There is a tendency to equate liberal Islam with moderate Islam. Yet there are occasions when to be liberal demands a sense of outrage and rebellion. The causes of the political radicalization of Islam are different from the roots of theological conservatism. For decades, the Royal House of Saudi Arabia has been theologically conservative but not politically radical. Indeed, for a long time the monarchy in Riyadh was a classic example of how a Muslim regime could be politically pro-western without being culturally westernized. Was the Saudi regime politically moderate without being doctrinally liberal?

This journal debate has been rich in trying to diagnose the nature of Islam’s radicalization, but relatively thin in diagnosing its causes. The best diagnosis of these causes in this collection comes from Graham E. Fuller:

The Muslim world, feeling itself under siege, and with its sensitivities heightened by its witness of the struggle of Muslims right across the global ummah, is not currently operating in an environment conducive to either intellectual openness or to liberal and reformist thought. The Muslim world is simply hunkered down in a defensive and survivalist mode. Indeed, the forces of terrorism in the Muslim world must be brought to heel. But this will not happen unless we see a change in hegemonistic American policies, the explicit American embrace of Israeli right-wing policies in the occupied West Bank, and the linkage with American fundamentalist Christian attitudes.

I have never heard the problem better formulated. Indeed, there are global causes of Islamic radicalism and global reasons why “Muslim terrorism” has gone international. One factor is the “Latin Americanization”

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The second major trigger of globalized Islamic radicalization consists of the state of Israel; its brutal occupation of the Palestinian people; the annexation of Jerusalem; and the United States’ enormous material, diplomatic, and uncritical support of the Jewish state. Israeli behavior cannot even be censured by the United Nations Security Council without encountering an American veto. Due to the United States, Israel has been enjoying almost total immunity since at least the 1967 war in the Middle East. The United States provides Israel with an umbrella of impunity. The resulting international frustration has aroused widespread rage throughout the Muslim world.

The third international trigger of Islamic radicalism and major cause of Muslim terrorism is the multiple humiliations of Muslims in so many different countries. Three Muslim countries are under direct foreign occupation (whether acknowledged or not) – Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. Two Muslim populations are under some kind of international trusteeship – Bosnia and Kosovo. Several Muslim minorities elsewhere are struggling for self-determination against enormous military odds – including Kashmir, Chechnya, southern Philippines, southern Thailand, and elsewhere. No other civilization in the contemporary world is under a comparable sense of siege. This is quite apart from lower intensity rivalries between Muslims and non-Muslims in Nigeria, the Ivory Coast (Cote d’Ivoire), and Ethiopia. (I regard the conflicts in Sudan as more Arab versus less Arabized, rather than Muslims against non-Muslims). Politically and militarily, the Muslim ummah is more sinned against than sinning.

Almost all of the contributors to this debate agree that there are also domestic causes of Muslim radicalization, as well as global causes. Such domestic causes include authoritarian Arab monarchs and other undemocratic Muslim regimes. But even those domestic radicalizing forces might not have risen to levels of terrorism if they were not reinforced by a resentment of American support for most Muslim dictators for decades – especially oil-rich dictators, but along with oil-poor Pakistan and Egypt. Pro-democracy forces in countries like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia were enough to politicize Islam, and even to radicalize it. But the rise of the temperature to
terrorism is almost always ignited by anti-Americanism or anti-westernism, even at the domestic level.

I am not a moderate Muslim in the American sense of *moderate*. Yet, at least on three issues I regard myself as a liberal Muslim: I am against the death penalty, in favor of gender equality, and believe that *ijtihad* will become increasingly crucial as a solution to Islam’s doctrinal problems. I came out of the closet on the death penalty during the uproar over Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in the 1980s. I deplored the book, denounced the author, and dissented from the death penalty not just for Rushdie, but also for anybody else, regardless of the offense.

On gender equality, I have had qualified reservations about polygamy, but not outright rejection. I grew up in a polygamous family and know its strengths as well as its weaknesses. On the other hand, I have supported Amina Wadud’s effort to end male monopoly of religious leadership. I began to support that effort of hers long before she dramatically demonstrated it by leading a Friday prayer in New York City in March 2005. She had attempted it in a mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, in the 1990s, but with only limited success. I cheered her even then.

**Liberal Islam on the Defensive**

Liberal Islam on the Defensive

But those of us who see ourselves as liberal Muslims are greatly hampered by the external forces of Zionism, the American imperium, and the global humiliation of Muslims from Kashmir to Chechnya. Once again, Fuller captures the fundamentals when he says the following:

> As long as conditions in the Muslim world remain radicalized – by terrorism, the sweeping American military response, dictatorship across the region, and a sense of Islam under siege – only radical groups will flourish. Moderation and liberalization can only flourish in a quieter and freer environment, where radical voices find limited response.

In this paragraph, Fuller almost equates liberalization with moderation. In the literature about developing countries, there was a time when modernization was equated with westernization. To be “modern” was to be as “western” as possible. In the literature about Islam, more recently, the concept of moderation has come close to being equated with westernization. To be “moderate” is now translated as being as “western” as possible. Sometimes the concept “liberal” is also hijacked by the West.

But most African social scientists and thinkers, for example, nowadays would reject the proposition that the modern African society is necessarily
the westernized African society. What about thinkers of the Muslim world? Do they accept the proposition that the moderate Muslim society is the westernized ummah? These are precisely the equations that make the reforms of Muslim liberals so difficult to implement in a broad climate of Islamophobia in the western world and a deepening Americophobia in the Muslim world. Muslims begin to lose their moderation.

Muqtedar Khan would surely agree that anti-western sentiment in the Muslim world is not necessarily anti-Christian. Al-Qaeda’s strategy of September 11, 2001, seemed to targeted the economic symbol of American power – the World Trade Center, which they destroyed. Al-Qaeda also appeared to target the military symbol of American power – the Pentagon. The airplane that crashed in Pennsylvania seemed to have been intended for either Capitol Hill or the White House, symbols of American political power. What was missing on September 11, 2001, was any attempt by al-Qaeda to target a cathedral in either Washington or New York as a symbol of American religiosity.

Al-Qaeda succeeded in demolishing a symbol of American economic might in New York. Al-Qaeda triumphed in damaging a symbol of American military hegemony in Washington, DC. Since the passengers in a fourth plane succeeded in overcoming the Muslim warriors, al-Qaeda failed to hit a symbol of American political power. What al-Qaeda never targeted at all was a symbol of American Christian faith.

All of the contributors to this debate find a place for *ijtihad* – a “juristic tool” and potential mechanism of reform. John L. Esposito gives *ijtihad* a wide role, whereas Abid Ullah Jan narrows its scope. My position may lie somewhere in between these two colleagues; however, my reasons may be somewhat different. *Ijtihad* may make Muslims more liberal, but not necessarily more moderate. My central thesis in this regard is that God deliberately reveals Himself in installments, partly through religious messengers and partly through the march of science and expanding human experience. Some of the experiences may be radicalizing rather than moderating.

**Human History as Divine Revelation**

The reason why Islam recognizes so many prophets (*nabiyun*) and so many messengers or apostles (*rusul*) is because Allah reveals Himself in such installments across time and across space. Prophet Muhammad was the last prophet (*nabi*), but was he the last messenger (*rusul*)? Let’s accept that he was also the last *rusul* in the form of a human person. But could *time* be a
continuing cosmic *rasul*, or at least a *risalah*? Is history a continuing revelation of God? Is expanding science a non-carnate *rasul*?

If God reveals Himself incrementally, and if history is a continuing revelation of God, should we not re-examine Muhammad’s message in the light of new installments of Divine Revelation? The Muslims of the first Islamic century would not have understood much about distant galaxies. So, Allah talked to them in simple terms about our own Moon (as if it were the only Moon) and about the Sun in the Milky Way (as if it were the only Sun). Fourteen centuries ago, the Arabs were overwhelmed by the Almighty as the creator of our own galaxy. Today we know that God created billions of galaxies. Should we not reinterpret the Qur’anic verses on the Sun and the Moon in the light of our new understanding of astronomy and the cosmos?

If we need to reinterpret these verses on astronomy, why can we not reinterpret Islamic verses about ancient punishments (*hudud*)? The expansion of human knowledge is not only about the stars; it is also about human beings themselves and their behavior. If we now know more about the causes of crime, we also know more about the limits of culpability and guilt. We know that poverty, bad parenting, a sense of injustice, racial discrimination, chemical imbalance in the human body, a bad neighborhood, and bad social environment can all be contributing factors that turn a human being toward crime. At times, *ijtihad* can lead to both liberalization and moderation.

From these conclusions, I proceed to the belief that some verses were about events during the Prophet’s own time, and that other verses were eternal in purpose. One can illustrate this with the verses about Abu Lahab (“father of the flame”). I believe that the Prophet’s contemporaries knew that the verses were about the Prophet’s uncle `Abd al-`Uzza ibn `Abd al-Muttalib. In the Prophet’s own time, it was understood that the verses were about a specific individual enemy of Islam. Should we reinterpret “Abu Lahab” in a more timeless fashion? Alternatively, should we be reinterpreting verses in ways that would make them historically specific?

The Sudanese theologian Mahmood Muhammad Taha argued about Islam’s two messages: the time-specific and the eternal message. The Nimeiry government executed him in 1985 in the name of Islamic *hudud*. Please read his *The Second Message of Islam* (Northwestern University Press – originally written in Arabic and later translated into English). Taha was a force for doctrinal liberalization rather than political moderation.
If God has been teaching human beings in installments about crime and punishment, and if there were no police, prisons, forensic science, or knowledge about DNA fourteen centuries ago, the type of punishments needed had to be severe enough to serve as deterrents. Hence the *hudud.* Since then, God has taught us more about crime, its causes, the methods of its investigation, the limits of guilt, and the much wider range of possible punishments.

Did Prophet Muhammad not say: “My people will never agree on error”? If so, we can take it for granted that Muslims of the future will be less and less convinced that amputating the hand is a suitable punishment for a thief under any circumstances. This is a prediction. I have not the slightest doubt that the Islam of our grandchildren will never accept penal amputation of a thief’s hand as legitimate. On such issues, doctrinal liberalism converges with social moderation.

Abid Ullah Jan rightly salutes the Companions and the Prophet’s disciples. We revere them as the first converts to Islam and as supporters of our Prophet (pbuh). But we must not forget that they were not themselves prophets; most of them were not even saints. As ordinary human beings, they were the usual mixture of vices and virtues. That is why three of Islam’s first four caliphs were assassinated and why there was an Arab civil war within little more than a decade after the Prophet’s death – with ‘A’ishah, the Prophet’s widow, fighting ‘Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law! The Companions’ behavior was often neither liberal nor moderate. Have we been idealizing them too much?

If the Prophet’s disciples could be fallible, so could the founders of the Islamic legal schools. Indeed, for fourteen centuries the Qur’an and the Hadith have been interpreted almost exclusively by men. Male-centrism has also been a historic feature of Judaism and Christianity. There is enough in the Qur’an to support gender equity, but none of the four Sunni schools was founded by a woman. It might have made a difference if one legal school had been founded by a woman like Amina Wadud. Such a female theologian could be a voice of liberalization rather than of moderation.

The Qur’an does not prohibit slavery (any more than does the Bible or the Torah), but the Qur’an goes further than its sister religions in encouraging the freeing of slaves. Islam is not anti-slavery, but it is pro-emancipation. If early Muslims had used *ijtihad* enough, the abolitionist movement would have started in the Muslim world 1,000 years before William Wilberforce, John Brown, or Abraham Lincoln.

Many other humane gems in the Qur’an are waiting to be fully revealed through *ijtihad.* Some may enrich liberal thought without encouraging
political moderation. But current Islamic thought is indeed “mired in literalism, narrowness of vision and intolerance” (to quote Fuller). The necessary climate for an Islamic renewal is hampered by the forces that have put Islam on the defensive. Both political moderation and doctrinal liberalization among the Muslim masses will remain difficult as long as the United States remains imperial and Islamophobic in foreign policy, Israel continues to brutalize and occupy the Palestinian population, and the rest of the world permits the humiliation of Muslims from Chechnya to Afghanistan, from Kashmir to Iraq. When Muslims are politically radicalized, they often tend to be resistant to doctrinal liberalization. The ultimate causes of radicalization are primarily non-Muslim in origin. However, the Muslim world suffers the most from the excesses of both political radicalism and doctrinal conservatism.