

Review: Roman Loimeier, Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa (2016)

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Roman Loimeier (2016), *Islamic Reform in Twentieth-Century Africa*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, ISBN 9780748695430 (hardback), 549 pp.

Covering the past 100 years of Islamic reform in sub-Saharan Africa is far more than just an ambitious academic undertaking; it is a substantial challenge, not made any simpler by the fact that “Islam,” at least in the view of a rapidly growing number of people in Western liberal democracies, has become almost a synonym for fundamentalism, terror, oppression, and backwardness. Against the backdrop of spreading “Islamophobia,” whose proponents could almost be described as evincing a siege mentality, one may justifiably argue that this volume is long overdue. It is the result of three decades of fieldwork and travels throughout Africa, boasts an extensive bibliography and index, and will probably come to be regarded as a reference book for understanding Sufi- and Salafi-oriented and jihad-minded reform movements in the multi-ethnic and multireligious societies of the African continent.

The comprehensive introduction underlines that in the nineteenth and twentieth century all Africans, including Muslims, had to learn to live with – and within – the boundaries of modern states, modelled on the European style. Within that context, a considerable chapter is dedicated to the seemingly simple question of what reform actually is, and the final chapter elaborates at great length on the “meaning of Islamic reform.” These two chapters eloquently frame the five chapters that respectively cover Senegal and Mali; Northern Nigeria and Niger; Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanganyika/Tanzania, and Kenya; and Zanzibar and Comoros. These five chapters comprise some 400 pages, in which historical, religious, and political themes are meticulously analysed. Given the sheer scale of detailed information on actors, events, places and time frames provided by the case studies, however, it is a challenge for the reader not to get lost.

All of the “country” chapters follow a stringent pattern focusing on the emergence and dynamics of Muslim reform movements in their local and national contexts at a specific time or period. They have in common that all Salafi-oriented movements were preceded by Sufi-oriented ones, meaning that the former is a relatively recent phenomenon, not having appeared before the 1930s. Wherever possible, the author provides extensive biographies of religious leaders whose thinking and writings have had an enduring impact on reform movements. These portrayals are an important contribution to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of African Muslim communities. Moreover, the case studies reveal the

contradictory roles and attitudes of these movements to the colonial powers and the indigenous political elites, both before and after independence.

In applying a wide-ranging definition of reform and utilising a *longue durée* time line, Loimeier is able to treat this complex and multifaceted topic in a credible and intelligible way. The many Arabic terms used – many familiar to political scientists dealing with African affairs – are well embedded in the text and can easily be cross-checked in the glossary. Defining “reform” as any transformation that is linked with an explicit programme of change, the author argues that this definition understands reform to be informed, first, by a normative, reformatory discourse, an ideology, a programme, a will, and an intention, and, second, by modes of programme-oriented action that aim to translate a specific programme of change into reality in a specific historical context. In addition, the author maintains that a reform movement will become a truly translocal movement only if it manages to implement its programme in a multitude of local contexts, and if it successfully addresses the needs, anxieties, frustrations, and aspirations of many different local populations, offering viable solutions to problems of everyday life. In other words, the respective local context has usually been decisive for the success or failure of a specific movement of reform.

As far as the “meaning of Islamic reform” is concerned, Loimeier points out that the two chains of reform – the Sufi- and Salafi-oriented reform movements – each adapted features of the other tradition over time. This, however, led to fragmentation when the second generation of Salafi-minded groups appeared in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly between the “*siyasa*” and “*tarbiya*” approaches – meaning, between those who were seeking political influence and power, and those who were focusing on Islamic education and its application to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Against this backdrop, the author underlines the fact that all Salafi-oriented reform movements started out as movements of students, traders, and public servants such as teachers, often emerging from a Sufi background, but rebelling against established authority. To some extent these movements were inspired by external sources from North Africa, such as Sayyid Qutb, or the Arabian Peninsula, where a number of African Muslims were trained according to the thinking and doctrines prevailing in Mecca and Medina. They attracted a small but growing number of comparatively well-educated people such as medical doctors, teachers, engineers, entrepreneurs, traders, and employees, who strove for wealth and status or were threatened by social marginalisation. In addition, all of the movements attracted youth. These groups tended

to reject established religious authorities, who were often Sufi scholars. At the same time, they were looking for a new social, economic, and religious orientation, compatible with their interpretation of modern life.

One core result of this comprehensive study is that despite their focus on modernity, very few movements of reform have become real mass movements; exceptions are the Yan Izala in Nigeria, the Islamic Movement in the Sudan and, to a certain extent, the Islamic Courts Union movement in Somalia, the Jama'a Ibad al-Rahman in Senegal, and the Ahl al-Sunna in Mali. In fact, the responsibility for the increasing use of the vernacular instead of Arabic as the language of religious learning, of social and mass media, and of modern education clearly lies with the modern, Sufi-oriented reform movements. Nevertheless, this does not prevent a growing number of Muslims from pursuing a more "worldly" Islam that lays less emphasis on communal practices and tries to reformulate religiosity in more individualistic terms.

Loimeier even maintains that, from a *longue durée* perspective, Islamic reform in Africa has, as a movement of social and religious protest, a certain quality not dissimilar to the structural features of European Protestantism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, whereby he prefers the French term "une qualité protestantisante" in describing this dimension of reform.

Last but not least, the author addresses the issue of jihad-minded groups by comparing Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria, al-Shaabab in Somalia, and different religio-political groups in Northern Mali. He emphasises that these groups pass through several stages of development. In the beginning they are fairly well integrated into existing social, political, and religious structures and form part of Salafi-oriented reform movements, sharing their pattern of doctrinal distinction, symbolic distanciation, and social separation. The shift towards active jihad, often prompted by state repression and state behaviour against any form of opposition, is coupled with efforts to form spatially segregated communities and to win territorial autonomy. When these efforts were successful, they sometimes led to an "emirate," which would generally last for a relatively short period of time. Almost inevitably, the eventual failure of such state-building measures leads to the "wounded animal" syndrome and usually triggers guerrilla warfare and terror that can go on for years, until those who survive the jihad are exhausted and willing to consider existing options and reintegration into the more moderate, Salafi-oriented mainstream. Against this backdrop, however, the author points out that contemporary leaders of jihad have limited knowledge of the

Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. As such, the jihad-minded groups' pursuit of doctrinal debates is relatively weak.

Loimeier goes on to say that this structural weakness is demonstrated by the fact that none of the jihad-minded groups has been able to gain majority popular support or significant territorial control over a longer period of time. Interestingly, this also applies to secular regimes with all their weaknesses and shortcomings, no matter whether they are military regimes, "one-party" dictatorships, or democratically elected governments.

The author maintains that the challenges faced by Muslim reformist movements when they are confronted with change and Westernisation are manifold and uncertain. However, a new understanding of Islam – of the faith and of Muslim societies – is emerging among a growing number of African Muslims. This in turn leads the individual Muslim to interpret the sources of the faith independently and to define or redefine social space, gender relations, and time, and to reject established institutions, mediators, and authorities; furthermore, this new understanding emphasises each individual's right to these reinterpretations.

- Heinrich Bergstresser