

Islamic Reform: Movement Models and Reform Programs

[THEME I]

On the Historical Factors Underlying Social and Cultural Collapse

THE WRITINGS that have dealt with the weaknesses in the Muslim world community and the causes underlying its decline are of great importance. However they are inadequate in both quantity and quality. The situation was summed up neatly by Ibn Ashur when he said:

Imam al-Ghazālī lamented the demise of the religious sciences and labored to revive them. Imam al-Ṭurṭūshī (451-521 AH/1059-1127 CE) decried the emergence of unfounded religious innovations and labored to purge the religion of them. As for al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr ibn al-ʿArabī (468-543 AH/1076-1148 CE), he wrote his famous work *Al-ʿAwāṣim min al-Qawāsim* in defense of the Prophet’s Companions and their Successors, while Imam al-Shāṭibī criticized illegitimate religious innovations while calling upon people to cling to their time-tested traditions in his book *Al-Iṭīṣām* and taking comfort in his life abroad as an aid to remaining steadfast to genuine Islamic practices. We then come to the pivotal role played by Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah (728-661 AH/1263-1328 CE) and his contemporaries in the reform of Islamic thought, the effects of which emerged in the form of the Wahhabi movement in the late twelfth century AH/eighteenth century CE along with the Salafi movements that came in response to it throughout the Islamic world. This was followed by the call for reform whose motto Jamal al-Din

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al-Afghani took from *Sūrah al-Raʿd*, 13:11: “...Verily, God does not change men’s condition unless they change their inner selves...” This principle was echoed by Muhammad Abduh in his statement that rather than measuring Islam by the situation in which they find themselves, Muslims should measure the situation in which they find themselves by Islam.

In what follows, we will be reviewing examples of relevance to the task of Islamic reform. Our survey will begin with Imam al-Ghazālī of the fifth century AH/eleventh CE, after which our focus will shift to other, modern-day figures who were both heirs to the historical reform movements that had preceded them, and witnesses to later developments in the Muslim world community, including the various weaknesses and aberrations that have been brought out by the influence of rationalist, materialist colonialism.

In his book *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), al-Ghazālī expounded at length on the developments that followed the end of the rightly guided caliphate. He wrote:

After the first four, rightly guided caliphs were gone, the caliphate was assumed by individuals who were unskilled in the science of jurisprudence and the art of issuing sound juristic rulings. Consequently, these later caliphs were obliged to seek assistance from qualified jurists, and they had such scholars accompany them wherever they went so that they could seek rulings from them on the various cases that were brought before them. At this time, there remained a number of the Companions’ Successors who had preserved an untainted understanding of the religion, and who still adhered to the practices established by their pious forebears. When individuals such as these were sought out by those in authority for their juristic expertise, they would flee and turn away, [knowing that they would be pressed into service as mouth-pieces for those in power]. Seeing how popular these scholars were with the rulers, others living at that time began applying themselves to the study of Islamic jurisprudence and offering their services to governors and rulers in hopes of finding favor with them. Thus, after having been the pursued, jurists became the pursuers, and after enjoying such status and prestige that they were in a position to turn rulers away, they found

themselves groveling before them, seeking their favor without shame. Excepted, of course, were those religious scholars of each generation who, by God's grace, maintained their integrity and dignity.

In the passage just quoted, al-Ghazālī reduced the crisis in Islam to the intellectual sphere, in which we can observe several levels of deviation from the approach that had been followed by the Companions and the Successors and their followers, which involved understanding religious texts and drawing valid conclusions from them, the open exchange of opinions and arguments, debating effectively with opponents, and the like.

Despite the suffocating ignorance, tyranny and bigotry that have plagued the Muslim community, the reformist spirit that inspired al-Ghazālī and his successors has been successively renewed throughout Islamic history. One prominent figure in whom this spirit manifested itself was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who carried on the tradition of Islamic reform with a Ghazalian zeal and eloquence. Al-Afghani likened the ailing Muslim community to a body that had once been strong and healthy, only to find itself racked with illness to the point of near disintegration, as though its every member were working at cross purposes with all the others. This weakening and disintegration, according to al-Afghani, began as the ruling caliphs came to be less and less qualified in the Qur'anic and juristic sciences. Instead, they had grown complacent, contenting themselves with the title "Caliph" or "Commander of the Faithful" rather than striving for a deepening understanding of their religion and laboring to derive sound legal rulings based on spiritual principles and the religion's written tradition as the first four caliphs had done. Beginning in the early third century AH/ninth century CE, juristic and theological schools of thought multiplied and ramified to a degree that was unprecedented in any known religious tradition, a phenomenon that coincided with a division in the caliphate. Alongside the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad there was a Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and an Umayyad caliphate in Andalusia. As these centers of power grew increasingly disjointed, the institution of the caliphate ceased to command the respect and obedience that it once had, and this even before the catastrophe that befell the Islamic realm

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with the onslaught to which it was subjected by Genghis Khan (1162-1227), Tamerlane (1336-1405) and their descendants who slaughtered, debased and scattered Muslims far and wide

Al-Afghani stated in *Al-Urwah al-Wuthqā*:

Even when those with greater knowledge explained what was true and what was false, what was valid and what was invalid, this was not enough to enlighten the general populace, especially given the overall lack of education and the failure to guide people by the unchanging religious principles to which they had been called by the Prophet and his Companions. The study of religion was only being undertaken in the correct manner in specialized circles and on a narrow scale. Hence, Muslims' regression may have been an unavoidable outcome of this situation, which is similar to the one we face today.

The elements that contributed to this deterioration might be summed up in the following points: (1) The root of the deviation was a process of distancing from the [Islamic] religion with its rulings, laws, principles, and moral values. (2) The loss of intellectual unity within the Muslim community came about as people divided themselves into various sects and schools of thought. (3) The system of the caliphate and political rule was corrupted by the separation that came about between the political and scholarly spheres, as well as by tyranny, injustice, preference for individual interests over communal interests, and foreign invasions with the destruction they wrought on the Muslim community's economy and infrastructure.

We come now to another movement which likewise inherited the historical reformist bent that had preceded it and which had manifested itself in the Salafi reform movement led by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. The movement of which we speak, which might be seen as an extension of the one led by al-Afghani and Abduh, is that of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) who, in his book *Majmū'at al-Rasā'il*, identified the factors underlying what he termed 'the dissolution of the Islamic state and the Islamic people.' Some of the major causes behind this phenomenon, according to al-Banna, were: (1) political and tribal

disagreements; (2) religious and sectarian differences; (3) absorption in worldly comforts; (4) the transfer of power and leadership to non-Arabs, including the Persians, the Mamluks, the Turks and others, none of whom had a proper understanding of Islam; (5) neglect of the practical sciences and a failure to observe the social progress being achieved by other communities; and (6) Muslims allowing themselves to rush to imitate others without regard for whether the practices they were emulating were beneficial or harmful.

To the factors listed by al-Banna, Egyptian scholar Muhammad al-Ghazali (1917-1996) added: (1) misunderstanding of Islam; (2) incorrect priorities; (3) the spread of superstitions in the name of religion; (4) the weakening of Islamic culture, which is what shapes Muslims' thoughts, tastes, and inclinations; (5) Muslims' ignorance of the world, which resulted from the weakening of their culture; (6) the spread of a fatalistic mentality among Muslims; (7) hypocritical traditions in Islamic society; (8) the failure to give women the opportunity to be educated and to participate in society; (9) the waning of Arabic literature; and (10) the politics of money and political corruption. In this connection, al-Ghazali quoted the saying of the Prophet, "When you begin assigning responsibility to those unworthy of it, be prepared for the coming of the Day of Judgment."

Al-Ghazali viewed ignorance of others to be a critical factor underlying societal and cultural collapse in the Muslim community. In order for Muslims to perceive their environment more clearly and to meet the conditions for advancement as a society, he suggested both 'external' and 'internal' activity that would catalyze the advancement process. The 'external' activity, he stated, should be based on the following three foundations: (1) A thorough investigation of the process of cultural advancement and of the achievements made by others, which would give Muslims a clearer sense of who they were addressing in their communication with others and what message they had to offer; (2) a thorough familiarity with the economic, industrial and cultural level of the world around them because, as he put it, "it would be ludicrous for Islam to be represented by backward nations that are looked down upon by others"; and (3) a study of non-Muslim political currents.

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As for the ‘internal’ activity proposed by al-Ghazali, it would consist of efforts within the Muslim community to: (1) combat the intellectual currents that had distanced the Muslim community from the Qur’an and the Sunnah; (2) rebuild the Muslim community’s faith based on a study of both the divine revelation and the cosmos with the understanding that the responsible use of natural resources is a formidable economic strength; (3) approach the Qur’an not only as a text to be recited, but as a program of action; (4) educate the Muslim community in sound morals and traditions; and (5) sift mindfully through the Islamic heritage.

The final contemporary model of reform to be examined is that offered by Taha Jabir Alalwani, who approached the task of Islamic reform by identifying areas of dysfunction and imbalance. As he put it:

The predicament in which the Muslim community finds itself is, in essence, a crisis of thought that lies at the root of all other crises, be they economic, social or political. Such a crisis will have arisen either as a result of confusion in the sources of thought, faulty methods and approaches, or both together.

In keeping with this insight, the International Institute of Islamic Thought is one of the few institutions that have striven to give voice to a variety of progress seeking Muslim thinkers whose aim in their writings is to identify the difficulties being faced by the Muslim community, to revive their Islamic heritage in creative ways, and to educate others and correct prevailing ways of thinking by explicating the methods by which they are working toward this goal.

Alalwani’s writings laid stress on the acuteness of the deterioration and fragmentation that has afflicted the Muslim community in recent times. Prior to this most recent period, Alalwani noted, the Muslim community had not gone in search of alternatives outside the framework of the Islamic identity, and the existing forces of renewal operated in the context of numerous Islamic cultural centers in which no sharp divisions or distinctions were drawn among the various peoples that made up the ‘mother’ community of Muslims.

The phase in which we find ourselves at present, by contrast, has

witnessed the emergence of a number of disturbing phenomena: the rending of the worldwide Muslim community's civilizational and social fabric, the abandonment of the Islamic "...law and way of life..." (*Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:48) and the adoption of man-made substitutes; a resurgence of racial discrimination between Arabs and non-Arabs within the body of the Muslim community; and the conflicts tearing across the Muslim world.

In a discussion of the historical roots of the current crisis, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman observes that the Muslim community finds itself being ruled by regimes that represent a *mélange* of Islamic and pre-Islamic ideas and values. Intellectual leadership has been divorced from political leadership, which has resulted in a failure to apply Islamic values to social responsibility and concrete practice, and an ignorant political leadership that lacks the intellectual foundation it needs in order to act on sound principles. In AbuSulayman's view, the crisis faced by the Muslim community is a crisis of thought, not of creed; the Muslim mindset has been taken prisoner to concepts and axioms that tie it to the mistakes and misunderstandings of the past. Until invalid concepts and premises are corrected, Muslims will remain incapable of looking critically and accurately at their beliefs, their circumstances, or their responses to these circumstances.

The causes and effects that have been listed here might be arranged in various ways, with additions here and deletions there, depending on the political, economic, and monetary challenges and circumstances that characterize the specific location or era being examined. Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (1805-1902 CE), for example, identified the root cause of the Muslim community's decline as "political tyranny", which he saw as having infiltrated all spheres of life. He noted a number of overarching phenomena underlying deterioration and collapse which, taken together, reflect the prevailing state of decadence in the Muslim community. These phenomena were grouped by al-Kawakibi under two basic causes: (1) failure to abide by religious laws and principles, and (2) failure to apply scientific laws and principles.

We now turn to the broad outlines of a number of reform movements in the history of the Muslim community.

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[THEME 2]

Reform Movements and Models: Premises and Methods

Most studies that have dealt with reform movements have examined them from a purely historical perspective, that is, by simply chronicling related events and figures rather than observing the overall patterns or principles they illustrate and deducing lessons that can be applied to later situations. Given their importance for ongoing reform efforts, we need far greater numbers of studies belonging to this latter category.

The first reform movement in the history of the Muslim community may have been that initiated by the Umayyad Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (sometimes referred to as ‘the fifth rightly guided caliph’), whose caliphate lasted from 98-101 AH/717-720 CE. When he became caliph, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz fell heir to conditions rife with error, corruption, and inept governance. This was a far cry from the situation that had prevailed under the first four caliphs, who had based their practices on those of the Prophet. Faced with conditions such as these, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz set to work on a number of fronts. As Imad al-Din Khalil has observed, this caliph’s policies were based on a set of principles that might be summed up as: (1) place higher priority on guiding people aright than on extracting resources from them (through taxes, for example); (2) invite others to faith; (3) use money in the service of principles; don’t violate principles in the service of money; (4) give communal interests priority over individual interests; (5) involve people in decision-making; (6) allow anyone who has been wronged to register a complaint against those who have wronged him, no matter who he or she happens to be; (7) spread knowledge and make it the basis of sound action; (8) avoid bloodshed between yourselves and those who differ with you through dialogue and persuasion.

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz resisted the temptation to be tyrannical and controlling. He chose his subordinates based on competence, knowledge, faith, and also their acceptability to the Muslim rank-and-file. Similarly, he circumscribed tribal fanaticism, instead stressing the need for unity among all Muslims. He would circulate communiqués among his subordinates urging them to cling to the principle of monotheism in all their affairs and to repudiate all forms of bigotry. One of his mottos

was, “guidance before taxation,” a rule he insisted that his subordinates adhere to as well. Once, when his appointed representative in Basra wrote to him expressing his concern that too many people were becoming Muslims because this threatened a reduction in the state’s revenue from the *kharāj*, or land tax paid by non-Muslims, ‘Umar wrote back indignantly, saying, “By God, would that everyone in the world became Muslim, even if this meant that you and I had to earn our keep by tilling the land ourselves!” In a similar demonstration of principled behavior, ‘Umar scorned any kind of fiscal irresponsibility, and applied this standard to all without exception. He applied it equally to himself, to his family, to his courtiers, and to everyone under his entire jurisdiction. In keeping with this policy, ‘Umar abolished all taxes that had been levied unfairly on the Muslim community in order to swell the state treasury, instead levying tithes on all non-agricultural workers, and insisting that taxes be collected with the utmost fairness. He also implemented and expanded the distribution of social security to all classes of society: men, women and children, the poor, the disabled, the sick, and travelers, whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims, Arabs or non-Arabs. Another innovative policy carried out by ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz was that of ensuring the mutual exchange of financial assistance between the central government and regional governments such that if any of them suffered a financial deficit, it would be made up by the other. He opened the door to free trade via both land and sea, regulated the collection of zakah and other taxes, implemented a sound agricultural policy, and required his regional representatives to carry out whatever reforms, repairs, land reclamation or building projects were necessary to ensure that everyone’s needs were met. By settling disputes with his opponents through dialogue, negotiation and persuasion, he was able to save huge sums of money which previous governments had exhausted in the suppression of internal uprisings and waging external aggression. He put a decisive end to corrupt practices such as embezzlement, which had once drained government coffers, and enforced his strictures on everyone: from himself to the lowliest of tax collectors and everyone in between.

Thanks to reforms such as these, conditions improved so much during the caliphate of ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz that one of his regional

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representatives went out looking for poor people to distribute alms to, only to find no one who needed them, so he used the money instead to buy slaves in order to set them free. This and similar incidents gained such wide circulation that Caliph ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz came to be known as the caliph who had “banished poverty from the land.”

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz did a great deal toward solidifying the base of ‘knowledge and action’, in the words of Imad al-Din Khalil, through the importance he placed on education and the formation of character. It was ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz who issued official instructions for the Prophetic hadiths to be recorded in writing, and it was under his rule that the government commissioned a number of scholars and thinkers to devote themselves full-time to research and writing either on a topic of their own choosing, or one assigned to them by the state. Given his concern to link knowledge with action, ‘Umar viewed any effort that lacked a scholarly basis as incapable of yielding meaningful outcomes. At the same time, he strove throughout his reign to promote the values of justice, freedom and compassion.

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz thus left a formidable legacy of integrity, reform and innovation. Nevertheless, no sooner had he passed away than the Muslim community’s cycle of decline resumed. His successors lacked commitment to the lofty values ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz had cherished, and made no attempt to apply them to the management of life’s affairs. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that he died by poisoning. Prior to his death, ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz had been poised to make a critical decision regarding the system whereby the caliphate was passed down based on heredity. He had conducted negotiations with delegates from the Kharijites, who had put him on the spot over Mu‘āwiyah’s having passed on the caliphate to the unscrupulous Yazīd. He asked them for a grace period of three days, and before the three days had passed, he was dead.

We now turn to the reform experiment carried out by the Muslim Berber scholar and teacher Ibn Tūmart (473-524 AH/1080-1130 CE). Ibn Tūmart’s reform movement was analyzed by Abd al-Majid al-Najjar with a view to identifying the premises, principles, values and methods that contribute to awakening, renewal and successful reform, as well as the factors that underlie regression and failure. Al-Najjar

first set out to identify the personal traits that qualified Ibn Tūmart for his reformist and leadership role, including the ability to interact profoundly with life's varied spheres, respect for freedom of thought, sincerity, dynamism, insightfulness and worldly wisdom, and unyielding determination to change what he deemed intolerable.

In his analysis of the situation in Morocco, Ibn Tūmart concluded that the corruption that had infiltrated various realms had its origins in the ruling Almoravids, their opportunistic hangers-on, and the Mālikī scholars and jurists who worked in cooperation with the Almoravid dynasty. The changes Ibn Tūmart sought to bring about were based on three primary foundations: (1) creed, (2) method and principles, and (3) sociopolitical factors. In addressing these three areas, Ibn Tūmart employed two fundamental techniques, one of them theoretical and inductive, and the other practical and applied.

Ibn Tūmart's program of action consisted of three integrated methods: (1) an educational method based on helping people to perceive that certain actions were wrong and to be avoided, and that others were right and to be engaged in; (2) a political organization in which followers were arranged into different departments that made up four basic organs with distinct functions; (3) a revolutionary, military branch.

Ibn Tūmart's revolt against the Almoravids (*al-murābiṭūn*) led to the rise of the Almohad dynasty (*al-muwahḥidūn*), which eventually conquered all of North Africa, including Libya, and Andalusia (Moorish Iberia). The Almohad dynasty is considered by historians to have been one of the greatest Islamic states ever established. Nevertheless, the Almohad experiment was not without its flaws, both methodological and conceptual.

On the political level, the practice of passing on ruling powers based on hereditary succession led to tyranny, with the ruler in power reserving all decisions to himself alone rather than establishing consultative councils. As the Almohad dynasty neared its end, the system of hereditary rule also led to infighting over leadership positions, which further hastened its demise. For although Ibn Tūmart did form experimental consultative councils, this experiment was not based on a clearly worked-out theory and, consequently, yielded no profound awareness of the meaning or importance of consultation.

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In the creedal sphere, although Ibn Tūmart had achieved his aim of establishing a strict monotheism and an affirmation of God's transcendence, his teachings did not have a lasting impact, and eventually gave way to the influence of Ash'arism. In the area of juristic principles and scholarship, the most visible influence of Ibn Tūmart's movement manifested itself via growing interest in mastering, memorizing, explaining and analyzing the basic principles of Qur'anic and hadith study. This phenomenon resulted in the emergence of a juristic movement that sparked a lively debate between the Malikite and Zahirite juristic schools, as well as greater interest in the principles of jurisprudence and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the higher intents of Islamic law), the latter of which reached its apex in the writings of Imam al-Shātibī (720-790 AH/1320-1388 CE).

The modern Salafi reform movement spearheaded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida drew upon the movements that had preceded it and left its mark on the movements that followed it. Al-Afghani once wrote defiantly:

Show me a kingdom where ignorance and discord are the rule of the day on all levels of society, and whose rulers, having immersed themselves in vanities and excess, have succumbed to humiliation and subservience, and I will show you a kingdom whose rulers have been removed from their thrones, enslaved by imperialists, and subjected to utter ruin!

Al-Afghani's overall message can be summed up in two main points, one of them internal and the other, external. The internal focal point had to do with the need for mental liberation from stagnation and tradition, while the external focal point was the need for political liberation from the influence of encroaching colonialism and the ability to resist and defeat it through a cultural awakening. However, al-Afghani and his student, Muhammad Abduh, disagreed over how to achieve these aims. This disagreement remained dormant for some time. However, when al-Afghani left Egypt and the leadership was turned over to Muhammad Abduh, the difference between the two men became apparent. For while al-Afghani was a revolutionary,

Abduh was a reformer who believed that the key to societal transformation was gradual change via upbringing and education grounded in reformed religious understanding.

Al-Afghani focused on mass action as a form of revolution, and called for participation in sound constitutional rule, reform of the parliamentary councils, and establishment of a system based on consultation and the electoral process. For Muhammad Abduh, by contrast, mass action held very little importance for the process of social and political change. Abduh placed little confidence in ‘the masses’ and ‘the general public’ whom he likened to ‘mindless machines.’ Consequently his effort was centered around the establishment of new educational institutions such as *Dār al-‘Ulūm* and the reform of existing institutions such as al-Azhar, the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and Islamic religious courts, among others.

Abduh’s message might be summed up in the following points: (1) Liberating thought from the shackles of tradition, and understanding the Islamic religion as it was understood by the early generations of Muslims before disagreements had arisen among them; (2) reforming the uses of the Arabic language in official correspondences, newspapers, and unofficial correspondence among members of the citizenry; and (3) drawing the necessary distinction between the obedience people owe the state, and the justice the state owes its people.

Abduh’s reforms aimed to help people sense the importance of their country and to foster their sense of national pride and belonging; they also aimed to nurture a community spirit and improve the national economy. In the area of creed, Abduh sought to liberate people from the doctrine of predestination and alert them to the blessing of reason, which is intended to operate side by side with revelation. Abduh was committed to combating partisanship, sectarianism, and blind imitation, and called for the ‘door to *ijtihad*’ to be opened for the sake of societal development, institutional reform, and the revival of beneficial writings.

Abduh saw education as central to reform work. Moreover, one of his most principle educational goals was to address the phenomena of self-centeredness and individuals’ loss of a sense of shared community, either because of overall ignorance, a failure to understand the true

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nature of Islam, or lack of information about the sciences and industries that enable people to take control over their lives in ways that Westerners had been able to do. Abduh thus drew up curricula designed to graduate Muslim evangelists, authors, scientists and researchers, and to make Islam's early heritage relevant to the people of his generation.

The Salafi reform movement initiated by al-Afghani and Abduh provided a powerful impetus for Muslim thinkers to address both the Muslim community's internal problems and the challenges it faced in dealing with colonialism. *Al-Urwah al-Wuthqā*, a journal founded and published by Afghani and Abduh, promoted a program marked by three particular distinguishing features. The first of these was its commentary on the God-given laws manifested in creation and in human social systems, how they develop and evolve, and their strengths and vulnerabilities. The second feature was its emphasis on the fact that Islam is a religion that promotes happiness and well-being both in this world and in the next. As for the third feature, it is its emphasis on the fact that Muslims' only 'nationality' is their religion; wherever they are, they are brothers and sisters who can be divided by neither ancestry, nor language, nor governments.

This current continued to gather momentum to the point where it was adopted by numerous Muslim thinkers, as a result of which it generated other movements characterized by intellectual, cultural, social and political comprehensiveness.

What the Salafi school did, essentially, was to reexamine Islamic values and concepts in light of the needs of the modern age. By so doing, it lent these values and concepts a new relevance. However, it did nothing to reexamine Western or modern concepts, which it introduced to an Arab Muslim populace without any attempt to polish, refine or adapt them. Instead, modern concepts were viewed uncritically without due consideration for their limitations or internal inconsistencies. Consequently, despite the fact that the Salafi school was influential for a period of time, it ultimately failed to bring about the changes that were needed.

[THEME 3]

Evaluating Failed Experiments

The Islamic reform experiments that have been witnessed by the modern era, especially since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are rightly viewed as heirs to reform efforts from the more distant past. At the same time, these experiments still constitute a valid reference point for ongoing reform efforts having accurately pinpointed many of the ills that afflict the Arab-Islamic world at the present time. Hence, were we to disregard such experiments, we would be passing over a critical period that witnessed profound transformations in the Muslim community's political, social and cultural forms as well as expressions.

The fact that these experiments failed to achieve their goals is no reason not to examine them. On the contrary, it gives us all the more reason to do so. By studying these experiments, we can identify their strengths and seek to remedy their weaknesses, whether on the level of conceptualization, actions taken, or modes of application. One significant factor underlying their breakdown was a failure to examine the laws of change referred to in *Sūrah al-Raʿd*, 13:11, "...Verily, God does not change men's condition unless they change their inner selves;..." and in *Sūrah al-Anfāl*, 8:53, "...God would never change the blessings with which He has graced a people unless they change their inner selves;..." As Ursan al-Kilani notes, the principle reflected in these two Qur'anic passages is that change begins on the inner plane, and is then followed by change in the concrete sphere.

It will also be observed that according to these passages, change – be it for better or for worse – will only take place if it is undertaken by “a people” – that is, as a community rather than only as individuals. Hence, if a community brings about positive change in ways of thinking via education, for example, this will be followed by fruitful change in other areas of life. According to al-Kilani, the periods of history in which the Muslim community exhibited strength and resilience were those in which sincere intention was joined with correct thought and action. Based on this observation, al-Kilani listed what he saw as keys to successful reform: (1) faithfulness to Islamic principles; (2)

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undertaking a thorough, honest review of failed reform attempts; (3) assigning juristic tasks to noble-minded, wise, enlightened individuals; (4) studying and applying the religion in keeping with a defined methodology; (5) avoiding classism and elitism; (6) joining sincere intention with ability and skill in the mobilization of natural and human resources; (7) working in stages rather than attempting to accomplish too much at once; (8) distributing specialized roles among the appropriate individuals; and (9) translating the theoretical and the abstract into the realm of the practical.

In order to have a sound conceptual framework for reform action, we need a proper understanding of the issues relating to Islamic law and doctrine based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Ancient currents of Islamic thought were founded upon rational interpretations that addressed the issues relevant to that day and age. In order for modern interpretations to properly address the issues of our own day and age, they will need to be consistent with the latest findings in the areas of the physical and social sciences, modern technological advances, and the need to avoid groundless innovations, superstitious mentalities, and the deadly complacency that sounded the death knell for previous reform movements.

Nor should we be content to study Islamic law piecemeal; rather, our study should be informed by an awareness of the overarching, universal principles applicable to governmental, social and political systems so that we can offer viable Islamic alternatives capable of solving the problems and challenges facing humanity.

The baneful effects of 'atomism' and 'elitism' on thought and action

By 'atomism,' I am referring to the tendency to view the application of Islamic teachings as a means of achieving the aims and interests of a particular group or class of society at the expense of others. The failure of previous movements to achieve the desired reforms both internally and in relation to other national, social and religious groups is that their approaches to renewal were not sufficiently inclusive of all educational, economic and social strata within and without the Muslim community. Another aspect of a properly inclusive approach is that it

sets out to reconnect with both spiritual foundations (embodied in the Qur'an and the Sunnah) and material ones (embodied in a solid grasp of the laws and principles of the physical universe).

As for what we are terming 'elitism', it should be borne in mind that an idea will only succeed if it inspires confidence and growing enthusiasm, and if there is a sincere desire and willingness to work and sacrifice on its behalf. No collectivity will support an intellectual or ideological current with genuine enthusiasm unless two conditions are met: (1) the public must understand the current's goals and aims; and (2) they must feel that it offers solutions to the actual problems they face.

The entire community needs to be involved in reform in one way or another, and most Islamic legislation does, in fact, take the communal into consideration. Imagine what harm would come to the Muslim community if the collective duties enjoined by Islam in the political, social and economic spheres were neglected. Two of the most central institutions of Islamic law are that of the caliphate, which links religious precepts to the institution of the state, and the duty to command what is good and prohibit what is bad (*al-amr bi al-ma'rūf wa al-nahī 'an al-munkar*). Historically, the Muslim community has been given a kind of collective authority to oversee the enforcement of the religion's teachings in numerous areas of life; under modern states, however, the situation has changed.