

ISLAM

THE STRAIGHT PATH



Third Edition

John L. Esposito

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1998

Neorevivalist Movements

Parallel to modernist reforms initiated in the first half of the twentieth century was the emergence of a neorevivalism, new religious societies, in particular Hasan al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Mawlana Mawdudi's Jamaat-i-Islami (the Islamic Society) in the Indian subcontinent. These movements saw the Islamic community of the twentieth century at a critical crossroads. Like secular and Islamic modernists, they acknowledged the internal weakness of the community, the external threat of Western imperialism, and the value of science and technology. However, the Brotherhood and the Jamaat were more sweeping in their condemnation of the West and assertion of the total self-sufficiency of Islam. While secularists rejected Western political hegemony, they still looked to the West in charting their present and future. They adopted Western dress, manners, music, and movies, and appropriated Europe's political, economic, educational, and legal institutions. Islamic reformers struggled to provide an Islamic rationale for selective borrowing from the West. However, neorevivalist movements like the Brotherhood and the Jamaat saw their options more clearly and simply. Both capitalism and Marxism represented man-made secular paths that were alien to the God-ordained, straight path of Islam. If Muslims were to remain faithful to God and His divine will, they must reject Western secularism and materialism and return solely to Islam, whose perfection assured guidance in all aspects of life:

Until recently, writers, intellectuals, scholars and governments glorified the principles of European civilization . . . adopted a Western style and manner. . . . Today, on the contrary, the wind has changed. . . . Voices are raised . . . for a return to the principles of Islam . . . for initiating the reconciliation of modern life with these principles, as a prelude to a final Islamization.⁷⁵

For the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami, Islam was not restricted to personal piety or simply a component in social or political life—it was a comprehensive ideology for personal and public life, the foundation for Muslim state and society.

Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) of Egypt and Mawlana Abul Ala Mawdudi (1903–79) of India were both raised in the shadow of British colonialism in societies where anticolonial national independence movements were active. They were pious, committed Muslims whose upbringing and education exposed them to Islamic education, modernist thought, and Western learning. Hasan al-Banna had studied in Cairo, where he

The Muslim Brotherhood grew rapidly as a mass movement, soon expanding beyond its rural lower- and lower-middle-class background to include many members of the new middle class in urban areas. It attracted a broad following: clerks, policemen, merchants, teachers, lawyers, physicians, civil servants, soldiers, and university students. At its height, its membership was estimated at from five hundred thousand to 1 million. In contrast, the Jamaat had a more restricted membership, focusing on developing a new elite leadership. For Mawdudi, change resulted from a vanguard working within society, and therefore, in contrast to the Brotherhood, the Jamaat was primarily an elite rather than a populist organization, concerned with training a core of well-educated and Islamically committed leaders. Although an activist, Mawdudi focused on a systematic presentation of Islam. A gifted and prolific writer, he attempted to provide a theoretical blueprint for the revival of Islam, or what he termed the process of Islamic revolution. His books and articles discuss such themes as the Islamic way of life, Islam and its relationship to the state, law, marriage, and the family, veiling and the seclusion of women, and economics.

Under the leadership of the Supreme Guide, Hasan al-Banna (and later, its prolific and influential ideologue Sayyid Qutb), and Mawlana Mawdudi, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami reinterpreted Islamic history and tradition to respond to the sociohistorical conditions of the twentieth century. Both regarded Islam as the all-embracing ideology. The union of religion and society, the relationship of Islam to all aspects of life, followed from the doctrine of God's unity (*tawhid*) and sovereignty over all creation as embodied in the comprehensive nature of the Sharia: "The sharia is a complete scheme of life and an all embracing social order."⁷⁶ As they looked at their societies, and the Muslim world in general, both Hasan al-Banna and Mawlana Mawdudi attributed the impotence of their communities to political disunity, social dislocation, moral laxity, and a growing indifference to religion. Western secularism, with its separation of church and state, and the unbridled materialism of capitalism and Marxism were regarded as the major culprits. In contrast, they argued, Islam's organic relationship among religion, politics, and society distinguished it from the West. The separation of religion from the state represented for the Brotherhood and the Jamaat the inherent fallacy of Western secularism. Withdrawal of divine guidance would be the basis for its moral decline and ultimate downfall. Western culture, and all who do not follow Islam, exist, as did pre-Islamic society, in a state of ignorance and darkness.

came into contact with Rashid Rida and the Salafiyya movement. He was influenced by the reformist thought of al-Afghani and Abduh, but as channeled through the more conservative, revivalist phase of Rida's life and *al-Manar* in the 1920s, with its emphasis on the dangers of Westernization and the complete self-sufficiency of Islam. He established the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. Mawlana Mawdudi, on the other hand, had been given a traditional Islamic education in which modern education was assiduously avoided. It was only later that he learned English and taught himself modern subjects. In 1938, at the invitation of Muhammad Iqbal, he moved to Lahore and in 1941 founded the Jamaat-i-Islami. Despite distinctive differences in their movements due to local conditions, both Hasan al-Banna and Mawlana Mawdudi combined religion with social activism. They shared a revivalist ideology and established activist organizations that remain vibrant today and have served as an example for others throughout much of the Muslim world.

Both the organization and the ideological outlook of the Brotherhood and the Jamaat were modeled on the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his first Islamic religious reform or revolution. The Islamic paradigm was reinterpreted and reapplied by these modern religious societies as it had been by revivalists and reformers in the past. Like Muhammad, they established communities of true believers who were distinguished from the rest of society and were totally committed to the struggle (jihad) to transform society. They did not leave (*hijra*) their societies but instead organized their followers into an Islamically oriented community or party within the broader (un-Islamic) society, forming a group of committed, like-minded Muslims who were to serve as the dynamic nucleus to transform society from within. In a sense, they were the vanguard of a religiously motivated elite. They were not a political party, but an ideological fraternity, as their names, the Society of Muslim Brothers (Jamaat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin) and the Jamaat-i-Islami (Islamic Society), signified. Each developed a well-knit socioreligious organization with a network of branches and cells. Members were trained and reinforced in their faith and commitment to create a more Islamically oriented state and society; this was their reformist struggle or jihad. They were carefully selected and underwent a period of training and ideological indoctrination that emphasized religious knowledge and moral fitness, and concentrated on moral and social programs. Religious instruction, youth work, schools, hospitals, religious publications, and social-welfare projects were among the activities utilized to create a new generation of leaders in a morally strong society.

Both the Brotherhood and the Jamaat incorporated the ideology, symbols, and language of revivalism within their reformist interpretation of Islam. There were two historic options—ignorance and Islam. Modern Muslim society was compared with that of pre-Islamic Arabia, a period of ignorance (*jahiliyya*), disunity, exploitation, and superstition. They felt that much of the Muslim world was gripped by factionalism, Sufi excesses, and acculturated, alien European institutions, practices contrary to Islam. The unity of the brotherhood of believers must replace the religious, political, and socioeconomic factions that divided and weakened the *umma*. Following revivalist logic, they called for a return to the Quran, the Sunna of the Prophet, and the practice of the early community to establish an Islamic system of government. Like Islamic revivalists and modernists, they rejected *taqlid* and upheld the right of *ijtihad*. They followed modernists in their acceptance of change through legal reform, though not accepting its application in modern family law reforms, which they regarded as Western in inspiration and intent. Unlike Islamic modernists who looked to the West and provided an Islamic rationale for the appropriation of Western learning, these contemporary revivalists emphasized the perfection and comprehensiveness of Islam and, hence, its self-sufficiency. All that Muslims needed could be found in or derived from the Islamic tradition. While open to science and technology, they denounced Muslim intellectuals and governments for their dependence on the West. They believed that the renewal of Muslim society and its social transformation or modernization must be rooted in Islamic principles and values. Thus, instead of speaking of democracy as such, the Brotherhood and Jamaat accepted the modernist reinterpretation of traditional concepts of consultation and community consensus, but noted that in an Islamic democracy the will of the people remained subordinate to the divine will. Mawlana Mawdudi called this a theocracy to distinguish it from a theocracy, or a clergy-run state, which he rejected. In an Islamic state, democracy could never mean that the majority had the power to legislate laws that contradicted religious belief regarding alcohol, gambling, prostitution, and so forth. Emphasizing the universality of the *umma* and its mission, they rejected nationalism and European-inspired legal codes, which they regarded as un-Islamic and a threat to Islamic identity, and called instead for an Islamic state to be governed by the Sharia. However, both Hasan al-Banna and Mawlana Mawdudi tempered their idealism with a realistic pragmatism. Mawdudi had rejected both Hindu and Muslim nationalism in India and initially refused to support the establishment of Pakistan as a separate homeland for Muslims. Like al-Afghani, Rida, and

Iqbal, pan-Islamic aspirations gave way to a reluctant acceptance of political reality, and thus al-Banna and Mawdudi focused on Egypt and Pakistan respectively, while remaining committed to the eventual restoration of worldwide unity and involved in the broader concerns of the *umma*.

Although they were not political parties, their holistic vision, their belief that the Islamic community was to exist in a state and society governed by Islamic law, drew the Brotherhood and the Jamaat into the political arena. Both had understood their social revolution or reform as occurring within society; their paths differed as a result of differences in political conditions. The Muslim Brotherhood's dissatisfaction with the failure of Egypt's government to establish an Islamic state escalated into violence, armed conflict, and the assassination of its founder in 1949. Government repression drove the Brotherhood deeper underground and subsequently led to a series of confrontations, imprisonment, executions, and, finally, its suppression and proscription in Egypt in the mid-1960s. In Pakistan, the Jamaat often found itself in opposition to governments and resorted to political action and participation in elections. Although Mawdudi and his followers were sometimes imprisoned for their activities, by and large they were able to work within the system.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i-Islami demonstrate the strength and attractiveness of neorevivalist movements. After the Brotherhood was banned in Egypt and apparently crushed as its leaders were executed, imprisoned, or driven into exile, Muslim Brotherhood organizations continued to grow in many other parts of the Muslim world—the Sudan, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Kuwait. Similarly, the Jamaat-i-Islami established organizations in India, Afghanistan, and Kashmir as well as Pakistan. What was the basis of the appeal of neorevivalists? First, they presented themselves as an indigenous movement. Although similar to modernists in their critique of Sufi excesses, saint worship, and the backwardness of the *ulama* and in their appeal to the process of premodern revivalism, neorevivalists did not seek to address modern life by demonstrating the compatibility of Islam with the West. Instead, they claimed that Muslims could adapt to the demands of modernity by reference to Islam alone. There was no need to go outside Islam's way of life, no need to be dependent on the West and run the danger of Westernizing Islam. Second, the organization and activism of neorevivalists contrasted sharply with the tendency of modernism to consist of a loose circle of intellectuals. Their emphasis on discipline, loyalty, and training as well as social-activist programs resulted in more cohesive and effective organizations. Third, though

crime rates, sexual promiscuity) of the West were exploited in a polemic that selectively compared Western realities with Islamic ideals, Western Christendom at its worst with Islam at its best. Secularism was equated with godlessness, an absence or denial of religious values, rather than a separation of church and state in order to guarantee religious freedom in pluralistic societies. Women's emancipation movements were dismissed as Western-inspired, anti-Islamic attacks on the sanctity of the family. Instead of adequately reexamining issues related to the real status of Muslim women (education, employment, divorce), traditional patterns were simply reaffirmed without a serious consideration of changing social realities. The source of these problems goes to the heart of the relationship between faith and history, divine revelation and human interpretation.

Neorevivalists have tended to follow conservative traditionalists in their tendency to equate the historical interpretation they inherited from their elders with revelation. They accept a rather romanticized, static notion of the development of Islamic belief and practice. This posture is understandable, given their perception and experience of modernity as the threat of Western political and cultural domination and assimilation. It resulted from the state of siege posed by both European powers and Muslim secular elites, who were regarded as indigenous domestic colonizers responsible for the Westernization of Muslim society: "The faction which works for the separation of Egypt from Islam is really a shameless, pernicious, and perverse group of puppets and slaves of Europe."⁷⁷ The need to respond to this internal and external threat motivated revivalists to assume a defensive posture, to defend Islam and its way of life against Westernization, instead of to adequately reexamine and reinterpret Islam. Both Islamic revivalism and modernism failed to produce an integrated, new synthesis or interpretation of Islam. Yet, this did not mean that the Brotherhood and the Jamaat were not open to change. Nothing could be more mistaken than to stereotype their goals as a simple, literalist return to the seventh century. However, the interpretation of Islam implicit in the ideological worldview of revivalism was limited by its failure to reexamine Islamic history more thoroughly. Lacking an awareness of the actual historical (as distinguished from the idealized) development of their faith, revivalists could not fully appreciate the dynamic, creative process of Islamization that characterized the development of Islamic law and theology. They were unable to realize the extent to which human reasoning and sociohistorical conditions affected the formulation of belief and practice: the role of local customary practice in law, social practice as a source of *hadith*, the influence of political consider-

criticizing blind adherence to medieval Islam and claiming the right to *ijtihad*, neorevivalist condemnation of Western values (Westernization) and insistence on the self-sufficiency of Islam proved more attractive to many of the *ulama* and the more traditional sectors of society. This was more akin to the traditional interpretation of Islam that they had learned and the lifestyle and values they cherished. Quite simply, the degree of change advocated by neorevivalists seemed less radical than that of the modernists, less of a departure from tradition. While neorevivalists and modernists advocated legal change, in practice, in sensitive areas like family law reform, the Brotherhood and the Jamaat made common cause with the majority of the traditionalist-oriented *ulama*. They also tended to agree in their condemnation of the free mingling of the sexes, Western dress and manners, movies, and banking interest. The Islamic credentials of modernists, on the other hand, were eroded by the tendency of many of the colleagues or students of early modernists to follow a liberal, Western secular path.

Neorevivalism blended the worldview that informed the activism of premodern revivalist groups, like the Wahhabi and Mahdi movements, with the holistic vision of Islam articulated in theory by modernists like al-Afghani, Abduh, and Iqbal. The result was an ideology grounded solely on Islam, an Islamic alternative that presented Islam as a timeless, rational, comprehensive faith whose transcendent message was relevant to this life as well as the next. Islam was identified with the everyday lives and concerns of Muslims. Poverty, illiteracy, economic exploitation, education, and health care were all issues to which the Islamic message was relevant. The transcendent was made immanent not by Sufi withdrawal or indifference to the material world but by involvement in it. For the Brotherhood and the Jamaat, Muslim submission to God implied the molding of the individual and society. The Quranic teaching that human beings were God's representatives or vicegerents on earth, charged with realizing and spreading His will for humankind, became the theological basis for the social and moral reformism that characterized the work of the Brotherhood and Jamaat. The preaching of Islam was not just a propagation of the faith among non-Muslims, but a revivalist call or mission to those born Muslim to awaken and become better Muslims. The message or interpretation of Islam that they preached and practiced addressed the totality of the human experience.

The strengths of neorevivalism also implied distinct weaknesses. Establishing the appropriateness, indeed superiority, of Islam often degenerated into a one-sided attack on the ills of Western culture. The worst characteristics or social problems (prostitution, alcoholism, high

ations on theological doctrine. The breadth of the process of Islamization by which Muslims had adopted and adapted foreign social and cultural practices, integrating them within a framework of Islamic principles and values, remained forgotten. (In contrast, the failure of modernists to produce a systematic reconstruction of Islam meant that their isolated, ad hoc reforms were not seen as part of an integrated whole, but instead as the result of an eclectic borrowing from the West. Therefore, modernists came to be regarded as Westernizers.) For revivalists, as for traditionalists in general, history provided the authoritative interpretation of revelation rather than an authoritative interpretation open to subsequent reinterpretation and reform as circumstances change. Although revivalists advocated change through *ijtihad*, they tended to accept past practice and undertake change only in those areas not already covered by Islamic law.

Conclusion

Revival and reform have been dominant themes in Islam since the eighteenth century, as Muslims responded to internal and external forces that challenged their faith and social order. Islam was used effectively in the formation of Islamic sociopolitical reform organizations and Islamic modernist movements. Revivalist movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrated the power of an appeal to Islam in providing a rationale for community decline and initiating religiopolitical movements bent on social and moral reform. Despite their differences, premodernist movements left a legacy to modern Islam in their ideological interpretation of Islam and their activist methods and organization. Islam proved a potent force in both the response to internal decline and the reaction to European imperialism. Islamic modernists reinterpreted Islamic sources to obtain new answers and to assimilate some Western ideas and institutions. Islamic modernism influenced attitudes toward Islam regarding both its past significance and its modern relevance. Its emphasis on Islam as a progressive, dynamic, rational religion generated a sense of pride, identity, and conviction that Islam was relevant to modern life. Though Islamic modernism did not produce a systematic reinterpretation of Islam and splintered in many directions, its outlook and modernist vocabulary penetrated Muslim society and enabled a new generation of Muslims to confidently embrace modern civilization with the belief that Islam was compatible and adaptable to the demands and challenges of modernity. However, some of these Muslims—neorevivalists—who grew

up during the independence struggles of the post-World War I period rejected the accommodationist spirit of Islamic modernism. They combined a holistic interpretation of Islam and an organizational activism, calling for a social order based not on modernist acculturation but on a self-sufficient Islamic alternative. The struggle to produce viable Islamic responses to the new demands of modernity has continued to preoccupy many Muslims in the latter half of the twentieth century, as evident in the contemporary resurgence of Islam.