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## The Creeping Liberalism in American Islam

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Far from spreading Shariah, as Islamophobes have suggested, America's Muslim clerics are focusing on a more familiar trend: youngsters blending into American life.

Since 9/11, a recurrent theme in the far-right circles of America has been "creeping Shariah." It reflects the fear that Islamic law will silently spread through the land of freedom to ultimately overtake it — to put all women in burqas and all adulterers to death. In this scenario, American Muslims, who make up only 1 percent of the population, will pursue this grand scheme because they are here not for freedom and opportunity, but to form a fifth column in it, as Steve Bannon seriously claimed in 2016.

Those with deeper knowledge of American Muslims, a minority that is much better integrated than some of their counterparts in Europe, can easily see such sordid fantasy as paranoia. Those with some knowledge of American history can also see that this new calumny about Islam has precedents, in the McCarthyism of the Cold War era and the anti-Catholicism of the 19th century.

But here is something even more ironic: When you examine the internal discussions among conservative Muslim leaders or pundits in America today, they don't come across as concocting some "Protocols of the Elders of Mecca." Instead of cheering for any creeping Shariah, they seem worried about a creeping liberalism within American Islam.

Read Mikaeel Ahmed Smith, for example. He's an imam in Virginia who has titled an internet article "A Spiritual Disease in American Muslims, Making Them Gods Above God." His criticism targets a new genre of Muslim bloggers and writers who he says "challenge or outright reject the traditionally normative Islamic view on social issues and Muslim life." These young people care less about traditional religious texts, the imam warns, because of "a rejection of any authority other than one's own intellect."

Or read Butheina Hamdah, an academic, who sees alarming signs of "liberal individualism" among American Muslim women. She thinks the hijab (the Islamic head scarf) is becoming a mere "cultural marker of identity" while losing its "deeper theological dimensions." That is why "trendy" or "sexy" versions of the hijab are emerging, she argues, while young Muslim women embrace feminist notions of "bodily autonomy" and "individual choice."

Perhaps nothing marks this liberal trend more than the skyrocketing acceptance of gay marriage, which, as a 2017 poll showed, is now stronger among American Muslims than among white evangelical Christians. It is also reflected in the pro-L.G.B.T.Q. stance of two new Muslim congresswomen, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar. (This month, Ms. Omar took a lesson in how to integrate into America's pluralist politics when she apologized, after heavy criticism from her

own Democratic Party's leaders, for a tweet that insinuated that American support for Israel is fueled by money from a pro-Israel lobbying group. "Anti-Semitism is real and I am grateful for Jewish allies and colleagues who are educating me on the painful history of anti-Semitic tropes," she said almost immediately, adding, "I unequivocally apologize.")

There are two distinct lines in this trend toward American values. One is a kind of anything-goes social liberalism, spearheaded by small groups like Muslims for Progressive Values. The other, larger line is a political liberalism that accepts a pluralist framework for society while preserving its own social and moral conservatism. Jonathan Brown, a convert to Islam and scholar of Islamic studies at Georgetown University, theorized the latter approach in a much-discussed article in which he accepted gay marriage of non-Muslims by making an analogy to traditional Muslim empires' noninterference in what he called "incestuous Zoroastrian marriages."

Of course, all this is happening within a political context, which Eboo Patel, an interfaith leader, explains in a chapter on "the American ummah" in his book "Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise." In the wake of 9/11, and especially in the Trump era, Mr. Patel writes, worrying about Islamophobia has required the Muslim community to show that it really fits America. Hence, the center of gravity has shifted from "traditional Muslims," whose authority derives from knowledge of religious sources, to a new group of media-savvy "social Muslims," whose strength is interpreting the Muslim experience for the broader society. The interesting twist is that the progressive narrative of the "social Muslims" is having an impact on the whole American Muslim community. "Once you invoke diversity as a value," Mr. Patel writes, it is hard to deny a place to "gay Muslims, Shia Muslims, non-hijabi female Muslims, less-observant-than-you Muslims."

The conservatives are understandably worried that this may go too far. For example, Rashid Dar, a thoughtfully committed Muslim academic, fears the prospect of an irreversible transformation in his community. A life of "adhering to political liberalism in the public sphere but social conservatism at home or at the mosque very easily runs the risk of creating severe cognitive dissonance," he told me. "I used to fear that this might lead to widespread 'reform Islam' movements. What I fear now is widespread nihilism and apathy toward faith."

I think that while this concern is understandable, the opposite may also be true: Young generations may lose the faith if Islam remains too closed to rationality, individuality, tolerance and freedom.

For that reason, I find the American Muslim quandary fascinating — and promising. "Liberalism" as a framework for a free society is painfully lacking in large parts of the Muslim world today. If the Muslim community in the United States, what Mr. Patel called the "American ummah," can embrace that by reinterpreting its traditions without losing itself, it could contribute to the broader ummah by offering new perspectives and a lived example.

Charles Taylor, one of the most prominent thinkers on religion today, reminds us of a historical precedent in an essay from 2011: In the 19th century, American Catholics were seen by the Protestant majority as "inassimilable to democratic mores, in ways very analogous to the suspicions that nag people over Islam today." But, Mr. Taylor added, "American Catholicism evolved and, in the process, changed world Catholicism in significant ways."

A similar transformation took place within American Judaism, as Steven R. Weisman shows in his recent book, "The Chosen Wars: How Judaism Became an American Religion." Rabbinical authority waned, women became empowered, practices were modernized and Reform Judaism flourished.

To say that change would never happen in Islam would be a view too unfair to this third big Abrahamic religion. It would also underestimate America's great potential to attract, and also transform, people of all faiths and races under a simple but rare principle — equal justice under the law. Shouldn't some of those who call themselves "American nationalists" know this better than they seem to know these days?

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