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The Great Awakening

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This article examines the middle-class roots of religious revival movements in the Middle East, drawing explicit parallels between similar movements in the early 19th century United States. It argues that rather than see such movements principally through the prism of violence and rejection of the status quo, they should be seen fundamentally as conservative efforts to inculcate values in urbanizing and otherwise rapidly changing societies.

One key difference from the United States experience with such groups is the way in which most Middle Eastern governments seek in some way to use religion to legitimize their rule. The consequence is that acts of religious contestation are not merely theological, but heavily political as well.

Imagine a rapidly growing city filled with young people from the countryside, looking for work and shirking the strict codes of their rural communities. Imagine them crowding into uniformly poor urban quarters, as the wealthy flee downtown for newly created housing in new developments. Imagine as well, a growing piety taking root. Religious charities spring up, and religious networks provide economic capital to the young strivers. Alcohol stocks are destroyed as liquor emerges as a symbol of moral decay. The young leaders in the community are noticeably pious, especially compared to their elders, and they seek to connect their piety with a notion of being civilized.

Most dramatically, there is a surge in personal proselytization, especially among women, as one by one family members become more engaged in a life of faith and observance. Religious politics do not follow far behind, as the newly faithful seek to make their votes align with their faith, and politicians embrace religious language, imagery, and outward piety.

While the city described here could be Riyadh, Cairo or Casablanca, it could be Damascus, or Zarqa or Fez. Instead, it is Rochester, New York, in 1831, during a period of massive evangelization and religious revivalism in the United States called "The Second Great Awakening." What happened then in Rochester sheds insight into what we are seeing in Muslim communities around the world today.

Most Western observers of the rise of salience of Islam in public life in the Middle East see it as driven by societies in meltdown: armies of deeply alienated, unemployed young people turn their backs on a society that failed them and instead turn toward God, whom they invoke in their bloody attacks. The spectacularly violent acts against civilians carried out in the name of Islam—the attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the Riyadh housing compound bombings of May and November 2003, the Madrid Train Bombings of March 11, 2004, the London Subway bombings of July 7, 2005, and the attacks on Amman hotels of November 9, 2005—persuade many that such violence, almost invariably suicidal, can only be driven by an unimaginable despair. The muted criticism and often-tacit approval that some Muslim clerics give to such attacks drives this point home even further. The view has become increasingly solidified in the West that the economic and social despair of the Arab world creates a pathological hatred, the most evident manifestations of which are increased religiosity in public life. Self-proclaimed Western experts expound on the notion of "*Dar al Islam*" locked in conflict with "*Dar al-Harb*," and explain that a Western war against Muslims is a war of self-defense, not of offense. The solution, they argue, is to relieve these societies of their rampant wants, creating more participatory governance, and providing education to the masses. A half century of efforts in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century helped eliminate much of the rural poverty here; a similar effort in the Arab world could eliminate much of the homicidal rage that they see driving political Islam.

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But it is worth considering the likelihood that the more important part of Islam's rise may not be the violent fringe that threatens the West (and the governments aligned with it), but the more sizeable and moderate middle composed of people who seek to shape their own societies in an evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, way. This part of the phenomenon is not a revolt from below. Instead, like the Second Great Awakening, it is an effort from the "middle" to establish order and meaning in a rapidly changing society. Such a reading is heretical among many Western observers, because of a conviction that "progress" must result in people behaving more like—and sympathizing with—Western societies, and anything that accentuates difference must be a sign of regression. Such a reading departs from the notion that modernity is somehow synonymous with homogeneity, and with Western societies representing the apogee of human achievement.

Many in the West see resurgent Islam as an indicator of a crisis in society and governance. The most obvious flaw in the theory that Islam's resurgence is a reaction to bad governance is just how common it is. If it were a consequence of bad governance, one would expect to see relatively well-governed Muslim-majority countries with relatively weaker Islamic movements, and more poorly governed countries with stronger ones. We do not. While the manifestations of Islam's rise vary in different societies, its existence is a virtual constant throughout the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia.

To understand why the manifestations of the Islamic resurgence differ from one place to another, it is important to keep two things in mind:

First, Islam is neither static nor inert. In the wise words of American University Professor Mustafa Kemal Pasha, "'Islamic' is not a self-evident category."(1)

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1. Oral comments to CSIS conference on Islam and charity, Washington, DC, October 10, 2003.

There are different explanations of "Islamic behavior" or "Islamic custom," and different authorities can often arrive at different conclusions. Syrian-born anthropologist Aziz al-Azmeh observes further, "There are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it."(2) What both of these scholars suggest is that Islam responds, it is vested with meaning, and it is a living force. The meaning of Islam is contested, and the nature of that contest shifts over time and space. Local clerics had once held enormous sway over their communities, but their authority is undermined both by the rise of electronic da'wa (on tapes, on television, and over the Internet), and the phenomenal growth of religious authorities who lack clerical backgrounds, such as preachers like Amr Khaled, authors like Muhammad Shahrour or Kamal Abu El-Magd, and even anonymous posters on Internet bulletin boards. Dynamism in Islamic intellectual life is driven in part by a force of homogenization as a modern, "orthodox Islam" drives out localized traditions and superstitions (and in many places, traditional Sufi movements). Yet, in the opposite direction, there is an emerging crisis of authority that makes everyone a potential expert and puts both digitized, searchable religious texts and broadcasting power in the hands of previously marginal figures. What we see happening in the Islamic sphere is remarkably dynamic, as technology simultaneously empowers everyone from regime-supported clerics (both within countries and those who often have Gulf funding to reach broad international audiences), to opposition clerics, to lay commentators. In such a dynamic environment, it would be surprising to find a uniform religious sphere throughout the Muslim world.

Second, Islamic movements are fundamentally modern and opportunistic in the way that they organize people and speak to them. Seemingly drawing on modern social theory, they network horizontally, create hierarchies, conference and share best practices. They aggressively use new media—from CD's and DVD's to streaming video and chat rooms on the Internet—to spread their message. Islamic institutions are often attractive and new, and they sport the latest technology. All of this happens in an environment in which literacy is increasingly common, and satellite television is often even more so.

They do all of this within the framework of avowedly traditional goals, proclaiming that their aim is not so much seeking to change behavior as to lead a return to proper behavior. Their outwardly traditional style makes them appear to be comfortable, authentic, and non-threatening. To the contrary, it is the "status quo secularists" who seem to be acting with reckless abandon, while the Islamists seek to act more cautiously and deliberately.

Islamist movements spread in much the same way that social movements spread in other parts of the world, through drawing together groups of people who share one or more common affinities. In the last decade in particular, there have been a number of studies of the growth of Islamist movements in the Middle

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2. Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities* (New York: Verso, 1993), p.1.

East, concentrating especially on Egypt, Jordan and Yemen.(3) The authors of these books survey an array of institutions, from formal non-governmental organizations carrying out charity work, to medical clinics, to informal study circles in people's apartments. What binds these organizations together is that they are avowedly religious in character, and in the cases under study, dominated by middle-class professionals with significant educational histories. They are precisely the kind of people who led the religious revival in Rochester, New York, in the 19th century, if one allows for changes in lives between the 19th and 21st centuries.

One significant finding about these groups is how relatively homogenous they are. They tend not to transcend social class, but instead to build trusted networks between fundamentally similar people. Whereas the Muslim ummah transcends class, race and national origin, many of these Islamic institutions are far more parochial. Social movement theorists suggest that this relatively common background, combined with a long process of affiliation allows people time to accommodate themselves to the idea (and to the identity) of being an activist. Such a process is often needed to cement ties to a group.(4) Other sociologists point to the importance of action in shaping notions of belief, turning on its head the notion that extreme people start with extreme beliefs which motivate them to take action on those beliefs. This new scholarship suggests that it is in fact a series of small actions that help shape people's notion of themselves as participants in a movement, and ultimately as agents of change. Religious ritual plays a role underlining this transition, because religion itself can be full of "meaning-laden rituals which it shares with the movement. Religion is unique from other social institutions in providing values and vocabularies legitimated by tradition and claims to the transcendental which are embedded in a whole variety of religious practices."(5)

In her study of Egypt in the 1990s, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham highlights the process by which educated youth are drawn into Islamist networks into which they have only scant curiosity at the outset. She calls for paying attention to "micromechanisms of mobilization" whereby the Islamist message moves its way closer to the core of participants' identities; one of the most significant aspects of this mobilization is "reinforcement through intensive, small-group solidarity

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3. For example, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity and Activism: Middle Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan and Yemen* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004); Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

4. See, for example, Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, "Network Analysis, Culture and the Problem of Agency," *American Journal of Sociology.* 99, no. 6 (1994).

5. Ziad W. Munson, "Becoming an Activist: Believers, Sympathizers and Mobilizers in the Pro-Life Movement," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2002), p. 258.

at the grass-roots level,"(6) a process that is driven by small group meetings and study groups. Sencer Ayata describes a similar process in the efforts of Turkish Nakshabendi Sufi groups to provide an entire intellectual, emotional and economic support structure for adherents in Turkey. He suggests that Turkey's Welfare Party used a similar strategy to build grass roots support, arguing that the party's field operation provided three things:

> A clear simple…ideology that explains what is fundamentally wrong with individuals, the society, and the country, and what has to be done to put things in order. Second, the activists provide poor people with certain material benefits…[and] finally, and most important, they offer 'sympathy,' an appreciation of the difficulties of everyday life for ordinary people, respect for their work and their struggles. Thus, they create a personal atmosphere of closeness, affection, congeniality, and companionship.(7)

This is clearly more than a mere political movement, but instead a social movement that reaches deep into the daily lives of its adherents.

Where middle class Islamist movements truly solidify their presence is the ways in which they help reconstruct aspirations for adherents. In societies in which inequities make many aspirations unattainable, middle class Islamist movements have stepped in and provided a set of attainable aspirations that have to do with individual conduct, moral uplift, and support from a tight network of co-religionists. Again, the parallels to 19th century New York could not be more striking. Large public campaigns against alcohol consumption and smoking, and a strong emphasis on the abolition of slavery, helped give meaning to middle class strivers who sought to build a better society. In the words of a leading historian of that period in the United States, "[t]he revival of 1831 healed divisions within the middle class and turned businessmen and masters into an active and united missionary army."(8) He argues further that the revival promoted a "perfect moral order based on individual freedom and self-government."(9) In common with the Islamic revival, the Christian revival of 19th century New York brought individual action together with the notion of an ideal society, and the role of the individual in it. It gave agency to the actions of individuals, and it sanctified everyday actions that, heretofore, had been without any religious content.

In 19th century Rochester, the newly converted flocked to the Whig Party, which stood in opposition to the Democrats. Like modern U.S. political parties, the Whigs had a base that was partly ideological and partly class-driven. In the one-party states or no-party states that prevail in much of the Muslim-majority world, Islamist voices lack a partisan alternative. Consequently, rather than rep-

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6. Rosefsky Wickham, p. 151.

7. Sencer Ayata, "Patronage, Party and the State: The Politicization of Islam in Turkey," *Middle East Journal,* 50, no. 1 (1996), p. 52.

8. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York*, 1815-1837 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 140.

9. Ibid., p. 141.

resenting an Islamist constituency within a broader party, Islamist movements most often exist independently, and often represent the strongest and most viable opposition to the status quo. Successful Islamic parties tend to share certain traits: They tout their modernity and their competence. They are often strongly nationalistic. In many cases, their pan-Islamic credentials are built on resistance to the West and support for the Palestinian cause. They do not run on platforms that advocate violence.

There is a paradox in Islamic politics. That is, in the words of one analyst, "often, the more successfully Islamists played the electoral game, the less they were seen as democrats by regimes and their Westernized political elites."(10) Islamist parties are welcome to participate in the political lives of many countries, but they are not welcome to contest power, or to threaten the hold of existing elites on that power. The response among Islamist parties is often to create a split between Islamists who are willing to accept the rules of the game and play even if they are barred from ever winning, and those who exist outside the legitimate political structure entirely. Governments tend to accuse the latter groups of ties to acts of violence and terror, but the connection is not always clear or convincing.

The reason this matters so much is that so many Arab governments have invoked religious sanction to enhance their legitimacy. The drive to establish the office of "mufti" in the Arab world was a largely twentieth century phenomenon intended both to enhance the religious character of the modern state and to bring the religious hierarchy under at least some element of state control. Consequently, religious debate becomes tinged with political import, because challenging the official clerics can be seen as challenging the rule. By the same measure, political challenges become religious challenges as well, and political difference can slide quickly from mere disloyalty to apostasy. States persuade religious authorities associated with them to issue religious condemnations for quasi-political purposes, which have some of the desired effect. Yet, at the same time, doing so diminishes the authorities' own religious credentials, which depend in part upon the clerics' autonomy from worldly influence.

Part of this battle, as well, is the ways in which religious institutions expand their purview to legislate public morality as a stand-in for state power. Religious figures argue for conceptualizations of morality that are not individualistic, but rather collective.(11) This construction gives the religious authorities the role of shaping collective judgments on such issues, rather than relying on the state to protect individual rights in this field. At the same time, for religious movements, issues of morality presented an opportunity to mobilize broad populations across economic and social lines on a common project.(12) That such morality broadly

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10. Jennifer Noyon, *Islam, Politics and Pluralism: Theory and Practice in Turkey, Jordan, Tunisia and Algeria,* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003), p. 4.
11. Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Modern World,* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 35.
12. Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), p. 77.

appealed to middle class notions of morality added to their luster. To be fair, concepts such as charity play a far larger role in Middle Eastern notions of morality than the emphasis in the United States on issues of sexual conduct, but it is hard to argue that such morality is a progressive force in these societies, as the "Liberation Theology" movement was in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s. They are essentially conservative, intended to enhance the status quo rather than overturn it.

What we saw in the late twentieth century, especially in avowedly Islamic states such as Iran, was that bringing religion and politics together did not sanctify politics, it politicized religion.(13) Religion became another forum for political contestation, and in many cases, it was one of the few that enjoyed some autonomy and protection from the state. As states protected secular liberals in return for loyalty (despite the fact that rulers themselves were hardly liberal), religion grew as a touchstone not so much for competition for votes, but rather for opposition to the status quo. This change tells us more about the nature of politics than religion, although the two have clearly blended.

None of this is to deny that radicalism exists in Muslim communities. Instead, it is to suggest that concentrating on the radical fringes systematically misses the growing Islamic revival in the "center" of many Muslim societies, which is what gives those movements their mass appeal. Rather than seeing Islamist movements as a revolutionary force, it is better to see them as an evolutionary force seeking to impose order and meaning on a changing society. After secular and revolutionary republican movements in Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere seemed to turn their backs on the idea of middle class empowerment, many see Islam as a way to nurture it. The Islamic revival described here is being stoked by large forces—technology, demographics, and education—that are difficult to either shape or direct. While many Americans are most comfortable with their own brand of secular liberalism, we will likely have to accommodate ourselves to an Islamic religious revival. Two ideas should be of comfort: the political consequences of that revival are neither self-evident nor inevitable, and like most revivals, it is far more likely to be part of a cycle rather than an end state. ■

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13. Or, as Olivier Roy put it memorably in 1999, "There is a growing tendency in, not only among democrats and liberals, but also traditional clerics, to separate religion and politics, this time in order to save Islam from politics, and not, as was the case in most of the processes of secularization in Western Europe, to save politics from religion." Olivier Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," *Middle East Journal,* 53, no. 2 (1999), p. 202.

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