We use the term Islam freely, thinking that we all know what we mean by it, and in a very general sense we probably do. But, the easy use of the term Islam conceals the fact that there are many Islams, many different Muslim societies, and many different ways of being Muslim within those societies. It is crucial that we remember that the world of the Islamic tradition, as in that of other religious traditions, contains many differences, and many discourses amongst those differences.

The same caveat must be made in relation to modernity. There was a time in the age of overwhelming Western dominance in the world, a time beginning with the era of the great founders of sociology - Marx, Weber and Durkheim - and ending in the third quarter of the twentieth century with the not-so-great practitioners of modernisation theory, that it was fondly thought that the West was the paradigm of modernity, that the processes which had begun in the West with the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution would be replicated in the rest of the world. Indeed, the whole world would come to be modelled after a Western fashion and would benchmark its laws, norms and values according to those of the West. Since the 1970s it has increasingly become clear that Western modernity is only one form of modernity, or perhaps we should say modernities. Other societies have been shaping their modernities in the light of their own histories, conditions, cultures and values. It is
much better, and certainly much better for the future of our
world, if we talk in terms of multiple modernities.

Let us begin by placing the issue of Muslim societies and
modernities in its historical context. It is important to note
that, for nearly one thousand years from the seventh
century, Islamic civilisation was the leading civilisation on
earth. True, the achievements of China could be regarded as
comparable, but it was limited in large part to one region.
Islam on the other hand created a world civilisation - poly-
ethnic, multiracial, international and intercontinental. It was
rich, commanding great long-distance trades across land
and sea, from China and South East Asia in the East to the
Atlantic Ocean in the West. Its achievements in the arts and
sciences were the greatest yet, bringing together the
knowledge and skills of the ancient Middle East, Greece and
Iran in a most fertile mix with innovations from China and
India. Muslims produced time and time again great
literature, great art, great architecture and major advances in
science. Medieval Europe was its pupil. This creative
civilisation lay at the heart of the Muslim world system
which preceded the Wallerstinian Western World-System.

Muslim domination came to an end as Renaissance,
Reformation, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution
transformed Europe from within. The first signs of the
changing power relationship came when on 12 September
1683 the Ottomans were forced to lift their siege of Vienna.
Further defeats followed, and the tipping point came when
in 1798 the French invaded Egypt and in 1799 the British
defeated the forces of Tipu Sultan, the last significant
Muslim power in India. From this moment, Western power
surged across the Muslim world with the British, the
Russians, the French and the Dutch in the van. By 1920
almost the whole of the Muslim world was under Western
rule or powerful Western influence. The only areas free
from it were North Yemen, Central Arabia and Afghanistan.
Between the middle of the twentieth century and 1990
almost all this world achieved freedom from formal Western rule. But often it was a much constrained freedom. Western rule left elites in their former empires moulded to Western purposes. Moreover, Western powers continued to try to shape Muslim states to their economic purposes, or in the case of the Cold War - if Soviet Union is regarded as a part of the civilisational West - their competing strategic requirements. There was constant intervention and interference in the affairs of Muslim states with predictably disastrous consequences: the Anglo-American overthrow of the Musaddegh regime in Iran in 1953, which arguably paved the way for the Iranian Revolution of 1979; the Anglo-French intervention in the Suez in 1956, which radicalised the Arab nationalism; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Western-funded resistance to it, which helped to destabilise the region from Central Asia to Kashmir; and Western adventures in Iraq from the 1980s to the present which have done much harm to the most advanced of Arab states and much damage to the reputation of the West in the rest of the Muslim world. These, alongside the issue of Israel/Palestine, are just the worst of the disturbances and oppressions visited on the Muslim world.

Muslims have not been happy about what has befallen them. Across the old empires from Istanbul to Delhi there grew up literary genres of mourning the passing of greatness. It is there in the late Ottoman traditions of hüziün so brilliantly described by Orhan Pamuk in his autobiographical evocation of Istanbul published in English in 2005.² It is there, too, in the late Mughal genre of Shehr-i Ashob, poems mourning the passing of great cities, great civilisations. A late example is one of the greatest and most influential works of late-nineteenth century Indo-Muslim poetry, Hali’s Musaddas or elegy entitled ‘The Flow and ebb of Islam’. The following captures the elegaic and nostalgic mood precisely:
When autumn has set in over the garden
Why speak of the springtime of flowers?
When shadows of adversity hang over the present,
Why harp on the pomp and glory of the past?
Yes, these are things to forget; but how can you with
The dawn forget the scene of the night before?
The assembly has just dispersed;
The smoke is still rising from the burnt candle;
The footprints on the sands of India still say
A graceful caravan has passed this way.³

But with sadness at the loss of power there also came protest at the dominance and behaviour of the West. Husain Ahmad Madani, the Principal of Deoband, the second most important traditional university in the Muslim world, declared in his autobiography written after his internment during the World War One: ‘The British and the European nations do not consider Asians and Africans as human beings, and thus deny them human rights. The British are the worst enemies of Islam and the Muslims on earth’.⁴ Muhammad Iqbal, a man who intellectually owed much to the West, accepted a knighthood from the British, and was the poet-philosopher behind the concept of Pakistan - a Muslim modernist and in no way radical - declared in his Persian Psalms published in 1927:

Against Europe I protest,
And the attraction of the West.
Woe for Europe and her charm,
Swift to capture and disarm!
Europe’s hordes with flame and fire
Desolate the world entire.⁵
This rejection of Europe, or by now the West in general, both as a destructive force and a false model of progress has been a continuing theme of the Muslim critique of the West from Sayyid Qutb, the leader of the second phase of the Muslim Brotherhood, through Āli Shari‘āti and Ayatollah Khomeini, who paved the way for the Iranian Revolution, through to Osama bin Laden, whose collected statements published in 2005 by Bruce Lawrence of Duke University, are well worth reading.\(^6\)

This sorry state of affairs raises the issue of why, after a millennium of success, Muslim societies should have suffered a decline relative to some but not all societies elsewhere in the world. The explanations are many. Some Muslims have blamed the destructive Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, which is hardly acceptable as some of their greatest civilisational achievements came afterwards. Others blame the imperialism of the West over two centuries, and to the present author’s understanding, this would have to form a part of any explanation. Yet other explanations involve the exhaustion of gold and silver sources in the Muslim world at a time when the West had access to new sources in the Americas; the impact of inbreeding due to the prevalence of cousin-marriage in the Muslim societies; and the depredations of the goat whose eating habits turned fertile land into desert. Yet other explanations point fingers at the ulama, the Islamic scholars, who interpret the faith to each new generation with the aim of making it live in the world of their time. The problem, the saying goes, lies not with Islam but with what Muslims have done to it. So the ulama have made it too inflexible to meet the challenges of Western science and the spirit which lies behind it; they have made it a barrier to the adoption of democratic forms of government and the release of social energies and economic potential which can accompany such developments; and they have made it a barrier to the effective inclusion of women, half of society’s human
potential, in the world of the modern economy and modern state.

There is no need to offer further comments on these explanations as some of which are based on spurious suppositions and are of dubious value. As of the moment, there is no satisfactory overall explanation of the failure of Muslim societies to stay at the forefront of human progress. What I do wish to set out for you is that, if Islam and its interpreters can be pilloried as the sources of the problem of keeping up with the challenges of modernity, they may also be, even unknowingly, a source of the answers to the challenges of modernity.

To explain this point, it can be said that from the eighteenth century there has been a movement of religious reform, of religious change, at work in all Muslim societies. In South Asia this was represented, of course, by the trajectories of reform of those in the Waliullah tradition through to Maulana Maududi. It is important to note that it began before the European conquest and only subsequently came to interact with the great transformations that Europe brought. At the heart of this process of religious change was a shift in the emphasis in piety from the other world to this world. Moving through the process was a new emphasis on the unity of God and an attack on all practices which compromised it - indigenous customs which had become incorporated into Islamic practice, or Sufi rites which suggested that Sufi saints might be able to intercede for men with God. To remind men of the perilous nature of their future, there was a new emphasis on the horrors of the Day of Judgement. Alongside these developments, there was a great review of the usefulness of knowledge handed down from the past; there was the translation of texts into vernacular languages so that for the first time they might be read by Muslims other than scholars; there was the adoption of printing press (a nineteenth-century process in the Muslim world) so that texts at last could become widely
available; and there was a strong emphasis on education for men, and later for women. The aim was that each individual Muslim should become powerfully aware of his/her personal responsibility to act on earth in the light of God’s guidance, if they wished to be saved. There thus began to develop a ‘Protestant’ form of Islam, a process which some have likened, amongst them many Muslims, to the Protestant Reformation in Europe.\(^7\)

The sense of personal responsibility and the centrality of action on earth to this new ‘Protestant’ Muslim life was expressed most completely by Muhammad Iqbal. For Iqbal man realised himself in the creative work of shaping and reshaping the world. The reality of the individual was expressed most explicitly in action. ‘The final act’ he declares in the closing sentences of his *Reconstruction of Religion Thought in Islam* (published in the late 1920s), ‘is not an intellectual act, but a vital act which deepens the whole being of the ego and sharpens his will into creative assurance that the world is not just something to be seen and known through concepts, but to be made and remade by continuous action’.\(^8\) As the prime mover, man was God’s representative on earth, his vice-regent, his Caliph. Thus, at the very moment that Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had brought to an end the Ottoman caliphate, the idea that in principle the most powerful Muslim ruler of the day should be the Prophet Muhammad’s successor as the leader of the Muslim community, Iqbal brought forward the idea of a new caliphate, one fit for a democratic era, the caliphate of each individual Muslim. It is an idea which has found widespread acceptance throughout the world of Islamic reform, of Islamism, of movements that some might think of as Muslim Fundamentalist movements. It is an idea of individual empowerment which has brought great energy and purpose to these movements.\(^9\)

Attention should also be drawn to new facets of Muslim life and thought which spring, in part at least, from the
emergence of forms of ‘Protestant Islam’, and represent changes that might also be associated with the emergence of Western modernities. They are: an assault on the authority of the past; a new emphasis on human will; a transformation of the self; and a rationalisation of belief and practice.

First, there is the assault on the authority of the past. Down to the nineteenth century there was a central belief amongst Muslims that truth did not reside in documents, however authoritative or ancient or well-presented, but in authentic human beings and their connections to each other. Authoritative transmission of knowledge was oral, person-to-person transmission by what was known as a ‘golden chain of sincere Muslims’.

Reform assaulted the authority of the past in two main ways. First reformers in their concern to make contact with the Quran and Tradition afresh, in making them relevant to the modern world, jettisoned much of the medieval scholarship of the Muslim world. They cast aside one thousand years of intellectual effort in fashioning Muslim societies, and the authority that came with direct connection to that effort. Second, the vigorous adoption of translation into indigenous languages and print by reformers meant that, as in the Christian Protestant Reformation, the once authoritative interpretations of scholars could be ignored and ordinary believers could begin to interpret texts for themselves.

There was a decline in old styles of religious authority (indeed, of authority in many aspects of Muslim life from medicine to governance). New forms of religious authority emerged, often associated with leaders of so-called Muslim fundamentalist movements, whose pattern of life and whose interpretation of religious texts had resonance for millions who now lived in the new forms of economy and state brought by imperialism and capitalism. Authority increasingly belonged less to a connectedness to a sacred
past and more and more to those who could make scripture and tradition live meaningfully in the present.\textsuperscript{10}

Second, there was a new emphasis on human will. In the absence of Muslim power, it was the will of each individual Muslim, primed by knowledge, conscience and the hope of salvation, which fashioned an Islamic society. Moreover, the reformers worked to make sure that this faith of conscience and conviction was as alive amongst women as it was amongst men. The outcome of this new emphasis on human will was that it heightened that `modern, feeling, in a Western sense, of human instrumentality in the world, that feeling which Iqbal celebrated when he talked of man being the prime mover in God’s creation. This is reforming vision gave Muslim men and women the feeling of being increasingly empowered on earth. Thus, that most sensitive observer, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his \textit{Islam in Modern History} (of 1957) referred to the extraordinary energy which had cours ed through the Muslim world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, talking of `dynamism, the appreciation of activity for its own sake, and at a level of feeling a stirring of intense, even virulent, emotionalism....’\textsuperscript{11}

Thirdly, there was the transformation of Muslim selves in a way in which, under the guidance of Charles Taylor and others, it has come to be associated with Western modernities. This transformation involves in part an inward turn, the growth of self-consciousness and reflectiveness which Taylor argues is an important aspect of the constitution of the modern self, and in part the affirmation of ordinary life which Taylor asserts `although not uncontested and frequently appearing in secularized form, has become one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization’.

It may be noted that self-examination was a key aspect of Islamic reform; a willed Islam had to be a self-conscious one. This stimulated an inward turn and the growth of the reflective habit. Muslims had to ask themselves regularly if
they had done enough to submit to God and to carry out His will in the world. Listen to one guide which instructs the believer to speak each day to his lower self thus:

O Self, you must recognize that in this world you are like a trader. Your stock-in-trade is your life. Its profit is to acquire well-being for ever, that is, salvation in the afterlife. This is indeed a profit! If you waste your life and do not gain your salvation, you suffer losses that reach to your stock-in-trade. That stock-in-trade is so precious that each hour - indeed, each breath - is valuable beyond limit.

O Self, recognize God’s kindness that death has not yet come.
O Self, do not fall into the deception that Almighty God will surely forgive you.

Of course, believers had examined themselves in earlier centuries. The importance of reform was that self-consciousness and self-examination were encouraged to become widespread.

With the inward turn, there also came the affirmation of the things of the self, the ordinary things of daily life. This process can be noticed at work in the new trends which emerge in the biographies of the Prophet, whose number increase greatly in the twentieth century. Increasingly, Muhammad is depicted not as the ‘Perfect Man’ of the Sufi tradition, but as the perfect person. Less attention is given to his intelligence, political sagacity and capacity to harness the new social forces in his society and more to his qualities as a good middle-class family man - his sense of duty and his loving nature, and his qualities as a good citizen - his
consideration for others and in particular those who are less fortunate. Religious thinkers found they could not afford to ignore the new importance of profoundly human matters. ‘The Islamic pattern of life’ declared one, ‘finds expression in religious and moral acts, in prayer, in love, in forgiveness, in seemingly mundane activities such as sex and domestic life, which should be radiated by the glow of the world beyond’.  

Finally, rationalisation of belief and practice was a further outcome of Islamic reform. By emphasising the development of a scriptural faith focussed on the Quran and Tradition, by attacking local customs around which many superstitions revolved, and by attacking all idea of intercession at Sufi shrines, indeed at times by attacking Sufism itself, Islamic reform rationalised belief and practice. Print was ever the handmaid. Printed guides were produced to say what practices should be followed and what customs should be abandoned. Through the work of rationalisation, which helped to reorientate Muslims from local cults towards widely shared practices and symbols, Islamic reform helped to prepare Muslims for the world of the modern political party and the modern state.

Side by side with the rationalisation of Islam there went its reification. This reification flowed in part from men and women consciously embracing a set of beliefs they identified with ‘true Islam’ and abandoning others which they did not. But reification flowed in part, too, from two additional influences: the distancing impact of print which enabled Muslims to stand apart from their faith, analyse it and conceptualise it; and their growing consciousness, which was very strong in South and South East Asia, that they were living alongside other faiths, at times real competitors, which were also being reified. For the first time in the late nineteenth century Muslims began to use the term ‘Islam’ not just to describe their relationship to God, but to describe an ideal religious pattern or a mundane religious
system, or even just Islamic civilisation. By the late twentieth century, with the impact of mass education, this reification of Islam in Muslim consciousness was widespread. The final stage in the reification of Islam was its conceptualisation as a system. This was the particular achievement of Maulana Maududi, the founder of the Jama`at-i Islami, South Asia’s Islamist movement. His concern was to establish an Islamic vision of life to set against that of the West. He describes Islam as a *nizam*, a system, which was comprehensive, complete, and covering all aspects of human existence. These aspects were integrated, as the human body was integrated into one homogeneous whole. This homogeneous system, which might also be seen as an ideology, had to be united to power to protect it against outside (sullying) forces. Thus Maududi’s followers sought to capture the modern state, as have other Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world.  

All these ideas (the rejection of the authority of the past, the new emphasis on human will, the transformations of the self, and the rationalisation and reification of belief), which are all ideas which we might associate with Western modernities, and which are underpinned by the impact of Islamic reform in Muslim societies, are to be found at work in Islamist or Muslim Fundamentalist movements. These movements, which began in the mid-twentieth century, made major headway in Muslim societies from the 1970s in the midst of the general Islamization of the Muslim world. The reasons for this were: the massive movement of population from the countryside to the cities which began in the third quarter of the twentieth century alongside some very high fertility rates; and the failure of modern Muslim states by and large to look after their new urban citizens which created the opportunity for Islamist and other organisations to move in and provide mosques, community centres, schools, clinics and the working structures of a civil
society. The reputation of Islamist leaders rose as those of nationalist, secular and socialist elites declined. Anyone who travelled to the great cities of the Muslim world - Istanbul, Cairo, Fez, Isfahan - in the 1960s and then in the 1990s would have seen the changes reflected in the dress of people they met - at a minimum men would have stopped wearing ties and women would have been more modestly covered. From the 1970s, of course, the great oil price rise brought vast new resources into the hands of Muslim individuals and states enabling them, should they wish, to play their own part in supporting Islamisation. In this context all kinds of Islamist and Islamic organisations - the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world, the Jama`at-i Islami in the societies of South Asia, and the Muhammadiyah and Nadhlat al-Ulama in Indonesia - all came to play a much greater role in the societies and politics of their states. At the extreme end, it can be noted, groups related to these organisations, or splintered from them, have used violence. Equally, the state has used violence against them. But their prime concern has always been to provide, in a pragmatic way, a better world in which their communities can live.

It is now clear from the above discussion that Islamic reform, and especially its Islamist forms, are not only modern phenomena but modernising phenomena. Moreover, they are arguably so when compared with the so-called friends of the West, more often than not dictators held in place by state force and by their alliances with outside powers. This idea will be pursued briefly in relation to the key issues of democracy and the position of women.

The organisations of religious reform are playing the key role in building up a space for civil society in Muslim states and in driving forward the process of democratic development, as of course many Christian organisations did in the West. Take Turkey, for instance, in November 2002 most voters gave their overwhelming support to a new Islam-oriented party, known as the Justice and
Development Party, which traced its origins back to Islamist parties banned by secular Turkish authorities in previous decades. The party leadership makes clear its commitment to human rights, the rule of law and pluralist democracy; it is determined to pursue Turkey’s application to join the European Union with all that that entails.\textsuperscript{14}

Iran can also be cited as an example. The Iranian revolution of 1979 was captured by Islamist forces. They produced a constitution more democratic in form than anything that existed under the Shah - a popularly elected Parliament, a popularly elected President - there was just the problem of an unelected Supreme Leader and a religious leadership which strove to interfere in who could stand for Parliament and Presidency. The past decade has seen an intense discussion on how the political system should develop, with President Khatami, President from 1997 to 2005, taking the view that Islam should not be the state religion but rather an inclusive, religious, democratic force. Iran is embarked on a long journey of learning how to develop pluralist institutions based on its own culture, religion and historical traditions. We interfere with that journey at our peril.\textsuperscript{15}

Finally, another example is that of Indonesia, too often overlooked in discussions of Muslim societies, though with its population of 200m it is by far the largest. In the final years of the General Suharto dictatorship (from 1966 to 1998) a powerful movement for democratic Muslim politics developed in which the parties of Islamic reform were the major players. In alliance with secular Muslims and non-Muslims in May 1998 they toppled Suharto and established a democratic process. During the campaign the Islamic reform parties devised religious arguments in support of pluralism, democracy and women’s rights.\textsuperscript{16}

Islamic reform, Islamism and the position of women in Muslim modernities opens up an area which is, if anything, even more complex than the relationship of those forces to
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democracy. Moreover, this is the one area in which Westerners, in particular Western feminists, tend to take the view that our way is the only way. Two considerations can be offered which relate very specifically to the argument which has gone before. Both deal with religious reform and the empowerment of women. The first relates to the women’s madrasas, or religious schools, which have grown up in India since independence. They serve the poorer levels of society. The opportunities they offer to women range from, being teachers in girls madrasas in India and abroad, and setting up their own madrasas, through to being religious authorities in their own right, to becoming the teachers of men, and to becoming representatives of the whole community in local councils. The second relates to the issue of the hijab or the wearing of modest clothing in public space. To Westerners this seems to symbolise oppression, and there will be upper class Muslim women who will support them in this view. On the other hand, large numbers of Muslim women look aghast at the way in which the female form is exploited in Western societies, and at the way in which women are judged for what they wear and how they look. For many women the reassertion of Islamic preferences regarding dress in public space has been a liberation rather than a confinement. It has meant that they could be present on the streets and in public transport, that they could take jobs, that they could go to a school and a university. In some Muslim countries more women have come to attend universities than men. Wearing the hijab is one of the things that has enabled them to take the upper hand in higher education. Wearing the hijab goes hand in hand with being modern.

To conclude, Islamic reform in its various manifestations has played, and is playing, an important role in underpinning modernities in the Muslim world in a way that is not dissimilar from the impact of religious reform in the Christian West. It means that some of those aspects of
Muslim modernities from which Westerners and Muslim progressives instinctively recoil - modernities clothed in religious enthusiasm, modernities in which women are differently presented in public - are arguably the generators of constructive change. So the trajectories of Islamic reform, represented in South Asia by those from the Wali Allahi tradition through to Maududi, are amongst the ways in which Muslims strive to build better societies in which to live. They are Muslim modernities which feel, for many, culturally authentic. As such they are an important part in the discourses of modernity in the societies of South Asia, as they are in the rest of the Muslim world.
Notes and References

1 The argument of this article is a substantially abbreviated version of my ‘Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia’ , Modern Asian Studies, 41, 5, 2007, pp. 1-23.


5 J. Arberry, trans., Persian Psalms (Zabur-i Ajam) … from the Persian of the late Sir Muhammad Iqbal (Karachi, 1968)


9 Ibid., pp. 53-6.


11 Ibid., pp. 11-13.
12 Ibid., pp. 13-16.

13 Ibid., pp. 16-19


17 Yoginder Singh Sikand, Bastions of the Believers: Madrass and Islamic Education in India (Delhi, 2005), pp 218-22 and Mareiki Jule Winkelmann, `From Behind the Curtain': a study of a girls' madrasa in India (Amsterdam, 2005).
