Islamic Reformers in North America

Muqtedar Khan, University of Delaware
Marvin Whitaker, University of Delaware
Inspired by the above prophetic tradition, or as evidence of its veracity, Muslim revivalists have frequently sought to revive Islam and reform Muslim society, producing a continuous tradition of revival and reform. The tradition has not always been transformative, but it certainly has existed. It is difficult to identify who was the Mujaddid—one who revives; this is the noun related to the verb yaqīdū (he revives) used in the above tradition—in any given century. Indeed, there is no agreed upon list. Islam in its current form has been extant for over fourteen centuries yet there are over fourteen claimants to the title of The Mujaddid. Claims about the status of any individual as reformer are often disputed and contentious, but there are some who are widely considered and accepted as true revivers of the faith of Islam.

Imam Haned al-Ghazali (1056–1111 CE) is an excellent example of a reviver of Islam. His magnum opus, The Revival of Religious Sciences (Ihya Ulom al-Deen), is considered one of the greatest books in the Islamic tradition. He played a large role in reconciling contentious debates between rationalists and traditionalists, between the orthodox and the Sufis, and between the theologians and the philosophers. He is considered by Muslim scholars as a Mujaddid par excellence and has inspired many who seek to reform Islamic thought. Today he remains one of the classical scholars who has had a profound impact on the way American Muslims understand their intellectual tradition. Translations of his works are proliferating and the internet holds many articles and videotaped lectures about his thought. He will be, centuries after his death, a major contender for the title of Mujaddid of the 21st century. Similarly there have been many great scholars who have been declared Mujaddids by their followers and have been accepted as such by many for several centuries. Some famous examples include Sheikh Muhammed Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), Sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), and Shah Waliullah Dehelvi (1703–1762).

In recent times, there are rumors that one of the leading thinkers of political Islam—the Islamic view that advocates the creation of an Islamic state—Maulana Maududi of Pakistan, thought of himself as the Mujaddid of the last century. He did not explicitly make that claim, but his understanding of the role of the Mujaddid does appear to be autobiographical. His followers have certainly thought of him as a Mujaddid and have not shied away from making those claims (Nasr, 1994, p. 136). Maududi, in the modern era, was the principle restorer of the idea of “the reviver,” and in the process made the entire tradition of revival and reform (Tajdid wa Islah) in Islam justifiable. Islamic revivalist movements need an Islamic justification for their break from traditional Islam to avoid the serious accusation of innovation (bid'a). Even though modern revivalist movements were proliferating across the Muslim world since the 1850s, the theory of revivalism gained attention primarily through the narratives of Maududi and his followers, which were then picked up by other movements. The concept of the Mujaddid has special resonance to Islam in Pakistan because of the controversy about the
Ahmediyyah movement. The Ahmediyyah movement was declared heretical by the government of Pakistan after concerted agitation occurred by traditional Islamists as well as Maududi and his followers. Today the revivalist movement is banned in many countries, including Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. The founder of the Ahmediyyah movement, Ahmed Qadiyani (1835–1908) had claimed that he was the Muqaddid of the 13th century of Islam. Qadiyani used the same concept of revivalism as the principle instrument for presenting his ideas as legitimate. It is partly to counter the Ahmediyyah movement’s growing popularity in Pakistan that Maududi wrote about the concept of the Muqaddid, in order to reclaim it on behalf of the orthodox Sunni Islam. The most recent attempt at advancing another reformist paradigm, which tries to ground itself in the legitimacy of this tradition, comes from Tariq Ramadan (Ramadan, 2009, pp. 12–14).

Islam and Muslim societies are in great turmoil in the present time. Many Muslim countries are coming out of prolonged socially and politically debilitating dictatorships, in the wake of the Arab Awakening of 2010–2012. As a result of international politics, revolutions within Muslim countries, and the efforts of Muslim minority communities in the West to integrate in their host cultures, demands for Islamic reforms are getting louder. What is the role of Islam in the public sphere? Can Muslims find a way to treat Muslims and non-Muslims, men and women, equally under the law? In the age of democracy, when religious freedoms and freedom of expression are becoming the international norm, what can Muslims do about the current inclination to stifle religious criticism? Islam is demonized by some non-Muslims and abused by some Muslims, so in this context how will the battle for the interpretation of Islam pan out? All of the above questions hover around the issue of Islamic reform, and in the United States, many Muslim thinkers are seeking to reform the epistemology of Islam and are revisiting its traditions, often from a critical perspective.

In this essay we explore the contemporary manifestation of the Islamic tradition of revival and reform as a response to the challenge of modernity, to the decline of Muslim societies, and their relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the West. We introduce the reader to five contemporary Islamic reformers and their strategy for reviving the tradition of Islam, namely Tariq Ramadan, Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, Khaleed Abou El Fadl, Fazlur Rahman, and Ismail al-Faruqi. We close this chapter with our conclusion on the implications of Islamic reform now and in the future, especially in the American Muslim community.

Before we begin the actual discussion of individual reformers, we would like to make a distinction between prominent American Muslim revivalists and reformers. We fully understand that it may not be possible to make a categorical differentiation between who is involved in reviving Islamic thought and who is seeking to reform it, especially since all reformers are also revivalists. Nevertheless, we believe that traditional scholars such as Sheikh Hamza Yusuf and Imam Zaid Shakir, among others, are essentially involved in the revival of the Islamic spirit. While some of their work may contribute to reform, we do not feel comfortable describing them primarily as reformers. We use the term reformer to suggest an intellectual effort to either revisit sacred texts to advance new interpretations of those texts, which will change religious practice, or a direct challenge to established practice in order to reform social structures and traditions. We also feel that while we have chosen to review the work of five reformers, there are many others who have also made significant contributions to reformist thought in the United States but have not been included here essentially for reasons of space. Some of the prominent voices we have left out are Abdullah An-Naim, Amina Wadud, Sherman Jackson, Fathi Osman, and Azizah Al-Hibri.

Key Contemporary Islamic Reformers

Fazlur Rahman

Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988) was a modernist Islamic reformer and a professor at both McGill University and the University of Chicago whose focus was on Islamic thought and philosophy. Rahman’s Islamic reform favored democracy and educational reform. Rahman sought freedom for Muslims to vote in elections and the leeway for elected members of legislative assemblies to enact Islamic laws. He wanted to reform the role of the ulama (Islamic jurists and Muslim legal scholars). He saw their role as not “to legislate but to provide religious leadership to the Community at large by their teaching, preaching and diffusion of Islamic ideas to the public” (Rahman, 1966, p. 261). Rahman makes plain that “Those who have qualms about this procedure think that the legal interpretation of Islam cannot be left to the people (assembly members), since they are generally ‘ignorant of Islam,’ and that it is the function of the Ulama to enact Islam into law. This is a big dangerous fallacy” (Rahman, 1966, p. 261). Indeed the arguments of Khaled Abou El Fadl come to mind as discussed before with emphasis on the Ulama as the authority over what constitutes the Shari’a, or Islamic Law. However, Rahman counters this by arguing that the spirit of Islam is democratic and thus the people (through the legislative assembly) should get to decide what constitutes the Shari’a. It is important to note here that Rahman’s conception of the Shari’a is that our understanding of the Shari’a is evolving and able to change and thus the laws can change according to the context, both historical and sociohistorical (Rahman, 1966, pp. 260–261).

Indeed Rahman cautions that if we can understand the original intent and meaning of ijithad as introduced by the
Prophet Muhammad, we will, no doubt, be on a path to true understanding. The magnitude of such an undertaking is vast and yet simple: “For one thing, the Qur'an is not such a mysterious or difficult work that one needs technically trained people to interpret its imperatives. It was, it could not address itself to the Community at large. There is certainly a correct procedure for understanding the Qur'an. One should study it in historical order to appreciate the development of its themes and ideas (otherwise, one is apt to be misled on certain important points)” (Rahman, 1966, p. 261). Rahman places more faith in individual Muslims (without specialized legal training) to come to correct interpretations of Shari'a and Islamic laws. However, he does not abandon the Ulama's role in Islamic society altogether, but that role is to serve as a creative link with the public's understanding of Shari'a; the Ulama, therefore, are to persuade the public “through discussion and debate, for there is no other way in a democratic society” (Rahman, 1966, p. 262). Thus, Islamic reform goes through the democratic will of the masses, along with elected officials of the assembly, with the Ulama serving more in an advisory role but one that is not considered to be infallible in any way (Rahman, 1966, p. 263).

Rahman stresses that Islamic reform must begin with education: “Educational reform is the only approach for a long-term solution of the current problems of the Muslim societies” (Rahman, 1966, p. 260). Rahman argues that before educational reform can be made, the “development of a theology/philosophy, ethics, law and social science based on the Qur'an and the model of the Prophet must, in fact, in some sense precede any actual undertaking of education reform... at present Islamic intellectualism is virtually dead and the Muslim world presents the uninviting spectacle of a vast intellectual desert in the depths of whose wilderness there hardly stirs a thought but whose deadening silence itself may sometimes resemble the apparition of a flutter” (Rahman, 1966, p. 260). Rahman believes that Islamic intellectualism is “virtually dead” because the Islamic world has been busy countering Western colonialism with liberation struggles during the last century and gives as the “most important and immediate reason, for the Muslim world’s failure thus far to regenerate itself is the ubiquitous emergence of fundamentalist attitudes and movements” (Rahman, 1966, pp. 264–265). Islamic fundamentalist movements can be seen as a reaction against “both the West and the earlier Muslim Modernism” (Rahman, 1966, p. 265).

Rahman argues that Islamic reform can be made through the adoption of “short-term measures,” which include the creation of “an authentic Islamic political orientation” (Rahman, 1966, p. 265). The foundation for an Islamic political orientation would be the “Muslim Community itself,” who will interpret the Shari'a democratically (Rahman, 1966, p. 265). Rather than having a Caliph as the chief executive officer who before was charged with executing the Community's will—that is, Shari'a—this function could now be given to “an elected president or prime minister who enjoys the Community's mandate for a defined and restricted period of time” (Rahman, 1966, p. 265). Thus at the heart and soul of Rahman's thought for Islamic reform is a democratic community that freely decides and constitutes the voluntary acceptance of the Shari'a... [and through] this free Community, by its free will, also elects an assembly” (Rahman, 1966, p. 265). Thus, Rahman's concept of Islamic reform can be seen as democratically equilibrant, where all individual Muslims have a say at the table of theology and democracy.

**Ismail al-Faruqi**

Ismail al-Faruqi (1921–1986) was a Palestinian American philosopher and a professor of religion at Temple University where he founded the Islamic Studies program. In addition Dr. Al-Faruqi was also the founder of the International Institute of Islamic Thought. As a philosopher, Al-Faruqi's thought evolved over time from an emphasis on Arabism to Islam as the universal religion of humanity. Thus, Muslim identity and Islam itself was to take center stage in Al-Faruqi's thought, in addition to a focus on the idea of “the Islamization of knowledge.” The process of the Islamization of knowledge describes the scholarly attempt to synthesize the philosophy of Islam and ethics with the modern social sciences and natural science (Ismail al-Faruqi, 1982). This in theory if accomplished could bring a new *ijma* (consensus) within Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence), which was both compatible and complemented the scientific method in an ethical Islamic way.

In addition Al-Faruqi was a strong advocate for the Palestinian people and was against the type of Zionism that the state of Israel had advanced with respect to Muslims and Jews. Al-Faruqi stresses the point that Islam is not opposed to Judaism but to Zionism: “Islam is opposed to Zionism, to Zionist politics and conduct... Islam demands that every atom's weight of injustice perpetrated against the innocent be undone. Hence, it imposes upon all Muslims in the world over to rise like one man to put an end to injustice and to reinstate its sufferers in their lands, homes and properties” (al-Ruqi, 1983, p. 261). Ultimately the Zionist state must be “dismantled” but this “dismantling [of] the Zionist state does not necessarily mean the destruction of Jewish lives or of properties” (al-Ruqi, 1983, pp. 261–262). For Al-Faruqi this core principle of justice and standing up for the oppressed is at the center of Islam.

Dr. Al-Faruqi also was able to articulate the common roots of the three Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity), which he believes through a better understanding could bring more dialogue and peace among these three faiths. Al-Faruqi stresses this last point further: “The honor with which Islam regards Judaism and Christianity, their founders and scriptures, is not mere courtesy but acknowledgment of religious truth. Islam sees them not as
that occurs through reason. But this acceptance of Islam is open to new discoveries of human science and new alternatives as stated. Therefore Al-Faruqi’s conception of Islam is one where spiritual reform is primarily within one’s own mind and heart, with reason playing the most critical role in weighing the evidence about what one believes.

**Taha Jabir Al-Alwani**

Dr. Taha Jabir Al-Alwani is an Islamic scholar who has served as the president of the Graduate School of Islamic Social Sciences (GSISS), USA, the Fiqh Council of North America, and the International Institute of Islamic Thought. Al-Alwani’s particular focus of Islamic reform is on *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), in which *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) plays a central role. Al-Alwani explains the key role of *usul al-fiqh* and what he believes its importance is with regard to revelation:

Usul al-fiqh is a science in which reason and revelation come together, where considered opinion is accompanied by received law. Yet, al-Usul does not rely purely on reason in a way that would be unacceptable to revealed law, nor is it based simply on the kind of blind acceptance that would not be supported by reason. Hence, the science of *usul al-fiqh* has been called the “Philosophy of Islam.” The classical discipline of *usul* is the forerunner, if not the foundation, of a new methodology for dealing with the sciences of revelation in the overall quest for answers to the problems of Muslim society today. The science of *usul al-fiqh* is rightly considered to be the most important method of research ever devised by Islamic thought. Indeed, as the solid foundation upon which all the Islamic disciplines are based, *usul al-fiqh* not only benefited Islamic civilization but contributed to the intellectual enrichment of world civilization as a whole. It will not be out of place to note here that the methods of analogical reasoning developed within the framework of Islamic Jurisprudence constituted the methodological starting-point for the establishment and construction of empiricism, which in turn is considered to be the basis for contemporary civilization. (Al-Alwani, 2003, pp. vii, x-xi)

Reason, revelation, and scientific empiricism therefore make up the core building blocks of *usul al-fiqh*. Al-Alwani explains *Usul al-Fiqh* as a science that through its methods and concerns has generated an empirical trend in Muslim culture (which has benefited both Islam and the West), and invites the harmony of both reason and revelation for the well-being of human society. Al-Alwani explains:

... the science of *usul al-fiqh* is ... based on certain fundamental predications (muqaddamah), knowledge of which the Islamic legal scholar cannot do without. These predications have been derived from several other disciplines namely

- a. Some are derived from the science of Aristotelian logic which the philosopher-theologian writers (mut-takallimun) have become accustomed to discussing in the introductions to their works. These academic discussions dealt, for example, with the ways in which
words convey meanings, the division of subjects into present and predictable, the need for, and varieties of, discourse depending on conceptual principles taken from interpretations and definitions, the validity of conclusions based on inductive reasoning, and discussions about the evidence and how it may be used to prove the claims of the one who is adducing it, or to refute contradictions, and so on.
b. Some are derived from 'ilm al-kalâm (scholastic theology), and include discussions of such questions as the nature of jurisdiction, in the sense of whether it is the Shari'ah itself or reason which decides what is right or wrong; or whether one can have knowledge of right and wrong before the Revelation; or whether rendering thanks to the Creator is a duty derived from the Shari'ah or from human reasoning.
c. Some are general linguistic rules which scholars of usul developed through linguistic research and presented . . . in dealing with languages and their origins, the classification of words . . . etc.
d. Some are derived from the classical sciences of the Qur’ān and Sunnah, such as discussions concerning the transmission of Hadith by a single narrator (ahad), or by an impeccable plurality of narrators (saw, wān), the criteria for the acceptance (taḥḥīd) or rejection (jarr) of narrators of Hadith, abrogation of legislation (nasīkh wa manṣūkh), the condition of the text of a hadith and its chain of narrators, and so on.
e. Finally, the examples cited by the scholars of usul in illustration of their arguments are derived from the specifics of fiqh, and from detailed evidence for the same as taken from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. (Al-Alwani, pp. 2–3)

Al-Alwani explains that the scholars of usul are primarily concerned with the following disciplines and areas of study:

- Logic and its predications
- Linguistics
- Commands and prohibitions
- Comprehensive (amm) and particular (khass) terms
- Inconclusive (mujmā‘) and determined (mubayan) concepts
- Abrogation (nasīkh)
- Deeds (in particular, those of the Prophet, and their significance)
- Consensus (ijma’)
- Narrations relating to the Sunnah
- Analogical reasoning (qiyyas)
- Indicating preference in cases of apparent contradiction
- Exercising legal acumen and scholarship (ijtihād)
- Following a specific school of legal thought (taqlīd)
- Disputed sources (those other than the four “agreed” sources). (Al-Alwani, 2003, pp. 3–4)

It is important to point out here that what is fully agreed upon by the Ummah is the validity of two sources which form the basis of legislation at the time of the Prophet: “These two sources are: The Qur’ān and the Sunnah” (Al-Alwani, 2003, pp. 3–4). In addition the Sunnah could only be understood by those who “knew its meaning and understood its phrases and context” in terms of the “Prophet’s words and in the Companion’s own language” (Al-Alwani, 2003, p. 7). If they could not find anything to guide their judgment, then they were to use ijtihād:

Ijtihād was practiced by the Prophet and by those of his Companions with legal proclivities (ahl al-nazar). The Prophet’s ijtihād was sometimes confirmed by the Qur’ān and sometimes not; in which case it was explained that the better solution was other than that which he had adopted. The ijtihād made by the Companions was always in response to situations which actually occurred to them. Later, when they met the Prophet, they would explain what happened and tell him what they had decided. Sometimes he approved of their ijtihād, and such decisions of theirs (having gained the approval of the Prophet) became part of the Sunnah. If he disapproved of their ijtihād, his explanation of the correct procedure would become the Sunnah. “Indeed, the ijtihād made by the Prophet set a precedent for his Sahabah and later Muslims, that clearly established the legitimacy of ijtihād, so that when they could not find an express legal ruling in the Qur’ān or the Sunnah, they were to make use of ijtihād in order to arrive at judgments on their own. (Al-Alwani, 2003, pp. 5–6)

An example of Al-Alwani’s Islamic reform and philosophy can be seen in the institution and activities of the Fiqh Council of North America, which seeks to make non-binding rulings and suggestions with regard to fiqh and ijtihād to the Muslim community in America. Al-Alwani, who has served as chairman of the Fiqh Council, explains its role: “The Fiqh Council began . . . to try to provide some uniformity in interpretations of Islamic law in America.” The council takes the view that Muslims in the United States “must be part of the American community, and they must share some of the acceptable culture” (Al-Alwani, 2003, pp. 5–6). The debate over who gets to interpret Islamic law and thus who can do ijtihād has wider ramifications for democracy and religious freedom within Islamic communities. Al-Alwani’s position and philosophy is one that takes into account both the Islamic tradition and a response toward modernity and Muslims living in the West. His position is one of moderation and engagement with the West and the local cultures Muslims find themselves in. It is one that seeks to revive the Islamic tradition through ijtihād in a way that is both democratic and moderate in nature.

Khaled Abou El Fadl

A critic of the Fiqh Council of North America includes Khaled Abou El Fadl, a Muslim jurist who is a law professor at UCLA. Abou El Fadl believes that the council lacks authority among Muslims in the United States. Instead Abou El Fadl stresses the central role of the ulama (the legal scholars of Islamic jurisprudence) throughout with
regard to Islamic reform. Abou El Fadl has received 13 years of systematic instruction in Islamic jurisprudence and grammar in Egypt and Kuwait. Thus, he sees himself as an authority to speak out against those Muslims who interpret Islamic law without legal training: “To put it bluntly... you have a lot of people who would never qualify as a jurist in the Muslim world... if you can convince a few people, who’s going to say you’re not?” (as cited in Gilbertson, 2001, para. 4). Therefore for Abou El Fadl those who can perform *ijtihad* are only those who have been trained in Islamic jurisprudence.

There are of course competing schools of legal thought and jurists who are trained by different authorities throughout the Islamic world, which means there will be widely differing views on what constitutes the Sharia (Islamic law). In addition there are centuries of interpretation to wade through from Muslim scholars and jurists. Abou El Fadl ultimately thinks that the ulema are still the key to this process of interpretation and *ijtihad*. The model that is presented is an exclusivist model of *ijtihad* guided by the ulema. These moral educators play a central role for Muslims by “appropriating[ing] God” for Islamic society (El Fadl, 2004, p. 36). However, Abou El Fadl argues that Islam and democracy are compatible:

> Democracy is an appropriate system for Islam because it both expresses the special worth of human beings—the status of vicegerency—and at the same time deprives the state of any pretense of divinity by locating ultimate authority in the hands of the people rather than the ulema. (p. 36)

Yet it is the ulema (that is, the Islamic jurists and the Muslim legal scholars) who will ultimately interpret the divine will of God, and even in a democracy the people must follow their guidance or face the judgment of God in the hereafter. Abou El Fadl makes this clear:

> But not even the will of the majority—no matter how well educated morally—can embody the full majesty of God. And in the worst case—if the majority is not persuaded by the ulema, if the majority insists on turning away from God but still respects the fundamental rights of individuals, including the right to ponder creation and call to the way of God—those individuals who constituted the majority will still have to answer, in the Hereafter, to God. (p. 36)

Abou El Fadl argues that democracy and Islam are compatible because he considers constitutional democracy a form of government that protects the basic rights that the Qur’an itself speaks of, namely pursing justice through social cooperation and mutual assistance (49:13, 11:119); establishing a non-autocratic, consultative method of governance; and institutionalizing mercy and compassion in social interactions (6:12, 6:54, 21:107, 27:107, 27:77, 29:51, 45:20) (El Fadl, 2004, p. 5). Abou El Fadl interprets Qur’anic verse (2:30) as God vesting all of humanity with a certain amount of authority as a “viceroy of God on earth,” showing that democracy is compatible with Islam: “Remember, when your Lord said to the angels: ‘I have to place a viceroy on earth,’ they said: ‘Will you place one there who will create disorder and shed blood, while we intone Your litanies and sanctify Your name?’ And God said: ‘I know what you do not know’” (2:30) (El Fadl, 2004, p. 6). Democracy therefore does not ensure justice, nor does it take away God’s perfection of judgment or will, but it allows “a basis for pursuing justice and thus for fulfilling a fundamental responsibility assigned by God to each one of us” (El Fadl, 2004, p. 6). Justice is prior to the divine law and is not divine because it is law but rather because it is just (El Fadl, 2004, p. 21). If this were not so there would be no point in exploring the “means of justice.” Muslim jurists could simply implement the divine law without thought or reflection (El Fadl, 2004, p. 21).

Abou El Fadl argues, contrary to Muslim modernists and reformers who have argued that the Islamic juristic tradition is itself an obstacle to democracy and human rights, by saying: “it is not premodern juristic tradition that poses the greatest barrier to the development of individual rights in Islam. Rather, in my view, the most serious obstacle comes from modern Muslims themselves” (El Fadl, 2004, p. 28). Thus, Abou El Fadl places his hope and interpretation of Islam in the Islamic juristic tradition, which he believes is the best and most legitimate authority for Islamic reform. Others have been less hopeful about Islamic legal thought as interpreted alone by Islamic jurists and instead have argued for a return to the primacy of Islamic political philosophy and an egalitarian form of interpretation (Khan, 2004, pp. 63–68).

Tariq Ramadan

Tariq Ramadan serves as a professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford University. He proposes a new geography for Islamic Reform that includes the authority of scholars of the social and hard sciences, as well as the critical engagement and creative imagination of the Muslim masses, which in turn radically shifts the center of authority from the legal religious text scholars. Ramadan writes of this Islamic reformation taking place in countries such as France, England, Germany, and the United States. This Islamic reformation is one that is shaped by an independent Western Islam rooted in the cultural reality of the West and Islam’s universal values that include seeking scientific knowledge.

No doubt the reason for this long Islamic tradition of seeking scientific knowledge is rooted in the teachings of Islam itself to seek knowledge. Tariq Ramadan conceptualizes two revelations from God, one coming from the universe (understanding the natural world through empirical science) and one coming from the text (the Qur’an), which can lead one to the same truth (Ramadan, 2009, p. 87). He
says of these two processes: “Interpreting the Universe, like interpreting the text, requires the heart's light to grasp the meaning, the ‘why’ of things. Both the Universe and the text only reveal their order, structure, and meaning—as to the ‘how’ of things—through the complementary mediation of human reason; this latter, relying on thorough analysis, must try to harmonize and unite the order of the ‘why’ and that of the ‘how’” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 87).

This essence of Islam can be confirmed in the Qur'an: “In the creation of the Heavens and the Earth, and the alternation of night and day, there are indeed signs (ayat) for all those endowed with insight” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 89). Another verse shows the underlying rationality and creation of the universe, which can be understood through empirical science as proof of those signs: “The Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Qur'an. He has created man. He has taught him an intelligent speech. The sun and the moon follow courses exactly computed. And the stars and the trees bow in adoration” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 87). Ramadan goes on to say that “the text does not impede human reason: on the contrary, it opens manifold, diverse horizons for the exercise of an autonomous active rationality” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 87).

Ramadan's philosophy of reform argues against a world of binary thinking that seems so common with regard to “Islam vs. the West,” “religion vs. science,” “philosophy vs. religion,” “social sciences vs. the hard sciences,” and so on. Instead Ramadan offers Islamic philosophy and Islamic reform as a holistic approach toward greater human understanding.

A holistic approach is rooted in Islam itself with the concept of Tawhid or the Oneness of God. From this understanding one can come to a holistic understanding of both the Revealed Book (Qur'an, the text) and the Book of the Universe (the hard sciences, social sciences, and the context) (Ramadan, 2009, p. 129). Yet from this concept comes an interesting point from Ramadan about how the West and Islam have each other within themselves. Only by learning humility can both sides see the whole truth: “We must reconcile ourselves with the world to be better reconciled with ourselves” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 152). However Ramadan's project is not just about reconciling the West and Islam, it is also about reconciling the social sciences with the "hard sciences," and the religious scholars such as Islamic Jurists with their fellow Muslim companions in the hard sciences and social sciences.

In order for Ramadan's concept of Islamic reform to be realized, human agents must go beyond “the simplifications of religious and/or rationalistic origins” and anything that leads us to conclude that our way of thinking has all the truth; in a word we must avoid dogma (Ramadan, 2009, p. 155). Muslims and non-Muslims must achieve another union as well, the union “without any paradox in the order of faith or of reasonable rationality: that of respect for obvious complexity and humility as to what one understands and proposes” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 155). Thinking in binary terms, “tradition vs. modernity” or the fantasized “West vs. Islam,” only allows a false construct, a false narrative of confrontation and distrust. The West, too, must avoid an arrogant stance or face “the end of the West,” as it would contain the very seed of its destruction leading to its “disappearance from history” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 147). Ramadan argues instead that Islam and the West should instead construct an ethics built on universals. If we are to do this we must have three qualities or traits developed over time: “Humility (associated with self-doubt), respect (allied to a positive outlook on others), and coherence (expressed in a constant critical-assessment)” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 147). Not only this but two ijtihads must take place: first, in the text, and second, in the socio-historical contexts (Ramadan, 2009, p. 143).

Ramadan's focus on ethical universals and the unity of all human beings is a humanistic Islamic position, one that speaks to the "post" philosophies (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postconstructivism) to reconsider "the meaning and substance of universals from within and with regard to the other" (Ramadan, 2009, p. 312). Yet it also speaks to the modernists and analytic philosophies: it is time to look for the Way, the Universal, the One, yet again. Ramadan's holistic approach does not lead to relativism in relation to the meaning of life, God, or the truth, but rather he argues it leads us to realize the need to reassess our position as our "ethical requirement necessitates [our] permanent questioning” (Ramadan, 2009, p. 312). This path no doubt requires great moral courage and great humility, but in the end it is worth taking because we can get ever closer to the holistic and universal truth.

**Conclusion**

In this discussion we have shared the thoughts of some of the most prominent Islamic reformist thinkers in the United States. Tariq Ramadan is not a resident of the United States but his reformist ideas are inextricably linked with the reformist thought in the United States, and therefore he enjoys the status of an "honorary American Muslim thinker" in our essay. The modern trend in Islamic reformist thinking emerged as a response to the challenges posed by modernity and hence is often also called Islamic modernism. American Muslim thinking is shaped by the normative challenges that Muslims face in the West as they carve a social-cultural and political space for themselves. They are seeking to answer questions such as the following: Are Islam and democracy compatible? Does Islamic legal tradition undermine the human rights of women and minorities as now envisioned by the global ethical tradition of human rights? Does the Islamic tradition strengthen the
environmental movement and address the rights of animals? Does it accept and foster other social initiatives such as those seeking to establish and defend the rights of people with alternate lifestyles? We believe that the opportunities extended by the Arab awakening will further open spaces for reformist thought in the Arab world, and that will only strengthen and empower Muslim thinkers in the West to push the envelope even further.

References and Further Readings