



Fostering Evolution in Islamic Culture

By
Steve McIntosh

Institute for
Cultural Evolution

March, 2015
www.culturalevolution.org

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A Strategy to Defeat the Virulent Ideology of Radical Islamism

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The ongoing rise of radical Islamism in the twenty-first century is a difficult and dire problem, for which *cultural evolution* is really the only viable permanent solution. In fact, it is impossible to adequately understand the causes of this problem without reference to the historical currents of development that have produced it. To overcome this growing threat to world peace and security, not only will Muslims themselves need to evolve, the developed world as a whole will need to grow and mature into a more moral form of civilization. Recognizing how the challenges of militant Islamism can serve as a powerful stimulus for the further evolution of all the forms of culture that are contributing to the problem—pre-modernity, modernity, and postmodernity—is the focus of this paper.

Overview of the Paper

First I examine the cultural factors that make radical Islamist ideology appealing to significant numbers of Muslims. This leads to a consideration of Islam’s “predicament with modernity” and how this dilemma has been exacerbated by postmodern critiques, which have called into question the moral legitimacy of globalization. Next I explore how an understanding of the process of cultural evolution is crucial for countering radical Islamism. This analysis shows that the key to overcoming this virulent ideology involves making traditional Islamic culture stronger and more successful on its own terms. Then I describe how the developed world can encourage the further development of traditional Islamic culture while simultaneously rejecting the illiberal features of Islamic law that continue to render much of Islam incompatible with the globalizing culture of modernity. The paper concludes by describing how “post-secular” forms of progressive spirituality in the West can help empower moderate Muslim change agents in the critical task of reforming Islamic cultural interpretations of the religion of Islam itself.

As I argue, Western culture can respond to the challenge of radical Islamism in ways that

can help Islamic culture evolve to become more compatible with modernity. And this will make the globalizing culture of modernity itself more welcoming for the larger premodern world as a whole.

Causes of Islamism—Tensions Between Traditional Islam and Modernity

As David Brooks writes in the *New York Times*: “The struggle against Islamic extremism has been crippled by a failure of historical awareness and cultural understanding.”¹ So in order to defeat this virulent ideology, the West must come to better recognize the underlying cultural motivations that are driving the Jihadist movement.

Many within this proud civilization feel humiliated by the economic and military ascendancy of the West. And this sense of rivalry creates a “heroic impulse” to try to secure Islam’s influence in the world. But notwithstanding the pathological expressions of this impulse in radical Islamism, this deep-seated desire to rescue Islamic culture from the perceived degradations of modernity includes positive aspects with which the West can actually make common cause. In short, Islam has much to contribute to the future of civilization. Therefore, by clearly understanding and honoring the vital role that Islamic culture will play in the twenty-first century and beyond, we can effectively disempower extremist ideologies by demonstrating to the larger Muslim community that they don’t need to support violence as a means of securing their place within our globalizing world.

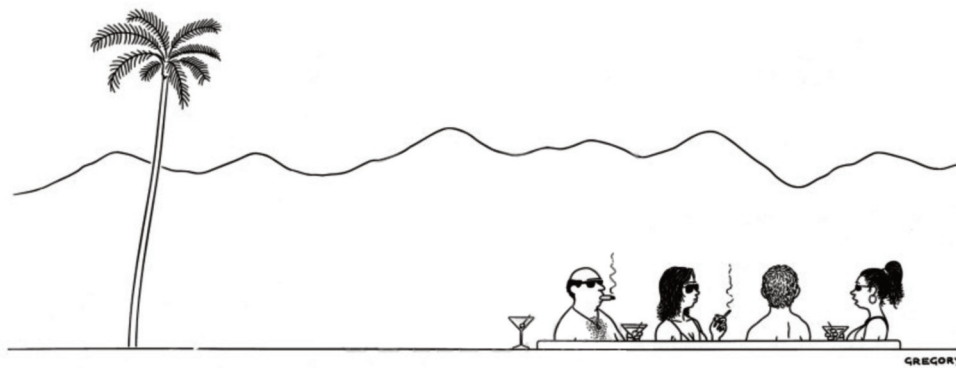
It is important at the outset to affirm that Islamism, the political ideology, is not exactly the same as Islam the religion.² Politics and religion, however, remain largely fused in most Muslim societies. Although the majority of Muslims are moderate and peaceful, the rise of radical, militant Islamism is being caused primarily by the ongoing failure of Islamic civilization as a whole to come to terms with modernity. And this means that militant Islamism is a problem that all Muslims are partially responsible for. Indeed, the damage and disruption wrought by radical Islamism has become a global problem that affects everyone, which means that all of us have a responsibility to try to solve it.

Radical Islamism, however, will only be defeated when the vast majority of Muslims are no longer willing to tolerate it. Islam has 1.6 billion practitioners worldwide, and experts estimate that approximately 15% of this group supports militant Islamism, with some polls showing the percentage of supporters to be much higher in some Muslim countries.³ Even among those Muslims who don’t support outright violence, there are many who nevertheless remain apparently ambivalent about the Jihadist movement. Yet it seems to me that jihadi terrorism presents a severe threat to the religion of Islam itself, so my hope is that the larger Muslim world will come to better acknowledge this threat and take more effective action to combat it.

Even though Islam has always been a “political religion,” and even though it has always had a militant component, the twenty-first century version of radical Islamism has new features. Now more than ever, contemporary Islamism is emerging as the result of the cultural and economic frictions being produced by globalizing modernity. As the material standards of living and personal freedoms enjoyed by those living in the developed world become increasingly visible to Muslims,

this creates discontent among many, and especially Islamic youth, who now represent sixty-percent of the population of Muslim-majority countries.⁴

Yet the discontent that is fueling the growth of radical Islamism does not result only from the attractive but seemingly unobtainable benefits of modernity, it also results from the crimes of modernity, both real and imagined. Muslim grievances with modernity include the West's colonial imperialism and its ongoing collusion with oppressive Muslim dictators, its complicity with the Israeli occupation of Palestine, and perhaps most threatening, the perception that secularism (often understood as synonymous with modernity) stands for the "abolition of religion." For these and other reasons, many in the Muslim world see the ongoing encroachment of cultural modernity as an existential threat to the very survival of Islamic civilization. And this serves to justify their ambivalence, and in many cases their support, of the radicals.



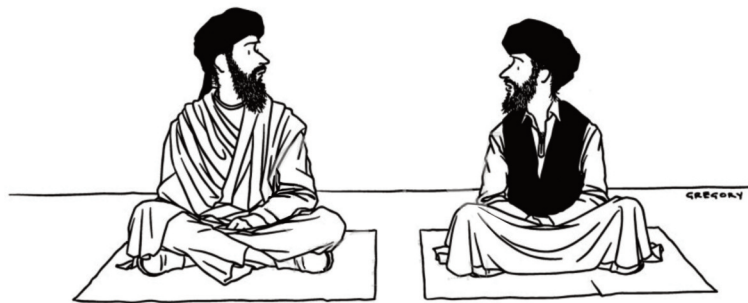
"I think that if these Islamic fundamentalists got to know us they'd like us."

From the perspective of many Muslims, modernity is simultaneously attractive and repulsive, and this has made it difficult for Islamic societies to adjust to the rise of Western civilization. Islamic culture's "predicament with modernity" is well recognized by experts and academics, most of whom advocate some version of an Islamic reformation through which Muslim societies could develop their own homegrown version of modernity, which would be more compatible with their native religion and culture.⁵ Yet the many well-intentioned attempts at Islamic reform, which have been pursued in various quarters over the last 150 years, have been largely unsuccessful because they have failed to reform the actual doctrines and dogmas of Islam itself. And because Islamic religion and culture remain closely connected, cultural reform ultimately depends on religious reform.

However, because the further advance of Islamic civilization appears to be blocked by its current resistance to modernity, many Islamists now perceive "the way forward" in terms of a return to a romanticized vision of its medieval past. Within Islamic culture, the moderate voices of academic reformers, who are sympathetic to traditional Islam but who want to help it become more compatible with modernity, are largely drowned out by the less nuanced messages of radical Islamists on one side, and on the other side by secularists who are generally hostile to their religion.

Caught in this historical dilemma, traditional Islamic culture remains seemingly incapable of reform. Yet the contemporary culture of modernity is also effectively blocked from fostering Islamic reform because of its ingrained opposition to political religion of any kind, and because modernity's overall moral legitimacy has now been undermined by the critiques of postmodernity (discussed below).

While there are many ways that the growing ideology of radical Islamism can be countered and resisted, my focus here is on the cultural dimensions of the problem. Although Muslims have been keen to adopt the *technologies* of modernity, they have yet to adopt the *cultural values* of modernity. However, it is the liberal values of modernity that produce the social developments that make the creation of such technologies possible in the first place. Without the values of personal freedom, civil rights, gender equality, individual achievement, and religious pluralism, the material and social benefits enjoyed by the developed world will remain largely beyond the reach of Islamic civilization. Moreover, “pseudo-modernity”—adopting the technology without the values—can be dangerous, as history has repeatedly shown.



“Granted, actual music is a no-no, but where do we stand on air guitar?”

Defeating the ideology of radical Islamism thus requires the West to gently persuade the majority of Muslims to adopt the liberal values that will be necessary for their peaceful coexistence with the rest of humanity in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Cultural Crosscurrents—the Complicating Influence of Postmodernity

Again, within practically every Muslim society there are moderate reformers who are working to reconcile the religion of Islam with liberal values in an effort to develop a uniquely Islamic version of modernity. Yet it is difficult for Western democracies to effectively support or encourage these reformers because any perception of collusion with the West will severely undermine their credibility with their fellow Muslims. And given the regrettable history of self-interested interference by Western powers in the affairs of Islamic societies, Muslim resistance to any attempt by Americans or Europeans to impose reforms is certainly understandable.

But despite the West's limited ability to directly produce cultural evolution within Islamic societies, the West can foster Islamic evolution indirectly by consciously working to evolve the culture of modernity itself. While this may at first seem unrealistic, the existential problem posed by radical Islamism to both Muslim societies and to developed democracies is providing the impetus that makes such a change possible, and eventually inevitable.

However, understanding how the modernist culture of the developed world can itself evolve so as to facilitate the further evolution of Islamic culture requires us to bring the discourse of postmodernity into our analysis. Over the last fifty years or so, many sensitive thinkers and activists have endeavored to transcend the cultural worldview of modernity by calling into question the shortcomings of modernism, and by critiquing many of its core values. The term "postmodernity" is most frequently understood with reference to the deconstructive critiques of leftwing academics. But beyond academia, within most Western societies there now exists a large demographic segment of counterculturalists who reject many of the achievements of modernity and view its international relations with grave suspicion.

Those who ascribe to this postmodern worldview now comprise approximately twenty-percent of the developed world's population.⁶ And this influential group's staunch opposition to modernity has served to encourage and empower Islamists who have used postmodernity's "hermeneutics of suspicion" to justify their own opposition to modernity. Through this process, both the premodern and postmodern opponents of modernity have now become political bedfellows in their resistance to globalization. What began as a cogent critique of "orientalism" (the West's condescending attitude of superiority toward Islamic culture), has now grown into a kind of "reverse-orientalism" held by many scholars who take a dim view of modernity's motives, and often reject its very legitimacy.⁷

Islamic culture's predicament with modernity has many causes and complicating factors, so I am not implying that these cultural realities explain the situation completely. But there is little doubt that historical and international cultural conflict is a significant cause of the problem of militant Islamism, and thus any viable solution must include a cultural component.



"I certainly hope we don't end up offending Islam."

Understanding the Dialectical Process of Cultural Evolution

A sophisticated understanding of how culture evolves at a macro, historical level is therefore crucial for addressing Islamic terrorism. And the project of developing such an understanding of the

evolution of values and culture is the primary focus of the Institute for Cultural Evolution think tank (“ICE”), under whose auspices this paper is being written. ICE clearly recognizes how culture evolves through a dialectical process, often simplified through the construct of “thesis-antithesis-synthesis.” It was through this process that Western modernity originally emerged beyond its traditional Christian social order during the Enlightenment. The values of modernity thus stand as the antithesis of traditional, premodern values in many important respects. And these same dialectical tensions are even more pronounced in the current cultural opposition between Western culture and Islamic culture.

However, the project of synthesizing the traditional religious values of Islam with the liberal values of modernity has been undermined by the rise of modernity’s own antithesis in the form of postmodern value structures, as mentioned above. In its well meaning attempt to transcend the shortcomings of modernism, postmodern culture has sapped much of modernity’s moral strength, rendering it less effective at persuading Muslims to adopt the emancipatory and liberating values of Western culture overall.

This means that at least three major stages of cultural evolution are now contributing to the problem of radical Islamism—traditional Islam, modernism, and postmodernism. As described in detail elsewhere in ICE’s work,⁸ each of these historically significant worldview stages stand for important values, which are enduring, and which will be necessary for the health and sustainability of humanity’s future civilization overall. Yet none of these worldviews are capable by themselves of fostering the cultural evolution that will be necessary for world civilization to grow out of the problems produced by militant Islamism.

For example, the solution embraced by many within traditional Islam involves a return to an insular medieval past wherein the culture of the West is rejected and Islamic civilization is effectively walled-off from modernity’s corrosive influences. Within modernity itself, conservatives advocate military intervention and a heavy-handed approach to policing all Islamists, even the nonviolent ones. More liberal modernists have pursued a less-violent but similarly dubious strategy of “real-politic,” wherein Western-friendly Muslim dictators have been propped-up in the name of stability. The postmodern solution, by contrast, entails apology and appeasement, under which modernity’s economic and military hegemony is delegitimized, and globalization is rolled back.

From ICE’s perspective, none of these solutions are desirable, nor even workable under current conditions. The project of fashioning a cultural solution to the problem of militant Islamism must involve the establishment of an authentically *synthetic* value perspective—a “post-postmodern” worldview that can sympathetically integrate the positive values of all three of these previous worldview stages, while simultaneously rejecting their respective pathologies and domineering ambitions. The larger contours and details of such a post-postmodern or “evolutionary” value stance are beyond the scope of this paper. But one element of this new synthetic worldview that is particularly relevant to the problem of radical Islamism can be found in the *spiritual perspective* of this emerging evolutionary approach to competing forms of culture, which is discussed below.

It thus bears repeating that the Islamic cultural reform needed to overcome Islamism depends

on the underlying reform of the religion of Islam itself. But in order to persuade moderate Muslims to reform their religion, the necessary vision of a reformed version of Islam must retain the deeply spiritual convictions upon which Islam is founded. Yet secularism's dialectical stance of antithesis toward religious worldviews of every kind means that a sufficiently spiritual version of reformed Islam cannot take root within secular culture.

Muslims are arguably the most religiously devout people in the world. And their stalwart faith prevents them from settling for a secular, watered-down version of Islam as the future course of their religion's development. In order for a reformed version of Islam to be sufficiently attractive to Muslims so as to persuade them to transfer their loyalties to a more modernist-friendly form of their faith, a *post-secular* perspective will be necessary. In response to this challenge, the evolutionary worldview advocated by ICE can provide just the kind of post-secular cultural understanding of the evolution of human faith that is needed to foster the reform of the venerable religion of Islam.

Making Islamic Culture More Successful on its Own Terms

According to this evolutionary worldview's understanding of cultural evolution, each of the major stages of humanity's historical development—traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism—build on the accomplishments, and push off against the shortcomings, of the stage that preceded them in history. In this way, the success of each stage serves as a kind of foundation for the next. And this is why the enduring values of each stage are necessary for the sustainable functioning of human civilization overall.

For example, the values of respect for the law and “fair play” are an important accomplishment of the traditional stage upon which the healthy functioning of modernist economies ultimately depend. Similarly, the modernist values of achievement and progress are what create the wealth and prosperity that enables postmodernists to look beyond the problems of making a living to focus on quality of life issues. The way each emergent stage builds on the accomplishments of its predecessors illustrates an important principle of cultural evolution: The successful transition from one stage of history to the next is made possible when a given stage has achieved the requisite *success* that allows that stage to serve as a platform for its own transcendence. In other words, healthy modernism emerges most readily from the most successful forms of traditionalism. This principle can be seen at work in the history of the Enlightenment, which only emerged after the Protestant reformation had produced a more moral and less corrupt form of Christianity than the medieval Catholicism that had preceded it. Similarly, countercultural postmodernism originally emerged within America's middleclass youth, whose successful parents had already provided most of what modernism had to offer.

To the extent this principle applies to the predicament of Islamic culture, it suggests that the best way for Muslims to create their own native version of modernity is for them to actually make Islam more successful as a religion. While this may at first seem counter-intuitive, this was the path followed by Martin Luther during the Protestant reformation. Luther was not a modernist, he did

not advance Enlightenment values. Rather, Christianity's most successful reformer sought to rescue his religion from corruption and stagnation; he worked to purify Christianity by making it more simple and more moral.

And it was this same spirit of love for his religion that motivated the famous nineteenth century Islamic reformer Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, who explicitly took his inspiration from the work of Martin Luther. Yet unlike Luther, al-Afghani, as well as the other would-be reformers of Islam, have not been able to adequately reform Muslim culture because they have consistently failed to grapple with the needed task of reforming the actual doctrines and dogmas of Islam itself.⁹ In other words, the failure of Muslim reformers to change their culture demonstrates how Islamic cultural reform ultimately requires a reformation in the interpretation of the religious teachings of Islam itself.

There is no doubt that Islamic culture needs to evolve. If it continues to spawn militant versions of itself, this may eventually lead to the destruction of Islam as a world religion. It thus devolves upon those who love Islam to help rescue it from this fate by reforming the interpretation of its religious teachings. At the traditional stage of cultural evolution, religious teachings are foundational and culturally determinative. Islamic reformers, however, have so far been unable to effectively change or reinterpret Islam's spiritual teachings because many Muslims understand the Quran to be a Divine revelation that is final and unchangeable.

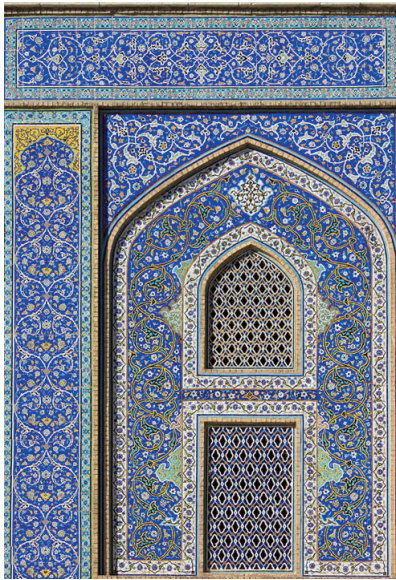


Yet Islamic history itself shows that this doctrine of the immutability of the Quran has not been followed in practice. The teachings of Islam have been interpreted in a wide variety of ways over the last fourteen hundred years. Indeed, during Islam's golden age the Quran was interpreted to support reason, science, and tolerance for other religions. While the forces of religious fundamentalism eventually triumphed and effectively extinguished the reason-friendly version of Islam that prevailed during its golden age, the most powerful contemporary forms of Islamic fundamentalism, such as Salafism and Wahhabism, have only arisen relatively recently, and partially in response to the perceived threats of modernity. So perhaps ironically, the rise of these ultra-conservative forms of Islam actually prove that the religion of Islam is in fact subject to changing interpretations.

Therefore, if Islam can “go backward” in response to modernity, it can also find a way to go forward toward a new era of peace and global cooperation. And understanding how such an advance can be fostered and encouraged by non-Muslims begins by recognizing how, like every religion, *Islam is a line of spiritual development* within human history.

Understanding Islam as a Spiritual Line of Development

The notion of an “essential Islam” that can never change is a myth perpetrated by both Western orientalist and Muslim fundamentalists. As discussed above, Islamic culture is seemingly frozen in history because of the deep love that Muslims feel for their religion—their loyalty to Islam prevents the majority from adopting the culture of modernity out of fear that their religion will be extinguished at the hands of secularism. Yet it is this fierce loyalty to their religion that actually offers Muslims a way out of their current predicament.



Harnessing these religious loyalties as a force for positive change involves identifying the enduring features of Islam that can edify humanity as a whole into the future. There is no doubt that much of Islam is true, beautiful, and good. Yet these essential gifts of Islam remain closely woven together with cultural and doctrinal pathologies—outworn medieval scaffolding—that tend to obscure the light that Islam brings to the world.

Therefore, the task of reforming Islam must begin by carefully teasing apart the “dignities from the disasters.” And this project of illuminating the enduring values of Islam is facilitated by anticipating how this cultural line of spiritual development will likely evolve as it grows out of the traditional stage of its birth and into higher and future levels of historical development.

The idea that Islam needs to evolve into higher stages of development is not just my value judgment, this is clearly the aspiration of the majority of Muslim youth who yearn to share in the freedom and prosperity that has been achieved by the developed world. And this aspiration for the positive evolution of Islam is also shared by many non-Muslims who recognize that this ancient world religion is a treasure worth preserving.

Post-Secular Spirituality

But again, the biggest obstacle to the emergence of a more modernist-friendly version of Islam is the deep-seated fear that embracing modernity will lead to a form of cultural secularism that will eventually result in the extinction of the religion of Islam. Secularism, however, will begin to appear much less threatening to Muslims as they come to see how secular modernism is not the end of

history. As noted, cultural evolution in the developed world is now producing postmodern and post-postmodern forms of culture, both of which are “post-secular,” and thus more friendly to spirituality and religion.

In America at least, progressive postmodern culture has enthusiastically reclaimed spirituality through its discovery of the wisdom of Buddhism, Hinduism, and a host of alternative spiritual forms. In addition to its embrace of Westernized versions of Eastern religions, progressive spirituality also includes a wide variety of esoteric teachings, as well as nature-oriented forms of spirituality such as shamanism, paganism, and eco-spirituality. While progressive spirituality remains largely countercultural, the rise of the myriad flavors of alternative spirituality in America and elsewhere contradicts the assumptions of modernist intellectuals who, for the last century at least, have been predicting the demise of religion in the developed world. The success of progressive spirituality accordingly demonstrates that humanity’s quest for spiritual truth will continue beyond scientism and atheism, which have provided secular modernism’s most culturally visible answers to the quest for the meaning of existence.

Like secular modernism, however, postmodern spirituality cannot provide the cultural soil in which a reformed yet authentic version of Islam can take root. As is the case with modernism, postmodern culture is still engaged in the task of overcoming the pathologies of its own religious heritage. As progressive postmodern culture emerged in America as a significant social force in the sixties and seventies, it sought to reclaim the sacred dimensions of life by redefining spirituality in an attempt to overcome the seemingly stale religious traditions of the Judeo-Christian establishment. Postmodernists accordingly embraced primarily nontheistic forms of spirituality that had a distinctly different feel and flavor than the traditional Western religions they were attempting to transcend.

Although this Western countercultural spiritual milieu now includes certain forms of Islam, such as mystical Sufism, and the poetry of Rumi and Hafez, postmodern spirituality generally rejects strong versions of theism such as those found at the heart of Islam. While the nontheistic preferences of postmodernism may be evolutionarily appropriate for its position in the timeline of humanity’s historical development, progressive spirituality’s aversion to monotheistic notions of God means that Islam’s biggest strength—its single-minded devotion to the personal creator of the universe—cannot be fully appreciated or embraced at the postmodern level of progressive spiritual culture.

The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality

However, like modernism, postmodernism is not the end of history either. Since the turn of the present century, a new form of culture has been gaining ground in the developed world. This emerging evolutionary perspective transcends the countercultural limitations of the postmodern worldview by moving beyond postmodernism’s antithetical stance toward modernism into a more synthetic view that can effectively integrate the values of traditionalism, modernism, and postmodernism.

This post-postmodern or evolutionary worldview contains a strong post-secular spiritual

component, known as *evolutionary spirituality*, which builds on the accomplishments of progressive spirituality, while also transcending its biases against the religious heritage of Western civilization. Evolutionary spirituality, however, is not a religion or belief system in itself. Rather, it represents a new level of pluralistic cultural agreement that includes and uplifts many of the existing forms of spirituality found within contemporary culture. Evolutionary spirituality rejects progressive spirituality's New Age pseudoscience and commercialized focus on self-help. Yet evolutionary spirituality honors and carries forward progressive spirituality's emphasis on spiritual practice and its refined appreciation for "nondual" spiritual teachings.

As I argue at length in my forthcoming book, *The Presence of the Infinite*,¹⁰ as postmodern spirituality has developed over the last forty years, it has placed increasing emphasis on nontheistic or nondual spiritual teachings, such as those found in Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, and in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. Postmodernists generally prefer nondual spirituality because it is perceived to be free from the more objectionable aspects of historically received Judeo-Christian religion, such as patriarchy and reliance on myths and miracles. And even though the historical significance of the rise of progressive nondual spirituality has not yet been adequately recognized by the mainstream, I believe that in the future this cultural development will be loosely compared to other major religious emergences, such as the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

In contrast to progressive spirituality, however, evolutionary spirituality recognizes that the theism of the Abrahamic religions has not been superseded or rendered obsolete by the rise of nondual spirituality in the West. Evolutionary spirituality sees how theism and nondualism actually represent an existential polarity that can be found throughout the history of world religion. And both sides of this existential polarity have an important role to play in the future evolution of human spirituality overall. Evolutionary spirituality accordingly rediscovers and reaffirms the enduring truths of a loving Creator, but at a post-mythic, post-secular, and post-postmodern level wherein theistic notions of God can be better harmonized with science.

This discussion of the relationship between theistic and nondual visions of ultimate reality within the context of progressive Western culture may seem far removed from the goal of defeating radical Islamism. However, as noted, moderate Muslim thought leaders have so far been unable to effectively reform Islamic culture's interpretation of the religion of Islam. And this inability to reform Islamic religion has resulted in a corresponding failure to reform Islamic culture. This points to the conclusion that theological reformation must be a central component of any viable strategy to defeat militant Islamism. Therefore, the rise of a new kind of progressive spiritual culture in the West—a form of culture that can appreciate the theistic truths of Islam with new eyes and at a new level—is a significant development.

Evolutionary spirituality's reclaimed affinity for God can make a significant contribution to the project of helping to tease apart the dignities from the disasters within Islamic religious teachings by better recognizing the enduring truths of practically all forms of theistic spirituality. And by helping to revive theism in the West, evolutionary spirituality can also help allay Islamic fears about secularism by showing how the idea of a merciful and compassionate personal God will continue to play a prominent role in the future evolution of religion.

Post-Secular Empowerment of Moderate Muslim Reformers

As I argued above, the key to defeating militant Islamism involves making traditional Islamic culture more successful on its own terms. If Islam were stronger and more confident in its encounter with modernity, it could better resist the regressive currents within it that seek to drag Islam back into its medieval past. And by becoming more successful at the traditional level, Islamic culture can also function as a foundation for the further evolution of Islam as a spiritual line of development that can evolve through the modernist level and beyond.

Yet this raises the question: How can a newly emerging and still relatively obscure form of pluralistic spirituality, such as evolutionary spirituality, have any impact on the traditional religion of Islam? Although there are a few leaders within evolutionary spirituality who identify as Muslim, this movement is not a new version Islam. Evolutionary spirituality, however, *is* a new version of human spirituality overall, and one in which Islam is rediscovered and deeply appreciated. And it is this newfound love for Islamic spiritual teachings in the pluralistic West that can actually help strengthen traditional Islam by giving it more confidence in the face of secularism.

As discussed above, critical postmodernism has had a significant impact on the discourse of the Islamic world. Postmodern academia's attempt to deconstruct the liberal values of modernity has proved to be a boon to premodern Islamists who seek to delegitimize modernity in the eyes of their fellow Muslims. So there can be little doubt that avant garde forms of Western culture can indeed influence events in the Islamic world.

So now that a post-postmodern form of culture is arising in the developed world that can counter the anti-modernist sentiments of postmodernists, this too can serve as a boon for Muslim intellectuals. But in this case the advantage will go to moderate Muslim reformers who seek to evolve Islam in ways that will make it more friendly to modernity.



Muhammed receiving revelation from the Angel Gabriel

Beyond Respect: Learning to Love Islam

Perplexed by the rise of radical Islamism, most Western liberals have adopted a stance of politically correct respect and multicultural sensitivity toward the religion of Islam. The story they want to believe is that this is just “extremist groups abusing Islam” or the “misuse of religion by a vocal minority.” However, as I have argued, militant Islamism is being caused primarily by Islamic culture’s inability to adopt or accommodate the globalizing culture of modernity. Therefore, ameliorating the global threats posed by radical Islamism means finding a way to welcome the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims into the culture of modernity and beyond. And doing this means welcoming the religion of Islam itself. Yet in its current form as a political religion that seeks to impose Sharia law, Islam remains largely incompatible with the liberal values of modernity.

We thus need to find a way to welcome the best of Islam—the enduring truths of Islam—into our culture while simultaneously rejecting and resisting its repressive premodern elements. At a cultural level, this means we need to go beyond tolerance and respect; we need to find ways to actually *love Islam*.

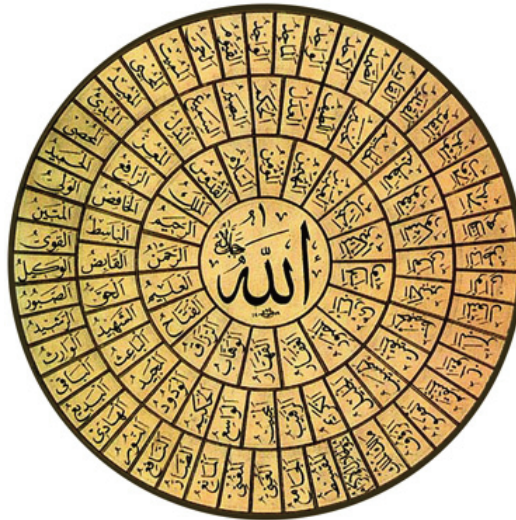
In my travels to Egypt, Turkey and Palestine, I have been consistently struck by the beauty of Islamic art and architecture. The faith of Islam has inspired some of humanity’s most beautiful creations. And the spiritual beauty of this ancient religion points to the very deep truths that are contained within its teachings. Attempting to discern these truths from the perspective of evolutionary spirituality begins to show that Islam’s most essential truth is found in its clear connection to God.

The universe exists—we are here—and this fact challenges us to search for an explanation. Even if we accept the assertions of scientism, that the big bang was brought about through the natural



The Taj Mahal—the world’s most beautiful building—is an artifact of Islamic culture

outworking of the laws of physics, the question remains: If the laws of physics are so marvelously creative, then what created the laws of physics? Our universe is an unmistakable demonstration of creative causation, and for the vast majority of humanity, God will always be the best answer to the question of why the universe exists. This is demonstrated by the fact that the majority of the world's modernists, who are not particularly religious, nevertheless continue to have faith that a self-aware Creator is the ultimate source of reality. And this means that God is not going away.



The 99 Names of God in Islam

Therefore, as human culture continues to evolve into the future, Islam can make a vital and ongoing contribution to humanity's understanding of God. As the progressive Christian theologian Hans Küng writes, we must endeavor to "understand the Quran as a living message, continually heard anew ... as the great prophetic testimony to the one and only mighty and merciful God, the creator and completer."¹¹ Even though the spiritual culture of the future will include many who are nontheistic or atheistic, theism will clearly continue to provide an answer to life's existential questions for billions of people. And within this theistic understanding of ultimate reality, the unwavering devotion to God that is the heritage of Islam can and will continue to edify humanity. As the fourteenth century Persian poet Hafez wrote:¹²

All the Great Ones speak of
The vital need
To keep remembering God,
So you will come to know and see Him ...

That is why Hafez says:
Bring your cup near me.
For all I care about
Is quenching your thirst for freedom!

Even for those of us who do not identify as Muslims, the religion of Islam can inspire us to sustain our awareness of the presence of God. As is written in the Quran: “Truly, in remembering God do hearts find rest.”¹³

As we learn more about the beauty and truth contained within the teachings of Islam, we may indeed come to love the enduring features of this religion. And as the West comes to better appreciate Islam in a culturally apparent way, this will empower the moderate Muslim reformers who are working to rescue this religion from those who would destroy it from within.

And perhaps, as it gains ground and becomes more culturally visible, this much needed project of theological reform may serve as an alternative channel for the expression of the “heroic impulse” that is now recruiting Muslim youth to fight for the honor of Islam. That is, the same sense of duty that now calls Muslims to rescue Islam from secularism can be harnessed in the service of evolving Islamic theology so as to advance a peaceful and pluralistic expression of Islam’s essential teaching that “God is great.”

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the battle between radical Islamism and the West is a cultural battle that is being fought for hearts and minds. And cultural battles are fought primarily with morality. The West’s response to the threat of radical Islamism can thus become more moral by going beyond modernist strategies of containment, and postmodern strategies of appeasement. While we must combat this threat through many means, including educational, economic, diplomatic, and even military responses, all of these responses will be more effective when they are accompanied by a *strategy of love* that welcomes religious Muslims into the culture of the developed world.

By evolving Western culture in a way that makes it more friendly to Islam, this will make the globalizing culture of modernity more welcoming for the larger premodern world as a whole. It is thus in this way that Islamic culture’s resistance to modernity can be used as a stimulus to produce forms of cultural evolution that can actually help improve our global civilization overall.

End Notes

1. David Brooks, “The Nationalist Solution,” New York Times Op-ed February 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/opinion/david-brooks-the-nationalist-solution.html>
2. “Islamism” includes the Muslim Brotherhood, and arguably even the ruling Turkish AK Party. So not all forms of Islamism are actively militant, but most seek to impose some version of Sharia law.
3. See Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003). While polling in Muslim countries is difficult, and results are said to be unreliable, it is worth noting the responses to a 2009 Pew Global poll which asked whether suicide attacks against civilians in defense of Islam are justified. According to this poll, 68% of Palestinian Muslims, 43% of Nigerian Muslims, 38% of Lebanese Muslims, 15% of Egyptian Muslims, 13% of Indonesian Muslims, and 12% of Jordanian Muslims agree that such violence is justified. For a compilation of Muslim opinion polls see: <http://www.thereligionofpeace.com/pages/opinion-polls.htm>

4. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/opinion/global/the-challenge-of-muslim-youth.html>
5. See e.g. Shireen T. Hunter, *Reformist Voices of Islam* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 2009), Bassam Tibi, *Islam's Predicament with Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford University Press 2012), and Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (Syracuse University Press, 1997).
6. See Ronald Inglehart, ed. *Human Values and Social Change* (New York: Brill, 2003), and Paul Ray and Sherry Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives, How 50 Million People are Changing the World* (New York: Harmony Books, 2000).
7. Bassam Tibi, *Islam's Predicament with Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2009) pp. 199-200.
8. See The Institute for Cultural Evolution's paper, *Premises and Principles of the Evolutionary Worldview* (2012), <http://www.culturalevolution.org/about-us/our-philosophy>
9. See Bassam Tibi, *Islam's Predicament with Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2009) pp. 37-28. See also Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford University Press 2012). Notably, Hashemi describes how the Catholic theological reformation of the 2nd Vatican Council in 1959 produced a "third wave" of democratization, which resulted from its sacralization of human rights.
10. Steve McIntosh, *The Presence of the Infinite: the Spiritual Experience of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2015).
11. Hans Kung, *Christianity & World Religions: Paths to Dialogue* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986) p. 36.
12. Hafez, from the poem: *I Know the Way You Can Get* (Circa 1380)
<https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6461611.Hafez>
13. *The Quran*, Sura 13, Verse 28.

Steve McIntosh J.D. is President of the Institute for Cultural Evolution think tank. A leader in the integral philosophy movement, he is author of three books on cultural evolution. McIntosh is an honors graduate of the University of Virginia Law School and the University of Southern California Business School. For more on ICE visit: www.culturalevolution.org