

THE REBRANDING OF ISLAM

A forecast of a changing faith

"As ambitious women, we have to hold ourselves to high standards of conduct in our lives — whether it's in the workplace or in community settings — prioritising being kind, helpful and compassionate above all else. We have these conversations about faith, personal growth, philosophy, theology, all the stuff that you would expect."

These are not the thoughts or convictions of a young lady at a Bible study group or Christian youth meeting. They come from Nafisa Isa (on the right in the photo alongside), inside a Millennial Women's Quran Study Group at their monthly *halaga* (an Islamic study group) at their family home in Ashburn, USA¹.



Nafisa Isa and the small group of ladies represent an 'unseen' face of Islam that could, if branded as vigorously as radical Islam by top Islamic clerics, progressively change the non-Muslim world's perceptions of Islam.

Islam is at a cross-roads and secular Muslim voices calling for a rebranding of Islam have increased, become louder, stronger and – more importantly – more authoritative. The call is no longer to 'reinvent' Islam but to 'rebrand' the religion. It is no longer about transforming what Muslims believe on the inside – it has now become a matter of changing what non-Muslims perceive from the outside. This could potentially open and close doors for the Gospel simultaneously, and considering a future forecast of this trend (taking into account the high roads and the low roads of predictions) is critical for those who pursue a harvest of souls in the Kingdom of God. The Church cannot afford to be caught by surprise.

FROM DORMANT TO DESTRUCTIVE

During the past three decades, Islam has become its own worst enemy. The visible brutality of movements like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Taliban and Hezbollah have become more and more repulsive to those in the West, who are seldom confronted with a religion that demands submission. But it hasn't always been that way.

Prior to 9/11, terrorism was mainly a 'geopolitical trend' that was limited primarily to the Middle East. Islam was a relatively unknown religion and perceived by many as belonging to people 'far away', in a region that had little relevance to the West. There were, of course, the odd attacks outside the Middle East such as the Munich Olympic Massacre in 1972, but that attack was aimed at the Israelis and was therefore still associated with the Middle East region. Even the 1988 Lockerbie Bombing – which killed 259 passengers and crew aboard Pan Am Flight 103 – was seen as part of the Middle East turmoil and attributed to Muammar Qaddafi, the Libyan dictator at the time.

But on 11 September 2001, everything changed. A 'dormant faith' (in the minds of Westerners) became a 'destructive faith'. 9/11 brought Islam into American homes, and it was an unsolicited introduction. It was a religiously motivated action, with Osama Bin Laden making it clear that Islamic jihad was the driving force behind his targeting of America. Islamic jihad then replaced communism as the 'prime evil' (communism was dying a slow death after the fall of the Iron Curtain two years before).



SINCE 9/11

33,828 cases of deadly terror attacks were documented

Sadly, 9/11 was a catalyst that would unleash Islamic violence and attacks throughout the next two decades. According to the *Religion of Peace* website², more than 33,828 documented cases of deadly terror attacks have been carried out by Islamic terrorists since 9/11.

¹ <http://time.com/longform/millennial-muslim-women-halaga/>

² <https://thereligionofpeace.com/>

In the minds of Westerners – Christian and non-believers alike – the violent face of Islam has become the trademark of what Muslims believe. The public actions of radicals such as those belonging to the Islamic State and Boko Haram have created ‘tipping points’ in inter-Islamic relations, and a platform of division that resulted in a dramatic implosion with tens of thousands of Muslim refugees turning to Christ. ‘Islamophobic’ Westerners were not alone in expressing their opposition to Islam – high numbers of Muslims started questioning what could only be described as a ‘self-destructive’ faith.

FROM DESTRUCTION TO RE-INVENTION



RADICAL ISLAMIC JIHAD

is responsible for the deaths of at least **4 Muslims** for every **1 non-Muslim**

While ‘moderate’ Muslims in the Western world denied that their “beloved faith” shared commonalities with the beliefs of the radical Islamic State, it became clearer by the day that Islam is a ‘many-splintered, much divided faith’. There are different doctrinal and ideological versions, varying degrees of devotion, and highly opposing interpretations. This is especially illustrated by the fact

that radical Islamic jihad has (to date) been responsible for the deaths of at least four Muslims for every non-Muslim victim.

A kingdom divided is a kingdom destined for desolation – Jesus said in Matthew 12v25: *“Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.”* This principle implies that in all societies, a common ruin is the consequence of internal quarrels. Division commonly ends in desolation: if we clash, we break; if we divide one from another, we become easy prey for a common enemy; “if we bite and devour one another, we shall be consumed one by another” (Galatians 5:15, KJV, with slight paraphrase).

On 1 January 2015, Egypt's devoutly Muslim President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, went to Cairo's Al-Azhar University (widely considered the most important centre in the Arab world for the study of Islamic doctrine and principles) and delivered what many considered to be a courageous and possibly historic ‘tide-turning’ speech.



Mr Sisi called on the assembled Islamic clerics, scholars, and imams to lead a revolution within Islam and to move away from the idea of wanting to destroy the non-Muslim world. He called for more “enlightened” thinking and for a re-invention of their faith. Mr Sisi directed his remarks about the ills of Islam to Islamic clerics in Egypt and around the world – something that was seen to be enormously brave. He did not single out radical Islam, but he did call on all Muslims to examine themselves, carry out a religious “re-invention” and renew their faith. He urged Muslims not to behave according to the ancient, destructive interpretations of the Qur'an and Islam that make the rest of the world hate them, that destroy Islam's reputation and that put Muslim immigrants in Western countries in the position of having to fight their hosts. He claimed that it is illogical for over a billion Muslims to aspire to conquer and subdue six billion non-Muslims.

A few days later, on 6 January, Mr Sisi attended a Coptic Christian mass and spoke there of his deep affection for Egyptian Christians – a first for any Egyptian president. This kind of behaviour by a Muslim world leader could have resounding ripple effects within the global Muslim community. There was a clear intention to re-invent the image of a faith ‘gone wrong’.

FROM RE-INVENTION TO REFORMATION



However, just rehabilitating Islam would not be enough. Leaders across the Islamic world knew this, and many voices called for a more moderate reformation of traditional Islam. Here are a few known (and less known) voices:

Author – Salman Rushdie

Targeted by a death edict from Ayatollah Khomeini for his book “Satanic Verses”, Rushdie said the following: *“What is needed is a move beyond tradition— nothing less than a reform movement to bring the core concepts of Islam into the*

modern age, a Muslim Reformation to combat not only the jihadi ideologues but also the dusty, stifling seminaries of the traditionalists, throwing open the windows of the closed communities to let in much-needed fresh air.”

Saudi activist – Mansour al-Nogaidan³



In 2007, Mansour al-Nogaidan wrote the following: *“Islam needs a Reformation. It needs someone with the courage of Martin Luther. This is the belief I’ve arrived at after a long and painful spiritual journey. It’s not a popular conviction — it has attracted angry criticism, including death threats, from many sides. But it was reinforced by 11 September 2001, and in the years since, I’ve only become more convinced that it is critical to Islam’s future. Muslims are too rigid in our adherence to old, literal interpretations of the Qur’an. It’s time for many verses—especially those having to do with relations*

between Islam and other religions—to be reinterpreted in favour of a more modern Islam.”

Television personality – Abdullah Gymnastiar⁴



Better known as Aa Gym (“older brother Gym”), Abdullah Gymnastiar has been a preacher, a television personality, a motivational speaker and a business leader. His religious self-help programme “Manajemen Qolbu” (Heart Management) afforded him pop star status in Indonesia during the early years of the new millennium. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the Bali bombings, his sermons about self-help for modern Muslims, Islamic ethics, morality and civic duty attracted interest from non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

Virginia Hooker writes: “Through his trendy yet semi-religious dress, discourse (feel-good homilies drawing on the Qur’an, the example of the Prophet Muhammad, and Aa Gym’s own life stories) and the supportive advice that he delivered with humour and in a ‘soothing psycho-therapy tone’, Gymnastiar has ‘an ephemeral sort of religious authority’ that was deliberately crafted to differentiate him from ‘conventional Muslim clerics’.”

The ‘Charlie Chaplin’ of Afghanistan – Karim Asir⁵



Afghanistan’s ‘Charlie Chaplin’ says he has witnessed suicide attacks, explosions and threats from hard-line Islamic militant groups, but is determined to waddle and bumble to fulfil the primary goal of his life. *“It is very simple, I want to give Afghans a reason to smile,”* said Karim Asir, a stand-up comedian who performs across the capital Kabul.

Website Host: Amr Khaled⁶



Asra Nomani writes in *TIME Magazine*: “Amr Khaled is not a household name in the West. But for a segment of the Islamic world, the [51-year-old] Egyptian is a rock star. At a time when conservative clerics have become primary arbiters of power, Khaled, a layman, has one of the Arab world’s most popular websites; regular shows on Iqra, a Saudi-owned religious satellite channel; and an influence that prompts comparisons with everyone from Dr Phil to Pat Robertson... Khaled’s model, ‘life makers’, encourages Muslims to implement

³ <https://spme.org/spme-research/letters-from-our-readers/mansour-al-nogaidan-losing-my-ijihadism/3558/>

⁴ <http://www.newmandala.org/book-review/rebranding-islam/>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karim_Asir

⁶ http://content.time.com/time/specials/2007/time100/article/0,28804,1595326_1615754_1616173,00.html

action plans for transforming their lives and communities through Islam. It also urges them to get along peacefully with the West.

What really put Khaled on the world stage was his decision to host an interfaith conference in Copenhagen in March 2006, after the publication of the controversial Danish cartoons which mocked the Prophet Muhammad. Muslim clerics criticised him for extending an olive branch to the Danes. But Khaled didn't back down. An accountant by training who favours Hugo Boss shirts and designer suits, he maintains some traditional views—he believes women should wear headscarves, for example—but Khaled is a needed voice of moderation from within the Muslim world. *'[Osama] bin Laden is saying he is talking on behalf of Muslims,' he said at the time. 'Who asked him to talk on behalf of us? Nobody.'*"

Lesbian Muslim writer: Irshad Manji⁷



Wikipedia offers this profile: "Irshad Manji, born in 1968, is a Canadian Muslim author, educator, and advocate of a reformist interpretation of Islam. She is a well-known critic of traditional mainstream Islam, described in 2003 as 'Osama bin Laden's worst nightmare'.

Manji has written several books, two of which have been banned in Malaysia. 'The Trouble with Islam Today' (first released in 2003 as 'Trouble with Islam'), has been published in more than 30 languages, including Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Malay and Indonesian. 'Allah, Liberty and Love' was released in June 2011.

Manji founded several educational projects to help young people discover their values and their courage; of note are Project Ijtihad and the Moral Courage Project."

Journalist: Mona Eltahawy⁸



Wikipedia offers this profile: "Mona Eltahawy is a freelance Egyptian-American journalist, and social commentator based in New York City. She has written essays and op-eds for publications worldwide on Egypt and the Islamic world, including women's issues and Muslim political and social affairs. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Miami Herald* among others. She is also acknowledged as one of the people who spearheaded the 'Mosque Me Too' movement through the usage of the hashtag #MosqueMeToo."

Further on *Wikipedia*: The *Mosque Me Too movement* is predominantly a Muslim women movement where female pilgrims speak up about sexual abuse experienced on the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to one of Islam's holiest places, Mecca (in Saudi Arabia). The movement spread to include Muslim women sharing sexual abuse experiences at other Muslim religious centres and holy places across the world such as at Jama Masjid, New Delhi (in India). The usage of the 'Me Too' in the movement stems from the 'Me Too' movement which gained worldwide prominence in October 2017."

FROM REFORMATION TO REBRANDING

Islamic leaders understand well that reformation on the 'inside' would not be enough to change the perceptions on the 'outside'. Due to the violent face of Islam, revealed through movements like the Islamic State, more Muslims are turning to Christ than ever before in history.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irshad_Manji

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mona_Eltahawy

What Islam needs is a 'rebranding'. And one who seems to be pushing in this direction is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the son of Saudi Arabia's 81-year-old king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who is head of the Saudi royal family and Custodian of the two holiest mosques within Islam.



On 24 October 2017, bin Salman addressed some 3,500 delegates from around the world. His words, which reverberated globally, were not spoken by a secular European Muslim leader as a minority in a Christian majority nation. These were the words of one of the most powerful leaders in Islam: *"We will not spend the next 30 years of our lives dealing with destructive ideas. We will destroy them today. We are returning to what we were before — a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world."*

This potentially faith-changing declaration echoed around the world, as bin Salman pledged to destroy extremism and return the kingdom of Saudi Arabia to "moderate Islam". This was a key moment in Islam's rebranding.

Bin Salman was appointed Crown Prince in June 2017, in a nation that is closely associated with radical Islam. He immediately assumed the positions of Chief of the Royal Court, Minister of State, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, all at the age of 32, making him the youngest minister of defence in the world.

Despite his age, bin Salman has made his presence felt in the Islamic community. He is recognised by the 2018 *"Muslim 500"* (a list of the world's 500 most influential Muslims) as the 13th most powerful Islamic leader and the 7th most powerful political leader. He has a PhD degree in International Law and is fluent in Arabic, English and French. He is one of the youngest billionaires in the world, with an estimated net worth of more than \$10 billion.

There is no doubt that bin Salman represents a new face of Islam whose reforms will challenge the conservative views of religious clerics in Saudi Arabia. In his future role as king, which could span decades, he would immediately assume the role of Custodian of the two Holy Mosques, controller of the world's largest oil reserves, head of the world's largest *da'wa* (Islamic missions) network and head of a nine-state coalition in the region.



In November 2017, bin Salman played a key role in detaining 11 princes and four ministers under the guise of corruption charges. He was also central to reforms that have broken an alliance between hard-line clerics. The reforms tackled societal taboos such as the recently-withdrawn ban on women driving, and scaled back guardianship laws that restrict women's roles. *NBC News* writes: "Driven by the young prince, the reforms are aimed at transforming the way the world sees Saudi Arabia, weaning it off of oil and remaking the [closed] Gulf kingdom into a hub of international business, finance and technology."

Bin Salman has done more than talk. *NBC News* continues: "He has spearheaded real change, limiting the powers of the kingdom's religious police, who once were able to walk the streets and impose gender segregation and ensure women were covered from head-to-toe in public. The changes have been sweeping and unthinkable just a few years ago — young people mix on streets and cafés where music is played and a few women uncover their hair and wear colourful robes. The crown prince has also lifted a ban on women driving, approved concerts and is has opened the first movie theatre in many years."

The biggest initiative thus far, however, is a \$500 billion business and tech zone dubbed "NEOM" — a planned 26,500 square kilometre transnational city and economic zone to be constructed in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia, close to the border with Egypt.

(See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N53DzL3_BHA)

"NEOM" is an amalgamation of the word "neo" (Greek for "new") and "m" of the word "mustaqbal" (Arabic for "future"). *Wikipedia* states: "The city was announced by bin Salman at the Future Investment Initiative conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on 24 October 2017. He



said it will operate independently from the 'existing governmental framework' with its own tax and labour laws and an 'autonomous judicial system'."

In the context of global terrorism, radical Islam, Muslim refugees, deep schisms between Sunni and Shia Islam and a dramatic implosion of the Islamic faith, bin Salman's call for Islam to be modernised could be compared to that of Christian reformer Martin Luther who, in the 16th century, was the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation. Luther triggered a movement that reformulated certain basic tenets of Christian belief, and in a similar way, bin Salman could become one of the most influential figures in the history of 'modern' Islam.

The Saudi Arabian crown prince is not alone in his endeavours to rebrand Islam. Twenty-four MegaProjects (projects that cost more than US\$1 billion and attract a large amount of public attention because of substantial impacts on communities, environment, and budgets) are currently planned in Azerbaijan, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Turkey. These projects alone will amount to nearly US\$2 trillion and will include malls, entertainment centres, theatres, new airports, etc. This points to parts of the Middle East 'rebranding' from an economic, social and religious point of view.

The next few years will be a defining season, not only for Saudi Arabia, but for the process of a reformation within Islam and a clash of theologies. And Mohammed bin Salman could prove to be a key role-player.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The 'reformation' of Islam will mostly affect Muslims and the way they express their faith in modern society. The 'rebranding' of Islam will mostly impact those from the outside and the way they perceive Islam in a modern society.

Before considering a Christian response to a reformed Islam, it is critical to understand the position of a faith rebranded. Two words are key in this regard: "ijtihad" and "salafiyya". Both words describe a change in vision – not from the followers of Islam, but from within the leadership.

IJTIHAD

Wikipedia states: "Among contemporary Muslims in the West there have emerged new visions and movements of what is called *ijtihad* (lit. effort, physical or mental, used in a particular activity) which emphasise substantive moral practices in public life over traditional juridical methodology." The advocacy of ijtihad has focused on communal practices and addresses issues like feminism, human rights, tolerance, LGBT rights, etc. For obvious reasons, this movement faces severe criticism and opposition from traditionalists.

SALAFIYYA

Salafiyya, also sometimes referred to as "Modernist Salafism", is "a movement that attempts to reconcile Islamic faith with modern Western values such as nationalism, democracy, civil rights, rationality, equality, and progress... Modernism differs from secularism in that it insists on the importance of religious faith in public life, and from Islamism in that it embraces contemporary European institutions, social processes, and values (*Wikipedia*⁹).

From a Christian perspective, these two movements – public life and values – within Islam need to be understood, considered and explored. And there is a 'high road' and a 'low road' for both Muslim and Christian in this regard.

THE ISLAMIC HIGH ROAD: Rebranding Islam in Western societies

The first and obvious question to ask from a faith perspective is IF Islam can be reformed and then rebranded. Does a religion of unconditional submission sufficiently allow its followers to take the initiative to change direction?

The answer would be yes, but only in 'unrestricted' communities. There is no doubt that individuals within Islam can reinvent their own faith and eventually rebrand it in a free community. But Islam is not an individual faith. Islam functions best in communities where the submission to leaders and the control of peer pressure rule supreme. Rebranding Islam in the US would be a lot easier than rebranding Islam in Afghanistan. And the reality is that less than 3% of all Muslims live in North America, South America and Europe combined.

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberalism_and_progressivism_within_Islam

THE ISLAMIC LOW ROAD: Rebranding Islam in Muslim communities

A second challenge for the 'Martin Luthers' in the Muslim world is that Islam is, in essence, irrevocably intertwined with a conservative culture – it is not only a strict religion, but also a conformist culture. Changing a religion is a lot easier than changing a culture, and rebranding Islam in a Western culture is a lot easier than the near-impossible task of rebranding Islam in a strictly conservative culture like that found in Iran.

So, for the time being, it seems like the rebranding of Islam will mainly take place in non-Muslim regions, with an emphasis on American and European societies. If and when this happens, it could result in two possible Christian outcomes, and the Church needs to be well prepared.

THE CHRISTIAN HIGH ROAD: Openness for those who seek

The majority of young people who have access to TV and the internet and have explored and tasted freedom of thought and freedom of dreams support the idea of 'liberating' Islam. Reforming and rebranding Islam will certainly encourage those within the faith who are disillusioned. This will mostly happen in regions where Muslims are a minority and where there is freedom to explore faith differences.

Many European nations has seen a tremendous influx of Middle Eastern refugees in recent years, and the rebranding of Islam could present opportunities for the Church to reach out. The Church needs to be prepared to provide answers that will touch the hearts of those who seek an eternal future. During a research trip to Germany, INcontext encountered leaders who shared the following:

- An Iranian pastor in Wiesbaden who had ministered for 22 years in Germany said that more than 3,000 Iranians had accepted Christ, most of them in the preceding three years.
- A Syrian pastor testified that "God is doing a mighty work" and 85 percent of his church were refugees.
- In the Café International in Leipzig, there were 20-30 refugees attending Bible classes once a week.
- In Frankfurt, a local church offered the Alpha course to refugees and ended up with a waiting list of 40 Muslims.
- In Wiesbaden, there were three Farsi and three Arabic-speaking churches.
- One Iranian convert was the only foreigner in the German church he attended in 2014, but there were now 40 Iranians in the church.

THE LOW ROAD: Alternative for those who do not seek

A rebranded Islam will also provide an alternative for those who grew up in an Islamic culture yet seek more than their traditional faith. This will slow the flow of converts and impact the harvest field in the Middle East today.

Strengthening the Church in the Middle East needs to be on the priority list of every Church in the Western world as the window of opportunity shrinks.

It is indeed now or never.

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