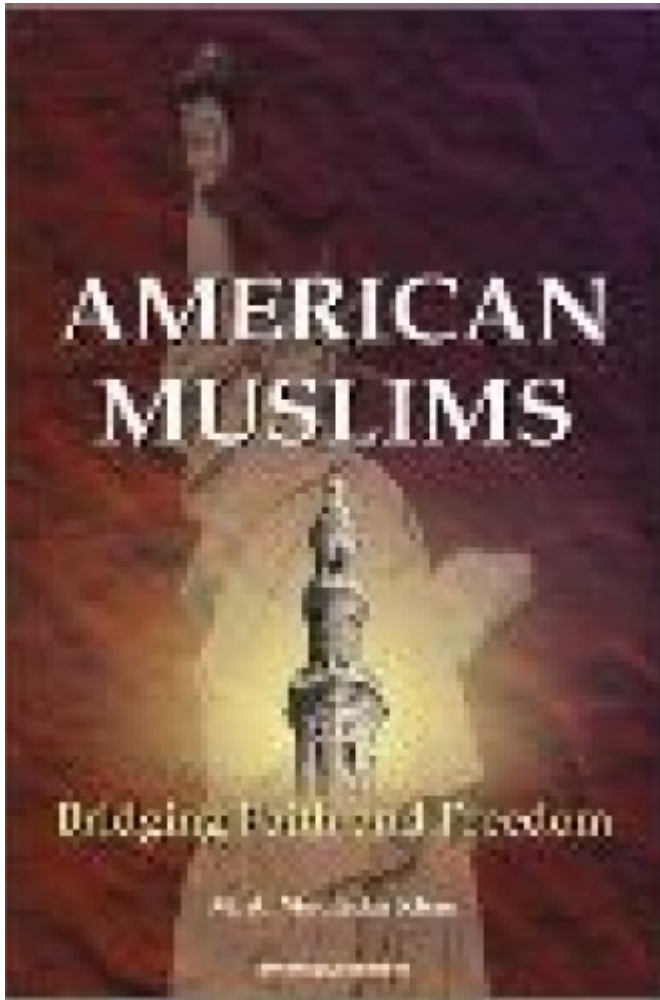


# Change agents

By [Charles Strohmer](#) in the [August 9, 2005](#) issue

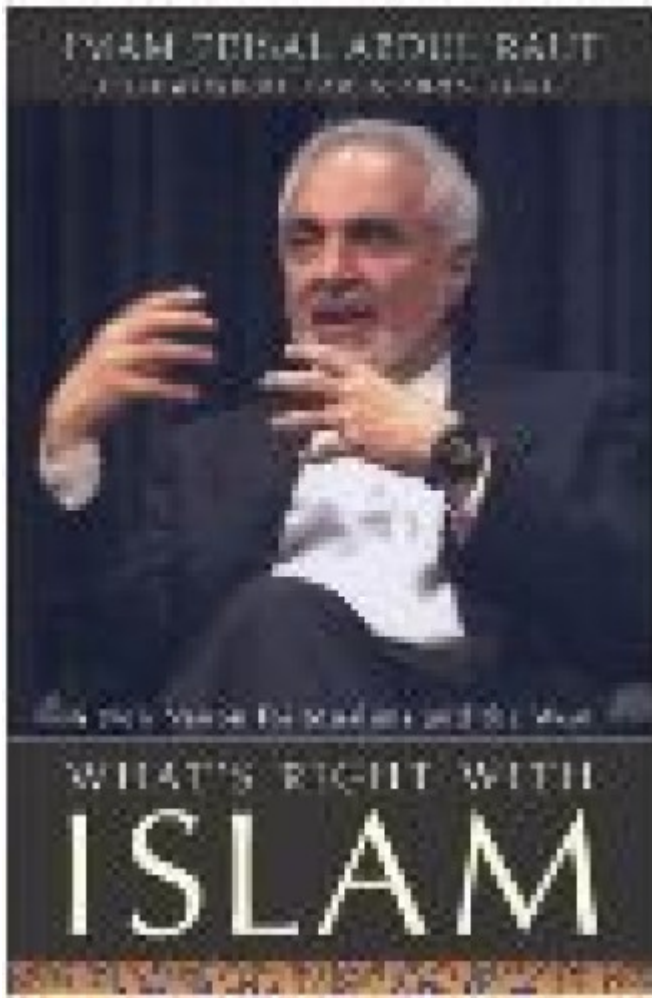
## In Review



### **American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom**

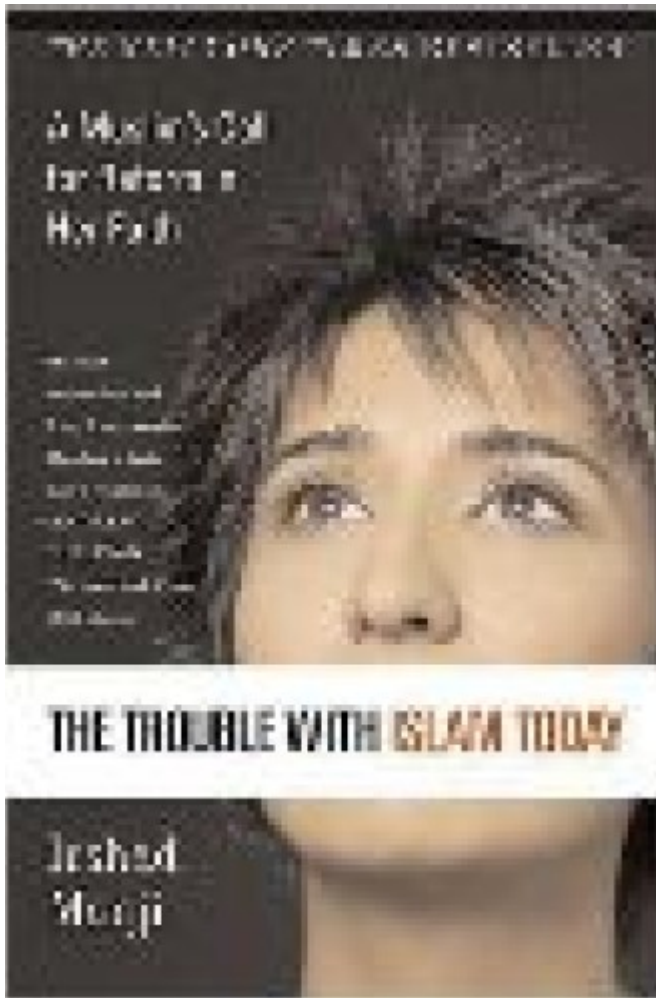
M. A. Muqtedar Khan

Amana



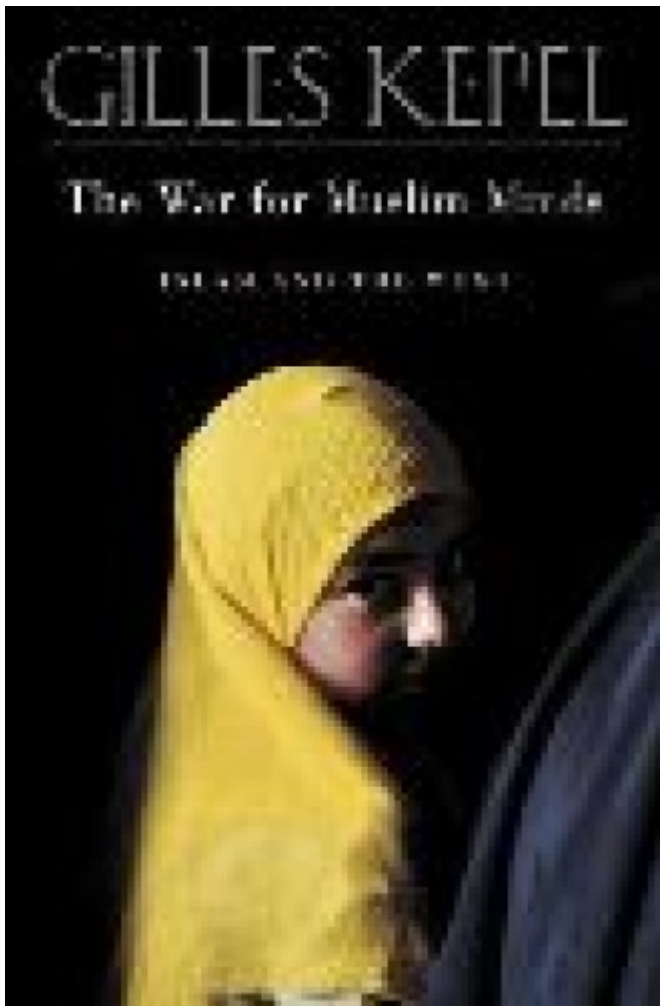
## **What's Right with Islam: A New Vision for Muslims and the West**

Feisal Abdul Rauf  
HarperSanFrancisco



## **The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith**

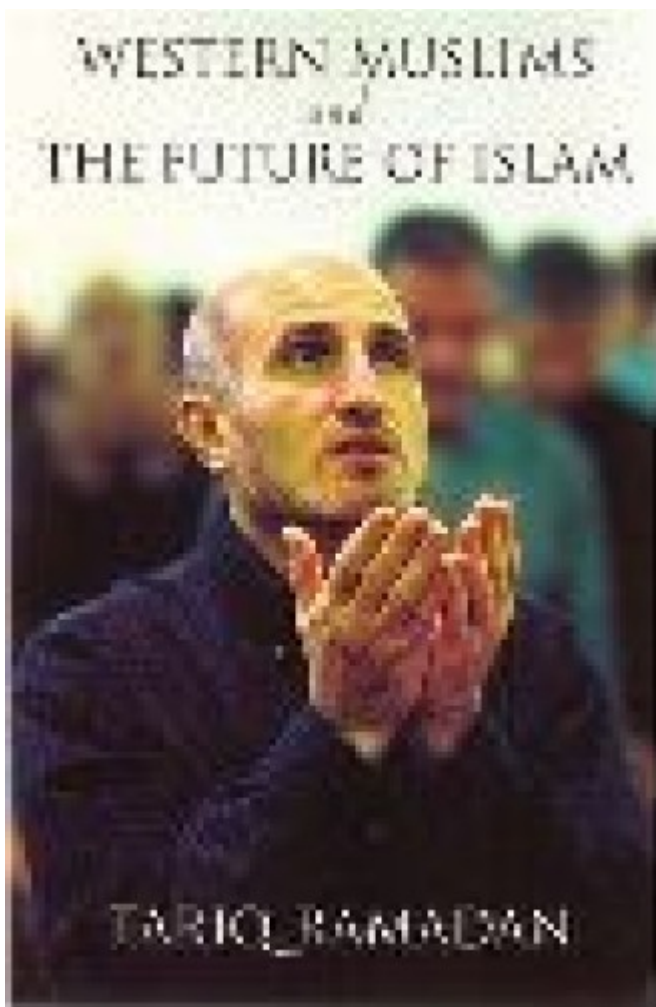
Irshad Manji  
St. Martin's Press



## **The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West**

Gilles Kepel

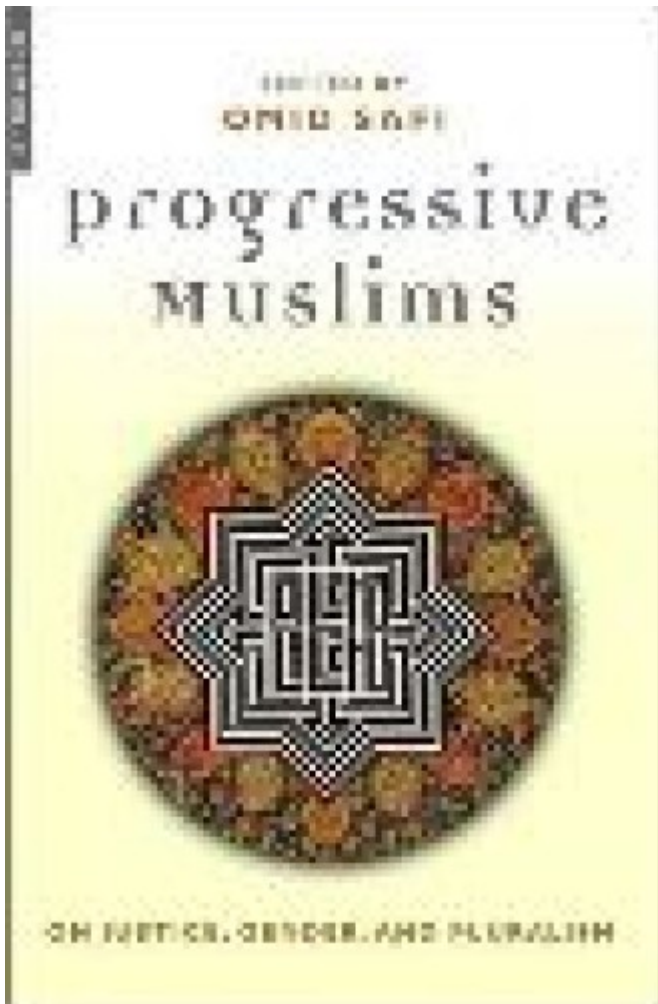
Harvard University Press



## **Western Muslims and the Future of Islam**

Tariq Ramadan

Oxford University Press



## **Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism**

Omid Safi, ed.

Oneworld

Most Muslim leaders in England responded to the terrorist bombings in London with unequivocal condemnation. Yet the Muslim community in England and elsewhere is pulled in conflicting directions. On one side are street activists preaching literal adherence to the Qur'an, shariah and hadiths, and calling for separation from, if not overthrow of, the West. On the other side are those who want to reform Islam.

Although Muslim reform may seem like an oxymoron to those who see Islam only through the lens of graphic violence, Muslim reformers have been in the sights of jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda for years. Their increasingly bold public stance has made them the natural enemy of those who seek to squeeze followers of Islam into a tight-fisted sectarianism at war with the entire infidel world.

At the start of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Islamic scholars Iyad Jamaledine (an Iraqi Shi'ite) and Hossein al-Khomeini (a grandson of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini) lived under the protection of U.S. troops in a Baghdad mansion because of death threats from Muslim extremists. Their crime? They see true Islam as a flexible, nondogmatic religion that is adaptable to the modern world with all of its plurality, and they call for the separation of mosque and state.

"We have failed as a civil society by not confronting the historical, social, and political demons within us," a Pakistani businessman wrote in a letter to the Pakistan daily the *Nation*. "Without a reformation in the practice of Islam which makes it move forward not backward, there is no hope for Muslims everywhere." Striking a more literary note from Egypt, poet and playwright Ali Salem wrote after 9/11 an open letter of apology to Americans: "Extremism may claim God as its redeemer, but it's really the selfish product of lunacy. . . . These extremists are pathologically jealous. They feel like dwarfs, which is why they search for towers" to destroy.

The growing literature of the Muslim reform movement has played an especially significant role since 9/11 shifted the earth's geopolitical axis. Western governments were bewildered about what efforts Islam itself would initiate to help prevent another 9/11 or worse from happening. The urgency of Muslim reform has become central to this concern, especially given the uptick of democracy in the Middle East.

Use of the words *Muslim reform* and *Islamic reform*, however, arouse mixed feeling in many Muslims. In his introduction to *Progressive Muslims*, a collection of essays by 15 Muslim scholars and activists, Omid Safi notes the essayists' ambivalence about using the word *reform* or *reformation* to describe what they envision. "Serious economic, social, and political issues in the Muslim world . . . need urgent remedying," Safi writes, and if "one is talking about a reformation that would address all of those levels, then I would suspect that most progressive Muslims would readily support that usage of the term." Yet the words *Islamic reformation* carry baggage about "the Protestant reformation initiated by Martin Luther" which makes the essayists uneasy, according to Safi, who is assistant professor of philosophy and religion at Colgate University.

"Ours is not a project of developing a 'Protestant' Islam distinct from a 'Catholic' Islam," writes Safi.

Many of us insist that we are not looking to create a further split within the Muslim community so much as to heal it. Furthermore, embedded in the very language of “Reformation” is the notion of a significant split with the past. . . . It might be an easier task to start with a *tabula rasa*, but that would not be an Islamic project. Being a progressive Muslim, at least in the view of this group, mandates a difficult, onerous, critical, and uneasy engagement with the tradition.

From within what Safi prefers to call “the progressive Muslim project,” voices of reform in North America and Europe are addressing constituencies and concerns relevant to their contexts. In the U.S., Muqtedar Khan emphasizes the need for Muslims to become more liberally democratic without losing their basic faith. Working out of his small, cluttered office at Adrian University, where he teaches political science, the seemingly indefatigable Khan stepped into the role of public intellectual for the U.S. Muslim community after 9/11 with incisive articles such as “Memo to Mr. Bin Laden: Go to Hell,” which was picked up by more than a dozen news agencies around the world. His Web site, called “Ijtihad” (the Islamic word for “independent reasoning” or “innovative thinking”), carries his prolific writings and is a much-visited resource for the media and for Muslims seeking a philosophically oriented approach to Muslim life.

An Indian Muslim frequently on the lecture circuit, Khan believes that his flexible, liberal voice offers an alternative to those of traditionalist Islamic theologians who furnish the reasoning for conservative fatwas. Muslims must become more involved in the American political process locally, regionally and nationally, Kahn argues in *American Muslims*, and his use of *American* as an adjective before *Muslims* is instructive.

“Muslims cannot be just another ethnic group [i.e., Muslim Americans] with special interests particularly in foreign policy,” he writes. “We are seeking change, not only in how the U.S. deals with Muslims overseas but also how American society evolves at home. . . . We must work as hard as possible to make it morally safe and materially satisfying.”

Whereas Khan stresses increasing Muslim involvement in the U.S. political process, imam Feisal Abdul Rauf believes that American Muslims must play a central role in the bigger picture of healing the rift between the U.S. and the larger Muslim world. This vigorous relationship was on the table at the second annual U.S.-Islamic World



Forum held in Qatar in April, sponsored by the emir of Qatar and the Brookings Institution. In his opening remarks at the conference, the emir admonished attendees from both the U.S. and Islamic countries “to arrive through dialogue at a point of transparency” where political transformation, now begun, can be completed, “so that Muslim peoples, who are the prime persons concerned with reform, can be assured” of their hopes.

Rauf has spent more than three decades in universities, mosques, synagogues and churches explaining Islam but generally resisting involvement in politics. The events of 9/11, however, pulled him from the pulpit of his mosque 12 blocks from the World Trade Center and into the media spotlight, where, he says, he has struggled to provide sound-bite political answers. *What's Right with Islam* explains in depth what he could only explain in part immediately after 9/11.

Drawing on his experience in interfaith dialogue, Rauf takes Abrahamic monotheism as his starting point, insisting that it is both theologically and socially radical because it offers a “common roots” understanding for Jews, Muslims and Christians. Drawing from the Islamic imperative that “God is one” and from the Qur’an’s teaching about Adam and Eve, Rauf arrives at two essential principles: that all humans are equal “because we are born of one man and woman,” and that “because we are equal . . . we have certain inalienable liberties,” such as the freedom to accept or reject God, to think for ourselves (ijtihad) and to make individual choices without coercion. A “cluster of monotheism’s core ideas,” which Rauf shorthands as the “Abrahamic ethic,” drives the book’s thesis, showing what’s right with both Islam and the U.S. and offering suggestions about how American Muslims and the U.S. government may become forces of healing in the larger Muslim world.

Khan writes largely for academe, and Rauf, who wears his heart on his sleeve, is chiefly pastoral. Canadian journalist and television personality Irshad Manji cries like a Muslim Amos. “Islam is on very thin ice with me,” she writes, then shows why in her daring book *The Trouble with Islam Today* (recently retitled from *The Trouble with Islam*). This blunt and provocative book, now a best seller, is meant to shake up what Manji calls mainstream Islam, to which she puts her honest questions about fundamentalist attitudes toward women, human rights, Jews, the U.S. and even the Qur’an. We must be self-critical, she writes, “coming clean about the nasty side of the Koran, and how it informs terrorism.”

But it's not all diatribe. Manji's appeal for a mainstream return to *ijtihad* lies at the heart of her passion. Without ignoring or romanticizing Islam's darker periods—which is the great weakness of another, otherwise important book, *Why I Am a Muslim*, by Asma Gull Hasan, a somewhat conservative Muslim woman—Manji shows the benefits that *ijtihad* once produced for both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, and then she asks, “When did we stop thinking?” The book suggests ways that Muslims may liberalize Islam through what she calls “operation *ijtihad*,” an ambitious initiative that would empower more Muslim women economically, align Islamic human rights codes with those of the modern world, reform radio and television outlets, create a less militant paradigm for the relationship between mosque and state, incorporate more democracy into the Muslim world and allow for engagement in interfaith activity. This, she concludes, “would give Muslims a future to live for rather than a past to die for.”

The situation in Europe, including Britain, is more nuanced than that in North America, largely because Europe's Muslim populations have a longer and more established social and political history in nations where Muslims (of the theological left, right and center) are represented by sophisticated networks of mosques and political NGOs that defend the rights of Muslims and shape their participation in civic life, including the introduction of Islamic law for civil cases. Muslim reformers in Europe therefore face different challenges.

In *The War for Muslim Minds*, Gilles Kepel, a French Arabist and scholar of Islam, shows little patience for neoconservative U.S. foreign policy, but most of the book is taken up with criticism of the chief enemy of Muslim reform in Europe: jihadist ideology imported from Saudi Arabian Wahhabism, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qutb brothers (Sayyid and Muhammad) and like-minded sources. Kepel argues that the jihadists are losing ground, but he does so by providing a political, religious and historical tour of the Middle East (“a nexus of international disorder”) that could be seen as providing evidence that the jihadists aren't losing ground. Kepel's conclusion is that the real battleground for hearts and minds lies in the immigrant communities of European cities, where Muslims are being propagandized with “terrorist ideology and tactics.” “The battle for Europe,” he writes, “is a battle for self-definition. The war for Muslim minds around the world may turn on the outcome of this struggle.”

And it is a struggle rooted in the concerns of daily life. Bill Gordon, a mental health nurse manager who works for Britain's National Health Service, lives near a small

neighborhood mosque in a well-integrated section of Birmingham, England. What fascinates Gordon are the daily lives of young Muslims. "They go filing into the mosque for prayers wearing traditional Muslim garb, and then later I see them around town wearing baseball caps turned backwards and all kinds of hip Western gear. Pop culture is completely inside Islamic youth culture here. It's just that it's all under wraps." This neighborhood microcosm reveals the forces of religion, secularism and pluralism pulling at Europe's growing Muslim population (estimated at at least 15 million), whose heaviest concentrations are in France, Britain and Germany.

One voice in this contentious mix is that of Tariq Ramadan, a charismatic French-speaking Swiss intellectual who has a large following among Europe's young Muslims. Arguing that Islam is universal and comprehensive in its message ("for all of life," as Christians would say about their faith), Ramadan offers European Muslims a fresh reading of Islamic sources to help them integrate faithfully into their pluralistic settings. *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* takes the vision offered in *To Be a European Muslim* (1998) and applies it "in practical terms on the ground," suggesting "a number of concrete responses to questions asked by Western Muslims in the various areas of their daily lives."

Decades ago it dawned on many Western Christian families that, try as they might, they could no longer "keep the world out." *Western Muslims* has that kind of feel to it. The book carries chapters of well-thought-out commentary, written with much circumspection, on practical issues that secular pluralism in Europe forces Muslim communities to deal with. Ramadan's advice ranges from issues of food, fashion and free time to children's education and Islamic feminism, to social commitments, political involvement and partnerships with groups outside of Islam that share progressive Muslims' concerns (about the environment, human rights, drug abuse and so on). His stated goal in all of this is to create an independent Western Islam, a new "Muslim personality" whose conscience can be faithful to Islamic principles while being fully integrated into Western societies.

But controversy surrounds Ramadan (see article on page 25). In *The War for Muslim Minds*, for instance, Kepel argues that Ramadan says one thing to Western audiences and quite another to fundamentalist Muslims and that he does this in order to expand his circle of influence. "Unless Tariq Ramadan takes responsibility for his growing internal contradictions," Kepel challenges, "they will propel him, like all shooting stars, into the dark night." Kepel's concern highlights an enduring

question for Muslim reformers that is on the minds of many Western secularists and Christians: What is their ultimate goal for the West? What do they *really* want?

Even the self-described liberal reformer Muqtedar Khan leaves his options open in an article titled "Who Are Moderate Muslims?" He writes: "I believe that moderate Muslims are different from militant Muslims even though both of them advocate the establishment of societies whose organizing principle is Islam." This is a very revealing statement. Does it suggest that, in urging American Muslims to get involved in local, regional and national jurisprudence, Khan ultimately wants the U.S. to become a nation shaped by Islam?

This query is indicative of basic questions remaining to be answered by progressive Muslims in dialogue with secularists and Christians. These three groups must struggle together to make the world a safer place for communities and families who see things differently from one another. Finding what the Christian wisdom tradition would call mutual-ground answers is the great task necessitated by the crisis of 9/11. To achieve this goal requires an imaginative height previously unknown to us.