Modernist Islam

Intl 450 / Murat Somer
• How can people reinterpret religion to make room for modern values (such as gender equality, democracy, secularism, human rights) and pluralism?

• Theological constraints
• Political constraints
Kurzman

- Traditional Islam

- Modernist Islam (c.a. 1840 – 1950)

- Secularism (c.a. 1950 – 1970) and Islamic revivalism (c.a. 1950 - )

- Liberal Islam
How do we interpret the Quran?

• Is Quran created?

• Which view would be preferred by states?
• The debate between the Caliph Mutasim and Ibn Hanbal (780-855)
• What are different ways in which (a) traditional Islam and (b) modernist Islam reinterpreted Quran?

• How do these differ from each other in terms of politics and adaptation to modern life?

• How do they differ from methods interpretation that exists in other religious traditions?
• Higher criticism of the Bible:

• The phenomenon of soft belief:
Cook: “Traditional Islam has not been resistant to the notion that the revelation reflected the milieu in which it was revealed....But TI could never have made the leap from the idea of a scripture which engages the society in which it was revealed to the notion of one which is a product of it.”
• Examples:

• Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah (1947): Quran is literature in a sense which abandoned the claim that they embodied literal historical truth. God’s concern was to move the Arabs of the day to embrace Islam

• Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1992): Quran “cultural product” reflecting historically specific aspects of the culture and language of the time
• Athetizing vs. abrogation
• Quran uncreated and inimitable in Traditional Islam.
  – Tabari: “whoever claims otherwise, you can shed his blood.”
• Similar debates in Hinduism and Christianity.
• Abd al-Karim Surush (1992): Quran always talks about “a straight path” implying that there can be different paths.. => room for religious pluralism
New answers to:

• Who can speak for Islam?

• Why speak now?

• What to speak?

• How to speak?
Novel Approaches

• Modernists found new ways to communicate their ideas
  – Islamic poetry, historically an important part of Arab discourse became a powerful new medium
  – Staged debates
  – Novels and plays
  – Publication of Islamic periodicals captured the power of the press
Social Dynamics of Modernism

- Islamic Communist movements
- Support for capitalism with both sides using religious arguments to substantiate their case
- Sufism, schism between modernist Sufis and more orthodox modernists displayed the disparity in modernist interpretations

Ubaydullah Sindhi
Reform

• “no distinction between man and man” Modernists argued for equality under colonialism and apartheid
• Does the Koran advocate submission to despotism? *21:23
• Is democracy compatible with Islam?
• Young Turks
• Science and progress equate power, and Islam ignores the two at its own peril and demise
• What is the source of stagnation?
  – Closed mindedness, that was remarkably absent at the advent of Islam
  – Religious elite stifled science – Afghani
• Women’s Rights
  – Demand for freedom must be accompanied by granting the same to women
  – Controversy over the banning of polygamy
  – Controversy over appropriate Islamic dress, “western” vs. “Islamic”
  – Education of women
Modernist Legacy

• To what extent has Islamic modernism affected the subsequent developments throughout the Islamic world?
  – Iranian Revolution
  – Pan Arab nationalism
  – Turkey