



MAINSTREAMING ISLAM: TAKING
CHARGE OF THE FAITH
DALE F. EICKELMAN

Dale F. Eickelman was educated at Dartmouth College (AB, 1964), McGill University (MA, Islamic Studies, 1967) and the University of Chicago (Ph.D., Anthropology, 1971). He has been Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations at Dartmouth College since 1989. He is a former President of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (1976–77), a Guggenheim Fellow (1992), a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (1996–97), a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg (2000–01), and a Carnegie Fellow (2009–11). Books include *Moroccan Islam: Tradition and Society in a Pilgrimage Center* (University of Texas Press, 1976), *Knowledge and Power in Morocco* (Princeton University Press, 1985), *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination*, co-edited with James Piscatori (University of California Press, 1990), *Muslim Politics*, co-authored with James Piscatori (Princeton University Press, 1996; new edition 2004), *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, co-edited with Jon W. Anderson (Indiana University Press, 2nd ed. 2003), *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*, 4th ed. (Prentice Hall, 2002) and, co-edited with Armando Salvatore, *Public Islam and the Common Good* (Brill, 2004). – Address: Department of Anthropology, Dartmouth College, 6047 Silsby, Hanover NH 03755-3547, USA. E-mail: Dale.f.eickelman@dartmouth.edu

My second stay at Wiko (January through early April) had a satisfying outcome, although – as I anticipated – no neat conclusion. My prior 2000–01 stay was for the entire academic year, so I already knew the rhythm of activity at Wiko. Indeed, the earlier stay was

followed by a two-year collective project, “Public Islam and the Common Good,” financed by the Humboldt-Stiftung but administered by Wiko. In a sense, I feel that I never left Berlin completely.

My 2010 Wiko residence came at the middle of a concurrent two-year Carnegie Corporation fellowship, the point where I began shifting gears from research to writing. Some scholars have a “big bang” approach to writing and follow a set outline. My approach is spiral. I have core arguments, but my presentation of them shifts as I learn more and try out ideas on different audiences.

My main idea is that the most profound transformations in the Muslim world today occur through the actions of middle-class professionals and religious intellectuals not trained in the conventional religious sciences. They are taking charge of developing their faith and practices for a modern, even postmodern, world that is as challenging for Muslims as for non-Muslims. We are familiar with fundamentalists, radicals and secularists, but less so with intellectuals rethinking religion outside traditional boundaries, organizers shaping new movements, others working quietly behind the scenes in support roles and reformers facing major institutional challenges as they go public.

The focus on ideas and organizational forms has been well studied by many, including myself. My current objective is to explore the impact of the concrete sets of skills and aptitudes now being cultivated among members of the educated middle classes, religious and non-religious, clerical and non-clerical, in majority-Muslim countries – and those active in Europe and North America. These skills contribute to mainstreaming Islam, the production of what is less exotic and therefore more normal and acceptable, which is itself a form of social and religious tolerance.

There are four major features that I am exploring, chosen in part by prior access to often challenging research environments. First are intellectuals who “take charge” of developing ideas and persuading large audiences in states where organized non-governmental movements are strongly discouraged. In Syria, for example, intellectuals who act on their own, whether religious or secular, are allowed considerable liberty to write if they avoid criticism of the government. The clerics in Najaf, Iraq, increasingly are likewise reaching outside the conventional contours of advanced religious study.

The second set of skills is the overt, up-front organizing of people and communicating effectively. States, including both liberal and totalitarian ones, depend on middle-class professionals just as successful religious and civic movements do, as in Indonesia and Morocco. State-sponsored efforts at religious dialogue, such as the Saudi-initiated 2008 inter-

faith conference in Madrid and the intrafaith 2004 “Amman Message” of Jordan’s King Abdallah calling for moderation, are organized and managed by middle-class professionals, as are non-state interfaith initiatives, such as those of the followers of Fethullah Gülen in Turkey and elsewhere. Forums and organizations that promote ideas and the exchange of ideas, such as the Arab Thought Forum for Palestinians, represent such up-front organizing. The civil society debate intersects with organizing for mainstreaming Islam, but it is not simply identifiable with that debate since the focus is not on civility in itself or democratization, but with the “selling” of the ideas and practices of a certain way of putting faith to work in society.

A third related skill is working quietly behind the scenes to further an interest or cause where weak forms of civic empowerment are linked to strong forms of structure, such as in the United Arab Emirates, where major state-sponsored initiatives are underway to use the “Islamic Studies” curriculum of primary and secondary schools to create a template for inculcating values of critical thinking, gender parity and religious tolerance. Likewise, the February 2004 revision of Moroccan family law, the *mudawwana*, to enhance the rights of women, was in preparation for years but enacted only in the wake of major terrorist attacks in Casablanca in May 2003.

A final skill is that of publicity trumping secrecy. Turkey’s Fethullah Gülen, initially trained as a state-sponsored preacher and recently named as one of the world’s top 100 intellectuals, has inspired a network of schools, newspapers and radio and television outlets to convey to his followers a respect for educational excellence and religious tolerance. Publicity can overcome the suspicion of groups and ideas, and in this way it contributes significantly to “normalizing” groups and ideas. Mainstreaming, however, also exacts a price. The advocates of mainstreaming can be criticized for vagueness and a lack of specificity, especially as “mainstream” Islam often downplays cultural specificities in favour of an affirmation of individual empowerment. Opponents to mainstreaming can vaunt their outsider status. Such opposition can be tenacious.

I settled quickly into a work routine at Wiko, although I forgot that Berlin sidewalks are not salted or otherwise chemically treated against ice. At first I mistook as ski enthusiasts the large numbers of pedestrians in Grunewald using hiking poles. After a few slips I understood why the poles were ubiquitous.

When not sliding on sidewalks, I completed an article on my project for *Encounters*, a new English-language journal published in Abu Dhabi, and a review essay also on the same topic. I regularly met with Berlin-area colleagues whose interests complemented my

own. One colleague, Jörn Thielmann (Erlangen), joined me for a week at Wiko, where we began work on a fifth edition of my *The Middle East and North Africa*, which he will co-author and subsequently translate into German. I also gave a keynote presentation at the “Time for Medialisation” conference co-sponsored by the Berlin Graduate School for Muslim Societies and Cultures and several Berlin-area institutions in early April. Berlin brought sharply into focus the goal of my “Mainstreaming Islam” project, and the weekly colloquium of Wiko Fellows presenting their work to non-specialists and specialists reminded me of the breadth of critical audience to which we should all aspire.