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Modern Islamic Thinking and Activism

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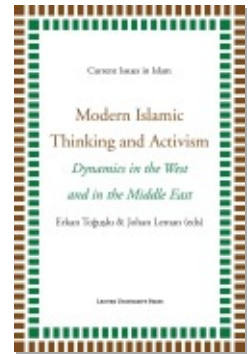
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CHAPTER 9

Tradition and Modernity in Social Islam:
The Case of Muslim NGOs in Jordan

Egbert Harmsen

This chapter deals with a particular form of Muslim social activism, namely the activity of Muslim voluntary welfare organizations delivering services of a varied nature (financial and in kind support, advice, employment, education etcetera) to socially vulnerable target groups such as the poor, orphans, single parent families, children at risk and the disabled. It analyses this activity from the perspective of the respective roles of tradition and modernity, especially in relation to civil society theory.

In the first section, the issue of defining tradition and modernity is dealt with, especially in relation to the concept of civil society and the role of reflexivity and a critical relationship toward tradition. Special attention will be paid to the way in which reflexivity and a critical relationship with tradition took shape in the Muslim Arab world.

Subsequently, a historical sketch of modern Islamic welfare activism in Jordan will be given. After that, a closer look will be taken at Muslim NGOs in Jordan on which I carried out fieldwork myself. The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Center Charity Society will be dealt with, as well as more liberal Muslim NGOs. Special attention will also be paid to the issue of gender in discourse and practice by Muslim NGOs. These associations will be dealt with from the point of view of reflexivity and a critical relationship toward tradition as markers of their modernity. The difference between more collectivist and system-oriented approaches toward modernity and more individualized and pluralized versions of modernity will be dealt with as well.

In the conclusion, an attempt will be made to answer the question of the extent and the way in which tradition and modernity play a role in the work of current Muslim NGOs in Jordan.

Tradition and modernity

This chapter wishes to reflect on the role of tradition as well as modernity in Muslim social welfare activism in Jordan, and especially in their accompanying (Islamic) discourse. In this regard, it is important to reflect on the meanings of both concepts. Tradition and modernity are often regarded as opposites. In orientalist thought and discourse, “the West” and “Islam” have been contrasted to one another in a way in which the former represents modernity and progress superseding traditions, while the latter represents the inability to supersede traditions and therefore constitutes a hindrance and obstacle to modernization. This assumption, not only about Islam but also about the relationship between tradition and modernity as such, has been criticized in more recent scholarship. In the work *Islam and Modernity, Key Issues and Debates*, Armando Salvatore states, for instance, that tradition is a dynamic cultural dimension of a civilization and that it serves, therefore, as an important source of modernization. Radical western religious movements, for instance, have laid an important basis for political modernity in Europe, as well as for religious and political fundamentalism. In this case, modernization was even unthinkable without (religious) tradition as a cultural resource to draw upon.¹

Concepts of tradition and modernity also play a central role in theories on civil society. Civil society can be conceived as the realm in which citizens associate themselves on a voluntary basis in order to promote their interests, ideas, beliefs, values and/or ideals in society. The voluntary nature of civil society associations distinguishes them from groupings with a membership of an ascribed nature (i.e. acquired by birth and/or blood-ties), such as families, tribes, geographic regions, nations or religious communities. The term “ascribed” has often been equated to traditional identity, and “voluntary choice” to a modern one. Following Habermas, Civil Society theoreticians Cohen and Arato describe, for instance, traditional (pre-modern) European society as one in which people were first of all ascribed members of extended families and communities. In this society, there was no modern differentiation between various institutional realms. There was no differentiation, for instance, between childrearing in families and education

in schools. Socialization of children was undertaken by these extended families and communities in an undifferentiated fashion. These families and communities were decisive for the identity of their members in every sense. Something like a public identity based on voluntary membership of associations, collectives and groups independent of ascribed identity hardly existed. Likewise, there was originally no clear differentiation between the religious, the artistic and the scientific. There was even no distinction between private and public in a modern sense.

Modernization of society, Cohen and Arato maintain, entailed a process of differentiation between all these spheres; specialized institutions started to assume special tasks: the (increasingly nuclear) family became responsible for childrearing and the school for formal education; science was taken out of the monasteries and became largely a university affair, and businesses and associations came into being whose members and/or employees did not join them on the basis of their familial ties. This also entailed the progressive liberation of personal identities and interpersonal relations from the unquestionable acceptance of traditional values and institutions. In turn, this resulted in a more reflexive and critical relationship towards tradition. Reflexive forms of association, publicity, solidarity and identity came into being. Norms, established patterns and definitions of situations were increasingly questioned and reinterpreted by the members of society. This resulted also in a new type of voluntary association, with equal rights of membership, freed from kinship, patriarchal and other ascriptive restrictions on belonging and holding office. This type of association renews its forms of solidarity primarily in the free interaction of its current members.²

According to Cohen and Arato, a *critical* and *reflexive* relationship towards tradition is essential to modern civil society, but not the abolition of tradition. This approach may also include forms of traditional identity, such as tribal and religious life, within the realm of civil society. Within such forms of life, people may also engage in common voluntary activities to serve their aims, interests and convictions. Such voluntary engagement presupposes a kind of reflexive consciousness regarding values, ideals and preferences on the part of individual participants. However, no individual develops his or her values, ideals or preferences entirely detached from relations with other individuals and from the general social, cultural and economic environment in which he or she lives. And from (religious) tradition, for that matter.³

On the basis of Cohen's and Arato's theory on civil society, one could suggest that reflexive consciousness and a critical relationship towards tradition are typical for modernity and constitute the features on the basis of which a modern society is to be distinguished from a traditional one. However, should we assume that "traditional", or pre-modern, societies were really unreflective and uncritical towards tradition? Some Muslim thinkers, who are proponents of the *Mujtamma' ahli* thesis⁴ and often sympathetic to moderate versions of Islamism, maintain that pre-modern Muslim society already knew something like a civil society. This civil society or *Mujtamma' ahli* consisted of institutions like guilds that organized craftsmen, *awqaf* (endowments) that served the public good, cultural associations and religious groupings. They used to integrate individuals, families and social groups into their social networks. They protected the members of the community and constituted a sphere that was relatively autonomous vis-à-vis state power. Through this *mujtamma' ahli*, Islam preserved its emancipatory essence, according to the proponents of this thesis.⁵ The thesis has been criticized, however, by secular Arab as well as western scholars ranging from Aziz al-Azmeh and Sami Zubaida to Ernest Gellner. Zubaida, for instance, maintains that these pre-modern Muslim societal institutions were often "uniformly patriarchal and authoritarian, often coercive". Positions of authority within, as well as general membership of these formations were usually based upon family-ties and inheritance from father to son. All of them stressed values of authority, loyalty and obedience.⁶ In other words, these institutions were a far cry from a modern civil society.

We do face a methodological problem here. This problem is that we cannot be absolutely certain about the extent and nature of reflexivity in pre-modern times, certainly not about the reflexivity, or lack thereof, among the vast illiterate majority of the (Muslim) population. Were they really so uncritical and unreflective in their attitude as a binary conception of tradition versus modernity suggests? What we can observe is that (contemporary) modernity in Muslim Arab societies has been shaped during the last two centuries by colonial rule, the development of relatively modern bureaucratic state structures, urbanization, the pervasiveness of globalization and the world market and, last but not least, the spread of mass education and mass media. Especially the last development gave rise to the emergence of a new and modernly educated middle class, consisting of members originating from the more traditional Muslim lower- and middle classes where traditional religious values continued to prevail.⁷ Due to this modern education as well as mass media, these new middle class members

were capable of reflecting on the Islamic message in a new, more modern, way. A way in which every Muslim can read/hear and interpret Islamic messages more or less autonomously and reflect on their meanings and relevance to the contemporary problems and dilemmas of the Muslim individual, family and society at large. And in which they can rationally debate these reflections and interpretations amongst each other. This state of affairs can be contrasted with the situation until at least the end of the 19th century, when the usual educational methods in the *madrasah* (mosque college) were largely focused on repetitive methods, such as memorization, recitation, grammar as well as ritual purity. And when explanation and interpretation of the Islamic textual sources was still the monopoly of a small class of specialized religious scholars.⁸

The newly emergent modernly educated Muslim Arab middle class of the latter part of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century faced many frustrations with the policies and modernization programmes of the secular and/or western-oriented elite of the state and the society they lived in. These policies and programmes failed to bring the bulk of the population meaningful prospects and prosperity. Their actual implementation was characterized by corruption, nepotism and the repression of dissidence. The newly educated (young) Arab Muslims were largely excluded by the dominant system from opportunities of social mobility and advancement and ended up in situations of un- or underemployment. Many of them became attracted to cultural and political trends that drew upon traditional Islamic values, albeit in a form that had been profoundly adapted to modern society.⁹ These trends, the Muslim Brotherhood most prominent among them, presented an alternative to the current unjust and frustrating state of affairs in a secular-dominated society. They presented a sociocultural as well as political ideal based upon Islamic social values such as piety, care, compassion, honesty, trust and mutual solidarity. They provided many (young) members of the modernly educated but excluded middle class with a sense of self-worth as well as social, moral and political orientation by involving them in various activities. Examples of these activities are religious preaching, ethically correcting one's own as well as another's behavior, political activity and, last but not least, organized social work carried out through religiously inspired voluntary welfare associations.

The history of Islamic voluntary welfare activism in Jordan

Very central to the history of organized Islamically inspired voluntary welfare activism in Jordan was the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood there in 1945. At that time, it was actually licensed under the Ottoman law of Associations as a charitable association.¹⁰ The native merchant Abu Qura, a native from the town of Salt which is located between Amman and the Jordan valley, became its General Guide.¹¹ Already years before, he had been known for his great religious zeal. This zeal was accompanied by his charitable works as well as by his interest in the Palestinian cause.¹² In fact, he stood in a (Muslim as well as Christian) tradition of religiously inspired social involvement and charity that goes many centuries back in time. This tradition obtained a modernly organized form in the area for the first time in 1912, when members of the Greek Orthodox community in the town of Madaba, to the southwest of Amman, established the Dur al-Ihsan (homes of charity) Association. This association was dedicated to serving the Greek Orthodox community, especially its needy children.¹³ From the 1920s onwards, its example was followed by the establishment of other voluntary associations established by Jordan's religious and ethnic minorities and aiming to provide charitable services to their own religious or ethnic community, such as the Greek Orthodox, the Circassian or the Hijazi.¹⁴ In the 1940s, women's societies were established in Jordan that were patronized by Princess Misbah, mother of Jordanian Crown Prince Talal. They focused on improving the social condition of Jordanian women by raising their educational level, assisting them in the care and upbringing of their children and raising their awareness of health and welfare issues, apart from the more traditional activity of assisting the poor and needy.¹⁵ The Muslim Brotherhood, for its part, emphasized Islamic education in order to bring about a "new Arab culture" based on Islamic principles. As part of this endeavour, it organized Boy Scout Clubs where social (including charitable) and athletic activities as well as religious study took place.¹⁶

When Jordan had to absorb so many Palestinian refugees in 1948, the Muslim Brotherhood was one of the major players providing those refugees with the necessary aid, including food, shelter and healthcare. In subsequent years and decades, the Islamic movement further developed and professionalized its voluntary welfare activism. In 1963, the Jordanian Brotherhood's leadership established the Islamic Center Charity Society. This NGO soon evolved into the largest voluntary welfare association in the country, apart from the associations led by members of Jordan's royal family. It runs schools, some institutions of

higher education, medical centres, some hospitals and centers offering financial and in-kind aid, vocational training and income-generating projects as well as (religiously inspired) educational and cultural activities to orphans and poor all over the country. Its greatest source of pride is the modernly equipped and commercially run Islamic hospital in Amman.

Many more religiously inspired Muslim voluntary welfare associations have been founded in Jordan since the 1960s, often, but not always, by politically engaged Islamists, members of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as others. Like the Islamic Center Charity Society, their activity is to be found in the realms of health, education and poverty alleviation, in addition to religious awareness raising.

After a period of 32 years of martial law and severe state repression against anything perceived as opposition against Jordan's monarchical regime, a process of limited liberalization started in the country in 1989. This provided space for Muslim Brothers and other Islamists to establish associations focusing on cultural issues. In 1991, for example, the Society for the Preservation of the Holy Qur'an was established by prominent Muslim Brothers. It opened centres for religious education all over the country. In 1993, another important addition to the community of Islamist NGOs was made when prominent Muslim Brotherhood member Abdul Latif Arabiyyat established with others the Al-Afaf Welfare Society. This NGO specializes in marriage and family issues and has organized well publicized annual mass weddings, intended as a model of a „better Islamic society“ of chastity, social solidarity and harmony.¹⁷

Discourse and activity by Islamic voluntary associations in Jordan

Before we deal with the Jordanian Muslim NGOs themselves, something about the modernization of Islamic thought and practice concerning welfare in general must be clarified. Much of traditional Islamic discourse surrounding social aid and solidarity has centered around the notion of *Zakab*, one of the five pillars of mainstream Islam. The general idea behind this wealth tax originating from the earliest days of Islam and destined for, amongst others, the poor and needy, is that by giving up a portion of one's own wealth, one purifies the rest of it as well as one's own spirit – since the *Zakab* functions as a restraint on one's selfishness, greed and indifference to other's sufferings. The needy recipient, in

turn, is purified from jealousy and hatred of the wealthy.¹⁸ In societal terms, this purification implies social stabilization and harmony between the economic classes. While being enforced as a law in the early Muslim community, historical studies have shown that in subsequent centuries, *Zakah* was merely considered as a matter of conscience and moral obligation left to the (prosperous) Muslim individual to act upon. In the Ottoman empire, for instance, voluntary *Zakah* transfers used to flow to the most visible poor, such as servants of the donors or the beggars who lived in the latter's own neighborhood, rather than toward the neediest. Little thought was given to the challenges of overcoming the sources of need.¹⁹

Modernization of Islamic thought and discourse on *zakah* and on social aid in general has in the course of the twentieth century led to innovative approaches toward this concept. Donating *zakah* became increasingly motivated by notions of socio-economic and cultural development of the Muslim community as a whole. Nowadays, Islamic banks invest the *zakah* donations they receive in a great variety of social projects for needy Muslim communities, ranging from relief aid after natural disasters to the establishment of religious and cultural centres. Ideas of promoting the economic self-reliance and empowerment of the needy have also been translated into ways of spending *zakah* donations by Islamic banks as well as by Muslim NGOs. Both of them are participating in the trend of shifting from traditional charitable aid to supporting the launching of small and medium-sized businesses by needy families themselves. The traditional Islamic (and Qur'anic) idea of the "right" of the poor to assistance from the rich is expanded through the notion that the latter face the moral duty to help the former rid themselves of their own state of dependency, become self-supporting (by setting up their own businesses or by other means, such as vocational training) and, therefore, fully integrated into an economically secure Muslim society.²⁰

We see here that traditional Islamic notions on the duty of the rich to give *zakah* and the right of the poor to receive are capable of being modernized and innovated. Such modernization and innovation are justified by referring to Qur'anic verses and hadiths which seem to point toward self-reliance and empowerment. Examples are the *qur'anic* verse stating that God only helps those who help themselves, and the *hadith* stating that it is better to give a needy person an axe to earn his own bread than simply a piece of bread. How do Muslim welfare NGOs of various backgrounds in Jordan deal with this Islamic tradition and this modernization?

The Islamic Center Charity Society

Traditional Islamic notions on the spiritual as well as social function of giving aid are clearly discernable in the activities of centres for orphans and poor belonging to the nationwide Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated NGO called Islamic Center Charity Society (ICCS) in Jordan. Such centres give their financial and in-kind assistance first of all to so-called orphan families, meaning fatherless and mostly single-parent families that lack a regular income-provider. They offer educational, social and cultural activities to these target-groups as well.

At one ICCS-centre for orphans and poor in a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman I regularly visited in 2003, the dependency relationship between its workers and its needy target group could be clearly observed, especially during distributions of financial and in-kind aid. The mothers of the orphan families had to wait patiently and quietly in rows in a hall until they were called upon to receive their modest benefits. This was obviously not an example of self-organization by the underprivileged fighting for their own rights. Rather, this was a welfare initiative established and implemented by Muslims from the middle class delivering services to the needy. The centre received the resources for financial and in-kind assistance mostly from local individual donors and sometimes donors in the Arab Gulf States.

Many of the ethical messages in folders, brochures, and pamphlets are addressed to potential donors and supporters. In the spirit of traditional Islamic social ethics outlined above, they are called upon to give selflessly to the poor and orphans *fi sabillillah*, for the sake of God. Fulfilling this duty is supposed to counter one's greed and egoism, to have a morally purifying effect, and to improve the chances of divine reward in the afterlife. The poor recipients, in turn, are told to find inner peace in God by being thankful for that which He provides them, and by cultivating a patient attitude in life. Wholly in line with traditional Islamic ethics, this entails countering their greed and jealousy vis-à-vis the better off. The perfectly just Islamic society is supposed to be realized through a pious mentality or attitude of all the believers, regardless of rank, status or wealth. Such an attitude has to be translated into honest, selfless and helpful behaviour.

This orientation on duty is also reflected in the way the centre uses its financial and in-kind assistance as a means of pressuring the orphans and their mothers to participate in its educative and cultural programme. Religious ideology, in my experience, plays a central part in these educational efforts.

During a language class for orphan boys that I attended, for instance, only religious material was used. Among this material was a poem about the life of

the prophet Muhammad. The teacher stressed the importance of understanding the poems' meaning. He drew a parallel between levels of aggression against the Prophet and his followers in Mecca and the present situation, during which Muslims were once again humiliated and threatened by others, especially the United States and "the Jews." The message was that Muslims had to regain power by restoring their mutual solidarity as a community of believers with its common faith in God and in His revelation. Similar political messages were expressed in a satirical play that the orphan girls in the center were staging. In this play, they mocked Arab rulers who betray their own people by collaborating with the Americans and the Israelis. At that occasion, the orphan girls and the centre's women workers also sang a song about Eid al-Fitr, the feast which concludes Ramadan. A message of social solidarity as well as protest was clearly discernable in the song. It dealt with the fate of an orphan family that was economically unable to celebrate while wealthier people celebrated the feast in luxury, a state of affairs which betrayed the holy month's true spirit and meaning of equality and solidarity among the believers.

In such messages, one can discern how the Islamic tradition is used in a modern fashion, and for modern purposes. The stress on understanding the meaning of religious sources and not merely ritually memorizing them is, as has been pointed out above, typical for the more recent Muslim Arab generations who have enjoyed a relatively modern (secular) education and been exposed to modern forms of mass media. Moreover, the centre's workers endeavor to disseminate this understanding and knowledge among the orphans who are from the lower classes, and do not keep it to themselves as past generations of *ulama* often did with their own understandings of scripture. Their vision of the *umma* or community of believers could be seen as modern as well. They propagate in their religious messages a united *umma* which is strong and independent and in which mutual solidarity and equality among the believers reigns. Islam is meant to overcome problems and to achieve progress (in this regard, the prophet's own background as an orphan is stressed as well) and not to resign itself to injustice and suffering. Therefore, orphans should take good knowledge of the content and meaning of Islamic scripture, in order to translate it into reflection, behavior and action.

Interviews with workers as well as orphans reveal that reading and reciting the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*, and following the behavioural injunctions contained within both sources, play a central role in the activities and group discussions at the centre. Duties and responsibilities in the field of rituals, civilized and pious

eating habits, ways of communication and modest dress, especially in the case of women, and the duty of older children to take care of smaller ones and of children in general to respect and obey the elderly or their older siblings are stressed.

Hence, when it comes to values pertaining to individual behaviour and to family relations, we see a rather traditional Islamic approach. However, tradition is also harnessed here to empower the orphans to function effectively in modern society as well as to change it for the better, which has a modernizing impact. Conversations with the orphan girls revealed that they understood the Islamic injunctions in terms of notions of dignity, taking one's responsibility, and developing and utilizing one's capabilities for the sake of beneficial purposes. There is a strong emphasis, for instance, on the importance of knowledge and education and high school achievements. The centre also tries to tutor orphan children in their homework for school. It emphasizes the value of work as a means of self-sustenance, and tries to obtain jobs for the older orphan boys by using its social networks. Furthermore, it offers the older orphan girls and their mothers training and some income in a sewing workshop and a bakery. Traditional Islamic notions of duty towards God are equated in this vision to a modern sense of duty and responsibility of every believer to contribute to the development of a better, stronger and harmonious Islamic society.

Research carried out by Danish researcher Marie Juul Petersen at another ICCS-centre for Orphans and Poor in Amman has shown that reinterpretation of Islamic scripture and tradition along modernist lines can go even further. She mentions projects organized by this centre that expressly aim to empower women and liberate them from oppressive traditional customs that are regarded as unislamic. One of these projects was called *The Woman Can*. It taught women that they can express themselves and can do what men can do. One of the centre's women teachers told her: "a woman should choose a career, she should not be dependant, she can earn money for the family". Petersen states that while traditional conceptions of gender roles among many Muslim voluntary welfare associations still limit endeavours of empowerment of women seriously, even the most conservative among them encourage girls to pursue their education and criticize views denying women their educational rights.²¹

Within the ICCS, there are differences in opinion about the nature of a correct Islamic welfare approach within modern society. Everybody in the organization seems to adhere to a vision of Islam with its laws and injunctions as constitutive of all aspects of life, of the ideal society and of their own work. Some of them, however, equate this Islamic approach to modern notions of empowerment and

human (including women's) rights while others criticize such a developmentalist discourse as an essentially un-Islamic attempt to please the West. Petersen observes that the latter view draws on models of a collectively binding Islamic order while the former one relates to more pluralist and individualistic interpretations of Islamic traditions.²² The difference between these two approaches is not so much a contrast between tradition and modernity. Both of them legitimize themselves on the basis of Islamic tradition and each of them represents another version of (Islamic) modernity: one focusing on sharia-based collective discipline as a model for society, and the other on individual reflection and choice as a believer.

It must be stressed that collectivist notions of an Islamic order are dominant within the ICCS. This is reflected, for instance, in the expectation of all of their staff members to pray and (especially in the case of women) to wear proper Islamic dress; frequent references to *Qur'an* and *Hadith* as the authorizing rationale for their own work; an emphasis on "family atmosphere" and "a sense of solidarity"; and the inclination to contrast their own Islamic welfare approach, supposedly based on love and charity, with secular welfare approaches, supposedly based on money and self-interest. However, Petersen notes that several ICCS workers also emphasize their experience of personal growth and individual creativity as an important aspect of their motivation for, and gratification in, their work. Women workers mention, for instance, how they acquired new skills in the field of teaching, lecturing and speechmaking through their work. In the self-imagination of ICCS-workers, a more classical modern sense of collective (Islamic) identity and a post-modern sense of individualized (also Islamic) modernity often seem to exist side by side.²³

A rights-based and secular Islamic approach towards orphans and their families

Other Muslim NGOs are not engaged in an endeavour to bring about a collectively organized Islamic order in society. They rather formulate their goals in terms of working for the rights of their target groups, albeit out of an Islamic inspiration. Al-Faruq Welfare Society for Orphans, which is mainly active in the Palestinian refugee camp of the northern city of Irbid and where I conducted field research as well, has no affinity with political Islam. It provides nonetheless the same type of services to orphan families (in the sense of fatherless one parent families) as the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated centers for the poor and orphans are doing. Its educational and cultural programs, however, are much less one-sidedly based on a religious doctrine. It pays as much attention

to globally formulated human, children's and women's rights. Its methodology towards orphan children and their upbringing is to an important extent adopted from UNICEF. This approach is focused on letting children discover their own individual qualities and taking their own individual feelings and thoughts seriously, rather than on conformity with strictly conceived religious injunctions. However, the Society organizes Quran courses as well, and uses Islamic concepts in its discourse. A female social worker of the Society, for instance, saw in the Quranic principle of *himaya*, or protection of the woman, a basis for the struggle against women's abuse and domestic violence. The social workers use religious concepts like *rahma* (compassion), *tasamuh* (forgiveness and tolerance), and *sabr* (patience) to redirect communication within client families in the direction of mutual empathy, understanding, and respect and to counter practices of verbal and physical violence. Al-Faruq Society's approach is decisively tilted toward a more individualized and pluralist conception of (post-)modernity, and is more secular as well. Secular not in the sense of absence of religion, but in the sense of limiting religion's function to that of a moral and ethical inspiration in general terms for progressive change, rather than considering it in a reified sense as an absolute basis for an all encompassing Islamic societal order and system.

Gender discourse as a reflection of Islam vis-à-vis tradition and modernity

A field in which mutual tension between as well as intertwinement of tradition and modernity comes strongly to the fore in the case of Muslim NGOs in Jordan is that of gender. Al-Afaf Society, another Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated association, specializes in issues of marriage and family. The founders of this society were motivated by a sense of alarm about the lack of access to marriage for many young Jordanians. This is due to the traditionally high financial and material demands attached to marrying and to the wedding party in Jordanian society, along with the costs and demands involved in starting a family. Al-Afaf Society starts from a strong anti-materialist and anti-consumerist ideology. According to Mufid Sarhan, the Society's general manager, Jordanians set their priorities incorrectly if they wait until they have obtained a well-paid job, a spacious home and a beautiful car before they decide to marry. "According to Islam", Sarhan argues, "marital life and love is fundamental for the well being of the human being. One shouldn't cherish too high material expectations in this regard ... material expectations should be lowered, and a higher priority should be put to the importance, the warmth and the love of marriage".²⁴

According to the Society's members, this lack of access to marriage leads to the spread of sexual immorality, mental disorders and frustrations and to the disintegration of the social fabric of Muslim society. They see this development also as part of a deliberate campaign directed against this society. Arabiyyat laments, for instance, the "absence of authentic values which govern individual and collective social conduct and customs ... in a framework of projects for Westernisation which are backed by wealth, experience and deadly means". Therefore, the Society states in one of its publications: "Let us sow the seeds of goodness in a good society ... let us set up the pillar of the Muslim home without overspending and extravagance, in order to shut the society's doors in the face of the winds of the foreign ... corruption and let our slogan be "Afaf".²⁵

Al-Afaf Society tries to put its vision of an Islamic society and family characterized by modesty, cooperation and compassion into practice by annually organizing a mass wedding for young Jordanian couples. Wealthy donors and companies contribute financially and in-kind to these weddings, in which the participating couples receive bridal gifts and interest-free loans.²⁶

What we see in this case is a critique of a certain traditional habit, the tendency toward extravagant spending and luxury in weddings and marriage, that is at the same time related to modern, western-inspired patterns of consumerism and materialism. The answer to this (from Al-Afaf Society's point of view) imbalanced, vicious and even dangerous state of affairs is to be found in the original true model of Islam. Islam provides the model for a correct way of life and a society where piety, justice and solidarity reigns, and in which the insights from the tradition of Islamic faith are in full harmony with those from modern science and are optimally utilized.

Al-'Afaf Society also organizes lectures and workshops on marriage and family issues and publishes booklets on these topics. Behavioral values of harmony, patience, mutual respect and understanding are stressed in these events and publications. In the Society's vision, the traditional role division between the husband as solid head and provider of the family and of the wife as patient mother and housewife are of fundamental importance to a unified, harmonious and warm family life. At the same time, the circumstances of modern society are reflected in the Society's vision. Its members and workers criticize certain indigenous traditional habits they consider to be un-Islamic as well as detrimental to familial well being in a modern context. An example of such habits is the interference of relatives, in particular the husband's mother, in the affairs of the married couple. This is a practice which all too often leads to increased pressures

on the wife, psychologically as well as in the sphere of household duties. In the name of respecting the privacy of the nuclear family and simultaneously of maintaining harmonious relationships with the extended family, Al-Afaf Society disapproves of this habit.

Another example is traditional patriarchal authority. While the Society upholds, in the name of Islam, the principle of obedience of the wife toward her husband as head of the family, it firmly rejects what it considers physical or verbal abuse of the wife.²⁷ A husband who had married at one of the Society's mass weddings told me that an important lesson he received at one of its workshops was the prohibition of abusing one's wife and the need to respect her dignity. Traditional habits, he pointed out, sanction this abuse, and he mentioned as an example his own mother who had suffered serious abuse from his father. One of the prominent women volunteers of Al Afaf Society explained to me that the Muslim wife's obedience toward her husband should not be understood in a military sense of following orders. It means, she said, that the wife should coordinate her activities outdoors and her desires in this regard with her husband, and respect his judgments in his role as head and provider of the family. She criticized the traditional lifestyle of her own parents, in which her mother unquestionably followed her father in everything and in which she did not have much of a life of her own outdoors. She cited reports on the behaviour of the prophet Muhammad in support of women's rights as well as on the duty of the husband to assist his wife in their household duties. We are obviously witnessing here the discourse of a modernly educated Muslim middle class which sees in the Islamic message the true (modern) answer to modern dilemmas in the sphere of gender, marriage and family.

Other Muslim NGOs, and especially women's associations among them, are more outspoken on this line and explicitly advocate the rights of women in the wider society, including the public domain. Their argument centres on women's need to use their skills and education to contribute to Jordanian and Muslim society at large, and not just her own home and family.

One example is the Al Aqsa Association led by Nawal al-Fauri. She is an Islamist activist for women's and children's rights who left the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1990s out of frustration with the conservative and patriarchal attitudes among the organizations' leadership. With the support of several Western embassies, her association had implemented micro-credit projects enabling needy women to set up agricultural and stockbreeding farms. Moreover, it carries

out awareness raising activities for underprivileged women on social, cultural and political issues, including gender. In the name of Islam, Al-Fauri stresses that women have a right to participate in economic, social and political life that is equal to that of men, and that a husband has to assist his wife in household tasks and the upbringing of children. Women, she states, should follow the will of God as it is revealed in the Islamic sources, and not the arbitrary and self-interested traditional habits invented by men. This constitutes a somewhat more radical critique of local patriarchal traditions in favour of modernization of gender relations in the name of Islam as compared to the discourse of Al-Afaf Society.²⁸

Another example of this is an Islamic women's association in a poor suburb in the industrial city of Zarqa, working for the empowerment of school dropout girls and their mothers from broken and socially weak families. Some of these mothers are even working as prostitutes in order to survive. Methods used by this association are literacy courses, a creative handicraft project, confidential discussions of personal and social affairs and recreational outings. It is led by a woman who is also working as a religious teacher and social worker in a mosque. She wears orthodox Islamic dress, including a *niqab* or full face veil. She was, at the same time, trained by a British development organization supporting projects for children at risk. In the name of the Islamic concept of *karama* or dignity, this association endeavours to raise the self-esteem of the girls and their mothers, and to counter traditional habits that discriminate against females regarding their social and educational opportunities.²⁹ Marie-Juul Petersen has visited this association as well. Its head told her that people often asked her why she did not just focus her efforts on getting the girls married, but no, she said, I want these women to be able to take care of themselves. One of the beneficiaries told Petersen that the association made her aware of her rights and capabilities and helped her to stand up for herself.³⁰

Conclusion

The examples of the voluntary associations dealt with in this chapter demonstrate that tradition and modernity can relate to each other in many different ways and are not necessarily at odds with each other. All of these associations were established by members of modernly educated Muslim generations which were already exposed to mass media for several decades and became more recently well versed in information technology as well. These people were able to study the

Islamic sources by themselves and reflect on their relevance to their own lives and their own society, in conjunction with their own experiences with modern life and society and their dilemmas. They adhere to the Islamic message and tradition and find them relevant for modern society, but the way in which they define this relevance differs from one association to the other.

In the case of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated NGOs Islamic Center Charity Society and Al-'Afaf Society, we find a strong emphasis on Islam as an all-encompassing model and system for life and society. Their views are in line with the more classical version of modernity which emphasizes humanity's need for the most desirable and just societal *system* in order to become happy and prosperous. In this version, the human agent needs to exert the necessary collective efforts in order to realize this ideal system or order. Therefore, it strongly emphasizes the duty of each individual to contribute to this collective effort. The Muslim Brotherhood-oriented NGOs emphasize that such a desirable and just order pertains to all aspects of life and behaviour and can be derived from the injunctions of the *Qur'an* and the words and example of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. However, even within these NGOs we find a (new) tendency to put this 'Islamic solution' into the perspective of the realities and dilemmas of modern life and society, to reinterpret the message accordingly, to put a greater stress on individual empowerment and rights and to acknowledge pluralism. The sense of an Islamic *umma* being under threat from its enemies (e.g. the West and Zionism) seems to be conducive to a classical modern collectivist conception of the good Islamic life and society, while criticism of oppressive indigenous patterns and customs, especially regarding the treatment of women and children, seems to go hand in hand with a more individualized and rights-oriented 'post-modern' approach.

The rights-oriented approach is most central in Al-Faruq Society, the Khawla bint al-Azwar Association and the Al Aqsa Association. We do see differences, though, with regard with to place of Islam within these approaches. In regard with the conviction and discourse of the, in terms of ideological and professional backgrounds of its members most secular Al-Faruq Society, Islam is an important element of Arab society's cultural and ethical heritage and at the same time an evolving part of its development and modernization, rather than an absolute and all-encompassing basis for society. In the Khawla Bint al-Azwar Association, the Islamic revelation and its injunctions are more dominant. It interprets the goals of this revelation, however, as the promotion of human dignity and social justice through the empowerment of the deprived. The same goes for the Al-Aqsa

Association, which also emphasizes the importance for Muslims meaningfully to learn from and cooperate with the non-Muslim world.

Being the product of a modernly educated Muslim middle class, all of these associations provide examples of being part of modernity on the basis of an inspiration from Islamic tradition. This orientation may entail criticism of Western political, economic and cultural domination, as well as indigenous customs that are being regarded as un-modern as well as unislamic. Even though the validity of Islamic tradition is itself not questioned, it is used as a basis for criticizing existing patterns of society, including aspects of traditional culture. Therefore, these associations belie any dichotomy between (religious) tradition and modernity.

Notes

- 1 Armando Salvatore, "Chapter 1, Tradition and Modernity within Islamic Civilisation and the West" in Armando Salvatore, Muhammad Masud and Martin van Bruinessen eds., *Islam and Modernity, Key Issues and Debates*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, pp. 11-14 and pp. 30-31.
- 2 Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge and Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1992, pp. 434-436.
- 3 As for how (religious) tradition shapes modern forms of reflexivity, debate and civil society, one could consult the works of Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion, Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (1993, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press), Charles Hirschkind, "Civic Virtue and Religious Reason: an Islamic Counterpublic", *Cultural Anthropology* Volume 16 No. 1, pp. 3-34 and Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety, the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005, Princeton, US and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press).
- 4 "*Mujtamma' Abli*" can be translated as "popular-" or "peoples society".
- 5 Amr Hamzawi, "Normative Dimensions of Contemporary Arab Debates on Civil Society. Between the Search for a New Formulation of Democracy and the Controversy over the Political Role of Religion" in Amr Hamzawi ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East*, Nahost-Studien 4, Berlin, Verlag Hans Schiler, 2003, pp. 28-29.
- 6 Sami Zubaida, *Civil Society, Community and Democracy in the Middle East* (unpublished version), pp. 3-5 en 13-14.
- 7 Francois Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2003, pp. 43-48.

- 8 Gregory Starett, "The Hexis of Interpretation: Islam and the Body in the Egyptian Popular School", *American Ethnologist*, 22 (4): 1995: p. 960.
- 9 Burgat, pp. 43-48, Gilles Kepel, *Jihad, the Trail of Political Islam*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 2003, pp. 62-68 and Oliver Roy, *De globalisering van de islam* (original title: *L'islam mondialisé*, translated into Dutch by Walter van der Star, Amsterdam, Van Gennep, 2003), p. 16.
- 10 Marion Boulby, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the Kings of Jordan 1945-1993*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1999, p. 46.
- 11 Shmuel Bar, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan*, Tel Aviv, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 1998, p. 10.
- 12 Ali Abdul Kazim, "The Muslim Brotherhood, the Historic Background and the Ideological Origin" in: Jillian Schwedler ed., *Islamic Movements in Jordan*, Amman, Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Centre, 1997, p. 15.
- 13 Waleed Hammad, *Jordanian Women's Organisations and Sustainable Development*, Amman, Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Centre, 1999, p. 25 and Katja Hermann, *Aufbruch von Unten, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen von NGOs in Jordanien*, Münster, Hamburg and London, Lit Verlag, 2000, p. 62.
- 14 Musa Shteiwi, *Voluntarism and Volunteers in the Arab World, Case Studies*, no location, The Arab Network for NGOs, 2001, pp. 39-40, and Hammad, p. 25.
- 15 Laurie A. Brand, *Women, the State and Political Liberalization, Middle Eastern and North African Experiences*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 120-121.
- 16 M. Boulby, p. 42-46.
- 17 Egbert Harmsen, *Islam, Civil Society and Social Work, Muslim Voluntary Welfare Associations in Jordan between Patronage and Empowerment*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2008, pp. 151-155, 159 and 163-164.
- 18 Jonathan Benthall, Financial Worship in Benthall and Bellion Jourdan eds., *The Charitable Crescent, Politics of Aid in the Muslim World*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2003, p. 9.
- 19 Timur Kuran, "Islamic Redistribution Through Zakah" in Michael Bonner, Mine Ener and Amy Singer eds., *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, pp. 283-284, Miriam Hoexter, "the Poor and Distribution of Alms in Ottoman Algiers", pp. 151-158 and Eyal Ginio, "Living on the Margins of Charity, Coping with Poverty in an Ottoman Provincial City", pp. 165-184 in the same volume.
- 20 Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan in Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan eds., pp. 42-44.
- 21 Marie Juul Petersen and Sara Lei Sparre, *Islam and Civil Society, Case Studies from Jordan and Egypt*, Danish Institute for International Studies Report no. 13, Copenhagen, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2007, pp. 39-41.

- 22 She made these observations in a document unpublished at the time of writing, entitled “We think that this job pleases Allah”: Islamic Charity, Social Order and the Construction of Modern Muslim Selfhoods in Jordan”.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Egbert Harmsen, “Islamic Voluntary Welfare Activism in Jordan” in *ISIM Newsletter* no. 13 (December 2003), p. 30.
- 25 Quoted by Quintan Wiktorowicz and Suha Taji Farouki in: “Islamic NGOS and Muslim Politics: a case from Jordan in *Third World Quarterly* Volume 21 No. 4 (2000), p.691-692.
- 26 Egbert Harmsen, *ISIM Newsletter* No. 13, 30. I have attended one of these mass weddings, in July 2003.
- 27 Even though they do adhere to the qur’anic ruling that in cases of persistent disobedience by the wife, she may be disciplined by means of “light” or “moderate” beatings.
- 28 Egbert Harmsen, “Between Empowerment & Paternalism” in *ISIM Review* no. 20 (Autumn 2007), p. 11.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Petersen, *Islam and Civil Society*, pp. 39-41.

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