming powerful – sometimes threatening incumbent regimes- in the Muslim world. More specifically, in addition to the Afghan *mujâhidîn*, the White House had to define its strategic relationships with newly emerged Islamist parties or quasi-parties in Middle Eastern and North African countries allied with the United States in case they came to power.¹² It was in order to leave open the possibility of political relations with these non state actors that the speech of the Meridian House, pronounced by Edward Djerijian¹³ in June 1992, was elaborated. It envisioned the United States' relations with Muslim countries as a political and complex type of relation that had to be disconnected from religious considerations and identifications:

“the U.S. Government does not view Islam as the next “ism” confronting the West or threatening world peace. That is an overly simplistic response to a complex reality... The Cold War is not being replaced with a new competition between Islam and the West. The crusades have been over for a long time. Americans recognize Islam as a historic civilizing force among the many that have influenced and enriched our culture (...) Religion is not a determinant –positive or negative- in the nature or quality of our relations with other countries. Our quarrel is with extremism and the violence, denial, intolerance, intimidation, coercion, and terror which too often accompany it.”¹⁴

In the same vein, Bill Clinton continued to reject defining the US's relationships with Muslim countries and opposition movements through religion. Both administrations avoided to explicitly echo Huntington's idea of a “clash of civilizations” founded on the conflict between Islam and the West and articulated a reading of the existing conflicts as an opposition between actors “radical” and “moderate” in their instrumentalization of

¹² Fawwas Gerges has shown how Algeria was the first country to illustrate the emergence of political Islam for George Bush I. See Fawwaz Gerges, *Ibid*.

¹³ Djerijian was vice state secretary for Middle Eastern Affairs.

¹⁴ Quoted by Fawwaz Gerges, *Ibid*. p. 80.

Islam.¹⁵ The 1993 attacks of the World Trade Center, which seem to have been a *répétition générale* or rehearsal of the 9/11 attacks, brought up the same expression of a separation between religion and political conflicts on the part of the legal authorities.

The figure and political language of ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, a cleric educated at al-Azhar University, became the center of media attention after the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993.¹⁶ ‘Abd al-Rahman arrived in New Jersey in July 1990, where he became a mosque imam. His political career in Egypt had started in the 1950s as a *compagnon de route* of the Muslim Brothers and a fierce opponent to Nasser. He was among the defendants accused of having fomented Sadat’s assassination in 1981. He later allied with the Gamaa Islamiyya in Asyut, and was one of the theological inspirations of the group.¹⁷ When in Jersey City, he gave sermons that criticized the Egyptian regime. He insisted on the long conflict between Islam and the West (defined as America, Israel and their allies) and the internal conflict between authoritarian regimes and Islamism. He also criticized American foreign policy and the support the White House gave to the Egyptian regime. Hence, once in the United States, his opposition to the Egyptian regime continued, but the struggle he imagined became a global one. The enemy’s definition expanded to include a large group of “impious” Muslim regimes (in particular Egypt) as

¹⁵ Fawwaz Gerges, *Ibid.* Gerges underlines that the Meridian speech also distinguished clearly “between moderate and extremist Islamist groups. Deredjian seemed to imply that extremist Islamist groups formed a concerted network, while the mainstream Islamists did not.” p. 80.

¹⁶ For a few examples, see Judith Miller, “Abdel Rahman’s criminal past. Bloody Sheikh.” *The New Republic*. March 29, 1993, p. 18-20; Richard Bernstein “U.S. Portrays Sheik as Head of a Wide Terrorist Network,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 1994, p. 1; Peter Waldman and Frances A. MacMorris, “Conspiracy Trial Gives Muslim Sheik Pulpit of a Lifetime,” (note the subtitle: “Omar Andel-Rahman’s blend of religion and politics will get global spotlight”) *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 1995, p.1. The shaykh himself gave interviews to al-Hayat, as well as ABC’s prime Time Live and CNN. See Judith Miller “Sheik Emerges on TV to Deny Link to Bombing,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 1993. Mary Anne Weaver “The Novelist and the Sheikh,” *The New Yorker*, January 30, 1995, pp. 51-69.

¹⁷ For a more detailed biography of Shaykh ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, see Malika Zeghal, “Religion and Politics in Egypt: The Islamists, the Ulema and the State (1952-1994),” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, volume 31, 3, August 1999, pp. 371-399.

well as the United States.

The Shaykh was arrested after the bombing of the WTC in 1993 and was accused of having participated with nine co-defendants in a conspiracy to lead a “war of urban terrorism against the United States.”¹⁸ This is when he became an object of scrutiny in the American media. During the trial, a debate developed between the defense and the prosecutors regarding the explanation of the 1993 bombing: ‘Abd al-Rahman’s defense team had requested the testimony of an expert on Islam, arguing that the Shaykh had only transmitted the ideas contained in his faith and was a political opponent to the regime of Mubarak as well as a fierce critic of the American support to this regime. His trial was therefore in part motivated by religious discrimination. Ms. Stewart, ‘Abd al-Rahman lawyer declared at his trial:

“he is, as we sit here today, the victim of an overreaching U.S. government prosecution, with the political goal of silencing this outspoken critic of policy in the Middle East and particularly Egypt, that he stands convicted as much by the temper of the times, the palpable fear of people who identified believers in one of the world’s great religions as equating with terrorism, a terrible stigma...”¹⁹

The Shaykh also presented himself as a mere transmitter of the Qur’anic text, who was persecuted for his religious opinions.

“I have not done anything and I have not committed any crime, except having taught people about Islam (...) All of these accusations I am accused of are no more than words, whereas in the court they have listened to my speeches and my lessons, and these words are not my own words, but these are the words of Islam and the verses of the holy Koran. And when the American government produces or puts forward my speeches and my Muslim lessons as evidence in this case, in so doing it is actually putting Islam on trial, and it is putting the Koran on trial, and America thinks that when it puts Islam on trial and tells lies against it and makes allegations, and makes it look bad, America believes that it is killing Islam, and in truth it is killing itself.”²⁰

On the other hand, the judge characterized the Shaykh as a political strategist, rather than as a religious man who was denied the free exercise of this religion.

¹⁸ *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 September 1995, p.1.

¹⁹ “Unites States of America versus Omar Ahmad Ali abdel Rahman,” United States District Court, Southern District of New York, January 1996, p. 159.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 165.

“You have argued here, and your lawyer has argued, that you were improperly denied the right to present evidence about the teachings of your religion through expert testimony. That evidence was kept out because the issue in this case was not what any religion taught or directed but rather what you taught or directed, and there is only one expert on that, and that expert did not choose to speak on that subject until sentencing. (...) The crimes of which you stand convicted would be just as much crimes if they were committed in the name of irreligion or greed or any other motivation that has ever impelled people to try to impose their views by force. The only reason that religion was any part of the proof in this case was that it served, regrettably, as the motivation for committing crimes. Because religion does not sanctify crimes, that motive could be proved just the same way that any other motive could be proved.”²¹

As demonstrated by the judge’s intervention, the idea of a complete overlap of Islam and violence was avoided. The defendant, as an interpreter of a doctrine in which he found “motivation,” was the person to be judged, not his faith. It was hence implicitly stated that a religion could only be understood through its human interpretation. It was through the medium of human interpretation –in this case the one produced by theologian ‘Abd al-Rahman- that the judge introduced an internal division within Islam between its acceptable uses and its violent interpretations. As a recent literature has showed, official discourses originating from the US administration have categorized Islam into different readings and have opposed “moderate” and “radical” Islam.²² After September 11, the RAND corporation has fully deployed this dichotomy and refined it in order to define its Muslim allies and opponents in the Muslim world.²³ This typology has used different dichotomous adjectives such as “moderate/radical,” or “secular/fundamentalist.” In conjunction with the violence of 9/11 and the response to these attacks through the War on Terror organized by the American administration, this dichotomy has had a constraining effect on American Muslim activists and intellectuals who have strived to normalize the presence of Islam in the United States. These official identifications have produced the idea of a “necessary” internal reform of Islam and have created at the same time an objective alliance –in other words an undesired convergence- between would-be

²¹ “United States of America versus Omar Ahmad Ali Abdel Rahman,” United States District Court, Southern District of New York, January 1996, p. 193-194.

²² Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

²³ Saba Mahmud, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture*, 18(2) 2006 : 323-247.

reformers (or reformers *tout court*) and the United States' administration's military endeavors in the Muslim Middle East. Many Muslim intellectuals who found in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 an opportunity to express their opposition to fundamentalist Islam and to articulate a liberal hermeneutic of the revealed text have not accepted to participate in this implicit alliance, which has made them politically uncomfortable. They have now become less visible, hence dissolving the publicity they had acquired for some time, which shows the failure of the United States' strategy of turning internal divisions of Islam into categories of identification to encourage the development of a liberal Islam in the United States.

2- Searching for “moderate Muslims:” American Muslims and their deciphering of the post-9/11 context in the United States.

The attacks of 9/11 created a complex and multilayered context of violence for Muslims in the United States. The first layer was characterized by the violence of the attacks themselves. The second was the explicit or implicit suspicion under which Muslims –and therefore Islam as a faith- found themselves after the attacks, accompanied by a series of discriminations and surveillance of Muslim communities, mosques and representative organizations.²⁴ The third, the “War on Terror,” deployed at the international level, was started in Afghanistan in October 2001, following in Iraq in 2003. This war made the old doctrine that strived to evacuate religion from the analysis of violence suspect for many Muslims, as the US administration continued to make use of the same ambiguous discourse regarding the relationship between Islam and violence, albeit with some discursive slips that made its statements even more suspicious. For instance, in the question and answer following his speech at the White House on September 16, 2001, President Bush first used the word “crusade,” saying “this crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take awhile.” Because of an international media backlash expressing a fear that the use of this term meant an official recognition of the clash of civilizations, Bush

²⁴ Louise Cainkar, “No Longer Invisible: Arab and Muslim Exclusion After September 11,” *Middle East Report 224*, fall (Washington DC: Middle East Report and Information Project, 2002), available at http://www.merip.org/mer/mer224/224_cainkar.html

made an appearance at an Islamic center in Washington to assure Americans that “the face of terror is not the true face of Islam,” while his press secretary declared that “what the President was saying -- had no intended consequences for anybody, Muslim or otherwise, other than to say that this is a broad cause that he is calling on America and the nations around the world to join.” And when asked if he regretted using the term, the given response was “to the degree that that word has any connotations that would upset any of our partners, or anybody else in the world, the President would regret if anything like that was conveyed. But the purpose of his conveying it is in the traditional English sense of the word. It's a broad cause.”²⁵ In other words, Bush’s political entourage insisted that his intended meaning did not have a religious connotation.

This conspicuous tension between a desire to provide a secular interpretation of politics and the expression by the state of the existence of a religious conflict has deeply reconfigured the internal debates and tensions among American Muslims regarding the ways in which they should define Islam and correlatively read and interpret the revealed texts. The representation of the United States launching its powerful army against Muslim countries, illustrated by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, in conjunction with a clash between fundamentalist Islam and liberal interpretations of the faith, expressed in the media and by state actors, have also made this internal debate taking place on American soil difficult. The narratives that follow illustrate these tensions and difficulties. They are excerpts from articles published after September 11 in the Muslim periodical *The Minaret*²⁶ as well as pieces that appeared in publications such as Omid Safi’s collective *Progressive Muslims*, published in 2003. They do not represent a uniform group of cultural mediators and intellectuals, but rather a set of diversified trends striving to produce a definition of Islam, or to problematize it, in the aftermath of September 11. Not that these trends were not present before the fall of 2001. In fact, some of its terms belong to the diverse interpretive traditions within the history of Islam.

²⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html>. For the correction by the Press Secretary, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010918-5.html>.

²⁶ *The Minaret* is a publication of the Islamic Center of Southern California that started being published in 1985.

However, September 11 has provided these new public actors with a unique opportunity to be heard by other Muslims as well as by the larger public. Their reactions were diverse: Some of them were divided between the critique of American foreign policy and the search for recognition as a religion equal to other faiths -through a rejection of radical Islam and the attempt to produce a clear definition of Islam as a “religion of peace” or a “moderate religion.” Others did not necessarily dwell on American foreign policy, but rather exemplified the desire of some Muslim public intellectuals to operate an epistemic shift in the interpretation of Islam. This shift hinged on the interaction between “Islam” and “Muslims,” and suggested that instead of defining Islam, they had to understand their religion as experienced and enacted by “Muslims,” almost dissolving the existence of a definable “Islam.” Before 9/11, this trend remained unnoticed, silent or isolated in the United States. They felt that conservative immigrant mosques and organizations were too hegemonic to allow them to offer their own interpretations of Islam and mobilize a new clientele. The violence of 9/11 propelled them into the American public arena.

a-The Expression of Fear

After September 11, Muslims expressed their fears. One article published in the October 2001 issue of *The Minaret*, read:

“Like every American, I am outraged. And I want justice. But perhaps unlike many other Americans, I am feeling something else too. A different kind of fear. I am feeling what my 6 million fellow American Muslims are feeling –the fear that we too will be considered guilty in the eyes of America, if it turns out that the madmen behind this terrorism were Muslim. (...) Every time I hear of an act of terrorism, I have two prayers. My first is for the victims and their families. My second is, please don’t let it be a Muslim. Because unlike when an act of terrorism is committed by a Christian or a Jew, when it is a Muslim, it is not considered an isolated act perpetrated by an isolated group of madmen. The entire faith is characterized as barbaric, as inhuman. And, my fellow Americans, I stand before you, as broken as you are, to tell you that it’s not. That we are not. That we Muslims love our country as you do, and that we are bleeding and grieving alongside you.”²⁷

This expression of fear –fear of the negative valuation of Islam and Muslims and its consequences- was counterbalanced by an identification with the pathos of the American

²⁷ Reshma Memon Yaqub, “The Horror is Unspeakable,” *The Minaret*, October 2001, page 23.

people after 9/11 and by a desire to be recognized as part of the America nation. Larger processes of public recognition were allowed as the larger public solicited Muslims to define and explain their religion. Numerous questions about the meaning of Islam were brought up by the media and in interfaith events after September 11. Muslims were called upon to answer: does Islam breed violence? Why do *they/you* hate us? What is the meaning of jihad?²⁸ These questions put most Muslims in a delicate position: they were perceived as “representing” Islam as they were asked to interpret it for the American public. They had to produce an image of Islam that would be acceptable to a large public in a context where Islam was becoming frightening.²⁹ Since the external enemy of the United States (the elusive network of al-Qaida) was so difficult to identify geographically and doctrinally but had an Islamic identity, local Muslims were asked to provide “explanations,” which would clarify their faith as well as their own position regarding violence. Progressively, the War on Terror and a policy of discrimination towards Muslims made their situation even more difficult: they were under suspicion and were asked by many media to represent what Islam “was” and what it “said.” It was in the context of this particularly tense situation that American Muslims intervened in public as Muslims and were confined to producing a public image and representation of Islam that would help them normalize their position in American society. In early 2002, an article from the *Minaret* read:

“...The average middle class, mosque going-Muslims who run grocery stores, office workers or students, are totally confused at what they should do or say. Should they side with the terrorists overseas or with the super power who is bombing the innocent civilians in hospitals and houses there in order to free the whole world of these terrorists? How can we present Islam to those who stereotype, profile and even call us their enemy?”³⁰

b-Locating the “Proper” Definition of Islam

Hence, this quest for “moderate Muslims” triggered a worried response by American Muslims: for many of them, the term “moderate” did not make sense. Why did they need

²⁸ Maher Hathout “New Jihad Becomes Free for All,” *The Minaret*, November-December 2001, page 15.

²⁹ The weakening of Muslims’ civil rights had started before the administration of G. Bush. In 1995, the Congress voted the *Anti Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act*, signed in 1996 by Bill Clinton.

³⁰ Shahid Athar, “What does the Future Hold?” *The Minaret*, January 2002, p. 32.

to “show” their moderation? They were asked to objectify their faith and interpret it, even if, for most of them, in their daily lives, they practiced it in an ordinary routine. Many Muslims who were not used to having a position of representation or religious authority suddenly appeared at the center of media attention and were propelled in the public eye on local television networks or newspapers: from this new public position, albeit often a temporary one, they had to elaborate a definition of their faith and to choose a language understandable by their audience. In a humorous article published in *The Minaret*, Muzammil Ahmad wrote:

“Muslims are victims of their sheer normalcy. On one hand, the media constantly asks, “Where are the moderate Muslims?” But on the other hand, the moderate Muslims are simply too normal and boring for the media to successfully cover. This current crisis should be a wake up call to Boring American Muslims (BAMs) across the blessed land: get crazy, get down, and show America we can be newsworthy without the use of rental trucks, airplanes or sniper rifles.”³¹

Many of these discourses strived to shape Islam within a universal definition that would be palatable to all Americans and would show normalcy. Many times the concept of jihad was interpreted as “inner struggle” for the good life, rather than resistance to oppression. Harvard graduate Zayed Yasin, in a speech he gave on graduation day said:

“On one level it’s simple: everyone wants the same things that we do. The true American Dream, is a universal dream, and it is more than a set of materialistic aspirations. It is the power and opportunity to shape one’s own life: to house and feed a family, with security and dignity, and to practice our faith in peace. This is our American Struggle, our American Jihad... So I ask again: where is your jihad, our struggle? Whether on our way to an investment bank in New York, or to Sierra Leone to work with orphans, Harvard graduates have a responsibility to leave their mark on the world. So let us struggle, and let us make our mark.”³²

More organized groups representing Muslims since the 1980s published their own definitions of Islam, molded in the “moderate” language that was expected from them. In

³¹ “Watch out for BAM (Boring American Muslim),” *The Minaret*, February 2003, page 14.

³² “Of Faith and Citizenship: My American Jihad.” *The Minaret*, July/August 2002, page 34.

early 2002, the Muslim Public Affairs Council published a declaration entitled “Why moderation is central to Islam.”³³

“Islam is by nature a moderate religion, a religion of tolerance (“We bestowed revelation from on high and gave you a balance so that people may behave with equity” Qur’an, 57:25) and Muslims are meant to be an *umma* (community) of moderation. Moderation is not a compromise, it is not a tailoring of the “real” Islam to conform to the pressures of *real politique* (sic). Moderation is not something to apologize for, have feelings of guilt over, or, indeed, a vision that occurs to Muslims that live in the West or in Western civilization. Nor is moderation a product of the 21st century... Some concerned Muslims have asked, are we falling into the trap of classifying Muslims as either moderates or extremists? The answer is no. We are forcing our way out of another trap, that of allowing others to make these distinctions according to their agendas. It is we, Muslims, who should reclaim the Quranic definition of our religion... The resolution of this convention is clear and resounding: we Muslims should never allow our faith to be hijacked, our rights to be violated, or our patriotism to be questioned.”³⁴

Through mechanisms of dissociation from the attacks and association with the American national identity, Muslim activists and intellectuals reclaimed their faith in order to “correct” or “reform” its mistaken interpretation by a minority who had chosen the path of violence. One of the major themes they developed after the attacks was that of a “hijacked” Islam.³⁵ For instance, Hamza Yusuf was invited to the White House, the only Muslim in a group of religious leaders invited to pray with President Bush. He declared: “Hate knows no religion. Hate knows no country.”³⁶ “Islam was hijacked on that September 11, 2001, on that plane as an innocent victim.”³⁷ Islam was hence, as a

³³Susan Schwartz, “MPAC redefines moderation,” *The Minaret*, February 2002, pages 28-29. This piece was a report on the MPAC annual convention in Buena Park, California, on December 29, 2001.

³⁴ *The Minaret*, February 2002, p. 29.

³⁵ See the excellent article by Marcia Hermansen, “The Evolution of American Muslim responses to 9/11” in Ron Geaves (ed). *Religious Responses to 9/11*. Ashgate, 2004, 77-96.

³⁶ Laurie Goodstein, “A Nation Challenged: The American Muslims. Influential American Muslims Temper their Tone,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2001, Section B, page 1.

³⁷ Two days before September 11, in a speech in Irvine, California, he had criticized the foreign policy of the United States and warned that America expected a “great, great tribulation.” Laurie Goodstein, “A Nation Challenged: The American Muslims. Influential American Muslims Temper their Tone,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 2001, Section B, page 1. See also Peter Ford, “Listening to Islam’s Silent Majority,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 5, 2001. Subtitle: “As Osama bin Laden calls for a jihad, and militants rally, where are the moderate Muslims?”

doctrine, the victim of violence by a minority, and it had to be protected from this minority, who did not represent it. These lines of reasoning were reproducing the administration's discourse about Islam and its uses by Muslims, providing a definition of the "nature" of Islam, which had been misinterpreted. These views were also striving to provide mechanisms of authorization to speak in the name of Islam.

3- Defining the Reform of Islam: Rituals, Embodiments and Hermeneutics.

However, two years after September 11, another type of discourse also emerged publicly, particularly among Muslim intellectuals often belonging to academic circles, who criticized the absence of internal critique by Muslims in the United States and beyond. They formed a heterogeneous group professionally as well as politically: they covered almost the whole range of the American political spectrum. Some of them expressed their views in a collective work, *Progressive Muslims*, published in 2003.³⁸ They questioned Islamic apologetics and literalism in order to give more "complexity," "context" and "historicity" to their religious experience and/or theology. They argued that Muslims have to work within their own rich heritage to condemn and dissolve violence, while also avoiding apologetics. A small minority among them rewrote the prevalent conceptions of gender, starting from the Qur'an: in their practice of Islam, women should be the equals of men, should stand in the same room in prayer, and could even lead men in prayer.³⁹ Religious freedom, doubt, transgression, even sexual satire are some of the themes with which "progressive Muslims" negotiate, as some of their texts reveal on the website *Muslim Wakeup!* Progressive local and national US organizations have tentatively emerged, trying to institutionalize these diverse trends into an organized movement, far from the American immigrant mosques from which they have grown distant. But the very nature of a trend that claims religious freedom, complexity and diversity, contradicts the possibility of a unified institutionalization of this religious thought.

³⁸ Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims. On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2003.

³⁹ See in particular Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad. Women's Reform in Islam*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2006.

While this intellectual trend is heterogeneous and follows a diversity of political and cultural projects, it is possible to define a common denominator in their approach of Islam. For most of them, a new type of reading of the texts should be enacted. It was not only a minority that was responsible for the violence, but also a general tendency among Muslims to avoid thinking critically about their textual heritage. The typology that emerged from these discourses was not opposing the “radicals” and the “moderates,” but rather the literalists and more broadly the apologists of Islam (who could be identified either with the “moderates” or the “radicals” defined by the U.S. administration) on the one hand, and the “liberal” or “progressive” non-literal readings of the Islamic tradition on the other hand, which had a more hermeneutic and contextualized approach to the text, “humanizing,” problematizing and “intellectualizing religion.” Comments by Muslim intellectuals underlining this internal conflict of interpretations within Islam could even become symbolically violent and use an exclusionary discourse:

“It is time that we acknowledge that the freedoms we enjoy in the US are more desirable to us than superficial solidarity with the Muslim world. If you disagree, then prove it by packing your bags and going to whichever Muslim country you identify with. If you do not leave and do not acknowledge that you would rather live here than anywhere else, know that you are being hypocritical. It is time that we faced these hypocritical practices and struggled to transcend them. It is time that American Muslim leaders fought to purify their own lot.”⁴⁰

It was therefore Islam, as interpreted in “the Muslim world,” as shown by the quote that follows, that had to be reconsidered, rather than the political strategies of a minority of radicals.

“... if the West, in its profitable trilogy of images, portrays Islam and Muslims as an iconized evil, it is the Muslim world itself that provides the script for that trilogy. It is upon its fossilized intellect that the edifice of Hollywood and the media is built. Mindless uttering on Islam, as a religion of peace and mercy, does no good if these words are not matched by deeds. ...The Muslim world is not at war with West. It is at war with its own. It is engaged in an orgy of self-annihilation. In violation of the divine decree, its organic existence can only be redeemed through exacting justice. Instead of shouting hollow slogans in frenzied voices, the stagnation, the fossilization and the creeping decay must be brought to an end if the Muslim world is ever to face the challenge of the 21st century

⁴⁰ Muktedar Khan, “A Memo to American Muslims. Now is a time to soul search, reflect and reassess.”

The Minaret, November-December 2001, pages 24- 25.

and beyond. The reanimation of the glorious past in the post text age needs neither an apology for Islam nor an ill conceived jihad.”⁴¹

The intellectual decay of the “Muslim world” is therefore, in this interpretation, at the origin of violence. In the same vein, for newly emerged and ephemeral commentators or more established writers and essayists, the American Muslim “community’s” interpretations and practical experiences of Islam became a potential object of public critique. In these critiques, two homogenized loci of practice and representation of Islam were in particular singled out: the Muslim Students Associations and the American mosques, often related to an interpretation and practice of Islam that was “imported” and at odds with American culture because of its migrant origins.

Accompanying the theme of intellectual “decay,” the critique of inadequate embodiments of Islam in its practices was also developed. The critique dealt as much with intellectual interpretation as with the physical attributes and material practices of the faithful, be it the external appearance of the practitioners or the structure of gender segregation. One year after September 11, Nader A. Hashemi gave to the readers of *The Minaret* a sense of his experience at his university Muslim Students Association in the 1990s:⁴²

“The first MSA general meeting was instructive. It set the tone and mood for the rest of the academic year. ... the three women who had the misfortune of showing up were escorted to the “women’s” corner of the room. It was evident that their mere existence made many of the MSA brothers uncomfortable. The meeting began (half an hour late) with a 25 minute Qur’anic recitation (it seemed like it went on for 2 hours) and no English translation of the verses. The chairperson lectured us for 45 minutes without coherence or clarity in a language I can openly call Urdubonics (The Indo Pakistani equivalent of African-American slang language, Ebonics). He never smiled, had uncombed hair, an untrimmed beard, and looked extremely unwelcoming, almost thuggish. The bulk of his high strung monologue was how in order to be good Muslims we had to have the “fear of Allah” in our hearts and it was morally incumbent on us to “spread” and “defend Islam” on campus.”⁴³

⁴¹ Munawar A. Anees, “Manufacturing enemies. The age of media wars,” *The Minaret*, March 2002, p. 17-20.

⁴² Nader A. Hashemi, “Losing my religion. Reflections on the Muslim University Experience,” *The Minaret*, November/December 2002, p. 20-23.

⁴³ Nader A. Hashemi, *The Minaret*, November/December 2002, p. 20-21.

The author also described the “intellectual lethargy of the MSA,”⁴⁴ its “misogyny,” “medieval mindset,” and “extreme Occidentalism (the reverse of Orientalism).”⁴⁵

More broadly, the “culture of the mosque” became an object of harsh critique, because it was reflecting the homogenization of a standardized discourse on Islam that centered on apologetics. Omid Safi wrote, for instance, in his introduction to *Progressive Muslims*:

“...being a progressive Muslim means self-consciously moving beyond apologetic representations of Islam. Our apologism does God no good, and it solves none of our real problems. And it is no exaggeration to say that the overwhelming majority of writings that dominate Islamic centers falls into the realm of apologetics.”⁴⁶

In these writings, the pluralistic interpretation of Islam and the opening up of hermeneutic possibilities against literal implementation of textual authority are often associated with aesthetic, beauty, artistic expression and pluralism. Sarah al-Tantawi, defining an anti-conservative Muslim ethos, wrote in the *Minaret*:

“It already exists, but the Muslim establishment likes to ignore this elephant in the room. They are the Muslims who love art, poetry, beauty, irreverence and contradiction. They are the Muslims that don’t hate alternative lifestyles, questioning authority –including religious- critical thinking, welfare for the poor, answering our own questions and embracing many of the values of the west. They are also the types that aren’t afraid to stand up and fight for what’s right politically –be it relief for California’s strawberry pickers, racial equality, justice in law enforcement or freedom for the Palestinian people.

⁴⁴ Nader A. Hashemi, *The Minaret*, November/December 2002, p. 22..

⁴⁵ For a similar but more unified and intellectually subtle critique of the Muslim Student Association, see Marcia Hermansen, “How to put the Genie Back in the Bottle? Identity Islam and Muslim Youth Cultures in America,” in Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims. On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2003, p. 306-319. Hermansen writes that “a considerable portion of American Muslim youth” are moving in a direction “that negates interpretation and diversity altogether, one that rejects historical development and cultural context. Furthermore, it privileges certain external markers of identity and is, in the process, anti-intellectual” (p. 306). It should be kept in mind that this quote is followed by an extremely self-conscious description of the tensions within progressive/liberal Islam today, and that Hermansen not only illustrates, but also explicates with great subtleties the inner contradictions of this trend through her writings. For instance, “I hesitate to construct this piece of writing on the basis of “problematizing” or “pathologizing” Muslim youth cultures. So often one is confronted by the concept of Muslim youth and of Muslims generally as a problem –criminalized, unable to adapt, and now as a violent threat” (*Ibid*, p. 307).

⁴⁶ Omid Safi, “Introduction: The Times They Are A-Changin’ – A Muslim Quest for Justice, Gender Equality, And Pluralism,” in Omid Safi ed., *Progressive Muslims*, p. 20-21.

As Muslims, we talk about wanting to be included in the pluralism of America. And indeed, we should be. But what about pluralism among yourselves? Does it exist? Is it desirable?”⁴⁷

She also insisted on the fact that presenting the Muslim community as a homogeneous one had negative consequences and that internal plurality had to be nurtured:

“Too many Muslims make the assumption that we are all the same, that we all believe the same things, think the same thoughts, wear the same clothes or say the same things. Not only is this not true at all, but it feeds into a media who wants to paint us this way to serve their own ideological purposes. Conformity makes it so much easier for others to argue that our world really is polarized; that it really is “us” against “them”, a clash of civilizations, a battle of lifestyles and fixed ideas. Conformity is a lie, an illusion, a construction. The clash of civilizations is a lie, an illusion, a construction. Therefore, it is time to realize that our diversity is our strength in the difficult times ahead.”⁴⁸

The most outspoken critique of the American mosque was Khaled Abuel Fadhl, who, defining himself as an “intellectual refugee,” provided his own vantage point on the American mosque’s practices:

“In the United States, and among the Muslim community, I suffer confusion and fear becoming an intellectual refugee. ... Muslims in the United States eject words like fireworks –they dissipate the minute they explode. Knowledge is considered unnecessary for words, and thought is an optional superfluity. In fact, in our Muslim community, the preachers are considered the teachers, and shari‘a is their monopoly. ...In the world of preachers, ...analytical and critical insight and the use of reason have all been declared a heresy. In our Muslim community, the experts are dieticians, nurses, medical doctors, herbalists, computer scientists and countless engineers who mutate the shari‘a into a faddish curiosity. ...I move throughout the Muslim community and suffer a million rambling speeches. We have excelled in conferences, symposiums, and retreats handsomely staffed by cheerleaders. The cheerleaders raise the banners, claim our superiority, and assert our manifest destiny. They aim to praise and adulate our intellectual defeat by singing “who needs an intellect? All we need is a handsome and luscious beard!”.”⁴⁹

Abu el-Fadl’s critique of the absence of intellectual engagement with the tradition on the part of American mosques’ representatives was echoed by programmatic reflections on

⁴⁷ Sarah al-Tantawi, “Toward A Thriving Muslim Left,” *The Minaret*, March 2003, page 11.

⁴⁸ *The Minaret*, March 2003

⁴⁹ Khaled Abu el-Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam. A Conference of the Book*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2006, p 187-188. (first edition by Lanham [Md.] : University Press of America, c2001.)

how Muslims should read their textual tradition. While many of the immediate reactions to 9/11 by Muslims and by the U.S. administration alike produced reified definitions of Islam as a “religion of peace,” some public intellectuals rejected such attempts to give a standardized interpretation of the faith: for them, it was simply impossible to achieve. As Ebrahim Moosa wrote: “It is not uncommon to encounter Muslims saying, “You have to separate between Islam and Muslims;” “Islam is great, with every epithet of perfection.” The general rhetoric would be: “Islam is a religion of peace, it is Muslims who are bad.”” He continued,

“But can one ever imagine Islam without Muslims? While the rhetoric that pleads for a separation between “Islam” and “Muslims” implicitly endorses my claims that it is actually Muslims that embody Islam, it is often employed in order to defend “Islam,” as if the tradition is in need of protection in the first place.”⁵⁰

Refusing to view Islam as pure “scriptural authority,” and as a set of interactions between an ideal definition and its human interpretations and instrumentalization –an understanding shared at the same time by the US administration and many Muslim public representatives after September 11- Moosa shifted the definition of his faith from a literal and definite reading of textual injunctions to religion as being only comprehensible through human interpretive mediation: “Whatever Islam is in its ideal formation, the only version we know of it is only the imperfect and flawed one we have as imperfect beings.”⁵¹ Hence, his interpretation dissolved the very possibility of the “ideal formation of Islam,” an unreachable goal, and contradicted the efforts to abstractly define Islam as leaning towards peace or violence. His discourse also rejected any possibility to define itself as “representative” of Islam per se, and could not have public efficacy, except that of defining a program for a subjective and contextually defined hermeneutic of the tradition, an aim that could not be molded in the dichotomies deployed by state actors or by Muslims striving to produce a definite characterization of Islam for the American public.

⁵⁰ Ebrahim Moosa, “the Debt and Burden of Critical Islam,” in Omid Safi, *Ibid.* page 115.

⁵¹ Ebrahim Moosa, *Ibid.*, p.116. This interpretation is close to the one developed by Marcia Hermansen in the same volume. She underlines the utopia of Islam as “pure form” as understood by large segments of the Muslim youth.

As shown in the case of the images and interpretations of Islam produced by Muslims in the United States after September 11, the intersection of violence and religion –through the state definition of “acceptable” Islam and the concomitant War on Terror inside and outside the United States- allowed for the self-replication and the continuity of dichotomies opposing “radical” Muslims and “moderate” ones, now often used by Muslim representatives who express themselves publicly. Discourses by the secular state on religion in a multiculturalist society highly constrains the modes of reasoning that can be expressed by a religious minority under suspicion. A state that cannot institutionally control a religion uses interpretive incitements, as well as the violence it can exercise in different forms, to fashion a religion in the image of what is acceptable in this state’s own social and cultural context. The approach I have developed here helps demonstrate that the research question about religious or ethnic minorities is not necessarily to investigate their ability to “adapt” to the cultural and political environment. Instead, the development of interpretative trends within Islam in the US, and the lines that differentiate them and define internal competitions and conflicts, are dependent on a multifold set of constraints that include state institutions, warfare violence, and state discourses about the cultural and religious identities of minorities.