

Dale F. Eickelman

## Inside the Islamic Reformation



Dale F. Eickelman was educated at Dartmouth College (A.B., 1964), McGill University (M.A., Islamic Studies, 1967), and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., Anthropology, 1971). From 1971 to 1989, he taught at New York University, and in 1989 he was appointed the Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations. He is a former President of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1976–1977), a 1992 Guggenheim Fellow, and a 1996–1997 Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington D.C. His publications include *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (1976), *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* (1985), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination*, co-edited with James Piscatori (1990), *Russia's Muslim Frontiers: New Directions in Cross-Cultural Analysis*, editor (1993), *Muslim Politics*, co-authored with James Piscatori (1996), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, co-edited with Jon W. Anderson (1999), and *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 4th ed. (2002). – Address: Department of Anthropology, Dartmouth College, 6047 Silsby Hall, Hanover, NH 03755-3547, USA.

Had I delivered this report at the end of my fellowship tenure in July 2001, it would have been easier to prepare. Two months after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it is more difficult to write.

The original conception and scope of my project was undeniably bold in conception and scope – and optimistic. I argued that we will look back on the latter half of the twentieth century as a time of change as profound for the Muslim world as was the Protestant

Reformation for Christian Europe. Like the printing press in the sixteenth century, the combination of mass education and mass communications is transforming this world, a broad geographical crescent stretching from North Africa through Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia – and increasingly significant communities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the world that often sustain close ties with their places of origin. The core of my argument is that, to an unprecedented degree, mass higher education, the proliferation of means of communication, and the greater ease of travel contribute to examining and debating the fundamentals of Muslim belief and practice in ways that their less self-conscious predecessors would never have imagined. This highly deliberate examination of religious belief and practice and its implications for religion and politics is what constitutes the “Islamic reformation”.

Part of my work was intended as a corrective to earlier versions of modernization theory, which underestimated or neglected the role of religion in modern societies. Although the continuing role of religion is not unique to the Muslim world – after all, the 1978–79 Iranian revolution was roughly concurrent with the Solidarity movement in Poland and the rise of liberation theology movements in Latin America – it remains foregrounded in the religious and political imaginations both of Muslims and of those who seek to understand the role of religion in the modern world.

A key element of my argument was the growing fragmentation of political and religious authority. I acknowledged the opening this fragmentation offered for religious extremism. However, like many others, I underestimated the scope and force of terrorism in the name of religion.

Part of my argument concerns the sustained force of traditional religious discourse and identity, but a significant element concerns how thinkers and writers not trained in the Islamic religious sciences – lawyers, doctors, civil engineers, even garage mechanics – are gaining significant audiences and are contributing to a steadily expanding public sphere.

Although part of my analysis concerns what new religious thinkers say, I am equally concerned with the proliferation of media through which these new voices are heard, often bypassing state authorities and presenting different messages to different audiences in different media. I am also concerned with the changing nature of audiences. Many of these messages and practices break with earlier practices in positive ways. Other voices – notoriously including the

videotaped communications of Osama bin Laden and the al-Qa'ida movement – do so in the most damaging ways possible. One of the paradoxes of the often authoritarian and non-participatory regimes that characterize many parts of the Middle East is that they create conditions in which the voices of radicalism and terrorism are amplified to the point where the voices of moderation and pluralism are muted.

Had I finished my manuscript on schedule, the discussion of terrorism would have figured primarily in the preface or the epilogue. I believe that my overall argument, including the advocacy of secular politics as a positive development by many Muslim thinkers, remains valid, as well as my emphasis on the different contexts and trajectories of the role of religion in social and political life in North Africa, Turkey, Syria, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Egypt. The role of transnational religion – and of transnational terrorism in the name of religion – will figure more prominently than I had anticipated.

Inside the Islamic Reformation was my main project during my fellowship year, but I accomplished complementary tasks. One was to complete revisions for the 4th edition of my *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*. First published in 1981, this book has become a standard for the field of Middle Eastern anthropology and social history, offering a framework for understanding the region and reviewing current methods and research. Central Asia was added to the Middle East in the 1998 3rd edition. Recent political developments make this refocusing of the book all the more salient. My German remains basic, but had advanced enough for me to incorporate more recent German ethnographic research than in prior editions.

Another activity – and the main reason for postponing completion of the Islamic Reformation manuscript – was acceptance of an invitation to convene (together with Armando Salvatore) a two-year Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Summer Institute for Young European-American Scholars on the theme: “Public Spheres and Muslim Identities”. The selection of twenty near- and post-doctoral participants, workshop preparations, and the co-authoring of a paper (now submitted for publication) on the idea of the public sphere in historically known and contemporary Muslim societies took considerable time and energy in addition to the actual period of the first year’s meeting (July 15 through 28). The theme of the workshop was sufficiently close to my principal writing interests to merit a delay in completing the main manuscript.