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The specificity of societies with a major Muslim population is generally attributed, regardless of social or historical peculiarities, to the religious and cultural preeminence of Islam. Various interpretations of Sharia'h, through legal verdicts and social practices, have shaped the Islamic society and its history. Similarly, customs, traditions, conventions in specific contexts influenced the theoretical and practical interpretation of the Islamic sources. As any other religion, Islam religion does not exist in a social and historic vacuum. The inextricable relation between religion and culture does not justify a reductionist logic equating religion to a specific cultural setting[1].

The normative dimension of Islam springs from the fundamental sources, *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, containers of universal principles and values transcending their literary expression and their contextual interpretation. *Tafseer* or Islamic exegesis is not indifferent to its historical and cultural determinants[2], be them those of the succession of divine revelations, of the consolidation of the Islamic community. Within the frame of their own geopolitical and cultural context, contemporary reformist movements continue to strive to investigate Islam normative structures in order to substantiate the Qur'anic ethical imperatives.

It is important to underline that Islamic normative perspective is neither static nor immutable. On the contrary, one of its intrinsic characteristics is the constant and legitimate actualization of sources through reinterpretation, reformation and reconstruction. As a religion, Islam is based on the idea of the reiteration during history of a unique and universal divine message. A plethora of prophets participated to the alchemical process of purifying the tradition and defining the status of the human being as *khalifa*. From the first prophet, Adam, to the last, Muhammad, the divine revelation was transmitted in a complex and ambivalent form, a consecration through preaching of authentic traditions as a way to render (*islah*) individuals to their natural state (*fitra*). *Al Islah*, the reform, is an ideal explicitly promoted by the prophets. This transformative process goes hand in hand with the reinterpretation of the sacred texts. Exegesis is essential for ensuring the implementation of Islamic percepts and the pursuit of Qur'anic objectives in a changing social and cultural setting.

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[1] Tariq RAMADAN, *Radical Reform*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 184. We have quoted Ramadan's study on reform because we assessed that it presents a good synthesis on the *islah*'s conceptual history in Islamic thought, without conceding or implicitly agreeing to the author's general political perspective.

[2] *Ibidem*. An attitude well-exemplified by the literalist neo-Salafite movement whose methodology regarding the interpretation of the normative texts allows the confusion between the Islamic principles and their cultural expression as it was delineated at the dawn of Islamic history.

Considering Islam as both a tradition and an accredited basis for the reformulation of this tradition, *Tawhidic* epistemological paradigm represents a useful instrument of analysis. The Qur'an status, Allah's eternal Word, had been associated from the beginning with a *sui generis* hermeneutics. The historicity of the sacred text, of the Prophet's wording and deeds (*ahadith*) have served as major interpretative signs for the Qura'nic verses. Identification of historical context, causes (*asbab*) of the revelation and chronology of the revealed verses were essential conditions in the science of *Tafseer*/Qura'nic exegesis[1]. *Ayat*/verses were revealed progressively over a period of twenty-three years as an answer to specific historical situations. It was indispensible to understand the historical, social and cultural context of their revelation in order to identify the adequate meaning of the verses as well as the higher objectives intended beyond the literal meaning. *Islah* illustrates the transforming potential of the Islamic tradition allowing for the manifestation of an accurate tradition in a variety of spatial-temporal contexts.

Translating *islah* by "reform" is accepting an impoverishing of the meaning of this notion. However, the translation is acceptable as long as we elucidate the semantic differences between the two terms. Even if they share a common core (*to change bad to good, good to better; to renew; to form again; to straighten; to better a situation, a conception* etc), *islah* is more extended, while being strictly embedded in the Islamic ideological system.

Etymologically, the word *islah* is the infinitive form of the transitive verb *aslaha*, which springs from the root *s-l-h*. From the lexical point of view, *islah* lays out multiple significations, consonant with the actions indicated by the verb *aslaha*: "*To make straight; to correct; to improve; to do something better; to settle something in a better position; to reconcile; to mend*". The antonym of *islah* is *ifsad*, a word meaning corruption, distruction[2]. The active participle of the word *islah* is *muslih*, having as antonym – *mufsid*[3]. Therefore, the word *mufsid* indicates an individual who operates a good changing – *taghiyr*[4]/change is an aspect of reform/*islah* – within its relationship with other individuals or with himself/herself. In other words, it is about the human being who realizes all the required steps to preserve peace and order, and to rule anarchy, disharmony and injustice out; he does good to humanity and reconciles it with the divinity and with the rest of creation. A human being can be considered good/*salih*, according to his nature and for himself, but without being a *muslih*, if it does not better the state of the others[5]. A person can be *muslih* in relation to his/her own evolution, but not in relation with the others.

The Qur'anic prophethood emphasizes the fact that the prophets are *muslihun par excellence*, through their special quality as messengers of Allah, agents destined to purify and revivify the primordial spiritual path of living/*ad-din*. An eloquent definition is offered by Tariq Ramadan:

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[1] Tariq RAMADAN, *Radical Reform*, cit., pp. 15-16.

[2] Selim SARUHAN, "Reform or Islah", in Josef W. MERI, Jere L. BACHRACH (eds.), *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, vol. I, Routledge, New York, 2006, p. 675.

[3] Namely, *a person who destroys or perverts* (Qur'an 2:220; 7:74; 21:28).

[4] In Qur'anic language, *taghiyr*/change has no ideological determinations; it is mentioned in both positive and negative contexts. The changeability *per se* is not a value, but it becomes so due to a given orientation.

[5] Any *muslih* must be a *salih* but not any *salih* is a *muslih*.

"The notion of *islah* implies bringing the object (whether a heart, an intellect or a society) back to its original state, when said object was still considered to be pure and good; it is indeed a matter of improvement, of curing, through re-forming, through *reform*"[1].

There are about forty verses[2] where one can find a lot of variants of the root *s-l-h*, all of them illustrating the primordial meaning of the word: *to bring re-conciliation* between people, *to make peace*, *to better* or *to restore* the human being[3]. These verses have authorized the Islamic reformism, no matter the variety of its historical manifestations[4] justified by the recognition of corruption, degradation and dissolution of the society.

Two of these verses, 11:88 and 11:117[5], justify from an ontological and soteriological perspective the necessity of a constant involvement in the *islah*/reform process. Whenever corruption/*fasad* occurs down on earth, *islah* becomes a divine imperative, an essential and non-negotiable duty of the Muslims, men and women alike, for securing and protecting the vitality of the community. *Muslihun*, those performing *islah*, maintain without interruption a noble prophetical mission[6].

Islah

"is deeply rooted in the basic soil of Islam, and cannot therefore be viewed solely in relation to the intellectual trends that appeared in the Muslim world at the beginning of the modern period"[7].

However, the concept was strongly criticized by contemporaneous Islamic scholars. As Tariq Ramadan underlines, for some, reforming Islam is confused with the religion alteration, for others, the reform is an undesirable approach imported from Christian tradition. Another group, eulogizing the eternal and universal nature of Islamic teachings, object to the necessity and usefulness of reformist approaches. In fact, obsessed to avoid alienation caused by a possible adaptation of certain categories belonging to a non-Islamic tradition, these critics paradoxically label as "foreign" an inextricable element of the Islamic tradition itself[8].

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[1] Tariq RAMADAN, *Radical Reform*, cit., p. 13.

[2] The word *islah* can also be found in the prophetic tradition, *Sunnah*, as designating religious and moral reform.

[3] The verses where the term *islah* or by-products from the same lexical family are mentioned: Qur'an 2:220, 7:170, 11:88, 11:117, 28:19, 38:19. The semantic load of the term *islah* is obtained through reference to Qur'anic verses context and through the holistic analyze of all Qur'anic verses focused on this subject.

[4] See John L. ESPOSITO, *Islam – The Straight Path*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, pp. 115-116.

[5] "And I do not intend to differ from you in that which I have forbidden you; I only intend reform/*islah* as much as I am able. And my success is not but through Allah": "And your Lord would not have destroyed the cities unjustly while their people were reformers/*muslihun*".

[6] In the Sunni tradition, this role is given to scholars; whereas the Shiite tradition assigns it to purified Imams, sole owners and keepers of the original Islamic gnosis. Regular scholars have to strive to endorse this responsibility, knowing that only the Twelve Imams can legitimately claim the infallibility of the process and the effectiveness of its results.

[7] Ali MERAD, "Islah", *Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol.4, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1978, p. 141.

[8] Tariq RAMADAN, *Radical Reform*, cit., pp. 11-12.

Islah is not a reformation of Islam, but of its understanding and actualization. Therefore we can identify a spiral model in the unfolding of the reforming-action. Perhaps this fact also explains the *hadith* reference to the cyclical emergence of a *mujjadid*/renovator in a certain moment, every century.

In an empirical way, the reform validates, in a doctrinal manner, and confirms, in a historical manner, the thesis of inexhaustible polysemy of the Qur'anic verses, diversely manifested at the level of all hermeneutic registers[1]. The same principles and values of Islam are profoundly scrutinized, considered and practiced in an innovator spirit, one that is compatible with different historical circumstances that are inherent in the transformation of human societies. The becoming coordinated through *islah* is not conceived as a linearly ordered set and it is not constructed through crystallization of the antagonisms – past-present, tradition-modernity, old-new. On the contrary, following a spiral trajectory, it periodically reconstructs the tradition, using the traditional essential data, renewing and enforcing its founding principles in a new context, all that through a fresh and appropriate manifestation. By *islah* we note the emergence of an Islamic *sui generis* phenomenon – a dynamic and vibrant tradition that does not oppose modernization, but exemplifies it through a constructive sequences of metamorphoses.

The discursive and dynamic character of Islamic tradition becomes comprehensible if we take into account Alasdair MacIntyre's definition:

> "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain funda-mental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted"[2].

In other words, tradition that is conceptualized in a form of discourses that evolve in a historical mode, is not the same with the reiteration of the past or the arrest within a system of immutable doctrines. It points to the materialization of a framework composed by texts, practices, arguments, serving as reference that ensures the permanent coherence of the tradition itself as well as its orientation and form of transformation[3]. So, it has been explained that tradition is completely different from the way it was conceptualized by metaphysicians, positivists and phenomenologists. Orientalist perspective on traditions was dismantled and its historical and ideological assumptions have been canceled. Talal Asad developed MacIntyre's thesis – "Traditions, when vital, embody the continuities of conflict"[4]. Consequently, he affirms that a tradition is essentially constituted by discourses, which try to discipline practitioners on a proper form and for the purpose of an assigned practice. This practice, just because is established, has a history. Thus, the essence of tradition is

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[1] Henry CORBIN, *Istoria filosofiei islamice*, Romanian transl. by Marius I. Lazăr, Editura Herald, Bucureşti, 2005, pp. 18-26.

[2] Alasdair MACINTYRE, "Whose Justice? Which Rationality?", in Kelvin KNIGHT (ed.), *The MacIntyre Reader*, University Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1988, p. 12.

[3] Samira HAJ, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality and Modernity*, Stanford University Press, California, 2009, pp. 4-6.

[4] Alasdair MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1981, p. 222.

constituted by a history of arguments and debates concerning specific conceptions, using a common language[1].

The dynamic aspect of cultural traditions has been reviewed by Marshall G.S. Hodgson, who identified three stages during the transmission of tradition (the creative action, group commitment and cumulative interaction within the group)[2]. Also, Daniel W. Brown gave a special attention to the Islamic phenomenon:

> "Tradition is not an enemy of change, but the very stuff that is subject to change. Tradition changes and may be used to justify change; it can, in fact, be revolutionary"[3].

In the same vein, Edward Shils highlighted:

> "The practiced beliefs of the traditionalist reactionaries are practically never identical with those tradions they seek to reinstitute; the latter are very selectively constructed. The revival of a tradition almost inevitably involves changing the tradition"[4].

Contemporary examples of this revolutionary manifestation are the emergence of the Islamic feminism, the Iran Shiite revolution, the proliferation of Sunni reformist movements, the new approaches on modernity and Islam etc.

The evolutionary approach to tradition is responsible for placing it in opposition to modernity[5]. In a Western perspective, modernity implies separation from the past, repository of a tradition of social stagnation and political tyranny. Tradition would then become the exhaustive antithesis of the European discourse on modernity whose coordinates are, as synthetized by Reinhardt Schulze, humanistic philosophy, strict secularism, republican nationalism, industrial development, modernized education and absence of religion in the public sphere[6]. Thus, progress and emancipation, as long as are perceived through the conceptual and ideological filter of liberalism, seem to be incompatible with Muslim reformers projects. A conceptualization of *islah*, the Islamic reform, understood in its own ideological system, may reveal alternative constructions of modernity that are capable to elude the antinomy tradition-modernity.

Within Islam, the restoration and renewal process is inspired by the example of a past experience – the ideal community of the Prophet that witnessed the application of divine revelation in human society. *Islah* is not generated by deliberate innovation or by the pursuite of a utopia[7]. As Nilüfer Göle asserted:

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[1] Talal ASAD, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986, p. 14.

[2] Marshall G.S HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, pp. 80-81.

[3] Daniel W. BROWN, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, p. 2.

[4] Edward SHILS, *Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1981, p. 246.

[5] See the colonial experience and the implications of some claims that uphold the idea of eradicating tradition in order to allow progress and development.

[6] Reinhardt SCHULZE, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, New York University Press, New York, 2002.

[7] John Obert VOLL, "Renewal and Reform in Islamic History: Tajdid and Islah", in John L. ESPOSITO (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, pp. 32-47.

"If traditionalism implies conservatism, the conservation of traditions and continuity with the past, the Islamist movements are radical [...] revolutionary, yet past-oriented [...] Paradoxically, contemporary Islamist movements endow Muslims with a collective identity that works critically against both traditional subjugation of Muslim identity and monocivilizational impositions of Western modernity [...] Modernity is not simply rejected or readopted, but critically and creatively reappropriated by new religious discursive and social practices in non-Western contexts"[1].

On the other hand, Islamic discourse on modernity does not deny the idea of modernity in itself, but denies the oppressive and exploitative version of modernity promoted by colonial regimes, and their assault on the Islamic epistemology. Fazlur Rahman, along with many other Muslim intellectuals, argued that modernity and Islam are not contradictory, but rather mutually constructive. Analyzing Al Afghani's philosophy, he noticed:

"Muslims, in learning science afresh from the developed West, would be both recovering their past and re-fulfilling the neglected commandments of the Qur'an"[2].

In a similar line of argument, historian Reinhardt Schulze asserts:

"We may realize that the European dialect of modernism is merely one of many cultural dialects of modernism. This multilingualism for the present only leads us to anticipate that modernism is at the same time both specific and universal and that this may be the sign of the 'universal time' which we call modernism"[3].

The diversity of reformist approaches demonstrates the dynamism of the Islamic tradition: all pieces of the past are not part of the tradition and all innovative schemes do not contradict tradition. Within the paradigm of Islam, immobility is excluded: reiterating the past does not automaticaly creates a legitimate tradition; observing the tradition means accepting its perpetual transformation, its constantly changing profile[4].

As any other philosophical concept, through history, the term *islah* has been subject to various interpretations. In Islamic idiom, *islah* is a conceptualization of protest. Beyond the intrinsic remonstrant nature of Islam *per se*[5], as mentioned above with reference to the successive revelations cycle, it played different roles and it served different purposes. Inward, it has been set against existing practices and habits, against normative constructions suffocated by formalism (see Sufism) or unjust social and political realities (ideological reactions). Outward, *islah* acquired a

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[1] Nilüfer GŐLE, "Snapshots of Islamic Modernities", *Daedalus*, no. 129, 2000, pp. 93, 96.

[2] Rahman FAZLUR, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 51.

[3] Reinhardt SCHULZE, *A Modern History*…cit., pp. 6-7.

[4] Prophet's teachings prove that he used to offer different verdicts (as a solution) to the same problem and same verdict to different problems, according to special circumstances and contexts.

[5] *Tawhid,* the absolut monotheism, is a form of protest against the deification of the immanent and/or against the atheism.

cultural (preservation and valorization of indigenous culture) as well as political and militant dimension (contesting imperialism and working for the creation of an Islamic state)[1].

   We recall briefly some of the decisive moments in Islamic history, when the idea of the legitimacy and necessity of *islah* in order to promote reform was put forth. The expansion of the Islamic state, the contact with different religions and ideologies, the existence of some new circumstances and problems generated an increasing number of debates concerning the need of reform. But calling on the ideal of reform also served to unmask and eradicate the unorthodox, innovative practices having penetrated the space reserved to fundamental Islamic beliefs regarding the worship of divinity/*ibadat*. These *bid'a* – novelties, innovations – were "characterized by lack of precedent and continuity with the past" and therefore considered dangerous[2]. The Sunni schools of thought built their ideological systems by striving to refute what they considered *bid'a* and by reforming the way of understanding Islam. In Shia tradition, grandson of the Prophet, Hussein, assumed the martyr's fate, initiating the first Islamic revolution, an extraordinarily impressive and outstanding one, all that in the name of *islah*. From Sunni perspective, same situation could have been solved by pledging unconditional obedience to the ruler. *Kalam*'s theologians[3] and partisans of esoteric interpretations (*batini*) felt that their speculative effort would be viewed as a re-formation of interpreting Islam. They believed that by discovering, analyzing and promoting the hidden meanings of Qur'anic verses they will revive the religion and restore its authentic significance diluted by the formalist understandings of Islam. Those who have retorted them vehemently, dismantling their mystical or philosophical theories, used the same concept/*islah* in order to get an authorization for the expurgation of pernicious innovations from Islam.

   At the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, a new reformist wave[4] became more and more prominent in Arab and Turkish politics. Consequently, the concept of *islah* watered down in a semantic nebula[5]. Neo-Salafi obsession concerning the infidelity of those who refuse to limit themselves to a literalist interpretation of the Qur'an gave a negative meaning to the reformist approach. The dissensions caused by the various political conceptualization of the reform[6] were

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   [1] Rahman FAZLUR, *Revival and Reform in Islam. A Study of Islamic Fundamentalism*, Oneworld, Oxford, 1999.
   [2] Muhammad Hashim KAMALI, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, The Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 2003, p. 47.
   [3] Literally *kalam* means word, discourse; here it is referred to Islamic scholasticism. For more details, see Henry CORBIN *Istoria filosofiei islamice*, cit., pp. 310-315.
   [4] Arab reformers of the last century set several guiding principles for a stable implementation of the concept *islah*. Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida evoked the following Qur'anic verses 13: 11, 17: 16 in order to prove the compatibility between Islam and science. They also emphasized the duty to repair and solve shortcomings in society that block any kind of development and compliance with Islamic objectives. Selim SARUHAN, "Reform or Islah", in Josef W. MERI, Jere L. BACHRACH (eds.), *Medieval Islamic Civilization: An Encyclopedia*, vol. I, cit., pp. 675-678.
   [5] Tariq RAMADAN, *Radical Reform*, cit., p. 10.
   [6] Terminological crisis of the Islamic principle of reform is clearly exemplified by often different, contradictory and radical visions to what *islah* means in relation with the government. The withdrawal and acceptance of a "problematic" governance or the authorization of a popular revolution were attitudes based on different understandings of the same concept – to improve the social and political situation.

reflected in the ideologies of different Islamic groups[1]. All these extremist or political manipulations of the concept of *islah* generated confusion and often negative reactions to what was originally said to be a project of Islamic reform[2].

A terminological clarification: the term *Islamic fundamentalism* has been applied by some researchers to those groups or individuals marked by a fanatical, radical, militant approach of Islam. However, Muslim scholars have made use of this term to designate the phenomenon of Islamic revival. Arabic language presents specific terms that allow a more accurate description of the different orientations, sometimes randomly subsumed to Islamic fundamentalism category. *Islah* (reform), *tajdid* (renewal), *salafiyah* (followers of the Pious Predecessors), *nahda* (renaissance) are terms with a different semantic load than the word *islamiyyun* (Islamist) that refers strictly to those claiming the revival of Islam, but using violent methods[3].

Another association, that is often found in Western Islamic studies and is caused by the same flawed methodology, namely the dissection of Islam in an exogenous reference system, can be summarized as follows: relentlessly, Islam generates violent fundamentalist movements and any reform must be dependent on liberalism. In this context, the attitude towards Islamic reform was often intensely influenced by Islamic renewal movements identified with one of its fundamentalist, but isolated manifestations, notorious in the eighteenth century – *wahhabiya / salafiyah* movement. Fortunately, the reality is more complex, because in the same century there were moderate Sufi reformist scholars. These reformists were marked by the views of Ibn Arabi and Ghazali. During their activity, they centered on dismantling *taqlid*'s legitimacy and on reorientation to *sharia'h*[4].

Exploring the variety of reform movements, Voll argues that

> "over the centuries the specific meanings of *tajdid* and *islah* have changed, depending on the evolution of Islamic thought and the changing circumstances of the Islamic community"[5].

The diversity of methodologies is explained referring to the different social-political contexts. In a study about the way reformist discourses affected Sufi practices in the South Asian space, Pemberton reiterated the same conclusion:

> "Scripture and jurisprudential sources thus can function as symbols or indicators of normative standards, but their interpretation – in light of the teachings and prohibitions advanced by reformists – varies considerably"[6].

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[1] Groups which were subsequently accused of Arabism and Pan-Islamism.

[2] M. Barry RUBIN (ed.), *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East*, State University of New York Press, New York, 2003, pp. 11-23 and pp. 125-141.

[3] For more details on this issue, see Robert MARIN-GUZMAN, "Fanaticism: A Major Obstacle in the Muslim-Christian Dialogue", *Arab Studies Quarterly* (ASQ), vol. 25, Summer 2003, pp. 63-96.

[4] Nehemia LEWTZION, John O. VOLL (eds.), *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1987, pp. 7-8.

[5] John Obert VOLL, "Renewal and Reform in Islamic History…cit.", p. 32.

[6] Kelley PEMBERTON, "Islamic and Islamicizing Discourses: Ritual Performance, Didactic Texts and the Reformist Challenge in the South Asian Sufi Milieu", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 17, 2002, p. 80.

So, a practice can be seen as illegitimate or sustained as permissible by invoking the same old set of normative texts. Islamisation of the discourse has produced a homogenization of the Islamic perspective, a focus on legislative issues, but it could not eliminate the controversial Sufi practices.

The clear transformations that occurred in the evolution of these concepts are indeed those determined by the inherently variable coordinates of the terms. In a particular historical period, *islah* was formed in response to a particular type of *fasad* (corruption, injustice), rigorously saying, to what was conceptualized and perceived as *fasad* in a given place and time. Without understanding in detail, in a contextualized manner, how a present reality (be it a theoretical construction or a practical problem) has been identified and defined as *fasad*, we cannot clarify the different shades and accents that have shaped the concept of *islah* (or *tajdid*). Paradoxically, while ubiquitous in all periods of Islamic history, the practical virtues of the concept of *islah* has not been upheld yet by a deeper theorization[1]. While there are many studies about the various *muslihun*/reformers, the list of studies devoted to the concept as such remains spare.

Semantic multivalence of the term *islah* does not allow its conditioning and confinement to the religious domain. The continuous purification of the soul through *tawba*/repentance represents an actuation of the principle of reform, but so does any critical, constructive attitude ruled by the desire of improvement and manifested within the society. The Qur'an and the universe, the two divine revelations, complementary and infused by the signs/verses (*ayat*) of the Creator, require a similar approach[2]. *Islah* determines a re-interpretation of the sacred text according to the contemporary social and historical circumstances in order to preserve authentically and effectively the Qur'anic principles and objectives. However it also generates a continuous improvement of the culture, the institutions, the politics and the society according to the Islamic norms.

Charles Kurzman addressed a very debated aspect of the contemporary dialogues on *fiqh*:

> "No reform can take place without re-shuffling the traditional suppositions and no re-shuffling can emerge unless one is masterfully acquainted with both traditions and the newly developed ideas outside the sphere of revelation"[3].

This perspective, also adopted by many Muslim authors, explains the importance given to Muslim intellectuals in the contemporary reformist discourse and the criticism around the traditional jurisprudence as an Islamic discipline.

Tradition-rooted categories of religious and social authority do not impair autonomous social agency. On the contrary, they are part of the process through which

> "forms of authority are transformed through the impact of social powers (like those relating to education, social disciplining and social distinction), without this implying a pre-fabricated, normative notion of 'secularization'"[4].

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[1] That is a justification for absence of an exact and exhaustive definition of the term.

[2] Tariq RAMADAN, *Radical Reform*, cit., pp. 88-90.

[3] Charles KURZMAN, *Liberal Islam: A Source Book*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p. 250.

[4] Schirin AMIR-MOAZAMI, Armando SALVATORE, "Gender, Generation and the Reform of Tradition: from Muslim Majority Societies to Western Europe", in Stefano ALLIEVI, Jorgen

The dynamic of the Islamic tradition is determined by inner interventions. It cannot be reduced to social and structural changing. Muslim reformists did not try "to stuff" Islamic tradition into the frame of some modern institutions, but wanted to redress and actualize a suitable theological and conceptual apparatus of these traditions[1].

Human history, in Islamic *Weltanschauung*, represents a sequence of reforms and renewals of the way in which faith is understood and actuated in the frame of a metaphysical system – *tawhid. Tawhid* is what determines the direction of these constant metamorphoses and protects the moral evolution of humanity. The ontological (historical) reality of *islah* has an ethical averment. *Per se*, the concept of *islah* confirms the influence exercised by history on the understanding and practice of the revelation. The revelation is perfect, immutable and infallible, but its interpretation depends on historical, social, economic and political factors. Criticism designed to correct and to better the present norms and practices in connection with the origins – the revealed and consecrated are realized through *islah*. If indeed reformists "are not legislators (*shari'un*), but exegetes (*sharihun*)", than that their task is to correct the deficiencies of the body of Islamic knowledge for uncovering new perspectives and understandings[2].

Some reformists were interested in political and social matters and others were interested in intellectual arguments, in the rebuttal of imitativeness and innovation[3]. In this respect,

> "the specific forms that *tajdid* and *islah* take do reflect the nature of the society in which they are undertaken. Thus, while the effort to bring society into conformity with the norms defined by the Qur'an and Sunna is, in general terms, a constant element in the *tajdid/islah* tradition, the role of the *muslihun* and *mujaddids* in any given social context will vary. Over the centuries, as a result, the contextual significance of the effort of moral renewal has changed and evolved"[4].

Reforms cannot be effective, except they are presented in a cultural idiom familiar to the community. The exogenous models, focused exclusively on the specific structures of modern secularism, if they try to cancel the normative dimension of individual, his/hers social and cultural identity, even if they are adopted by a politically active elite, remain marginalized or radically disputed. In this way they will stimulate unilateral reactions and build extremist alternatives that are unfeasible and subordinated to political interests at the expense of genuine reform ideals. Islam cannot be defined using exclusive terms, tradition or modernity. It has a constant potential in reexamining and neutralizing the traditions that establish themselves under its *aegis* and synthesizing valences in regard to the existent values within the frame of endogen and foreign traditions. Providing access to an inexhaustible normative source, it ensures both the legitimacy and the legibility of the new practices and theoretical constructions required by the new contexts.

S. NIELSEN (eds.), *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, vol. I, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2003, p. 53.

[1] *Ibidem*, pp. 56-57.
[2] Samira HAJ, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*…cit., p. 7.
[3] John L.ESPOSITO, *Islam*…cit., p. 124.
[4] John Obert VOLL, "Renewal and Reform in Islamic History…cit.", p. 35.