

(Not So) Progressive Islam

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The term ‘progressive’ has always been associated with something which favours or advocates progress, change, improvement or even reform. Hence, a progressive individual will always strive for progress toward better conditions for himself, his family as well as the society, advocating more enlightened or perhaps liberal ideas and always venturing to explore new methods. A progressive society will strive for progress toward better living and working conditions, through unrelenting engagement with those in power to push for a reform in policies which are in favour of civil liberties, social justice and liberation of the oppressed and powerless.

The above notion of progressiveness should not then be any difference when one is talking about a progressive religion. Progressive adherents of a particular belief system will always strive for progress and improvement toward better conditions in the way they carry out their religious ideals, through constant critical engagement with the religious traditions as well as the religious elites who are in power. A progressive religion is one that allows room for changes and reform; that allows a re-interpretation of its divine texts in order to address contemporary social problems; that advocates the relentless pursuit of social justice and human rights. A progressive religion is one that is able to “give voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless, and confront the ‘powers that be’ who disregard the God-given human dignity of the *mustad’afun* all over this Earth.”¹

The understanding of Progressive Islam, however, was not quite near to the above notion of a progressive religion when it was deliberated in a closed-door round-table discussion with Prof. Dr. Azyumardi Azra, Rector of State Islamic University (UIN), Jakarta, who is considered as one of the leading Muslim intellectual and historian in Southeast Asia. Azyumardi Azra was invited by the MUIS Academy on 5 February 2007 to present his views on the issue of Progressive Islam to a group of audience comprising of several MUIS officials and community leaders.

¹ Omid Safi, *What is Progressive Islam?*, ISIM Newsletter 13, December 2003, viewed February 6 2007 http://www.isim.nl/content/content_page.asp?n1=4&n2=21&n3=1.

According to Azyumardi Azra, Progressive Islam forms part of the mainstream thinking of the Muslim majority. In fact, it is considered the middle path which falls in between two extremes – Literal Islam and Liberal Islam. While those of Literal Islam, which has its roots traced back to those of the Kharijites, would adopt rigid textualism based on a partial reading of the religious texts, those of Liberal Islam, on the other hand, are anxious enough to adapt to Western secularism through an uncritical acceptance of the Western modes of thinking. A good example, he said, could be seen in the secularization of Turkey during the post-Ottoman period, propagated by the young Turks. Closer to home, he mentioned the existence of Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL), a group comprising of less than ten people led by Ulil Abshar, and their efforts to disseminate liberal ideologies to the public. Following the irrelevant mention of the insignificant number of people in JIL, what was more perturbing was the way Azyumardi Azra referred to the group as ‘young Muslims who are still in the process of developing their thoughts and are not well established in the religious traditions.’ While the former may be true, the latter is rather inaccurate, given the *pesantren* background as well as early grounding in traditional religious learning of some JIL activists like Ulil Abshar Abdalla and Luthfi Assyaukanie. Ironic to the discussion of Progressive Islam, there was no mention of JIL’s strong advocacy of social justice and their standing behind Islamic interpretations that withstand on the minorities, oppressed, and marginalized.²

Considering Azyumardi Azra’s intellectual stature, it was rather baffling to hear him repeatedly stressing on the issues of *solat* and *hijab* within the discourse of Progressive Islam when, in contrast, JIL clearly does not make these central to their discourse, other than allowing space for individuals to choose their own path. Relating the dispute he had with the liberal groups, who accused him of being a traditionalist just because he would not lift the regulation of wearing *hijab* for female students in campus, he somehow made it rather transparent with regards to his stance in the issue of gender justice and individual rights when he told the groups off that “if those students are not willing to put on the *hijab* in campus, fine... there are other universities they can go to.” Azra’s position seems to give a sense of affirmation with regards to the audience’s own prescribed notion of Progressive Islam from a highly regarded intellectual figure.

² It needs to be noted here that, though the writer advocates JIL’s idea of social justice and emancipation, this essay is not written in defense of JIL, and that the writer has no affiliation, in one way or another, with JIL.

Throughout the entire discussion, there was no mention of a Progressive Islam that ‘strives to realize a just and pluralistic society through a critical engagement with Islam, a relentless pursuit of social justice, an emphasis on gender equality as a foundation of human rights, and a vision of religious and ethnic pluralism.’³ Progressive Islam was simply being referred to as a middle path in between two extremes, without the acknowledgement of the existence of another middle path that resides in between the middle and either extreme. Even the charge against Liberal Islam as a by-product of Western secularism was not justified. Though it could be a product ‘born and developed in the West, but the essence of liberalism - “against tyrannical authority for preserving the citizen’s rights” - is relevant with the non-Western society’s virtue, including Muslim society.’⁴ Just like in any other religious-centric discussion sessions, the much needed consciousness of social justice and emancipation, providing for the marginalized members of society, the poor, the orphaned, the downtrodden, the wayfaring, the hungry and the oppressed were being silenced and ignored. Like in any other self-aggrandizing session with excessive admiration of one’s own religious superiority, the round-table discussion was just another narcissistic exercise.

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³ Omid Safi, *What is Progressive Islam?*, ISIM Newsletter 13, December 2003, viewed February 6 2007
http://www.isim.nl/content/content_page.asp?n1=4&n2=21&n3=1.

⁴ Ahmad Sahal, *Free and Liberal*, Liberal Islam Network,
<http://islamlib.com/en/page.php?page=article&id=1130>, 2006.