



THE PRIVILEGE OF SPENDING A YEAR
SEARCHING FOR WAYS OF TALKING
ABOUT ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD
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My main work at Wiko focused on articulating Islamic arguments in support of pluralism, tolerance, gender equality, democracy, human rights, individual freedom, etc. This is the easy part. These values should not be regarded as simply Western, since they can also be found in most if not all cultures as well. The more challenging part is how to construct effective Islamic rebuttals against Islamic criticisms of these values. The arguments and counter-arguments have been made from the diverse and clashing viewpoints of Muslims who have been variously labeled “secularists”, “modernists”, “reformers”, “moderates”, “liberals”, “salafists”, “fundamentalists”, “militants”, “extremists”, “activists”, “radicals”, “conservatives”, “traditionalists”, or “neo-traditionalists”. These terms have increasingly

become morally and politically charged. Some Muslims throw the labels of “moderate”, “reformer”, “modernist”, or “liberal” as a moral indictment of intellectual opponents for aping the West blindly, a charge that seems more plausible in light of recent policy-oriented studies advocating alliance with “moderate Muslims” to serve as proxy combatants in the titanic battle of ideas between “Islam” and the “West”. For other Muslims, the same labels can signify moral opposition to the counterproductive projects of subordinating Muslim women, or allegedly defending Muslim interests by wanton violence against innocent Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Because the same terms can signify opposite moral stands on the same issue, it follows that they can no longer serve as innocent classificatory categories for analytically mapping the various intellectual trends and ideological currents within contemporary Islamic societies. Several typologies have been unable to capture the incredible diversities, intricate linkages, and constant shifts that are the key features of both the intellectual and political spheres in the Islamic world. Interactivity among various Islamic currents and trends has led to incremental movement away from grand doctrinal statements about Islamic (in)compatibility with democracy, individual freedom, gender equality, human rights, etc. towards gradual adjustment, accommodation, and even enthusiastic endorsement.

Although clear delineation has so far proved elusive, it is still imperative to find ways of grasping the numerous aspects of the intellectual traditions of classical Islam that provide not only authentic validation but also the appropriate designations for the values of pluralism, tolerance, gender equality, etc. For example, Qur’an 2:143 describes Muslim community as *ummat^{an} wasat^{an}*, which means balanced or median community. This verse is the basis of the discourse of *wasitiyya*, built on the axioms that Islam upholds moderation but abhors excess in religion (*la ghuluwa fi al-din*); Islam endorses simplicity but prohibits difficulty (*yassiru wa la tu’assiru*). The founding figures of Islamic jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*) endorsed different articulations of basic Islamic tenets into enforceable rules of Islamic law. Realizing the potential of human error in deriving rules of Islamic law from Divine Revelation, they refused to invest their individual understanding (*fiqh*) with the divine imprimatur of eternal truth; some even avoided having their specific articulations of rules of Islamic law enforced by state power. These points do provide an authentic Islamic basis to critique contemporary political projects using the tremendous powers of the modern state to encode subordination of Muslim women or to outlaw dissent in modern legislation purporting to enact Islamic law. One can even argue further that state enactment of Islamic law is contrary to the doctrine in Islamic jurisprudence that legislative authority is an ex-

clusive prerogative of God. Hence an Islamic argument against the modern state enforcing religious activism can be articulated without recourse to Western secularism.

I presented drafts and preliminary findings at various forums, including Humboldt University, the Modern Oriental Institute in Berlin (ZMO), and Bayreuth University. The first publication from my excavations of the classics of Islamic thought in search of warrants for supporting the values of pluralism, equality, freedom, and democracy will appear in Summer 2007, and more will follow shortly.

My participation in the weekly discussions of the working group on “Religious Transformations Processes” explored various aspects of the phenomena of *religious change* as they unfold before our own very eyes. I sought to understand how slow and imperceptible shifts could build up incrementally before they explode into spectacular changes, and conversely how apparently major changes appear suddenly but then mutate into minor adjustment or even none at all. The discussions of the working group changed gradually throughout the year, ending eventually with a conference on the theme of *ambiguity* as a category of exploring how one and the same religion can flourish in diverse social contexts and different political environments. It would have been more profitable if the working group had remained focused on the theme of religious change. But perhaps the more the relevant point is to understand how subtle shifts virtually made the working group an experiment in the very phenomenon of change that the group initially set out to study.

The other seminar at Wiko during the year was the “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe”. I profited greatly from the sessions I attended, particularly the international workshop on the emerging field of “Islamic Feminism”, or what has been aptly termed the “Gender Jihad”. A memorable moment in the workshop was the spontaneous exchanges that cohered into an insightful observation. When one participant remarked that “Islamic feminism is the child of political Islam”, another participant added “unwanted”, while a third participant uttered “but legitimate”. The final sentence became: *Islamic feminism is the unwanted but legitimate child of political Islam!*

Being a Fellow at Wiko was a great privilege. The dedication of the entire Wiko staff created the enabling environment for many pleasant discoveries not only in my own immediate project, but also in the multidisciplinary seminar on Tuesdays, particularly about the diverse branches of modern biology and art history. Living in Berlin offers opportunities of first hand experience of “the miracle of German recovery” in the magnificent Kurfürstendamm, but also discovering the lingering aftermaths of the ravages of World War II, communism, and the Cold War.