

The Revival of Islamic Rationalism

In this book, Masooda Bano presents an in-depth analysis of a new movement that is transforming the way that young Muslims engage with their religion. Led by a network of Islamic scholars in the West, this movement seeks to revive the tradition of Islamic rationalism. Bano explains how, during the period of colonial rule, the exit of Muslim elites from madrasas, the Islamic scholarly establishments, resulted in a stagnation of Islamic scholarship. This trend is now being reversed. Exploring the threefold focus on logic, metaphysics, and deep mysticism, Bano shows how Islamic rationalism is consistent with Sunni orthodoxy and why it is so popular among young, elite, educated Muslims, who are now engaging with classical Islamic texts. One of the most tangible results of this revival is that Islamic rationalism – rather than jihadism – is emerging as one of the most influential movements in the contemporary Muslim world.

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-48531-9 — The Revival of Islamic Rationalism
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*Logic, Metaphysics and Mysticism in Modern
Muslim Societies*

MASOODA BANO

Oxford University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
 New Delhi – 110025, India
 79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108485319

DOI: 10.1017/9781108756273

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First published 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Bano, Masooda, author.

TITLE: The revival of Islamic rationalism : logic, metaphysics and mysticism in modern Muslim societies / Masooda Bano.

DESCRIPTION: 1. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2019034884 (print) | LCCN 2019034883 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781108485319 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108706827 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781108756273 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108756273 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781108485319 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108706827 (paperback)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Faith and reason—Islam. | Islam—21st century.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BP190.5.R4 B365 2019 (ebook) | LCC BP190.5.R4 (print) |

DDC 297.2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019034884>

ISBN 978-1-108-48531-9 Hardback

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In the loving memory of my mother, Zahida Amin
(1946–2019)

Cambridge University Press
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[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>A Note on Transliteration</i>	xv
<i>Glossary</i>	xvi
1 Global Shifts and the Rise of Islamic Rationalism	I
PART I SPECIALIST VERSUS TACIT KNOWLEDGE	49
2 What Is Islam?	51
3 Learning from the Old Geographies of Islam: Acquiring Specialist Knowledge	92
4 Teaching in the New Geographies of Islam: Having Tacit Knowledge of Reality	121
5 Mixing Dispersed Knowledge: Real-Life Implications	138
PART II AFFLUENCE AND CREATIVITY	165
6 Material Conditions and Attitudes Towards the Texts: Islam of the Prosperous Muslim Youth	167
7 Elites and Institutional Consolidation: Why the Movement Is to Spread	197
<i>Bibliography</i>	230
<i>Index</i>	244

Maps

1.1 Islamic rationalist scholars: key locations in the West	<i>page</i> 15
3.1 Key sites of traditional Islamic learning	100

Tables

2.1 Zaytuna College perennial faculty

page 78

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978-1-108-48531-9 — The Revival of Islamic Rationalism
Masooda Bano
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

Preface

My earlier works have focused primarily on Muslim-majority countries. Interested in tracing the evolution of Islamic scholarly platforms in contemporary times, I was drawn to leading establishments such as al-Azhar University or Saudi Salafism as well as the rich informal networks of Islamic learning in the Muslim heartlands. It was thus while doing fieldwork with female Islamic study groups in Syria in 2010 that I first heard of Alqueria de Rosales, a madrasah in the mountains of Granada, which I was told had been recently established by some Spanish converts. Moorish Spain, due to its critical contribution to early Islamic scholarship, had always been a region of historical interest to me, and I therefore made a note to visit Rosales. Academic commitments meant that I could not find time until the summer of 2012 to actually make this visit, but it proved a journey very well worth taking. The discussions that I began during this visit with Abdus Samad (the head of Rosales), his family, the young Muslims attending a retreat there, and Dr Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, who by chance was there during those dates, motivated me finally to take Islam in the West seriously. Since then my fieldwork has expanded to include Islamic learning institutions in the United Kingdom, Europe, the United States, and Canada, and the results have been fascinating. In this volume, I identify a network of Islamic rationalist scholars working across the United States and Europe, which – though very much a product of the West – is deeply embedded in the Islamic scholarly networks in Muslim-majority countries and in my assessment has initiated the most important Islamic revival movement of the twenty-first century. I base this claim not on my fieldwork with this network in the West but on my prior work on Islamic knowledge production in Muslim-majority countries,

which has enabled me to identify the contribution of the network to global Islamic scholarly debates.

To date normally referred to as ‘the traditionalists’, the scholars in this network are reviving the deeply philosophical and mystical dimensions of Islam, while placing equal emphasis on the *shari‘ah*. Taking Hadith Jibril as the essence of Islamic teachings, these scholars are keen to focus on *Iman* (a rationalist ‘*aqidah*), *Islam* (a *shari‘ah* that has been operationalised by logical methods developed under the four *madhhabs*), and *Ihsan* (deep mysticism). I therefore prefer to refer to these scholars as Islamic rationalists. They themselves might like to self-appropriate the term ‘traditionalists’, as it helps to assert their claim to represent the authentic Islamic scholarly tradition; but the reality is that other Islamic networks equally claim to be representing the authentic tradition. What is, however, distinctive about this network is that it is helping to revive rationalist readings in Islam, the Ash‘ari-Maturidi school of *kalam*. It is these scholars’ ability to familiarise young Muslim university students with the deeply philosophical and mystical dimensions of their faith that, I argue, is making them so popular among young Muslims not only in the West but also among societal elites even within Muslim-majority countries. The evidence that this book provides about the rapid spread of this movement among university-educated Muslim youth in the West, as also among affluent youth in Muslim-majority countries, shows that, contrary to popular assumptions, it is not militant Islam but Islamic rationalism that is set to become the popular face of Islam in the current century. Drawing on the evidence presented in this book, especially in the last two chapters, I argue that the current century, which opened with Islam being labelled as a religion of violence, will by its end be known as a century for the revival of Islamic rationalism; the Islamic militancy that we have witnessed in the first decade and a half has in reality acted as a trigger for this revival.

The significance of this book rests not merely in mapping an important Islamic revival movement of the present century; for me personally it is important because it represents the culmination of my scholarship over the last fifteen years on different forms and modes of Islamic knowledge platforms wherein I have demonstrated that whether Islamic knowledge stagnates or goes into a creative mode is a direct response to societal conditions. The political, economic, and social realities, which together form the societal conditions, have a direct bearing on how the texts are interpreted, what questions are asked of those texts, and which scholars and texts from earlier Islamic scholarship become popular. As I have

discussed at great length in my previous monograph, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press), colonial rule led to a decline of creativity within the Islamic scholarly establishment, because societal conditions became un conducive for it. The revival of Islamic rationalism is similarly a product of the changing societal conditions in which young Muslims in the diaspora, as well as in the urban centres of Muslim-majority countries, find themselves. Thus, in my assessment there are no grounds for the claim that there is something inherent in Islam that is anti-creativity, is radical or militant, or is necessarily hostile to individual freedoms, democracy, and women's agency. Such claims also fail to take account of simple historical reality: why has Islam inspired one of the world's most sophisticated civilisations, as well as regimes as narrow-minded as that of the Taliban? Islam has indeed a clearly identifiable core, which is its greatest strength, but around the core rulings there is much scope for adaptation to local realities.

Further, my second major analytical concern is to establish the role of elites in knowledge creation, as we simply cannot understand the causes of the stagnation of Islamic scholarship in the past two centuries, or fully appreciate the importance of this movement for the revival of Islamic rationalism, without understanding the critical relationship between elites and knowledge creation. The colonial period not only led to changes in the societal conditions in which 'ulama had to produce Islamic knowledge – they lost access to financial resources and faced intense competition from modern Western educational institutions, which now received state funds and awarded degrees that provided routes to upward mobility – but most critically it led to the exit of Muslim elites from the Islamic knowledge platforms. This also involved the exit of the leading Islamic scholarly families, who in order to maintain their elite status sent their younger generations to be educated in Western institutions. The result was that Islamic scholarship during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was for the first time in Islamic history primarily delegated to the socially and economically marginalised, and often also the least intellectually able: in ethnographic studies of madrasahs, including my own, parents repeatedly acknowledge sending their weakest child to the local madrasah for schooling. The consequent stagnation in Islamic thinking during the previous two centuries should thus not be a surprise. The biggest contribution of the current movement for Islamic rationalism is that it is reversing this colonial legacy by motivating Muslim societal elites – culturally liberal and university-educated Muslim youth in the West and also

increasingly in Muslim-majority countries – to engage seriously with the study of Islamic texts. It is this, as I show in the last two chapters of this volume, that is enabling the rationalist movement to have a real-life impact on Muslim communities and societies. The engagement of elites with any knowledge base brings intellectual capital acquired through their education in leading institutions, but equally elites bring social connections and influence that in turn shape socio-economic and political institutions. Their involvement also brings economic security to a knowledge platform, as they have the resources to support it. This book thus shows how changing societal conditions and the re-engagement of Muslim elites with Islamic texts are causing the rationalist movement to have a major impact not only on how Islam is being understood by educated Muslim youth, but also on how it is to be lived.

For the scholars and individuals featured in this book, I have primarily relied on analysing their writing and their speeches on audio recordings or YouTube videos, and on attending their events in a range of locations (including Cambridge, London, Chicago, New York, Berkeley, and Toronto) and asking questions during those seminars. I have also visited or spent time at Rosales, SeekersHub, Cambridge Muslim College, and Zaytuna College. Thus, this book is by no means an attempt to present the biographies of the scholars linked to this network, or to present a summary or defence of their views or positions. It presents my independent assessment of an Islamic revival movement that has had a meteoric rise in the last twenty years in terms of the influence that it is today exercising on the more affluent Muslim youth, and which in my assessment is set to play a critical role in changing perceptions and presenting a more intellectual and humanist face of Islam to the world in the twenty-first century.

Finally, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the generous support I have received from the European Research Council (ERC). Between 2014 and now, I have held a five-year ERC start-up grant (ERC grant agreement no. [337108]), funded under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme [FP7/2007–2013], which enabled me to build a research team to study changes in contemporary Islamic authority. I will, in particular, like to acknowledge the contributions of Nathan Spannaus and Christopher Pooya Razavian, two of the researchers I engaged on this project, who have made active contribution to the analysis presented in Chapter 5. I am also very grateful to Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for her enthusiasm for this project and to Maria Marsh for seeing potential in the initial idea.

A Note on Transliteration

The transliteration in this volume has been kept simple in view of the multidisciplinary nature of the expected readership. With the exception of the ‘ to indicate the Arabic letters ‘ayn and ’ hamza, diacritical marks have been avoided. Except for the word ‘ulama, the plural form of Arabic words is indicated by addition of an *s* to the singular form. To avoid strain on the eyes and minimise distractions while reading, words that are frequently repeated (such as *madrasah*) are not italicised. Other non-English words are italicised only on their first occurrence. Non-English words used only once in the text are defined where they occur but are not included in the glossary.

Glossary

<i>‘Abayah</i>	A robe-like dress worn by Muslim women
<i>Adab</i>	Islamic norms of behavior and comportment
<i>‘Aqidah</i>	Islamic creed
<i>‘Aql</i>	Intellect
<i>Ash‘ari</i>	School of Islamic theology
<i>‘Asr</i>	Muslim afternoon prayer
<i>Bay‘ah</i>	Oath of allegiance to a Sufi shaykh
<i>Bid‘ah</i>	Illegitimate religious innovation
<i>Dar al-‘ulum</i>	House of the Sciences; a common title for an Islamic seminary or educational institution
<i>Dars</i>	Sermon; here specifically refers to Islamic lessons
<i>Darurah</i>	Necessity
<i>Da‘wah</i>	Proselytizing, Islamic propagation
<i>Dhikr</i>	Reciting praises to God or to Prophet Muhammad
<i>Fajr</i>	Muslim morning prayer
<i>Fard al-‘ayn</i>	Legal obligations that must be performed by all Muslims
<i>Fatwa</i>	A formal but generally non-binding statement on an issue or question related to Islamic law, given by a mufti (from <i>ifta</i> ’, ‘to advise’)
<i>Fiqh</i>	Islamic law or jurisprudence
<i>Fiqh al-aqalliyat</i>	Jurisprudence of minorities
<i>Fiqh al-waqi’</i>	Jurisprudence of reality
<i>Fitrah</i>	Human nature

<i>Ghusl</i>	Bath
<i>Hadith</i>	Reports describing the words, actions, or habits of Prophet Muhammad
<i>Hajj</i>	The annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>Halal</i>	Permissible in Islamic law
<i>Halaqah</i>	Teaching circle
<i>Haqiqah</i>	Spiritual truth
<i>Haram</i>	Forbidden by Islamic law
<i>Hukm</i> (pl. <i>ahkām</i>)	Positive Islamic laws derived from Islamic legal methodology
<i>‘Ibadah</i>	Ritual practices such as prayer and fasting
<i>Ifta’</i>	To advise; the act of giving a fatwa
<i>Iftar</i>	Opening of the fast
<i>Ihsan</i>	State of utmost religious piety
<i>Ijazah</i>	Permission given to a student to teach the texts that were learned in the Islamic sciences
<i>Ijtihad</i>	The process of legal reasoning in which the jurist applies maximum effort in order to derive a ruling
<i>Ikhwani</i>	Of Muslim Brotherhood orientation
<i>‘Ilm al-kalam</i>	Science of discourse; study of Islamic creed
<i>‘Ilmi</i>	Islamic schools in Nigeria
<i>Iman</i>	Faith
<i>Isnad</i>	A chain of transmitters or authorities
<i>Jum‘ah</i>	Friday congregational prayer
<i>Kabar</i>	Grave
<i>Kalam</i>	Islamic theology
<i>Khawarij</i>	Seceders; early sectarian group that revolted against the Caliph Ali ibn Abu Talib (d. 661/ 40)
<i>Khilafah</i>	Leader of the caliphate or Muslim ummah
<i>Khutbah</i>	Sermon given during the Friday midday service
<i>Madhhab</i>	Way; an Islamic legal school of thought
<i>Madrasah</i>	Place of study; an Islamic educational institution, higher religious school
<i>Maghrib</i>	North Africa region; also name of the the Muslim evening prayer
<i>Ma‘rifah</i>	State of high spirituality
<i>Masha’ikh</i>	Plural of shaykh (Islamic scholars)
<i>Mashriq</i>	East
<i>Maslahah</i>	The common good

<i>Maturidi</i>	School of Islamic theology
<i>Mawlid</i>	Refers to the birthday of the Prophet
<i>Minbar</i>	Pulpit in the mosque
<i>Mi'raj</i>	Prophet Muhammad ascension to the heaven
<i>Mu'amalat</i>	Legal transactions such as marriage, leasing, and sales
<i>Nafl</i>	Optional prayers
<i>Namaz</i>	Obligatory five daily prayers
<i>Naql</i>	Copy; imitation
<i>Nashids</i>	Chants; Sufi songs
<i>Naskh</i>	Abrogation
<i>Qat'i</i>	A classification in Islamic epistemology for knowledge that is certain and definitive
<i>Rabb</i>	The Lord
<i>Salaf</i>	The first generation of Muslims
<i>Salih</i>	Pious; those on the right path
<i>Shahadah</i>	Testimony; declaration of faith in Islam
<i>Shari'ah</i>	God's eternal will for humanity that is considered binding; the ideal of Islamic law
<i>Silsilah</i>	Chain; spiritual genealogy
<i>Sirah</i>	Biography of Muhammad
<i>Subbah</i>	Friendship, companionship, comradeship
<i>Sunnah</i>	Established custom and cumulative tradition based on Prophet Muhammad's example
<i>Surah</i>	Chapter of the Quran
<i>Tafsir</i>	Clarification; Quranic commentary and interpretation
<i>Tahajjud</i>	Midnight prayer
<i>Tahqiq al-manat</i>	Ascertaining the reason, refinement of the cause
<i>Tajdid</i>	To make new, renovate; religious reform
<i>Takfiri</i>	One who excommunicates
<i>Tanzih</i>	God's transcendence
<i>Taqlid</i>	Following another's position or judgment in Islamic legal or religious matters
<i>Taqlidi</i>	The act of doing <i>taqlid</i>
<i>Tarawih</i>	Special night prayer in Ramadan
<i>Tariqah (pl. turuq)</i>	Way; a Sufi order
<i>Tasawwuf</i>	Sufism, Islamic mysticism

Glossary

xix

<i>Tashbih</i>	God's immanence
<i>Tawhid</i>	Oneness of God
<i>'Ulama (alim singular)</i>	Islamic scholars
<i>'Umrah</i>	Optional Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca that can be performed any time during the year; often referred to as lesser Hajj
<i>Usul al-fiqh</i>	Islamic legal theory (the 'roots' of fiqh)
<i>Wali</i>	Friend of God
<i>Wudu'</i>	Islamic ritual purification
<i>Zakat</i>	Obligatory charity, one of the five pillars of Islam
<i>Zawiyah</i>	Circle; a platform for study of Islam

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