

Interview: Islamic Reform

[[Republished interview by Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#)]

[Shireen Qudosi](#) was named one of the top 10 Muslim reformers in North America in 2011. She works to further the progressive movement within Islam. Qudosi earned a B.A. in English and a B.A. in Political Science from University of California, Irvine.

She attended California Western School of Law, but left to build a foundation for her work as a [Muslim Reformer](#). Here we start this educational series off on reformers.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Based on freedom of (and from) religion and the fact of modern extremism, two paths emerged as solutions for fundamentalist extremism: one for individuals who want to leave Islam and another for persons who want to reform Islam. Muslim Reformers is the second path.

How did you found it?

Shireen Qudosi: The path for reformers isn't new. From the birth of Islam's presence on the world stage, through today, Islam has always been progressing, regressing, shaping and evolving to suit the needs of the community. We see it in the way Islam waxed and waned during Prophet Muhammad's time, starting out as peaceful and later emerging as a more warring religion when early Muslims were at risk of annihilation. We saw it in the first hundred years after the prophet's death, as Muslims tried to flesh out the faith, as the faith adapted to local regions and branched into niche interpretations of Islam. And of course, there has been a consistent involvement of scholars (now imams and celebrity community activists) who try to shape Islam based on reasoning or propaganda depending on the character of the individual. For better or worse, Islam is not a static faith. It is better understood if it's seen as an organism, or an evolving consciousness.

Muslim reformers are simply the newest wave of thought leaders. In one way or another, it was an inevitable rising, especially for women, especially today as we realize how brutally some of us have been silenced and groomed by voodoo.

I say voodoo because what else do you call an outer influence that paralyzes the true self from acting authentically. Generations upon generations have been possessed by cultural rot that has survived for so long only because it leeches onto an idea that enjoys a form of immortality...religion. Who would so many have been, who could we be now, if we were no longer possessed and free to know ourselves and what is possible still for humankind.

Privately, we are many voices. Publicly, you only see a few handfuls. All of us carry a rich heritage of philosophy and inquiry, and I can't think of a greater act of faith than to ensure that right is exercised and that legacy is protected for future generations.

Jacobsen: Why found it?

Qudos: I would recommend we set aside the idea that the Islamic reform movement was necessarily founded in one fixed point in space and time, but rather that it is part of a continuum.

Why someone does this work varies from person to person, their reasoning often colored by their personal experience or ambitions.

For me, I'd say I've been very sensitive to an injustice since as far back as I can remember. Most of my formative memories from when I was as young as four have been some kind of pain I've witnessed or experienced from what in hindsight I would call small cruelties. That soon became a layered experience, having lived in three continents and cultures by the time I was 7.

When I was four-years-old, I used to listen to the story of *A Little Match Girl*, over and over again, pulled into the narrative and empathizing with her before I could even read properly, before I even knew what empathy was, and before I realized that it's perhaps not so 'normal' to feel another's pain so intimately.

As you grow into yourself, become more self-aware and confident, that sense of purpose only deepens. For me as a reformer, that sense of purpose has grown over 15 years from what was initially a very naive and presumptuous mission to change a religion...to a love for human potential and a future for mankind rooted in dignity.

That's essentially why I do what I do. Muslim reform for me started with a question, a possibility. Over time I've learned so much and I've gotten to know so many incredible people and their stories, that it's not something I can just put down and walk away from at this point. In some way or another, this will always be a touchstone in the work I do. How much I'm able to do will always depend on the resources and funding available.

Jacobsen: How do modern media and communications technology play into this?

Qudos: Technology has been a game changer. A 'Shireen' from the past would have been crushed instantly, killed or otherwise silenced. Technology gives us the ability to get our message across, to connect with each other, to keep educating ourselves so we're more refined in our message. However, technology dependency is crippling and dances on the perimeter of [dehumanization](#).

Media, however, is an entirely other matter. You have to be a sort of gladiator if you want to be successful in media – and that's not necessarily to anyone's benefit, including the gladiator.

Media has become a sausage factory, a slush pile of soundbites and opinion where conversation and dialogue are simply not possible. That's not where I want to be, personally.

Media has become polarized and geared toward ideological camps. Even simple one-on-one interview segments today are dumbed down to canned audience responses and other forms of sensationalism. There's currently no television media space for the meaningful engagement we witnessed in say a 1977 interview with [Patrick McGoohan](#).

That's not to say those types of conversations aren't happening at all. They are. They're happening on podcasts, in workshops, in books, essays, articles, in small gatherings, salon dinners, private presentations, and often make it to radio too. But they're not getting the kind of amplification they need and deserve, and that's because of one main reason: these conversations are slow-cooked, they take time to come together. When we're in a time period of instant gratification, where things are flashy and loud, there's no space for real conversation.

As a dear friend recently shared, this sort of coming together involves the kindling of a rapport, which he described as "creating a connection in and through our communication...People who are in good rapport with each other start to breathe, talk, and move in the same rhythm."

I was recently reading John O'Donohue's *Beauty*, in which he spoke of timing and patience – two things I confess I'm still a bit wobbly in at times.

In his section on "Towards a Reverence of Approach, " he writes:

"What you encounter, or recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach. Many of the ancient cultures practiced careful rituals of approach. An encounter of depth and spirit was preceded by careful

preparation and often involved a carefully phased journey of approach. Attention, respect and worthiness belonged to the event of nearing and disclosure...Our culture [now] has little respect for privacy; we no longer recognize the sacred zone around each person. We feel like we have a right to blunder unannounced into any area we wish. Because we have lost reverence of approach, we should not be too surprised at the lack of quality and beauty in our experience...We have become more interested in 'connection' rather than communion."

There is no space for reverence of communion in a gladiator pit – just the fight.

Personally, there is so much I want to write on and I cannot do that if I'm tied to a 24/7 news cycle, a 24/7 connectivity, feeding the disease of opinion where everyone needs to have one (often before they've even had a decent amount time to process an event).

One of the things I did early this year was disconnect from social media (and most people entirely), to embrace a sort of sabbatical where I could rediscover my voice, and process so much of what I had experienced recently. I was able to pour into reading, thinking and writing toward long-term projects in a way that just isn't possible day-to-day.

Because of my work I cannot disconnect completely but I do still shelter myself as much as possible from these things and hope to more so in the years to come. One simply cannot think and create if they're fed a steady supply of other people's thoughts.

And that's where the media doesn't help. The media feeds vanity, and it is possessed by it's own gluttony to glamorize, sensationalize, hype, punish or push certain narratives and the propagandists who drive them.

Let's look at Islamic reformers in the this context. 9/11 happened almost twenty years ago. How many reformers has the

media highlighted since then? Every year there's a stream of grievance fetish programs over that day, over every attack since, but not one meaningful push for any reformer...bred of the faith to challenge the faith from within in a way that no kinetic war can ever achieve. The ultimate ideological nuke.

The few outlets that have welcomed reformers as it suits them, often do so for their own confirmation bias, sometimes playing into the myth of the noble savage. There are exceptions to this, but far too few and so far all among the small privately driven platforms.

Jacobsen: As a woman, we see the rise of the advancement and empowerment of women not only in international rights documents starting with the modern movement of the universalization or democratization of rights as human rights in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* circa December 10, 1948, but also in the coming to fruition of the plans for implementation of women's rights with moderate actualization of them now.

How can modern media advance and empower the rights of Muslim women with an interest in reform of the extremist and fundamentalist elements of the faith community?

Qudos: Stop caricaturizing us.

Linda Sarsour, for example, is seen as some kind of champion when an alarmingly high percentage of her comments about Islam show she's largely uneducated in Islam. Liberal media loves that she's aggressive, without looking at how her persona damages our community in two ways. First, by mainstreaming her views which creates a more rigid [hegemony](#) within Islam – which is actually completely counter to our faith. Second, by generating more non-Muslim hate toward the rest of us. There's a percentage of the population that will look at her and think "Well if that's a Muslim, I hate Muslims."

By showing only one type of Muslim and giving them reckless

amounts of airtime, the media ensures that only one Muslim narrative exists in the public consciousness – the hyper-aggressive Islamist narrative.

Here's another example, Ilhan Omar who just won a congressional seat. Something like over a hundred articles have been written about her but how many of them have been honest about her hardline anti-Semitic rhetoric that sounds an awful lot like rhetoric that comes from the caves of Kandahar. We can't nationally mourn a horrific attack on a synagogue and then celebrate someone who doesn't sound that different from those who would attack.

Look, it's not just about how Islam is covered. It's about how both sides of the political aisle view women. Aggression is rewarded, and that is quite literally the opposite of the feminine. What makes women exceptional isn't how hard we can pump our fist in the air while scowling, or bobble-heading some argument into a camera. What makes us exceptional is our gifts of creation, connectivity – healing gifts this world definitely needs.

And there is rage, a powerful component of the female psyche – but [rage is a process](#). It is not the solution.

The other thing the media can do is lose the trope of sad Muslim woman. This has been going on before reformer was even a buzz word. Around mid-2000's, I pieced together a totally rubbish book (if we can even call it a book), with uninformed, uncultivated hodgepodge of ideas about faith, identity and belonging.

It should have been thrown into the trash. Instead, David Bold and Associates over in the UK picked it up and miraculously got the manuscript into a bidding war between three publishers. There was one condition. They wanted me to write more about being a sad Muslim woman.

I refused for two reasons. First, I had just finished reading

someone's book that was little more than a sad Muslim woman story. I didn't want to create anything so self-indulgent in one's own perceived misery, which is exactly what it was. Nothing so terrible happened to her to have hundreds of pages of narrative about how terrible she had it, considering the fate of so many women elsewhere. Secondly, because I was still in my early twenties. I was at the threshold of understanding what it meant to be a woman, let alone a Muslim, and I had no business writing about any of it yet.

I wasn't ready until 2015. Now, I have at least 3 different works I'm piecing together and shopping agents/publishers for.

Jacobsen: Who are some reformers to keep an eye out for now – women in particular?

Qudos: We're looking forward to bringing some new names on. Elliot Friedland and I co-founded [Toke for Tolerance](#), a radically honest interfaith festival we hope to launch in 2019. Our vision includes using this space to nurture newer voices, both men and women, in a sacred space that honors the art of approach.

Jacobsen: What books make a good case for reform, especially in the implementation of women's rights?

Qudos: If we can adjust how we understand Islam, women's rights within Islamic reform will follow suit. I'm hesitant to lead with just a women's rights platform because it again pushes the myth of sad oppressed Muslim women, the response to which is more racism and bigotry.

The issue of women's rights is much broader and more complex, and includes [challenging patriarchal institutions](#) across the board. In the U.S., we have our own women's rights issues with the number of missing Native American women and why those stories are ignored, the scale of sexual abuse, media that rewards exposure and materialism, and a culture of emotional abuse and discardment by Western men who think we're something

to consume and throw away on a whim. All of this, another form of voodoo.

To get back to the point – a great place to start on making the case for Islamic reform is to read Fazlur Rahman Malik's work. In 2019, I look forward to adding my own book to that list, [Islam's Origin Story](#).

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Shireen.

Image Credit: Shireen Qudosii.

[Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#) is the Founder of [In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal](#) and [In-Sight Publishing](#).