

Creeping Theo-Progressivism

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Writing in the *New York Times*, Cato Institute fellow Mustafa Akyol argues that the “Muslim community,” far from campaigning for theocracy (as claimed by “Islamophobes”), is better characterized by a “creeping liberalism.”

He seems to have a point. Prominent radical-Muslim voices now argue for “intersectional feminism.” Groups such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations —just 10 years ago named by federal prosecutors as part of an enormous terror-finance network—rally for Black Lives Matter and campaign for “social justice,” prison reform, and a minimum-wage hike. Leading Salafi clerics protest President Trump’s immigration policies at the border. And the prominent activist Linda Sarsour dreams of “a world free of anti-black racism, islamophobia, xenophobia, antisemitism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, sexism, and misogyny.” Standing against this march of progress, Akyol observes, is a minority of “conservative” Muslim clerics.

Akyol is oversimplifying a much broader array of contending ideas among America’s Sunni Muslims—and its Islamists—on the question of whether progressive politics is the right vehicle for their wider agenda. It’s certainly true that, at one end of the spectrum, a rising group of activists from Islamist circles genuinely seem to believe in a progressive-Islamist alliance. Branches of the Council on American-Islamic Relations are increasingly staffed with young, hijab-wearing graduates of Muslim Student Associations, who appear to have reconciled working for an extremist-linked organization with publishing transgender-rights petitions on their social media accounts. Sarsour, leader of the national Women’s March, appears to be an earnest advocate of Islamist-progressivism, calling for a “jihad” (ostensibly nonviolent) against Donald Trump and quipping: “You’ll know when you’re living under Sharia Law if suddenly all your loans & credit cards become interest free. Sound nice, doesn’t it?”

Other Islamists who have embraced and adopted progressive rhetoric are clearly being duplicitous, however. The Texas-based cleric Omar Suleiman, for instance, has been vocal in protesting the Trump administration’s immigration policies. “Haunting” and “powerful” images of Suleiman gazing into the eyes of an immigrant child ran in national media outlets (with the help of Suleiman himself, who promoted them heavily). And yet, speaking before an Islamist audience, Suleiman has warned Muslim girls that if they are “promiscuous,” they may face death at the hands of a family member. Likewise, Al Jazeera’s social media channel, AJ+, posts documentaries on transgender rights and the wickedness of misogyny, homophobia, and other

bigotries—but its Arabic parent station broadcasts sermons by Muslim Brotherhood clerics advocating the killing of Jews and gays and offering husbands permission to beat their wives.

Some of the most ascetic Muslim clerics reject all ideological alliances. They may engage in barebones interfaith activities, but they do so while warning against accepting the “validity” of other religions and preaching that “Islam in the West is a resistance movement against totalitarian liberal ideology.” (As Michel Houellebecq illustrates with alarming plausibility in his novel *Submission*, this line of thinking may end up appealing to Western traditionalists also frightened by the progressive movement, who find shared values with Islamist ideologues.)

Other Islamists have made it clear that non-Muslim progressive allies are merely useful idiots. As Kyle Shideler of the Counter Islamist Grid recently uncovered, Virginia General Assembly member Ibraheem Samirah compared the Islamist/progressive alliance with the decision of Islam’s final prophet “to form treaties with his enemies.” Muhammad, he said, “had to form alliances with people who weren’t necessarily believers of his message, who would later on become people who would be his enemies.” (Samirah also served as a senior campaign official for freshman Michigan congresswoman Rashida Tlaib.)

Finally, still other Muslim thinkers have begun to regret their forays into progressive politics. Leading clerics such as Yasir Qadhi have expressed shock that Muslim students supported LGBTQ campaigns on local campuses, for example.

In any case, a generation of young American Muslims is growing up convinced that the progressives’ social-justice and sexual-identity narratives are intrinsic components of the Islamist agenda. This doesn’t always go over well with their elders. Some Salafi clerics speak out forcefully against “liberal ideology,” or caution against too close of an embrace of progressive allies—they see their own radicalism being supplanted. In 2018, the first two Muslim women elected to Congress—Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib—won office with the support of both Islamist and progressive voters. Intersectional Islamists have a much greater chance of imposing extremist ideas on American society than the Muslim Brotherhood or the Wahhabis ever did.