



Revivalism and Reconstructionism in Islamic Reform Intellectual Trends in Modernist Maghribi Thought

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Abstract

Modernist Islamic thought has grown in a variety of ways for the last two centuries. This paper argues that two distinct directions can be detected in the works of contemporary Muslim thinkers in the Maghrib, namely revivalism and reconstructionism. These two intellectual trends were already present as tendencies in tension within the contributions of early modernist reformers. Since the second half of the twentieth century, they have evolved into two distinct perspectives that have formulated two different projects of reforming Islam. The writings of influential feminist Muslim thinkers Fatima Mernissi and Asma Lamrabet provide us with instructive examples of reconstructionism and revivalism respectively.

Keywords: Islamic modernism, reform, feminism, secularism, contemporary Islamic thought

Introduction

The early twentieth century was a period of turmoil in the Maghrib, but also a period in which the success of France as a colonial power in the area led to a period of introspection and adaptation to the new realities. Unsurprisingly, the Muslim modernist reformers that marked the era framed their reformism in nationalist terms, a fact that would create a tension within this current of thought between self-critical attitudes and defensive postures. On the one hand, modernist reformist thinkers recognized the necessity of reform within Islam and the unavoidability of incorporating modern ideas and concepts in that process of reform. On the other hand, focusing the gaze on the self and promoting ideas that originated in the world of an imperialist and hegemonic West would possibly weaken Maghribi societies and threaten

their presumed unity at a dire time in their history, particularly that the French both implicitly and explicitly pointed out the alleged inferiority of Islam and Maghribi culture. Finding the right balance was a monumental task for reformers and the tension at play remained part of the discourses of modernist reformism throughout the colonial period and beyond. Importantly, while the mid-twentieth century saw a decline in reformist attempts to reimagine Islam in the Maghribi sphere within a context of military struggles against colonialism and in the face of rising hard leftist ideologies, late twentieth century reformist thinkers showed greater intellectual sophistication and took two different paths that I term revivalism and reconstructionism respectively.

Tradition, Modernity, and Modernist Reform

Among other things, this paper seeks to participate in helping move the discussions within academic treatments of Islam away from largely examining modernist Muslim thinkers in terms of whether their ideas break from the Islamic tradition or remain within its orbit. The dichotomy of tradition versus modernity is itself analytically problematic because it causes us to neglect how “traditional” ideas are not a simple calquing of past practices and beliefs but are instead reconstructions, at particular moments, of what are received/perceived as elements belonging to a long tradition. In relation to that, I find particularly useful Armando Salvatore’s definition of traditions, building on the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, as “bundled templates of social practice transmitted, transformed and reflected upon by arguments and discourses across cultures and generations” (6-7). That definition correctly shines the light on the process of negotiation and innovation in which are involved social actors. Thus, a sounder and more balanced approach is to contextualize reform-oriented works and let them express the processes of negotiation in which they are engaged.

Therefore, in this frame, someone who is outside the Western sphere but values the contributions of Western modernity, without necessarily being a simple imitator of that modernity, can be called a modernist. It follows that a proponent of modernist reformism within a Muslim context is someone who takes in consideration the input of Western modernity seriously in a new episode of Islamic reform and renewal, *tajdid wa islah*, a phenomenon that has long been part of how Islam is approached within many Muslim circles (Voll), even when not explicitly acknowledged by Muslim scholars. The term modernity itself is admittedly problematic because it oversimplifies and reifies a complex set of social processes and intellectual currents.

Defining modernity is a tricky proposition. At a basic linguistic level, the modern denotes the new in relation to what has been the case, to what we have been used to. One could say that modernity presupposes some kind of break, “an act of self-conscious distancing from a past or a situation regarded as naïve” (Benavides: 187). In a historical sense, a “matrix of modernity” is constituted in Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth century. Here, modernity carries what Stuart Hall calls “a certain analytic and theoretical value, because it is related to a conceptual model” (8). Classical theorists of modernity had posited a number of elements that characterize societies that witnessed the rise of modernity, including the decline of traditional social orders and religious worldviews, the rise of more materialist, rationalist, individualistic culture, and the dominance of secular forms of political power and authority (Hall: 8). The proponents of modernization theory proposed one principal driving factor in

the development towards a modern society, namely the economy (Hall: 12). On the intellectual plane, Enlightenment thinkers of the eighteenth century are credited with making the most valuable contributions in creating the break from the old to the new (modern) order, defending reason, rationality, empiricism, and science as lights on the path of liberation from the shackles of superstition. Their intellectual contributions claimed to establish a universal program of human progress (Hall: 22-24).

In recent times, scholars from a variety of disciplines have ignited an important debate over modernity and challenged the inherited wisdom surrounding that notion. A particularly potent critique has sought to deconstruct the claim of a singular modernity, defending instead multiple modernities. S. N. Eisenstadt develops this idea and explains that it

... presumes that the best way to understand the contemporary world – indeed to explain the history of modernity – is to see it as a story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs. These ongoing reconstructions of multiple institutional and ideological patterns are carried forward by specific social actors in close connection with social, political, and intellectual activists, and also by social movements pursuing different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern. Through the engagement of these actors with broader sectors of their respective societies, unique expressions of modernity are realized (2).

According to Eisenstadt, the transition of concepts and institutions stemming from Western modernity into other contexts create shifts, corrections, additions, etc. . . . that reflect the local cultures. This allowed the elites among those cultures to incorporate themes of Western modernity without disregarding what they view as important aspects of their traditional identities. In that fashion new collective identities are constructed (Eisenstadt: 14-15).

Following in this kind of analysis but standing in a more critical position toward the simplistic use of the notion of “traditional identities,” I start from the premise that modernity is not a reified and finished product or entity that Muslims (and others) simply accept or reject. I use the term modernity in the sense of a continuing process that starts from an epistemological shift and that carries within its fold various contestations, negotiations, and contradictions (Benavides: 187-90). However, I also insist on a distinction between the “modernist” and “modern” characterizations. Trends that I describe as “modernist” harness the contributions of intellectual modernity, as they perceive it, to rethink Islam. The description of “modern,” on the other hand, can be given to all actors that live within a world that the processes of modernity have shaped; this would include those who view intellectual modernity as irrelevant to their own perspectives as well as those who are openly anti-modernist. This does not mean that the views of those who fall within the latter camps are stagnant and unchanging or that modernity has no impact on them. It is quite the opposite; all these orientations are an integral part of the modern contexts and could only exist, as such, in those contexts regardless of the labels utilized to describe them, i.e. traditionalists, fundamentalists, etc.

What is of interest here is that within Islam, the difference between modernist reformism and the reformist projects of yesteryear lies at times in the seeming radicality of the changes proposed. This is directly connected to the depth of the intellectual challenge that modernity has raised for all religious traditions. Importantly, rather than being on the other side of tradition, modernist reformists are often engaged in a battle to reimagine tradition or to steer it in particular directions. What we call “tradition” has always been multiple; modernist intellectual reform is but a manner (or rather manners) of negotiating new ways of defining the self in interaction with changing historical realities and novel ideas but in continuation with inherited legacies. Tradition plays the central role of maintaining meaningful communication between social actors, as societies go through processes of change and adaptation to change. As Salvatore puts it, tradition “is essential to social action communication and even cultural and institutional innovation” (7).

The rigor and sophistication of the reformist ideas differ from one setting to another and from one thinker to another. Importantly, rather than approaching these intellectual attempts through the dichotomous lens of tradition versus modernity, which might end up ideologically dividing thinkers into two camps, one belonging to a “true” Islam and another one rejecting that “true” Islam, we ought to begin from the premise that we are encountering reformist thinkers that are *products of modern settings in which Islam plays a central role*. In this case, I zoom in on the context of the Maghrib and seek to provide a window into some trends that have shaped Maghribi society and that arguably mirror trends in other Muslim-majority societies.

The Maghrib as Marginal

Edmund Burke III has rightly lamented the marginality of the Maghrib within the American academic world. The precariousness of the Maghrib’s position within various regional classifications is highlighted by its relative neglect within the world of Africanists, Arabists, and Europeanists alike despite its strong geographic and historical ties to the areas that these experts study (17-19). This problem cannot however be approached adequately without seeking to define the Maghrib. Are there reasons to speak of a Maghrib at all? Is there a Maghrib to be studied separately? Or are we better off, as a method of study, just attaching it to one of the other larger regions? Ali Abdullatif Ahmida adds an important element in this discussion, namely the Eurocentric characteristic of defining the Maghrib within Western academia generally. He points to the fact that this has led to narrowing the Maghrib to the three countries of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia because of their former status as French colonies/protectorates. Ahmida champions the idea of including even Egypt in the frame of the Maghrib (6-7).

Certainly, the category of al-Maghrib predates the colonial period. The “land where the sun sets” is a designation that positioned Northwestern Africa in relation to the central lands of the “House of Islam.” The ties of that area as a geo-cultural area to the rest of the lands of Islamic civilization is of course significant, particularly in relation to the Arab parts of the latter. Nevertheless, the historical record and the various cultural experiences we can access both challenge the idea of the Maghrib as a simple extension of the Arab-Islamic world to the east, a region in which incidentally Egypt has played a central role throughout history, particularly with its strong cultural, economic, and political relations to the Levant. Nor can we simply limit the Maghrib to the “core” three countries mentioned above; Libya as well as

parts of Sub-Saharan Africa that border Morocco and Algeria, such as what is today Mali and Mauritania can also be seen as forming a unity through different cultural and religious networks that go back centuries.

Without being exhaustive, I propose to lessen the impact of this problem by rethinking the Maghrib in multiplicity rather than presuming that it is one easily definable entity. In other terms, we need to acknowledge the existence of many Maghribs and not a single Maghrib. All these Maghribs are historical constructions. They are shaped by various geographic, ecologic, and socio-political factors and are connected to a number of historical interactions. The constructed Maghribs are not natural but they do contain a logic on which they are built. Importantly, although these constructions vary in the strength of their cementing elements, none of them should be simply dismissed because of the perspectives from which they stem. In analytical terms, there is real value in not rushing to reject a construction that may appear highly ideological only to replace it with another one that is as ideological without looking deeper into the cementing material used to build a particular form of the Maghrib.

Thus, based on favoring the idea of multiplicity, there is room for a variety of Maghribs. There is room for thinking of the Maghrib as roughly delineating only the lands of contemporary Morocco, incidentally in contemporary times called in Arabic *al-Maghrib*, which remained generally and consistently independent from all the large empires of classical and late Islam that were based in the central Muslim lands or what is today called the Middle East. We can add Andalusia to this frame as part of a premodern region of Western Islam, dominated politically by empires based in Morocco and connected religiously through adherence to the Maliki school of law. We can also accept the notion of the Maghrib as a cultural unity, the lands where heads are shaven, *al-kuskus*¹ is eaten, and *al-burnus*² is worn (Balta: 5).³ In relation to that, we are in position as well to accept the particularity of the Maghrib in ethnic terms as the lands inhabited by the Berber peoples long before the Arab-Islamic conquests. Importantly, we can take in consideration the notion of the Maghrib as those lands that had many of these connections but that had also experienced the hegemony of France, a fact that has forever changed their cultural, social, and political landscapes. Accordingly, the particularity of the study itself dictates the form of the Maghrib that a researcher uses.

The intellectual world of modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, including of course the legacies of their modernist reformers, is shaped by a context in which France and French intellectual and political legacies play an integral part. This is true at the level of ideas encountered as well as in the use of French as a language of thought and scholarship among the elites of the three countries, thus creating a space of intellectual interaction that sets the region apart from other possible Maghribs, and even more so from other parts of the Arab World. It is thus not because of any Eurocentric bias that my focus is on the three countries.

¹ Couscous, balls of crushed durum wheat semolina that are the basis of a number of popular dishes in North Africa

² Burnoose, a long-hooded cloak traditionally worn in the region in question here.

³ This is a formulation often attributed to Ibn Khaldun (d. 808/1406) but is in fact from *Kitab al-muhadarat* of al-Ḥasan al-Yusi (1102/1691).

It goes without saying that the cement of this construction of the Maghrib is, however, made of much more than the French colonizing presence and the common intellectual struggle in the face of modernity.

Revivalist and Reconstructionist Drives in Maghribi Modernist Reform

An examination of the intellectual production of the major Maghribi modernist reformers in the first half of the twentieth century highlights that there are a number of characteristics that remain a constant. These thinkers insisted that religious reform was the most urgent task to tackle in order to awaken Maghribi people from their slumber. The premises from which they began their own *mission civilisatrice* were that Muslims had deviated from the path of true Islam and that there was for Muslims a need to recapture the spirit of the original message and for the masses to become reconnected to that powerful divine blessing. We see in these premises what I term a revivalist drive, an attempt to reconnect to an alleged pristine Islam that has been obfuscated and that needed to be revived to define the direction of a Maghribi society at a crossroads. At the same time, these thinkers embraced conceptions and institutions that were clearly part of the modern Western intellectual legacy and practice, including democracy, constitutionalism, freedom of thought, and individual liberties. The difficulty resided in the attempt to locate these conceptions and institutions in a perceived pristine Islam with the goal of radically reimagining the inherited Islamic legacy. This is what I term a reconstructionist drive.

Another way to present the two drives in tension is to see the revivalist drive as a process of de-historizing Islam and the reconstructionist one as re-historizing it. I use the notion of de-historizing Islam in the sense of decontextualizing its textual sources from their original contexts and placing them above history, making them ready to be inserted into the modern context. Re-historicizing Islam on the other hand entails acknowledging the central role of historical context in shaping both the inherited texts and the current conditions of Islamic interpretation. This makes it relatively easier to rethink Islam from a modern standpoint.

The prominent and highly influential figures of the Algerian ‘Abd al-Hamid ibn Badis (1889–1940), the Tunisian ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Tha‘alibi (1876–1944), and the Moroccan ‘Allal al-Fasi (1910–1974) provide us with great examples of modernist reformism proponents who would strongly impact the world of Maghribi Islam in all its orientations. Yet we must certainly not classify these figures as unique; they represent a whole trend of scholars and activists who embraced a reformist outlook but who did not necessarily provide the same kind of critique to the inherited traditions. They varied in their access to modern ideas and differed in their approaches, some preferring to work within the frames of the Maliki *‘amal* and the tools it provided and others seeking a stricter focus on scriptural texts in ways reminiscent of the neo-Hanbali style of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, with some harnessing a hybridity at the intersection of the two in order to be more effective. Among the prominent proponents of this intellectual position are Mawlud al-Zuraybi (d. 1925), ‘Abd al-Halim ibn Sumaya (d. 1933), Muhammad ibn Mustafa ibn al-Khawja (d. 1935), al-Basir al-Ibrahimi (d. 1965), Tayyib al-‘Uqbi (d. 1962) and Mubarak al-Mili (d. 1945) in Algeria; Salim Abu Hajib (d. 1924), al-Bashir Sfar (d. 1937), Muhammad al-Nakhli (d. 1924), Muhammad al-Tahir ibn ‘Ashur (d. 1973) and

al-Tahir al-Haddad (d. 1935) in Tunisia; al-Mahdi al-Wazzani (d. 1923), Abu Shu'ayb al-Dukkali (d. 1937), and Muhammad ibn al-'Arabi al-'Alawi (d. 1964) in Morocco.

'Allal al-Fasi

The Moroccan *'alim* and political activist 'Allal al-Fasi authored an important work entitled *al-Naqd al-dhati (Self-Critique)* in which he delineated his vision of reform. Al-Fasi was born in Fez within an eminent family of Andalusian origin that had a long history of producing scholars from the famed al-Qarawiyin School. During his studies, he fell under the influence of Abu Shu'ayb al-Dukkali, another important reformist scholar who had studied for a number of years at al-Azhar in Egypt and who became familiar with the ideas of Rashid Rida (d. 1935). Al-Fasi would become a seminal figure within the Moroccan nationalist movement, causing him to clash with the French colonial authorities and leading him to experience exile, including extended sojourns in France and Switzerland. In Geneva, he also befriended Shakib Arslan (d. 1946), a prominent Lebanese figure who had a significant impact on a number of Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan nationalists over the years (Al-Fasi 2011: 13-23).

Al-Fasi sought to build Moroccan nationalism on the basis of Islam, but not the form of Islam that had dominated Maghribi society at the time of the beginning of his activist career. What shaped the Maghribi world then was, according to al-Fasi, an aberration and a corruption of the pristine Islam of the Qur'an and Muhammad. It was indeed that alleged pristine Islam that the graduate of al-Qarawiyin sought to recapture through his reformist vision. Al-Fasi argued that deviating from *al-islam al-sahih* occurred because of many reasons, some internal and others external. On the internal side are the love of worldly gains and the selfish pursuit of mundane interests while externally, a number of ideas that are foreign to Islam encouraged fatalism and flight from the practicalities of life (Al-Fasi 1952: 235-36, 261-62). Thus, history in the eyes of al-Fasi has had a corrupting effect on the practice of Islam leading to a situation that mandates for modern Muslims the careful study of history as a vital way to eliminate all the deviations and problematic practices (Al-Fasi 1952: 53-54).

Looking around him at the social and political disorder in Morocco, al-Fasi sought to find a way to marry the new to the old for the benefit of his society. For him, "it is imperative to benefit from what the modern world has produced as well as from the human heritage of the past" (1952: 68). He therefore insisted that "we must choose the creed that we want and the method that we use without worrying about the sources from which we seek their parts; we take from the old its best and from the contemporary its finest, and continue progressing with what we innovate from our own experiences" (1952: 68). Importantly, al-Fasi portrayed true Islam as a conduit to successfully engage in this process for it is "built on sturdy bases that make it susceptible to progress and onward movement and prepare it to be viable for all classes, times, and places" (1952: 110).

In order to make his case for reform, al-Fasi attempted a historical analysis of various periods of the Maghribi past. The analysis attempts to draw a coherent sketch that shows the decline of Moroccan society coinciding with the spread of religious superstitions coupled with tribalist politics. In his view, such a dysfunctional and corruptible system was also the reason that the colonialist enemy found a ground to plant itself and dominate the Moroccan social and political scenes. Accordingly, while regaining independence was an important step for a

better future, what was even more vital was an intellectual and religious reform that would reconnect Moroccan realities to the spirit of Islam as practiced by the *salaf* (Al-Fasi 1952: 41-44).

The main thrust of *al-Naqd al-dhati* is reconstructionist in the sense that it seeks to ground modern concepts, institutions, and ideas within the Moroccan context, thus refashioning it in a very significant way. The author defends among other elements such things as democracy, freedom of opinion, the emancipation of women, and workers' unions. For instance, in a chapter entitled *al-Fikr al-siyasi*, al-Fasi urges his fellow Moroccans to embrace a democratic and constitutionalist system of government. He discusses many of the experiences of democratic nations to be carefully studied, although not necessarily blindly emulated. The Moroccan experience was indeed unique but not divorced from human realities elsewhere; here as elsewhere, the people must be given a voice. Al-Fasi wrote,

[t]he desire to give the people their right to supervise [the rulers] and propose [policies] requires organizing the people in general terms and organizing the institution or institutions that represent them; it also necessitates organizing the government based on sound democratic principles. I do not seek here to enumerate all the types of governmental systems that can be learned from many a book nor do I try to impose a particular type of constitution on the Moroccan nation because one individual cannot achieve that. Rather, it must come from an elected popular entity after [achieving] independence [from France] . . . our position at the end of the line imposes on us that we benefit from other experiences, and on this front we have to pay close attention to popular democracies and their achievements (1952: 141).

As another example and in a similar spirit, al-Fasi praises liberty of thought and speech. For him, the young generations of Moroccans must be given a chance to be creative and productive and none of that is possible without a setting that guarantees for them the right to free expression. He interestingly does not put any limitations on this not even concerning religion. In what might be read as a critique of conservative religious scholars, al-Fasi even highlights the negative impact on Moroccan society of social actors who are keen to protect archaic views and practices and spend much time and energy fighting free thought and speech (1952: 45-49).

Importantly, al-Fasi also claims that these seemingly borrowed concepts have a basis in Islam, the *true* one. In another influential book entitled *Maqasid al-shari'a al-islamiyya wa makarimuba* (*The Purposes of Islamic Law and its Moral Goods*), he provides the readers with his view of the conception of *maqasid al-shari'a*, a construction of medieval Muslim jurists that arguably played the role of an extender of the space of legal interpretation, in response to the restrictions of the paradigm of *taqlid* (following the legal precedent of established legal schools). In the hands of al-Fasi, the *maqasid* discourse becomes a way of reviving the true spirit of Islam, putting forward essential elements such as *'adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), or *tasamub* (tolerance). Yet, he also argues that using the *maqasid* to elaborate on these general concepts is only applicable when there is no explicit textual reference on the issue ("*fi ghayr ma nussa 'alayh bi-saraha*") (1993: 45). Thus, the *maqasid* approach, for al-Fasi, guarantees the comprehensiveness of Islam in the modern world and its applicability to all aspects of

individual, social, and political life. While the approach opens the door for reforming what is not explicitly stated in the textual sources of the Qur'an and Hadith and for introducing modern institutions and concepts into the Islamic fold, they also make everything subservient to a *claimed Islamicity*, a feature that would be characteristic of revivalist modernism in the late twentieth century as discussed below.

'Abd al-Hamid ibn Badis

The Algerian *'alim* and preacher 'Abd al-Hamid ibn Badis is also a key figure in the Algerian nationalist movement and unquestionably the face of the early twentieth century reformist movement in the central lands of the Maghrib. Like al-Fasi, Ibn Badis belonged to a prestigious family. Born and raised in Constantine, his educational itinerary took him to al-Zaytuna School in Tunis where he fell under the influence of reformist *'ulama*' like Muhammad al-Nakhli and Muhammad al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur. He also received an *ijaza* degree from al-Azhar before returning to Algeria and founding the Association of Algerian Muslim Scholars.

Despite most of his production being in the format of lectures from his preaching at mosques and newspaper articles geared towards a general educated public, Ibn Badis stands out by a keen awareness of the challenge of his time and a drive to push his fellow Algerians in the direction of a productive modernity with grounding in an Arab-Islamic identity. Ibn Badis' privileged family background would have allowed him to benefit from the support of the French colonial authorities that had built friendly relationships with the rich aristocracies of big urban centers like Constantine. However, he chose a path of modernist reformism that the French saw as a much bigger threat than the by-then quietist Sufi *zawiyas* because of its potential to feed nationalist fervor and its possible connection to the pan-Islamic trend that had had much influence in many parts of the Muslim world (Ibn Badis: 15-38).

Ibn Badis and his close companions found themselves in the position of unwilling opponents of the colonial authorities, carrying much disappointment in their hearts over the policies of the French. Ibn Badis was not interested in direct political activism; he was instead keen on pursuing a process of education to reconnect Algerians to their "authentic identity" (Merad 1967: 388-89). This is implicit in his attempt to differentiate between what he termed "*jinsiyya qanmiyya*" (belonging to a religious nation) and "*jinsiyya siyasiyya*" (belonging to a political entity) (Merad 1967: 397). It is important to note that the colonial enterprise, then three-quarters of a century old, has had deep effects on the structure of Algerian life at a variety of social and economic levels. The disenfranchisement of the majority of Algerians and the intensification of rural migration to the big cities created much social tension and poverty. Meanwhile, Algerians who had received their schooling under the French educational system saw salvation in successful assimilation into the French national experience and thus continued to demand full rights and universal access to the entirety of that experience. With little success at the end, the Young Algerians political movement had used various forms of political activities to reform the French colonial system and abolish the *Code de l'indigénat*⁴ which treated the indigenous populations as subjects and did not allow their integration as full citizens of France (Ruedy: 106-9).

⁴ French legal code governing indigenous populations.

In response to this complex situation of assimilationist tendencies on one side and religious conservatism on the other, Ibn Badis and his companions raised a cultural banner as a first step forward. They multiplied the efforts to facilitate access to an Islamic education, providing lessons in mosques, publishing newspapers, and more importantly establishing schools to teach Arabic and Islamic subjects (59-61). The reformist spirit had to ultimately define the direction of the Algerian nation and its future.

Ibn Badis insisted on revalorizing the direct input of Islamic textual sources and downplaying centuries of accumulated cultural traditions and doctrinal “deviations” (Merad 1971: 103-4). For the Algerian reformer, this revalorization of the text was also a path towards creating an atmosphere in which a modern Islamic identity was to thrive, an identity built on utilizing the gift of human reason to ponder the message of God, just as allegedly did *al-salaf al-salih*.⁵ This was unlike the ages of legal *taqlid* and theological speculation that kept Muslims away from positive action and progress (Ibn Badis: 374). Modern Muslims had to grasp that valuing rationality was not the property of Western culture, it was at the center of the original Islamic vision (Merad 1967: 259). Ibn Badis proposed a program to achieve the rebirth of that golden Islamic age in the modern Algerian context, insisting among other things on liberation from the spirit of *taqlid*, the defense of the Arab-Islamic identity of Algeria, the promotion of liberty, and the formation of an educated elite that could carry the banner of modernization and progress (Merad 1971: 218-20).

Interestingly, the Algerian reformer showed support for the Egyptian ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq during the controversy surrounding his 1925 book, *al-Islam wa usul al-hukm* (*Islam and the Fundamentals of Governance*), in which he rejected the religious necessity of the caliphate and called for a modern civil government. In a similar vein, Ibn Badis wrote a fascinating article in 1938 following the death of Atatürk, the nationalist Turkish leader, who abolished the caliphate, banned *shari‘a* courts, closed Sufi lodges and implemented several far-reaching reforms to separate religion from the government. Atatürk’s secular agenda did not keep Ibn Badis from showering him with high praise, even calling him, “the greatest man of modern history,” “the greatest among the geniuses of the East who appear in the world at different times and transform the path of history,” and “the resurrector of Turkey from near death to . . . wealth, dignity, and distinction” (215). In Ibn Badis’ view, Atatürk was not anti-Islam as his detractors maintained; rather,

[t]ruly, Mustafa Kamal carried out a strong revolution yet he did not revolt against Islam but instead against so-called Muslims. He thus abolished the fake caliphate, cut the access to governance for those [so-called] ‘*ulama*’ by rejecting the *Majalla*, and plucked out the corrupted tree of [Sufi] orders from their roots (215-16).

While Ibn Badis seemed to disagree with the Turkish leader’s rejection of *al-ahkam al-shar‘iyya* (legal rulings of the Islamic law schools), he embraced his reconstructionist drive and zeal for reform. Importantly, his numerous articles never systematically addressed the tensions

⁵ “Pious Ancestors,” a common description of (usually) the first two generations of Muslims.

between reviving the “true” Islamic legacy and establishing a modern society and political system. Ambiguity and vagueness remained a constant.

‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Tha‘alibi

In the Tunisian sphere, a figure that stood out in the Islamic reformist camp is ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Tha‘alibi. Unlike al-Fasi and Ibn Badis and despite receiving a *tatwi‘* degree (four years of study) from al-Zaytuna, al-Tha‘alibi did not reach the status of a traditional *‘alim*. He preferred to pursue his later education at al-Khalduniyya School, another institution that the reformist Young Tunisian movement established in order to spread access to modern knowledge. His educational training as well as his travel to the Mashriq, including Egypt where he became familiar with the ideas of Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and his interpreter, Rashid Rida, shaped his reformist mindset. That connection earned him a controversial return to Tunisia where he would spend time in prison following a blasphemy charge pushed forward by conservative scholars of al-Zaytuna School. Later, al-Tha‘alibi would become the leader of the nationalist Dustur political party that would play a significant role in the call for independence from France before losing ground to *al-Hizb al-burr al-dusturi al-jadid* of al-Habib Burqiba and his companions (al-Tha‘alibi: 7-13).

In his *Rub al-taharrur fil-Qur’an (The Spirit of Liberation in the Qur’an)*, al-Tha‘alibi sought to locate in the Qur’anic text a liberal spirit on which to ground a modern Islamic order. Like other modernist reformers, he attempted to both liberate the sacred text from the grip of traditional interpretations and show the compatibility of Islam with modern notions. He rhetorically asked whether a liberated Muslim, “could write or speak anything in favor of that liberation without being accused with disbelief and heresy and judged in the name of that same Qur’an that calls for freedom of opinion?” (al-Tha‘alibi: 42). He thus defended emancipation from “ignorance, illusions, and extremism” (al-Tha‘alibi: 41), ills that he connected, like al-Fasi and Ibn Badis, to the influence of the *ṣawiyas* (religious schools). To achieve that goal, al-Tha‘alibi did not shy away from calling upon his co-religionists to learn from the French revolution and its defense of human rights and the rights of citizens (al-Tha‘alibi: 18-19). This was for him but a return to a focus on rationality that was an integral part of the pure Islamic legacy before the multiple corruptions that undermined the latter’s greatness (al-Tha‘alibi: 40).

Al-Tha‘alibi proposed some far-reaching positions on a number of fronts if one considers the social context of the time. One example of that is his view on gender issues:

If mandatory education that the Messenger, prayers of God be upon him, has made obligatory in his hadiths . . . became an achieved reality, a woman would enjoy all her rights and would discover that there was no [scriptural] text that made it obligatory on her to cover her face nor was there a [scriptural] text that mandated her hiding at home as if it were a prison. She would have learned that among her duties was to take care of her interests and those of her children and to reflect on their education and upbringing, and that it was necessary for her to enjoy her right at home [as well as] take her share of life outside as equal with men. [Only] then would Islamic society experience [real] change (al-Tha‘alibi: 32).

Nevertheless, on this subject and on most others as well, al-Tha‘alibi appeared more interested in unfolding an apologetic arsenal to position “true Islam,” the one practiced before the alleged harmful influence of “Persians” (al-Tha‘alibi: 33-35) and other “foreigners” (al-Tha‘alibi: 63-64), as compatible with the demands of modernity than any thorough engagement with or complete analysis of the Islamic legacy and the intellectual challenges of modernity.

In conclusion to this short overview of some of the influential intellectual contributions of the modernist reformist thinkers of the early twentieth century, it is important to highlight that the ambiguities and the tensions between the revivalist and reconstructionist drives abounded. Furthermore, despite the big claims put on the table of discussion, systematic approaches remained absent; and what replaced them was a rhetorical approach that sought to instill confidence in Muslim social elites at a dire time and present a blueprint, albeit arguably a superficial one, for a modernist Islam capable of withstanding the rapid changes of the Western-dominated modern world. Most of the early reformers remained meanwhile prisoners of a simplified conception of modernity because of a general lack of direct access to many of the European intellectual productions and a dependence on French colonial claims. The outcome was a selective encounter with both “Islam” and “modernity” and a lack of significant epistemological debates on the status of modern reason or important concepts like revelation.

Resistance and Independence

New developments would seriously impact modernist reformist discourse in the Maghrib around the mid-twentieth century. A shift had to occur from the language of renaissance to that of revolution and resistance as the Maghribi field entered a period of violent struggle against the colonizers with the hope of achieving independence. The time was one of direct confrontation. Reformist leaders became to varying degrees involved in that immediate struggle, carrying the banner of Islam and using its symbolic language to rally the people alongside other nationalist orientations, particularly those on the political left. By the early 1960s, all three countries were independent, with Algeria paying the highest price in loss of life. Furthermore, the newly formed nation-states attempted to keep Islamic discourse tied to the political regimes in one fashion or another, using it as needed for gathering popular support or legitimizing particular policies.

Ultimately, despite their ideological differences, the regimes in place in the three countries created a generally comparable climate for intellectual discourse. The authoritarianism of those regimes, the failure of modernization policies, the lack of significant economic growth, the perceived un-Islamic character of a number of policies, and important regional and global developments all participated to one degree or another in paving the way to an era of strong ideologies that would dominate the second half of the twentieth century. The conflicts between Marxists, Arab nationalists, and a little later Islamists pushed modernist reformism to the side, each co-opting some of its aspects but all taking a more radical and highly politicized approach to shaping national identity. Even someone like ‘Allal al-Fasi, who had forcefully made the case for modernist reform in his *al-Naqd al-dhati* and his *Maqasid al-shari‘a*, took steps in the other direction with the post-independence publication of *difa‘ ‘an al-shari‘a* (*A Defense of Shari‘a*) that called for the “full application of *shari‘a*” and the rejection of Western ideas. As Zeghal points out,

While before independence the concern had been to rethink religion in order to reform it, it was now more important to protect it and to preserve it from outside attack. The idea of reform, of interpreting the text to harmonize it with the cultural developments of Moroccan society, was thus abandoned. Rather than re-interpreting the text, it was necessary to see to its immediate application (63).

Later, al-Fasi had the press of his Istiqlal political party publish the books of Sayyid Qutb, the ideologue of the Muslim Brothers, who after spending many years in prison, was executed by the regime of Nasser (d. 1970) (Zeghal: 72). Nevertheless, the dualist educational path discussed above and the access that some Maghribi students had to advanced studies in France produced new intellectuals, some of whom carried the torch of modernist reformism in more sophisticated directions.

New Directions in Modernist Reformism

The post-independence Maghrib witnessed the slow decline of traditional learning. The regimes in the three countries marginalized, albeit through different processes, such form of learning, putting on the defensive the older traditional elites and limiting the opportunities of future social success for the relatively few who sought that educational path. Not surprisingly, modernist reformism in the second half of the twentieth century became tied to graduates of modern institutions of education both in the Maghrib and abroad. One of the ramifications of this situation is that both French and Arabic were used in intellectual production with Arabic regaining, at least in relative terms, some of its lost status in the latter part of the twentieth century, partly as an outcome of Arabization policies within the educational systems of the three countries. Importantly, the reconstructionist and revivalist drives within the works of reformist figures continued to exist in tension but we must note a number of elements concerning this intellectual output.

The engagement with modern Western intellectual thought became more direct and sophisticated, resulting from much stronger familiarity with the intellectual legacies of the West. This led to the introduction within modernist reformist works of methods and approaches that emerged in the various fields of the humanities and social sciences, although the extent and frequency of use of such methods and approaches differed depending on whether a thinker leaned more heavily towards reconstructionism or revivalism. Moreover, one could recognize within modernist discourses in the second half of the twentieth century a more accentuated critical distance vis-à-vis both modernity and the Islamic tradition. Yet, the epistemological priorities that a modernist displayed in her or his work made it arguably easier to differentiate between a reconstructionist camp and a revivalist one.

I would contend that in that context, a revivalist modernist thinker often posits a solid and identifiable Islamic core based on a strong commitment to texts, doctrines, norms, and practices that were part of what Sunni orthodoxy deemed authoritative and unquestionable. There is certainly no complete agreement about what that core is but the recognized core in each case is generally seen beyond critical enquiry and becomes a starting point for further elaboration of a modernist reformist vision using a range of methodologies in implicit or explicit discussion with modern fields of knowledge. Secondly and more importantly, a

revivalist modernist seeks to maintain Islam as an all-encompassing system, subsuming all reforms and changes under the rubric of an Islamic framework.

A reconstructionist modernist on the other hand is more likely to prioritize contemporary methodologies and philosophical notions and concepts, using their prisms to read the Islamic heritage. In other words, the modernist reformist vision in this case does not bow down to the priorities or categories of the late Sunni orthodoxy or even in some cases to the text of the Qur'an itself. This does not preclude attempts to locate elements within the intellectual field defined by that late Sunni orthodoxy that assist in the sought reconstruction. Significantly and in conjunction with this attitude, a reconstructionist modernist in the latter part of the twentieth century is often eager to keep substantial spaces of human life outside the frame of Islam, defending what can be labeled a secular space and embracing a more or less secular political system.

One feature of the later modernist reformist field is the increasing participation of women in the discussions and debates of Islamic reform. To elaborate on the distinction that I make between revivalist and reconstructionist forms of modernist reformism, I propose to consider the intellectual contributions of two modernist reformers and feminist thinkers within the Moroccan scene, Fatima Mernissi (d. 2015) as an example of reconstructionism and Asma Lamrabet as an instance of revivalism.

Fatima Mernissi

Fatima Mernissi (d. 2015) was a prominent intellectual and noted feminist thinker in Morocco. Trained as a social scientist in France and the United States, Mernissi showed from early on a strong interest in issues surrounding Moroccan women. In order to defend an egalitarian social order she harnessed the tools of her academic training, but she came to realize the vitality of engaging the Islamic tradition given that it continued to shape the worldview of average Muslims in significant ways. In a telling episode that Mernissi recounts in one of her most famous books, her question to a grocer on whether a woman could be a leader of Muslims led to an interesting conversation that a customer cut short by invoking a Prophetic hadith, attesting the inadequacy of female leadership (2010: 7-8). This common attitude of closing the door to a feminist ethos through the use of scriptural texts, particularly hadith literature, was a motivating factor for Mernissi to delve into the world of the Islamic tradition and attempt to articulate a modernist feminist perspective from within Islam.

In *Le Harem Politique* (2010), Mernissi argues that the Prophet's vision was thoroughly egalitarian in its articulation of gender issues. Utilizing Qur'anic texts and the narrative of the Sira as background in addition of making use of some tools of traditional hadith criticism, Mernissi sought to deconstruct the patriarchal structure that Sunni orthodoxy had built and defended. Importantly, in developing her points, she did not shy away from crossing what Sunni orthodoxy would consider red lines.

Among other strategies to make her egalitarian case, Mernissi highlights a moment in the life of the early Muslim community that shows both the commitment of women to be treated as equals and the positive response of revelation to that demand. According to a report found in a number of traditional sources, Umm Salama, one of Muhammad's wives, is said to have

complained to her husband that revelation addressed men but not women. In response, the report explains, this verse was revealed:

Indeed, men who submit and women who submit, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere and women who persevere, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give charity and women who give charity, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard it, and men who remember God much and women who remember Him, God has prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward (Qur'an 33:35).

Based on the context provided and on the wording of the verse in question, Mernissi argues that Umm Salama is not a lone voice but rather expresses the yearnings of a protest movement seeking to ensure that the break that Islam sought to establish vis-à-vis the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* (ignorance) was also achieved on the gender plane. She writes,

Not only did women share the preoccupations of Umm Salama, they also took that response of the heavens for what it was: a break from pre-Islamic practices, questioning the customs that had regulated the relations between the sexes. Regardless of what those traditions were, women were apparently happy about the change and aspired to see things change [further] with the new God . . . [women] would enter in competition with men in wealth sharing (2010: 165).

Although the Qur'anic responses to the wishes of the protesters were positive, Mernissi contends that many among the men of the community were not eager to accept gender egalitarianism and found ways to undermine the drive towards that Qur'anic goal. Mernissi points to reports that portray men as complaining to the Prophet about the role of women and struggling to restore male privilege (2010: 173-77). It is here that Mernissi is arguably willing to move beyond the bounds that Sunni orthodox scholars had drawn.

Mernissi sees this counter-protest as the instigator of new revelations that were less egalitarian (for example, Qur'an 3:32-34) (2010: 178-79). She portrays Muhammad as someone who *did not achieve his egalitarian goal*. According to her, he became prisoner of circumstances in which he could not alienate male fighters at a difficult and violent juncture in the life of his forming community (between the fourth and eighth years of the *hijra*), nor could he eradicate the incidents of molestation that women suffered from in Medina. Looking at the situation from a sociological point of view, Mernissi does not shy away from presenting mundane existence as dictating the direction of revelation and as forcing the Prophet to change course against his own original intentions. Mernissi's conclusion is that "the genius of Muhammad and the greatness of his God . . . is to have put [the equality of the sexes] up for discussion and to have pushed the community to reflect on it" (2010: 192). With this, she laments the fact that many of her Muslim contemporaries in the twentieth century ironically reject that equality under the guise of applying the Sunna of the Prophet.

In addition and importantly, the leading Moroccan feminist seeks to show that some of the Companions of Muhammad whom Sunni scholars have venerated were in fact defenders

of a *jabili* or anti-Islamic ethos concerning gender relations. The figure of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, second Caliph and highly regarded leader in Sunni sources, becomes in Mernissi’s work the epitome of men unwilling to embrace a new order of gender egalitarianism. She cites reports that portray ‘Umar as violent in his interaction with women, also highlighting his invasive intervention to call upon Muhammad’s wives to cease a boycott, through which they had begun to show their displeasure on a particular occasion, before being rebuked by the strong-willed Umm Salama (2010: 196-201).

Moreover, Mernissi finds no issues in rejecting prophetic reports that traditional hadith scholars deemed “sound,” even if found within such “sacralized” collections as the *Sahihayn*. She even utilizes the method of hadith criticism to challenge the authenticity of particular reports that might undermine her modernist feminist vision. For example, she provides ample evidence to try and impugn the figure of Abu Bakra who transmitted the hadith claiming that those who are led by a woman would not succeed (2010: 71-88), although here again she is bold in challenging *‘adalat al-sababa* (the moral/legal probity of all the Companions), a conception that was generally embraced among traditional hadith scholars.

Mernissi’s work shows her willingness to desacralize Islamic history, even its earliest period, by showing that *jabili* practices and beliefs not only continued to play an important role in the life of the early community, but they also became an integral part of the Islamic building that Muslim scholars constructed over the decades and centuries. However, rather than calling for a comprehensive Islamic order that would correct these deviations, Mernissi is arguably more interested in showing the mundane character of the historical development of Islam and in closing the door to the fear from modern notions like democracy, feminism, freedom of thought and belief, or secularism. For her, these modern notions must be established in Muslim societies because of their high value in creating viable social orders in today’s world and because they simply do not contradict the true message of Muhammad. In her *Islam and Democracy* (2002), Mernissi praises secularism, insisting that it was “an attack not on God but on government officialdom and a ban on its use of government funds and institutions to propagate religion, any religion.” She therefore laments that countries like those of the Maghrib “never experienced that phase of history so indispensable to the development of the scientific spirit, during which the state and its institutions became the means of transmitting ideas of tolerance and respect for the individual” (2002: 45-46).

Asma Lamrabet

The reconstructionist reformism of Mernissi can be contrasted to the revivalist attitude of Asma Lamrabet, another modernist reformist thinker who has become influential in Maghribi circles in recent years. Lamrabet is a medical doctor by training, but her encounter with Liberation Theology while living in South America led her on a journey to rediscover her own religion with new eyes. Like Mernissi, Lamrabet calls for the equality of men and women and insists on differentiating between “Islam as a spiritual message and Islam as religious culture with its institutions, ideologies, and various interpretations” (11). Yet, a careful reading of Lamrabet’s work suggests that there are important differences between her perspective and that of Mernissi.

Whereas Mernissi constantly highlights the voices of women, showing along the way the worldly elements shaping their lives, the negative attitude of men towards their emancipation, as well as the remarkable nature of their rebellious attitude even vis-à-vis revelation, Lamrabet wants to move beyond the dichotomy men/women altogether and to focus on the positive role of “faith” in the lives of the believers. Lamrabet focuses on what she terms the global character of the Qur’anic message that speaks to all, “thus transcending all notions of masculine or feminine genders.” She laments the focus on the concept of “women’s rights,” stressing that traditional *fiqh* manuals did not discuss “the status of woman in Islam.” For her, it is more appropriate to return to the generally gender-free attitude of the Qur’an (Lamrabet: 19).

It follows that while Mernissi is keen on repositioning women sociologically as actors in the modern (secular) public sphere without patriarchal limitations based on religion (despite what Qur’anic or Sunnaic texts might imply), Lamrabet wants to reinvigorate what she sees as the gender-blind character of the Qur’an in order to help create a more just modern *Islamic* order. Accordingly, Lamrabet defends the scriptural sources of the Qur’an and hadith, a core not to be challenged, and blames any discriminatory practices on the human interpretations of the ‘*ulama*’ (188-90). When the founding texts seem to directly imply discrimination, Lamrabet proposes to consider a distinction between the spirit of the text and the particular response it gave to a contingent event (21-22). Importantly, when examining a “sound” hadith report from the *Sahihayn* that appears problematic from a modernist feminist perspective by presenting women as originating from a “bent rib,” Lamrabet is unwilling to challenge the status of the hadith itself and instead attempts to interpret the seemingly negative aspects in its *matn* (gist of the matter). Lamrabet argues that the hadith in question belonged to a long series of exhortations of the Prophet during his farewell pilgrimage and that included a strong appeal to men to treat women well (Lamrabet: 46-47).

Interestingly, Lamrabet also discusses the episode of Umm Salama’s concern about the Qur’an not addressing women, prompting the revelation of a verse highlighting the spiritual value of both men and women. Lamrabet’s tone is however different from Mernissi’s. She mentions the idea of women’s protest but downplays it in her narrative, emphasizing instead the consistently egalitarian message of the Qur’an. She writes:

This verse is then a response to those [men and women] who remained reluctant to recognize the egalitarian vision of the last divine message on earth. Although Revelation, from the beginning, never ceased to call upon human beings, men and women, this request of Umm Salama was the occasion to renew this key principle of Islam, namely that women and men were inherently equal in their spiritual and temporal commitments (67).

This short overview does not imply consistency or a lack of contradictions in the works of Mernissi and Lamrabet; a more comprehensive study is necessary to deal with all the complexities of their intellectual contributions. However, the analysis presented above is sufficient to highlight the distinction I make between reconstructionism and revivalism within late modernist reformism in the Maghribi sphere. This classification allows us to distinguish the prevalence of a revivalist approach in the works of such varied figures as Rashed Ghannouchi, Ahmed Khamlichi, Abdesslam Yassine (d. 2012), and Taha Abderrahmane, and

on the other hand the dominance of a reconstructionist approach in the works of thinkers like Abdelmajid Charfi, Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi (d. 1993), Hichem Djait, Olfa Youssef, and Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010).

Conclusion

From a close reading of the intellectual contributions of important early modernist reformers in the Maghrib, I argued that they all began from the premise that Muslims had deviated from the path of true Islam and that there was a need to recapture the spirit of the original message in order to reconnect to that powerful divine blessing. I saw in this commitment what I termed a revivalist drive, an attempt to retrieve an alleged pristine Islam that has been obfuscated and that needed to be revived to guide Maghribi society at a dire time of its history. At the same time, these reformers embraced conceptions and institutions that were clearly part of the modern Western intellectual legacy and practice, including democracy, constitutionalism, freedom of thought, and individual liberties. The difficulty resided in the attempt to locate these conceptions and institutions in a perceived pristine Islam with the goal of radically reimagining the inherited Islamic legacy. This is what I termed a reconstructionist drive. Importantly, these two drives remained in serious tension because all these early attempts at reconciling them remained rather superficial.

I also argued that in the second half of the twentieth century, while modernist reformism lost ground to other perspectives, its engagement with modern Western intellectual thought became more direct and sophisticated, partly as a result of much stronger familiarity with the intellectual legacies of the West. The methods and approaches that emerged within the various fields of the humanities and social sciences in Europe became part of the arsenal of modernist reformers; nevertheless, the extent and frequency of use of such methods and approaches differed depending on whether a thinker leaned more heavily towards reconstructionism or revivalism. Yet, I also suggested that the epistemological priorities that a modernist displayed in her or his work made it easier to differentiate between a reconstructionist camp, that kept substantial spaces of human life outside the frame of Islam, defending what can be labeled a secular space and embracing a more or less secular political system, and a revivalist one, that maintained Islam as an all-encompassing system, subsuming all reforms and changes under the rubric of an Islamic framework, shunning secularism and secular frames of reference.

In order to illustrate the difference between revivalist modernism and reconstructionist modernism as they have evolved in the second part of the twentieth century, I briefly looked at the works of two prominent feminist thinkers in the Maghrib, Fatima Mernissi, as a representative of the reconstructionist camp, and Asma Lamrabet, as a proponent of the revivalist perspective. I would suggest that the classification presented here can be extended to thinkers throughout the Muslim world and I invite fellow researchers to test it in other contexts. I would also argue that the distinctions stemming from the previous analysis could be helpful in limiting the confusions that arise in public discourses over the aims of various individuals and groups who claim to defend an Islamic worldview.

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