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M. Zaki Kirmani
A joint publication of:

Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America (AMSS)

and

International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT)

Mailing Address:

All correspondence should be addressed to the Editor at:

AJISS, P.O. Box 669, Herndon, VA 20172-0669 USA

Phone: 703-471-1133 • Fax: 703-471-3922 • E-mail: ajissadmin@gmail.com

http://www.amss.net/AJISS
AMERICAN JOURNAL OF ISLAMIC SOCIAL SCIENCES

A double blind peer-reviewed and interdisciplinary journal

A Commemoration of the Life and Works of Ismail al Faruqi

Special Issue Guest Editors
John L. Esposito
Imtiyaz Yusuf

ASSOCIATION OF MUSLIM SOCIAL SCIENTISTS OF NORTH AMERICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT
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ISSN 0742-6763
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Editorial

This special issue of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* on Ismail al Faruqi is prepared to honor the memory and contribution of Professor Ismail al Faruqi to the academia, the history of Islamic thought, and the development of the Muslim community (Ummah). Providing a perspective twenty-five years after Professor al Faruqi’s death, it provides thought-provoking papers relating of the person, mission, and intellectual jihad initiated by Professor al Faruqi.

Ismail Raji al Faruqi (1921–1986) was a great scholar of Islam in modern times. His scholarship covered a broad spectrum of Islamic studies: the study of religion, Islamic thought, approaches to knowledge, history, culture, education, interfaith dialogue, aesthetics, ethics, politics, economics, science, and gender issues. He had indeed an encyclopedic knowledge, a rare person among contemporary Muslim scholars.

Ismail al-Faruqi laid the foundation for a new interpretation and analysis of the quintessence of *tawhid* and its relevance in various dimensions of human life and thought. He also made unique contributions to the study of Islam and its relevance to the contemporary age. In fact, many of his unique contributions to Islamic scholarship remain especially relevant today and have been carried on and extended by many of his former.

Professor al Faruqi was a founder of “the school of Islamization of knowledge,” which has been incorporated at several international Islamic universities. His school of thought, academic approach, and practice is also being applied by hundreds of his students who are teaching and doing research at different universities in all continents.

This special issue of the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, revisits the intellectual legacy and continuing influence of Professor Ismail al Faruqi since his death.

Professor Ismail al Faruqi has played a very special role in the lives of his students, including us – John Esposito, his first student to complete a Ph.D. degree in religion, and Imtiyaz Yusuf, who obtained his Ph.D. degree also in religion after Professor al Faruqi passed away. We were among his adopted intellectual children. John Esposito had no desire to study Is-
Ismail when he came to Temple University in 1968. Today, he is a University Professor of Religion and International Affairs and of Islamic Studies at Georgetown University’s Walsh School of Foreign Service and the Founding Director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding; he is recognized worldwide for his contribution to Islamic studies. Imtiyaz Yusuf, engages in Muslim-Buddhist dialogue in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Imtiyaz Yusuf is the Program Director, Department of Religion, Graduate School of Philosophy and Religion, Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. He specializes in religion with a focus on Islam in Thailand and Southeast Asia. He is currently, Senior Fellow, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, Washington, DC. Both John Esposito and Imtiyaz Yusuf were groomed intellectually by Professor al Faruqi.

Memoirs

At a recent international seminar on Professor Ismail al Faruqi, Professor John Esposito reminisced about how he came to study Islamic studies and the legacy of Professor al Faruqi:

*When I met Ismail, it was typically Ismail. He said, “Well, we have to plan your course of studies.” And I said, “Well, why would you plan my course of studies?” He said, “So you can major in Islamic Studies and do your Ph.D.” I said, “But I’m not going to do a Ph.D in Islamic Studies.” So, he said, “Well don’t worry about that.” And then about a couple of months later, he called me and he said, “You know you have to study Arabic.” I said, “Well, why would I want to study Arabic?” He said, “How can you continue to work in Islamic Studies?” I said, “Well I’m not going to pursue Islamic Studies,” and he said, “Sit down and fill this application.” I said, “What’s the application for?” “To study Arabic at the University of Pennsylvania.” So I filled it out, figuring I’d never get the fellowship, and I got it.

Ismail made Islam come alive in the classroom as only Ismail could do it. I remember the stories about Ramadan. During Ramadan, Ismail’s approach was not only was he going to teach. The few non-Muslims felt, “This is great; it’s Ramadan; there’ll be short classes; or maybe he’ll cancel the class.” Not only was he going to teach, but he announced there would be no break.
Because, of course he didn’t word it this way, but why would he want a break? He couldn’t do anything during the break. So, there was no break at all; so, he just did one course after the other with no break.

In any case, I eventually ended up going into the field. I think that the role that Ismail played at that time was a remarkable role in the Department of Religion at Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It was, as with all things, related to Ismail. It was constructive and productive. He initiated and built Islamic Studies despite differences with some faculty. Ismail came with a vision — and he represented and insisted upon that vision and that tradition. I think that the downside at times was the fact that, for some, Ismail was too strong: he was not a “liberal-enough” Muslim. On the one hand, he possessed a super, intellectual education, and he knew Western culture and civilization. But on the other, he was not as accommodating as many would have liked. Ismail was an incredible pioneer because when you think back, who were the Muslim scholars? Of Islam, there was a time when there were almost none. And then all of a sudden you had Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Fazlur Rahman, and Ismail al Faruqi. Basically, they were the biggies in terms of the Muslim scholars in America. There were other Muslim scholars around, but most did not have anywhere near that kind of cachet or reputation. Few of them were like these three, who also travelled all of the time all over the world and therefore were known, not only in the United States and in Europe, but known throughout the Muslim world.

As many of you celebrated the other day, Ismail was able to build a program that was not only intellectual but – when you really think about it, phenomenally – that he could build a program with so many Muslims. And yet, when I reflect back, the enormous advantage of studying at Temple was not only the exposure to Ismail’s scholarship, but the exposure of studying in the United States without having to go to the Muslim world at that stage of the game and studying in a Muslim context. Not only was your professor Muslim, but the overwhelming number of students in your class that you were interacting with all the time – that you interacted with academically, that you interacted socially with – were all Muslims.
What I think made Ismail really unique ... but let me just say this other thing: two embarrassing situations with Ismail – he prided himself on knowing, on being cross-cultural; he prided himself on the number of languages he could speak and would use them freely; he prided himself on knowing Western civilization, but he also prided himself, on knowing, as you know, Christianity. And, so, he would feel free in class to say “As Paul said, in Corinthians, John....” because I was trained in and at the time teaching Catholic theology. Even though I taught scripture, I at times could probably not cite it as well as Ismail. Of course, he knew the exact text he wanted to use.

But really, what was his contribution? It wasn’t just the scholarly side. It was the fact that he created a program but also an academic community in terms of the actual people that came and studied together, and he was phenomenally active and successful in raising money to bring so many young Muslim students who would never have had the opportunity to study in America. There was no university in the United States that provided the kind of funding in a massive way to graduate students that was provided, and particularly to Muslim students. No major university provided that – so that, in a sense what Ismail could do was in a couple of years, “create facts on the ground,” to use that famous Israeli phrase. But within three or four years, he not only had a curriculum up there, but he had a whole group of students.

For some, the quality of the comparative study of religion wouldn’t be as good as it would be today. But this was the early period in the study of comparative religions in America and at Temple. To Ismail’s credit, he was way ahead of his time in his belief and vision that the next generation of young Muslim scholars had to be people who were trained in more than one religious tradition. When you consider where in fact his counterparts, who were prominent professors of Christian theology, at that time really were. Who wouldn’t even have thought that way. The idea that he would then not only be involved in creating major Muslim organizations, but he’s the one that got Islam into the American Academy of Religions. The American Academy of Religions in its early days was comprised primarily of scholars of Christianity with some Judaism, then it also allowed scholars of Buddhism and Hinduism. But really the last study group, and
that’s what you had to commit to, before you could then move to possibly being recognized as a really major group was to be called “a study group” – it was Ismail that created that. He created that reality, led it for ten years, and then handed it off, which was very unusual.  

In contrast to many Sunni Muslims, Ismail engaged the Black Muslim movement early on. I remember him bringing me during Ramadan to the Clara Muhammad Mosque in Philadelphia. At the dinner, I just leaned over to him and said, “Given many of their teachings and practices, is this really Islam? Why are you so involved here?” Ismail took the long term view. For him, this was part of both his intellectual approach as an academic, but also his da’wah. His sense was, in time, at some point in the future, they will, as it were, come in from the cold.

He was an intellectual, but he was also functioning as an activist on many fronts, including internationally. Those of us that were at Temple knew that you never knew where he was. Most of the time, he would make our classes; I don’t remember missing classes very much. But he would also fly off to Jordan or Malaysia for one day, deliver a lecture, and fly back. And come in with the same level of energy – that tremendous amount of energy that he always had.

And that’s what enabled him to be so visible internationally. Whether you went to Egypt, Sudan, or Malaysia, you discovered people knew him.

When I finished at Temple, I had no idea how well known he was. I went out as a young academic who had no visibility or reputation, but just about wherever I would go, anywhere in the Muslim world, Ismail had already been there.

He became my credential in many of these circles, whether I went to meet scholars or members of Islamic movements – like Sudan’s Hasan al-Turabi, to Malaysia to meet Anwar Ibrahim, or to Lebanon and Pakistan – Ismail’s name meant immediate entree.

When I look back, I realize that relative to his time, Ismail was a one man show, more than so many other scholars in his time – advising heads of government, younger scholars, and budding Islamic activists. Ismail was known in so many different venues.

The other and most important thing that has to be recognized, that other people also talked about, is the role that he and his wife
Lamya (Lois) al Faruqi played in some ways as surrogate parents to so many of the graduate students.

And maybe at times, the surrogate patriarch, but Ismail was there for his students. In many cultures, professors are people at a distance; many professors are not people who are all that accessible to their students personally as well as professionally. It was just the opposite with Ismail. He and Lois were partners in the recruitment of students from overseas, in finding funding for their scholarships and board, looking after them – often inviting them and all his students to their home.

One of the things that a lot of people aren’t aware of is Ismail’s willingness to take risks. When Ayatullah Khomeini came to power, I remember two interesting things. Ismail and I were in New York in a hotel room, and many of you know he strongly supported the Revolution, as did many of us. But the first thing he said to me was “I’m very worried about what’s going to happen under Khomeini,” and I asked, “Why?” He said, “He has been such a victim and also believes that he and his family have been such victims. I worry about some of the policies that he may implement.” And yet Ismail went on in The Wall Street Journal and other places to support him.

But, as a result of being trained by him, I was able to go out and in fact be able to interact with Muslim audiences – and then to see programs created where at first you had non-Muslim scholars and now you have many Muslims. For example, from my center and other places, that go out into the Muslim world. And the government at that time was open to this kind of exchange that hadn’t existed in those days. I think that was a product of the way in which he set things out.

Many of us know Ismail through a single lens, and aren’t aware of just how diverse his interests were, and the kinds of things that he wrote on and spoke about. So, for example, if one goes back and actually says, “What did Ismail al-Faruqi say about tajdid and ijtihad in his time, and relative to his time, how significant was it? Not about how relative to today.” You could say relative to today, but it’s secondary. But to realize and take a look at what at his time was that cutting edge – or as I said yesterday, same can be said for his early support for the idea of a dialogue of religions or a trialogue of religions.
So, what was his contribution to Islamic Studies? What was his contribution to the development of Muslim institutions here and overseas? What was his contribution to Islamic thought? In particular, how did Ismail talk about ijtihad? How did Ismail distinguish between fiqh and Shar‘iah? How did that distinction play out in terms of reform? Did he talk about universal principles and values, and if he did, what did he mean by them? Was he ahead of its time?

If you go back and look at the way Ismail spoke about it — and I looked at Ismail and Fazlur Rahman and others when I did my dissertation and then did the book on women and family law reform—the approach they took later became a given approach so much so that many people would say, “What’s new about that?” Well, the reason it was new was that if you went back and saw at what time and what context were these ideas being put out there, one would see what was new and pioneering about their approaches.

I think the final area of Ismail’s contribution that I would like to address is the question of religious pluralism. Ismail as both a person who was one of the people that opened the door to the dialogue and triologue of religions, but he could also be a hardliner. While he acknowledged what the Abrahamic faiths shared in common, he could be firm about recognition and respect for religious differences as well. And that’s why I think Ismail always retained his credibility within the Muslim community. On the one hand, they could see him being open to dialogue, but they also could see him in dialogue really drawing the line where he thought distinctive differences existed and ready to point out what he regarded as flaws in other religions. Ismail had the kind of personality that did not shrink from and sometimes relished intellectual debate and even conflict. The problem was that he did it at times in a combative way. For the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture of academia at that time, this was abrasive and not the way you did it.

Ismail liked to roll up his sleeves and really get engaged, and people didn’t understand that when that was over, he moved on. It was like saying he liked the argument; he liked the fight; he was at times an intellectual wrestler or warrior. Ismail believed, “I can argue with you on your sources. I’ll take you down using
Christian sources if I had to.” I think that if you take those major areas and you tease them out, you wind up with somebody who really was a major transitional figure in many ways. Ismail never trained formally in Islamic Studies until after he finished his Ph.D. Now, we have lots of Muslim scholars who start early and get the best training. He was someone who began one of the major programs in the United States in Islamic Studies against all kinds of odds. He was a Muslim, wanted to really have a lot of Muslim students as well as non-Muslim students; he wanted a certain perspective or approach; Ismail was somebody who could build Muslim organizations, somebody who could be an initiator in dialogue, but draw the line, and somebody who could really engage in dialogue with the West – but did it in a context which was, as I said, a dialogue but it was a feisty dialogue. It was a dialogue that was capable of saying “Hey, when you move into this area, sorry, you can’t cross that line.”

I’m happy to be here. I think this is just the beginning of a time to remember Ismail, but I think it ought to be a beginning to, in a systematic way, to attempt to see that this legacy is remembered and mined. We don’t even know what that legacy is, so it’s not a matter of just getting together and saying, “Oh, we’ve got this group of people, and we’ll put out one or two volumes on Ismail.” If that’s going to happen, there’s going to have to be some more original research done. But I think it is important to reclaim the contribution that he himself made at a time when we are trying to understand how we got here and who the minds are that influence the field.

And Imtiyaz Yusuf remembers one of the greatest pieces of advice that Professor al Faruqi left behind; he once said, “Allah has been very kind, merciful and bounteous to us, even if we thank Him million times, it is not enough.”

Contents
This special issue comprises seven excellent and thought-provoking articles by prominent scholars who have studied, worked, or reflected on the intellectual and practical contributions of Professor al Faruqi.

Since his death in 1986, the legacy of Professor Ismail al Faruqi has contributed intellectually to Qur’anic studies; the study of religion; Islamic
thought; education and Islamization of knowledge; interfaith dialogue; Islam and art; ethics; Islam and science; Muslim social issues; Islamic history; Islam and culture – which have practically grown and flourished through the contributions of his students and the institutions he inspired such as the International Islamic Universities and the International Institute of Islamic Thought. Hence, it is time to reconsider this legacy and design a road map for its future development. This is exactly what the papers in this special issue do.

Professor John Voll, an historian of Islamic thought and history from the eighteenth century to today, analyzes the role of Professor al Faruqi as a believing intellectual who contributed toward the development of an alternative model of modernity in which religion plays a definite and contributory role. Alternative modernity is not inevitably secular or nonreligious. This Islamic version of modernity is one amongst the multiple modernities of the globalized world. It puts forth a “modern” knowledge. Professor al Faruqi contributed to this venture through his project called the “Islamization of Knowledge.” In this way, for Voll, Professor Ismail al-Faruqi illustrates the changing role of believing intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century.

Professor Mohammad Nejatullah Siddiqi – a pioneer of Islamic economics, engaged in the theory and practice of Islamization of knowledge in the field of economics – questions whether or not the Islamization of knowledge project was linked to the movement for restoration of Islam to a position of leadership and dominance in contemporary society. After fifty years of engagement in the process of Islamization of knowledge, which started in the post-colonial era, he maintains that, “Knowledge creation and beneficial use of new knowledge are two distinct though complementary processes. Each has its own requirement. Morality rooted in spirituality is decisive in ensuring that new knowledge is used beneficially. But the creation of new knowledge requires freedoms of thought and discussion, encouragement of creativity and innovation, toleration of dissent and diversity. It requires a mindset that can entertain ambiguity, one that does not hasten to discard potential spoilers of legacies long established as sacred – requirements which the sponsors of the Islamization of knowledge project might have failed to give due weight.” Furthermore, he comments that the Faruqian project can be revived by making it expansive and inclusive, by “creating universal awareness of what makes use of knowledge beneficial and prevents the fatal error of allowing laissez faire in knowledge-use.”
The way forward is “to share the quest of knowledge and its proper use with all and everyone.”

Professor Muhammad Kamal Hassan, the former rector of International Islamic University Malaysia, was a participant in the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Makkah between March 31 and April 8, 1977, in which Professor al Faruqi played a significant role. Among the conference attendees were Shaikh Ahmad Salah Jamjoom, Dr. Abdullah Omar Naseef, Dr. Muhammad Abduh Yamani, Professor Muhammad Qutb, Professor Syed Ali Ashraf, Professor Syed Naquib al-Attas, Dr. Abdullah Mohammed Zaid, and Dr. Ghulam Naqib Saqeb along with 350 other scholars. This conference laid the ground plan for the establishment of Islamic universities in Dhaka, Islamabad, Kuala Lumpur, Kampala, and Niger. Professor al Faruqi played a critical and central role in the deliberations and action plans emerging from this conference.

In this special issue, Professor Kamal Hassan’s article delves into Professor al Faruqi’s understanding of the role of Islamic Ummah as being the ummatan wasatan – “the median among the peoples of mankind” (Qur’an 2:143). For Professor al Faruqi, the concept of al-wasatiyyah (the middle way) explicates the concept of al-tawazun (Islamic balance and “golden-means”). This mode of Islamic moderation as stressed by Professor al Faruqi is today in 2011 employed by the Singaporean Muslim community in its response to the government’s concern about Muslim radicalism in the republic. In this way, they do not stoop to the pressures of the country’s secular or religious authorities to compromise any of their religious convictions or beliefs, however much these were distasteful to the authorities.

Professor Ibrahim Zein, a former student of Professor al Faruqi and also the former dean of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) addresses the teaching of religion at IIUM. The program was influenced by the thought and curricula developed along Faruqian lines. It is a program that delves into Faruqi’s view of meta-religion rooted in an ethical paradigm giving it universal perspective and approach toward the study of comparative religion. Actually, the establishment of IIUM and the religion study curriculum implemented at IIUM is a development of Faruqi’s earlier vision regarding the teaching of Islam as a civilization and worldview, which he had envisioned and hoped to apply to the academic program at the Central Institute of Islamic Research, Karachi, Pakistan during his professorship there in 1960s, but which was not realized.
Professor Mohamed Aslam Haneef of the Department of Economics, IIUM, critically reviews the process of the Islamization of knowledge as applied toward the discipline of economics over the last thirty years. He is of the view that one of the lacuna behind the not yet fully developed field of Islamic economics is the nondevelopment of its methodological aspect due to assigning its teaching to scholars of *usul al-fiqh* (Muslim jurisprudence). He calls for revisiting the methodological aspect of the Faruqi work plan for the Islamization of knowledge, which has been overlooked and neglected.

Dr. Charles Fletcher of McGill University, wrote his Ph.D dissertation on the aspect of interreligious dialogue of al Faruqi’s work, which will soon appear as a book. Fletcher, looks at the suitability and relevance of al Faruqi’s dialogical ideas in relation to Asian religions, with special reference to Buddhism. Fletcher comments that the primary weakness in Faruqi’s dialogical and meta-religious principles in relation to Asian religions lies in his methodological exclusion of mystical and esoteric contributions, insights, and perspectives. Thus, rational approach to dialogue needs to be combined with other approaches. There is scope for al Faruqi’s principles to be shaped and deepened further, and this continues to remain one aspect of his legacy.

Dr. M. Zaki Kirmani, Chairman, Centre for Studies on Science, Aligarh, India, revisits the forty-year Islamization of knowledge debate in relation to science. He maintains that values and worldview have an undeniable role in science and its multidimensional growth. He maintains that the role of values in science is no more controversial and if some people still deny it, it may not be long before they will reverse and reframe their opinion on the relation between science and religion.

This testimony to the living legacy of Ismail al-Faruqi, a great thinker and *mujahid* of Islam of the modern age, reminds us of what the Qur’an has said:

> Think not of those, who are slain in the way of Allah, as dead. Nay, they are living. With their Lord they have provision.

(Qur’an 3:169)

> And those who believe in Allah and His messengers, they are the loyal; and the martyrs are with their Lord; they have their reward and their light; while as for those who disbelieve and deny Our revelations, they are owners of hell fire.

(Qur’an 57:19)
Endnotes


John L. Esposito
Imtiyaz Yusuf
The Challenge of the Believing Intellectual: Religion and Modernity

by

John O. Voll

Abstract

This paper analyzes the role of Professor al Faruqi as a believing intellectual who contributed toward the development of an alternative model of modernity in which religion plays a definite and contributory role. Alternative modernity is not inevitably secular or nonreligious. This Islamic version of modernity is one amongst the multiple modernities of the globalized world. It puts forth a “modern” knowledge. Professor al Faruqi contributed to this venture through his project called the “Islamization of Knowledge.” In this way, Professor Ismail al-Faruqi illustrates the changing role of believing intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century.

Religion and modernity interact in changing ways in the modern era. This interaction is not simply between two abstract and reified concepts. It is embodied in the lives and thought of believers and intellectuals as they confront issues of faith in the contexts of modern history. It is commonly thought that religious belief and modernity are fundamentally antagonistic. In this view, believers and modern intellectuals are rivals, representing different worldviews. As a result, the idea of a “believing intellectual” seems to many to be self-contradictory. However, by the final quarter of the twentieth century, it became clear that “modernity” is not inevitably secular or non-religious. In this context, an intellectual who is also a committed believer in a major religious tradition is not an anomaly, and believing intellectuals are recognized as playing important roles in defining the diverse modernities of the evolving modern world. Scholar-intellectuals like Ismail al Faruqi illustrate the dynamics of the changing roles of believing intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century.¹

The beginning of the 1980s was an important time of transition in the relationships between “religion” and “modernity.” The establishment of

John O. Voll is Professor of Islamic History and Associate Director of the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He is a specialist in modern Islamic history and has done research on Islamic movements in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia as well as in the Middle East. At Georgetown University, he teaches courses on Islamic movements and modern Muslim thought.
the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a result of the revolution of 1978 and 1979,
emphasized the continuing strength of religion as a force in the modern
world; religion was not simply an anachronistic and disappearing remnant
of “traditional” society, it was a modern phenomenon as well. The Iranian
revolution highlighted what came to be identified by many as the “Islamic
resurgence” of the final quarter of the twentieth century. In this resurgence,
modern educated intellectuals who were also religious activists played an
important role. The intellectual nature of the contributions of important be-
lieving activists in the 1980s is reflected in the contributions of people like
Hasan Turabi (Sudan), Anwar Ibrahim (Malaysia), Khurshid Ahmad (Pak-
istan), and Ismail al Faruqi to the deliberations of a conference organized
in 1980 by John L. Esposito, and held at the University of New Hampshire
in the United States.2 Activist believing Muslim intellectuals played an im-
portant role in the long-term modern Islamic resurgence and were in many
ways the articulators of the ideas and programs of contemporary Islamic
movements.3

By the 1980s, it was becoming clear that the key concepts of “religion,” “modernity,” and “intellectuals” were changing significantly in their
meanings and in the human phenomena to which they referred. As “believ-
ing intellectuals” became more active as public intellectuals, the broader
relationships between religion and modernity were redefined in significant
ways. Intellectual, religion, and modernity are not stable terms and may
even, in some ways be considered what W. B. Gallie called “essentially
contested terms.”4 The changing definitions reflect important dimensions
of the changing realities of “religion” and “modernity” in contemporary
globalized societies.

**Intellectuals and Religious Belief**

The classic image of the modern “intellectual” emerged at the end of the
nineteenth century, “when the Dreyfus Affair [in France] sparked a posi-
tive and almost messianic collective identity among intellectuals.”5 In their
self-definition, intellectuals believed themselves to be without corrupting
ties to economic class or specific social institution. In what became an
influential foundational analysis of the sociology of intellectuals in the
1920s, Julien Benda argued that the duty of the true intellectual was “to set
up a corporation whose sole cult is that of justice and of truth, in oppo-
position to the peoples and the injustice to which they are condemned by their
religions of this earth.”6
The concept of “intellectuals” as a separate body of objective, disinterested thinkers able to engage in unbiased analysis, which would lead to knowledge of “The Truth,” crystallized in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The definition of this “intellectual” was shaped in many ways by developments in France. In the context of French politics and intellectual life at that time, the activism of the writers, artists, and academics who were viewed as “intellectuals” came to be identified with liberalism, and although there were some prominent ideological conservatives, “the intellectual quickly came to stand for the upholder of leftist values.” In this context, the concept of the intellectual became tied to French intellectual anti-clericalism and secular worldviews. “Modern” intellectuals around the world were basically viewed as competitors with the representatives of the major religious traditions, and “religion” and “modernity” became viewed as opposites.

In this polarity between religion and modernity, an important distinction was made between belief and rationality. In the middle of the twentieth century, a major Christian thinker, Paul Tillich, defined this tension. Defining the intellectual as “he who asks,” and noting that the intellectual “as intellectual, questions everything,” Tillich observed, “if asking becomes the dominant function of the intellectual, then a tension arises between the intellectual’s radical will to ask and the immediate, blessed certainty of the religious man and woman.” The image of the “intellectual” as an objective agnostic (or atheist) is strongly embedded in modern attitudes, and continues in the twenty-first century. The view is well illustrated by the works and reputations of public intellectuals like Christopher Hitchens, whose recent best-selling book has the subtitle, “How Religion Poisons Everything,” or Sam Harris, whose recent book on science is described as a “blistering take-no-prisoners attack on the irrationality of religions.”

The concept of the pure-rational-objective “intellectual” already was evolving during the first half of the twentieth century, as it was recognized that intellectuals had personal identities that could shape their “disinterested” objectivity. The influential Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci argued simply that the concept of “the intellectuals” as a distinct social category independent of class is mistaken. “All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals. When one distinguishes between intellectuals and non-intellectuals, one is referring in reality only to the immediate social function of the professional category of the intellectuals, that is, one has in mind the direction in which their specific professional activity is weighted, whether towards
intellectual elaboration or towards muscular-nervous effort.”Intellectuals, in this perspective, are organically tied to their class or basic interest group within society, and their function is to provide the persuasive narratives of authority for that class or group.

The key element in the function of the intellectual, whether viewed as a separated rationalist or a class-based “organic” intellectual, is the development of conceptual frameworks, and the intellectual’s tools are ideas. Thomas Sowell, in his discussion of contemporary intellectuals, defines this clearly: “‘intellectuals’ refers to an occupational category, people whose occupations deal primarily with ideas – writers, academics, and the like.... An intellectual’s work begins and ends with ideas.” These ideas have an important function in human societies in creating authoritative narratives for the public. Edward Said argued that “the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public.”

By the second half of the twentieth century, there was a growing recognition that intellectuals were, in fact, advocates, not simply disinterested observers. The works of scholars like Thomas Kuhn helped expand the recognition that even “modern science” involves accepted structures of rational thought and methods that are not absolute and are constantly engaged in processes of reconceptualization and correction. It became more common to recognize, with Said, that intellectuals presented messages, and this process made possible the recognition of religiously-believing intellectuals along with secular, old-style intellectuals.

In the early 1980s, an important transition was becoming visible. People who were scholars were willing to admit that they had a message. The intellectual turmoil of the opposition in the United States to the Viet Nam War had emphasized that even the most analytical social scientist was a committed person with institutional interests and analytical biases. In religious studies, scholars of Islam and Muslim began to understand that belief and critical analysis were not always adversarial. In this process, scholars like Ismail al Faruqi played an important role as increasing numbers of Muslim intellectuals became identified as religious rather than secular in their perspectives and approaches.

Religion and Modernity – and Intellectuals

The concept of the intellectual was changing throughout the twentieth cen-
tury, and this process continues in the twenty-first century as well. The changing image of the intellectual is closely tied to the changing understanding of the relationships between “religion” and “modernity.” Just as the nature of the intellectual has been reimagined, the concepts of “religion” and “modernity” have also been subject to profound transformations. The old image of the intellectual was quite monolithic – a secular, objective, and critically-removed individual – and most “intellectuals” were basically the same. Similarly, images of religion and modernity were mono-conceptual – that is, there was one category or definition that was applied to all cases.

In this older framework, intellectuals were often assumed to be the advocates of “modernity,” and opponents of established religion. Almost a century and a quarter ago, a debate about Islam reflects this situation clearly. In 1883, the French philosopher and critic Ernest Renan gave a lecture in which he argued that Islam and modern science were incompatible. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, a highly visible Muslim thinker at the time, responded in an exchange that reflects the nature of modern intellectual reservations about religion. In Al-Afghani argued that “Religions, by whatever names they are called, resemble each other” and that in the suppression of science and philosophy in its history, Islam was not unique. Although al-Afghani in general argued that “Islam was in harmony with the principles discovered by scientific reason,” the two men agreed on the validity of rational science. Renan responded to al-Afghani favorably, saying, “It is by listening to the most diverse voices, coming from the four corners of the globe, in favor of rationalism, that one becomes convinced that if religions divide men, Reason brings them together; and that there is only one Reason.”

In these early discussions about religion and modernity, both sides of the debates accept the idea that there is only “one Reason,” and that “modernity” takes only one form. The difference between Renan and al-Afghani was primarily that Renan believed that monolithic “religion” was incapable of being compatible with modernity, while al-Afghani argued that even though historic “Islam” at the end of the nineteenth century had a heritage of opposition to science and philosophy, it had the potential for compatibility with modernity. However, the intellectuals could agree that there was a major conflict between religion and modernity.

During the first half of the twentieth century, an important dimension of the tension between religion and modernity was expressed in terms of political reform. In political discussions in the Muslim world (and elsewhere),
modernity was primarily viewed in terms of the necessary development of secular nation-states. In these discussions, secularist intellectuals debated and disagreed with religious scholars on a variety of issues, viewing the religious leaders – in the words of a prominent secular intellectual in the 1940s, Khalid Muhammad Khalid – as gullible advocates of ignorance following anti-materialist philosophies of the East. Khalid was advocating a secular state and elicited a response from Muhammad al-Ghazali, a prominent activist religious scholar, who argued that “the simpletons among the leaders of Egypt who feel that it is necessary to separate the state from religion are still reading books from the previous century about the history of Europe” when there was antagonism between the state and Christianity, but, given current political rhetoric, that is obviously no longer the case. However vitriolic the debates were, the two sides tended to agree on one thing: that what was considered “modern” was not what mainstream Muslim thinkers identified as Islamic. “Modern” was understood to be identified with the practices of Western societies, and modernization meant the creation of basically similar, Western-style societies around the world.

By the middle of the twentieth century, secularization had become an issue in the relationship between religion and modernity. In the debates between Renan and al-Afghani, the primary issue was rationalism versus belief, but during the first half of the twentieth century, secularism became an important part of the intellectual discussions of the relationship between religion and modernity. Since modernity was defined by many people as being an increase in the secularization of society, and since the definition of secularization involves the reduction of the role of religion in society, by definition there would not be any way that religion could be seen as effectively compatible with modernity.

**Religion and Modernity in the Era of Area Studies and Radical Modernity**

By the 1960s, a new framework for understanding the relationship between religion and modernity was emerging. This development had important consequences for intellectuals, especially in what came at that time to be called “underdeveloped” societies. In scholarship, old-fashioned positivist intellectuals and Orientalists were gradually replaced by “area studies” specialists. The area-studies approach was development oriented, and the conceptualizations of modernity changed as the actualities of modern and
“modernizing” societies changed. For the study of Muslim societies, the old Orientalism was replaced by “Middle Eastern Studies,” and the basic unit of analysis was usually a set of imagined semi-secular nation-states clustered in a region. Activists and intellectuals within these frameworks developed ideologies for mobilizing people based on nationalism or radical socialism.

“Religion” was a marginal part of this emerging world. Although radicals and nationalists rejected imperial and neo-colonial control, they generally accepted the assumptions of modernization theory that the public role of religion would be reduced as societies became modern. In this ideological context, the relationship between religion and modernity was less combative and, instead, involved a tolerant acceptance of some “religion” in the formulations of “modern” programs and ideologies in order to secure support from the more “traditional” masses. A well-informed observer of the Arab world could state in the late 1960s that in “most intellectual circles, the slogan of secularism no longer raises a serious issue,” although there was still some tension between “the out-and-out westernizers to whom religion is largely irrelevant in public life ... and [Islamic reformers who want to make Islam] a more progressive faith, adapted institutionally and theologically to modern life.”

Among Muslim thinkers and activists, believers had to define their faith in relationship to the dominant ideological positions of the time. Some, like Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, explicitly shaped their positions as refutations of the modernity-defined concepts of Arab nationalism or class-based revolution or moral reformism: “This blessed program would not have belonged to God alone if the call [to Islam by the Prophet Muhammad] had begun in its earliest stages simply as a nationalist call or a call for a social-class movement or a call for moral reform or if it had raised any emblem other than ‘There is no divinity but Allah’.”

Other important Muslim thinkers were beginning the process of articulating their faith in more contemporary terms in ways that redefined important movements of the time in Islamic frameworks. In these endeavors, a change in the understanding of the relationships between religion and modernity is visible. The basic questions were changing. The concern was not the old nineteenth-century question of whether or not Islam (and “religion”) was compatible with modernity. Instead Islamically-identified thinkers were concerned with the ways that fundamentally modern concepts, ideologies, and institutions could be redefined in religious/ Islamic terms.
In the 1960s, major themes in the dominant secular movements included nationalism and radical socialism. Secular intellectuals often attempted to add Islamic terminology to give popular appeal to the ideologies of ethnic nationalism and secular socialist radicalism. This marginal recognition of Islam can be seen in the limited place of Islam in the Egyptian National Charter of 1962, which was a defining document for ideological Nasserism. Similarly, some Muslim thinkers added a “modern flavor” to their conservative positions in order to appear to be up-to-date.

In addition to the simple efforts of terminological syncretism, some important Muslim thinkers, emerging as truly believing intellectuals, worked to define intellectual syntheses of major modern and Islamic positions. While much of the discussion of “Islamic socialism” in the 1960s and 1970s was superficial, some influential intellectuals were articulating a genuine synthesis of concepts. Ali Shariati (1933–1977), the Iranian intellectual considered by many to be a major ideologue of the Iranian Revolution, was “well acquainted with Western sources and remarkably versatile in utilizing them to expound the sociological fact of Islam,” while at the same time he grounded his discourse in important Islamic traditional symbols, emphasizing, for example, the image of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, Abu Dharr, as a “paragon of Islamic struggle for social justice.”23 In the Arab world, Hasan Hanafi was developing a concept of “The Islamic Left,” which also was a critical synthesis of Western and Islamic visions.24

Ismail al Faruqi began, in the early 1960s, a major effort in redefining the major ideology in the Arab world of that time – that is, Arab nationalism in both its Pan-Arab and more localistic forms. Arab nationalism had been and was being articulated within the conceptual framework of Western modernity and European modes of defining “nation” and “state.” Al Faruqi did not attempt simply to define Arab identity by restating Western-style nationalism using Islamic terminology, as was frequently done in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, he set out to reconceptualize the whole framework of Arabism. He began his major work on this subject with the statement of his basic position: “Arabism, or the pursuit of ‘urubah, is not ‘Arab nationalism.”25

In his analysis, al Faruqi carefully defined Western-style nationalism and then distinguished it from ‘urubah. He rejected “thinking, as many Westerners do, that that which we are trying to analyse is the product of the twentieth century; or, as some Western-inspired Arab nationalists have thought, of a century or so earlier. Conceived as an offspring of Western
nationalism, with similar or identical character, Arab nationalism is of recent origin and certainly new. But conceived as pursuit of ‘urubah, Arabism is as old as the Arab stream of being itself.”

Most discussions of Arab nationalism at the time were framed in relatively secular terms, showing how Islam was a part of the national identity. In this mode, someone like Ibrahim Jum’a could argue that “Arab nationalism was an existing reality before the emergence of Islam ... Arab nationalism achieved its completed form with the creation of the Arab state by Islam.” This conceptual marginalization of Islam was rejected by al Faruqi whose basic analysis placed Arab identity within the framework of Islam rather than the more common position at that time: for example, Jum’a’s identification of Islam as simply a part of the Arab identity.

For al Faruqi, the true nature of being Arab, which he called “‘urubah,” is inclusive and open to all humanity as a “universalistic ummatism” or universalistic communalism. After an analysis of different perspectives, al Faruqi says, “We may therefore conclude ... that without Islam, Arab nationalism runs aground in ethical shallowness and superficiality. Islam has not only furnished our ethical ideals, but has ethicized whatever values our pre-Islamic ancestors had.” This reconceptualization of Arab identity and its relationship to the concepts of nationalism dominant at that time represented a major alternative to Marxist leftism as well as radical Arab socialism.

With his emphasis on the centrality of Islam in the Arab identity, al Faruqi was unusual among the intellectuals of the 1960s. An informed observer concluded in the early 1970s that the “modern intellectuals have broken decisively with the Islamic past” and “nationalist loyalties have largely taken the place of religious loyalties among the educated classes.”

This reflects the continuing understanding of “modern” as being monolithically Western and secular in its nature and the view that “intellectuals” are secular in their modernity. In many ways, al Faruqi was a harbinger of the future in which believing intellectuals would play an increasingly important role.

### Intellectuals and the Change from Modernity to Modernities

One of the major changes by the early 1980s was that the way that people understood “modernity” was changing in important ways. The processes of modernization were beginning to be recognized as being much more
complex than the theories of modernization assumed. Assumptions from the 1950s and 1960s that this transformation was basically a linear process following the historic paths of societies in Western Europe and North America began to be altered as diverse patterns of modernity began to be visible. Analysts began to recognize that modernization is not identical with Westernization. As S. N. Eisenstadt notes, “The appropriation of different themes and institutional patterns of the original Western modern civilization in non-Western European societies did not entail their acceptance in their original form. Rather, it entailed the continuous selection, reinterpretation and reformulation of such themes, giving rise to a steady crystallization of new cultural and political programs of modernity.” To use Eisenstadt’s terminology, the result of this complex set of appropriations was the emergence of a world of “multiple modernities.”

In these alternative modernities, one of the major divergences from the old-style monolithic modernity was the “resurgence of religion” and the decline of the importance of strict secularism in nontraditional institutions. In the Muslim world, the Iranian Revolution was one of the most visible manifestations of this new mode. Despite attempts by more secular-oriented observers to portray the Iranian revolutionary movement as a return to medieval modes, the Iranian Revolution was a creation of modern developments and was revolutionary rather than “traditional” or reactionary in its nature. It was also distinctively non-Western and non-secular and, as a result, represented a different mode of modernity from the secular-Western mode.

In this changing context of the resurgence of religion and multiple modernities, the role of intellectuals who were believers became more significant. In Edward Said’s words, the task for intellectuals of articulating a message could and did involve formulating the message of the new modernities in religious terms. This undertaking took many forms in the Muslim world, with the most visible being what many came to call “Political Islam.” Believing intellectuals, like Rashid Ghanushi in Tunisia and Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, began defining a new Islamic political modernity, which was not a copy of old-style nationalism nor was it a repetition of the old-style Islamism that had developed within the framework of the old monolithic concepts of modernity as identified with “the West.”

The changing nature of modernity and how people understood it opened the way for the articulation of modernities, which were not secular and could be religiously identified. This required more than proclaiming political platforms; it required undertaking the task of creating an “Islamic
modernity” that could take its place among the multiple modernities of the increasingly globalized world. Ismail al Faruqi argued that this undertaking involved the fundamental redefinition of “modern” knowledge. In this context, he defined and set in motion the project that came to be called the “Islamization of Knowledge.”

The project for the Islamization of Knowledge involved transforming the modern scholarly disciplines. Muslim thinkers “must master all the modern disciplines in order to understand them completely.... Then they must integrate the new knowledge into the corpus of the Islamic legacy.” The project was most successful in encouraging the development of Islamic economics, which combined modern modes of economic analysis with Islamic principles to create a variety of forms of Islamic banking and finance.

The project of the Islamization of Knowledge is a manifestation of the major changes in understanding of the relationships between religion and modernity. By the 1980s, it was clear that religion was not going to disappear as a major factor in human life. Modernization did not eliminate the power of belief in contemporary society. Instead, it became clear that belief systems are inherent in all human structures. What modernization did weaken was the old-style belief systems inherited from premodern times. However, believing intellectuals, like al Faruqi, in all religious traditions rearticulated their traditions and were part of the emergence of the multiple modernities of the late-twentieth century. In this new context, religion and modernity are not contradictory, and the debates are not between “religious” people and “modern” people; they are between representatives of different modernities.

**Conclusion**

Many things have changed since the initiation of the Islamization of Knowledge project and the rise of Political Islam in the 1980s. Both of those efforts have been replaced by a variety of new movements. However, the developments involving the change in the relationship between religion and modernity and the emergence of the believing intellectual as a significant voice continue to be an important part of contemporary history.

The nature of the modern “intellectual” has changed significantly from the days of Renan and al-Afghani. In their time, it was assumed that modernity and religion were contradictory and that “intellectuals” were modern and, therefore, were not believers. In the past century, profound chang-
es have taken place in human understanding of religion, in the nature of modernity, and in the role of intellectuals. As modernity ceased to be monolithically defined by Western conditions, religion came to be an important part of the emerging definition of an Islamic modernity. In this process, Muslim-believing intellectuals like Ismail al Faruqi played a significant role.

In more general terms, in the twenty-first century, believing intellectuals have growing importance. As a recent study affirms, “Around the world – from the southern United States to the Middle East – religion is on the rise.” Globalization has transformed modernity, religion, and the role of intellectuals. “A new world is in the making.... The major world religions are all taking advantage of the opportunities provided by globalization to transform their messages and reach a new global audience.” In this new world, the task of the believing intellectual in articulating the transformed messages of faith will be more important than ever before in modern times.

Endnotes

1. I initially explored the subject of the believing intellectual in John Obert Voll, “Believing Intellectuals and Their Contemporary Challenge,” *American Muslim Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 9–18. On August 26, 2010, I also presented the Annual Professor Ismail al Faruqi Lecture at the International Institute of Islamic Thought in Herndon, Virginia, on the subject “The Challenge of the Believing Intellectual: Religion and Modernity,” and this essay benefits from comments made in the discussion period at that time.

2. See the essays in the publication that was the product of that conference: John L. Esposito, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).


26. Ibid., 2.


29. Ibid., 198.


35. Ibid., 101.
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