

# MERIA

## The Coming Transformation of the Muslim World\*

By Dale F. Eickelman

Like the printing press in sixteenth-century Europe, the combination of mass education and mass communications is transforming the Muslim majority world, a broad geographical crescent stretching from North Africa through Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Indonesian archipelago. In unprecedentedly large numbers, the faithful -- whether in the vast cosmopolitan city of Istanbul, the suburbs of Paris, or in the remote oases of Oman's mountainous interior -- are examining and debating the fundamentals of Muslim belief and practice in ways that their less self-conscious predecessors in the faith would never have imagined.

Buzzwords such as "fundamentalism," and catchy phrases such as Samuel Huntington's "West versus Rest" or Daniel Lerner's "Mecca or mechanization," are of little use in understanding this transformation. They obscure or even distort the immense spiritual and intellectual ferment that is taking place today among the world's nearly one billion Muslims, reducing it in most cases to a fanatical rejection of everything modern, liberal, or progressive. To be sure, such fanaticism -- not exclusive to Muslim majority societies -- plays a part in what is happening, but it is far from the whole story.

A far more important element is the unprecedented access that ordinary people now have to sources of information and knowledge about religion and other aspects of their society. Quite simply, in country after country, government officials, traditional religious scholars, and officially sanctioned preachers are finding it very hard to monopolize the tools of literate culture. The days have gone when governments and

religious authorities can control what their people know, and what they think.

### MASS HIGHER EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION

What distinguishes the present era from prior ones is the large numbers of believers engaged in the "reconstruction" of religion, community, and society. In an earlier era, political or religious leaders would prescribe, and others were supposed to follow. Today, the major impetus for change in religious and political values comes from below. In France, this has meant an identity shift from being Muslim in France to being French Muslim. In Turkey, it means that an increasing number of Turks, especially those of the younger generation, see themselves as European and Muslim at the same time. And some Iranians argue that the major transformations of the Iranian revolution occurred not in 1978-79 but with the coming of age of a new generation of Iranians who were not even born at the time of the revolution. These transformations include a greater sense of autonomy for both women and men and the emergence of a public sphere in which politics and religion are subtly intertwined, and not always in ways anticipated by Iran's formal religious leaders.

If "modernity" is defined as the emergence of new kinds of public space, including new possible spaces not imagined by preceding generations, then developments in France, Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, and elsewhere suggest that we are living through an era of profound social transformation for the Muslim majority world.

Distinctive to the modern era is that discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involves people on a mass scale. It also necessarily involves an awareness of other Muslim and non-Muslim traditions. Mass education and mass communication in the modern world facilitate an awareness of the new and unconventional. In changing the style and scale of possible discourse, they reconfigure the nature of religious thought and action, create new forms of public space, and encourage debate over meaning.

Mass education and mass communications are important in all contemporary world religions. However, the full effects of mass education, especially higher education, only began to be felt in much of the Muslim world since mid-century and in many countries considerably later. In country after country -- including Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, and Indonesia -- educational opportunities have dramatically expanded at all levels. Even where adult illiteracy rates in the general populace remains high, as in rural Egypt and Morocco, there is now a critical mass of educated people able to read, think for themselves, and react to religious and political authorities rather than just listen to them. Women's access to education still lags behind that of men, although the gap is rapidly closing in many countries.

Both mass education and mass communications, particularly the proliferation of media and the means by which people communicate, have had a profound effect on how people think about religion and politics throughout the Muslim world. Multiple means of communication make the unilateral control of information and opinion much more difficult than it was in prior eras and foster, albeit inadvertently, a civil society of dissent. We are still in the early stages of understanding how different media -- including print, television, radio, cassettes, and music -- influence groups and individuals, encouraging unity in some contexts and fragmentation in others, but a few salient features may be sketched.

At the "high" end of this transformation is the rise to significance of

books such as *al-Kitab wa-l-Qur'an* [The Book and the Qur'an] (1992), written by the Syrian civil engineer Muhammad Shahrur. This book has sold tens of thousands of copies throughout the Arab world in spite of the fact that its circulation has been banned or discouraged in many places. Its success could not have been imagined before there were large numbers of people able to read it and understand its advocacy of the need to reinterpret ideas of religious authority and tradition and apply Islamic precepts to contemporary society. On issues ranging from the role of women in society to rekindling a "creative interaction" with non-Muslim philosophies, Shahrur argues that Muslims should reinterpret sacred texts and apply them to contemporary social and moral issues.

Shahrur is not alone in attacking both conventional religious wisdom and the intolerant certainties of religious radicals and in arguing instead for a constant and open re-interpretation of how sacred texts apply to social and political life. Another Syrian thinker, the secularist Sadiq Jalal al-'Azm, debated Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a conservative religious intellectual, on Qatar's al-Jazira Satellite TV in May 1997. For the first time in the memory of many viewers, the religious conservative came across as the weaker, more defensive voice. Al-Jazira is a new phenomenon in Arab language broadcasting because its talk shows, such as "The Opposite Direction," feature live discussions on such sensitive issues as women's role in society, Palestinian refugees, sanctions on Iraq, and democracy and human rights in the Arab world.

Such discussions are unlikely to be rebroadcast on state-controlled television in most Arab nations, where programming on religious and political themes is generally cautious. Nevertheless, satellite technology and videotape render traditional censorship ineffective. Tapes of the al-Jazira broadcasts circulate from hand to hand in Morocco, Oman, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere. Al-Jazira shows that people across the Arab world, just like their counterparts elsewhere

in the Muslim majority world, want open discussion of the issues that affect their lives, and that new communications technologies make it impossible for governments and established religious authorities to stop them.

Other voices also advocate reform. Fethullah Glen, Turkey's answer to media-savvy American evangelist Billy Graham, appeals to a mass audience. In televised chat shows, interviews, and occasional sermons, Glen speaks about Islam and science, democracy, modernity, religious and ideological tolerance, the importance of education, and current events.

Religious movements such as Turkey's Risale-i Nur appeal increasingly to religious moderates, and in stressing the link between Islam, reason, science, and modernity, and the lack of inherent clash between "East" and "West," promote education at all levels, and appeal to a growing numbers of educated Turks. Iranian, Indonesian, and Malaysian moderates make similar arguments advocating religious and political toleration and pluralism.

As a result of direct and broad access to the printed, broadcast, and taped word, more and more Muslims take it upon themselves to interpret the textual sources—classical or modern—of Islam. Much has been made of the opening up of the economies of many Muslim countries, allowing "market forces" to reshape economies, no matter how painful the consequences in the short run. In a similar way, intellectual market forces support some forms of religious innovation and activity over others. In Bangladesh, women's romance novels, once a popular secular specialty, now have their Islamic counterparts, making it difficult to distinguish between "Muslim" romance novels and "secular" ones.

The result is a collapse of earlier, hierarchical notions of religious authority based on claims to the mastery of fixed bodies of religious texts. Even when there are state-appointed religious authorities—as in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt—there no longer is any guarantee that their word

will be heeded, or even that they themselves will follow the lead of the regime. No one group or type of leader in contemporary Muslim societies possesses a monopoly on the management of the sacred.

#### THE EMERGING PUBLIC SPHERE

Without fanfare, the notion that Islam should be the subject of dialogue and civil debate is gaining ground. This new sense of public space is shaped by increasingly open contests over the use of the symbolic language of Islam. Increasingly, discussions in newspapers, on the Internet, on smuggled cassettes, and on television cross-cut and overlap, contributing to a common public space.

New and accessible modes of communication have made these contests increasingly global, so that even local issues take on transnational dimensions. The combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created. It feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.

Two cautions are in order. The first is that an expanding public sphere need not necessarily indicate more favorable prospects for democracy, any more than civil society necessarily entails democracy. Authoritarian regimes are compatible with an expanding public sphere, although an expanded public sphere offers wider avenues for awareness of competing and alternate forms of religious and political authority. Nor does civil society necessarily entail democracy, although it is a precondition for democracy.

Publicly shared ideas of community, identity, and leadership take new shapes in such engagements, even as many communities and authorities claim an unchanged continuity with the past. Mass education, so important in the development of nationalism in an earlier era, and a

proliferation of media and means of communication have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities and networks among them, dissolving prior barriers of space and distance and opening new grounds for interaction and mutual recognition.

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