

Islam's Unique Encounter with Modernity: Intellectual Discourse and Political Project

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Abstract: Islam has a dissonant relationship with modernity in that it agrees with central aspects of this epochal phenomenon and parts ways with others. This is the key to understanding how Islam engages with the two main components of modernity, namely its intellectual discourse and its political project. A thorough study of Islam's intellectual tradition reveals, in Ernest Gellner's words, that Islam agrees with basic orientations of modernity like universalism, rationality and the emphasis on following the law or the *sharia*, while it strongly shuns secularism. This opens the way to what is termed *multiple modernities* where a particular civilization charts its own way to progress, gender equality, empowerment and representative government, while adhering to the principal components of their heritage and ethical traditions. It will be argued in the course of the article that this position is unique to Islam as recent historical experience has shown that other, non-western, societies seem to undergo a process of cultural metamorphosis as they come to terms with modernity. Their entry into modern times involves a measure of cultural secularism. This article aims to show that only the adherence to the paradigm of *multiple modernities* will ensure a balanced, clear-sighted entry into modernity, one which would ensure adherence to Islam's basic ethos and principles. Conversely surrender to any constitutive components of modernity, whether its intellectual discourse or political project, would "humanize" the faith and render the Muslim world absorbable within the contemporary hegemonic world system. Evidence will be marshaled for the first aspect from two major contemporary Muslim thinkers (Mohammad Arkoun and Abdol Karim Soroush) and for the latter from the trajectory of the tenure of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey.

Key words: Islam • Modernity • Democracy • Subjectivity • Maturity • Intellectual discourse • Political project

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of modernity has hardly left any sphere of life, whether political, economic, or cultural without having an impact on it. This process is exacerbated through globalization. How to come to terms with modernity has become a pressing problem for non-western societies especially the Muslim world because Islamic culture and worldview, as we shall see later, have a unique mode of engagement with modernity which is not replicated in any other culture. It is important first of all to have a grasp of this epoch-making phenomenon before one can venture to discover Islam's relationship to it and what are the promises and perils of this engagement.

There are many definitions of modernity and the one which seems to be encompassing is the explanation given by Alain Torraine, a prominent French sociologist.

According to him modernity means the diffusion of rationalism in all spheres of life and the consideration of reason as the valid source of knowledge and the criterion for value [1]. This latter quality means that we judge on the goodness and badness of things not according to tradition and revelation but according to reason and human experience.

Apart from that modernity has three distinct components: an intellectual discourse; a political project and an economic part. The intellectual discourse is posited upon a number of principal cultural notions chief among which are subjectivity and maturity. Subjectivity in this sense is distinguishable from the notion of subjectivity in the natural and human sciences where it is taken to mean the opposite of objectivity. Subjectivity as an intellectual principle of modernity means something quite different. It means the growth of the self-willing, free, active human subject who has agency and is

concerned much more with his rights than his duties and the notion is associated with such things as the use of reason, acting upon the world and the pursuit of happiness. Subjectivity is closely related to another foundational notion of the intellectual discourse of modernity which is called maturity. Maturity means not giving others the right to think on your behalf. According to Immanuel Kant maturity is the most important principle of modernity [2].

The political project of modernity is posited upon popular legitimacy, citizenship rights and separation of powers. Popular legitimacy means that power belongs to the people and it is they who give the system of government legitimacy and delegate to it the right to form a government. Citizenship Rights implies that a person who is a citizen of a country by either birth or naturalization has the same rights and duties as every other citizen in a particular country. The principle of the separation of powers is there to ensure that power would not be concentrated in the hands of one person or one group of people.

It is essential here to take into account that the intellectual discourse of modernity which is synonymous with cultural secularism is a pre-requisite for the political project of modernity which is identified with democracy. In other words, there can be no proper democracy without cultural secularism. This is because democracy is not just a procedural and institutional system which can be imported and implanted in any society regardless of its traditions and cultural values. For in this case democracy would not enjoy legitimacy and deep-rootedness and would never succeed in becoming the norm which constitutes the chief reference point for the settlement of disputes and the smooth transfer of power. The third principle of modernity is economic rationalism which emphasizes on the importance of efficiency and profit without consideration to humanitarian or ethical issues.

Postmodernity: At least since the end of WWII a critical gaze has been directed towards the phenomenon of modernity by western thinkers because of the immense sufferings it has caused both within western countries and abroad. Its balance sheet included two devastating world wars and, externally, a process of colonization which was responsible for killing millions of people, especially in the Americas and the exploitation of the indigenous populations and the plundering of their resources. This is not mention the ongoing destruction of the natural environment on a global scale. This has given impetus to western thinkers to cast a critical eye on the central most important feature of modernity- rationalism.

Reason, as the rock on which the modernist project was built, was attacked as being parochial, pertaining to a particular culture and therefore should not entertain any universalistic pretensions; that reason is nourished by irrational impulses in the subconscious and therefore not wholly rational or impartial and lastly that it is implicated in the knowledge/power paradigm. This critical trend later became known as postmodernism.

Perhaps nothing illustrates the folly of western rationalism and the existential void underlying its intellectual underpinnings more starkly than the admission by a key contemporary western philosopher, Jacques Derrida, that each truth-claim can be deconstructed and shown to be not based on any objective criteria. In a lecture in Sydney's town hall entitled "Deconstructing Vision" Derrida embarked on deconstructing a theory in the human sciences and showed successfully that its claims are baseless. For this he received a round of applause. Immediately after that he said: "now I will deconstruct my deconstruction of it" [3]. And if he did that he then would go on to deconstruct the deconstruction of the deconstruction of it ad infinitum. Consider the following Quranic verse: Say: "O People of the Book, Ye have nothing to stand upon until you implement the Torah and the Gospel and what has been sent to you from your Lord" Sura 5:68.

Islam's Encounter with Modernity: Islam has a distinct relationship to modernity, unlike other monotheistic religions and also distinct from how other, non-western, cultures relate to this phenomenon. According to Ernest Gellner, one of the more prominent sociologists in the second half of the twentieth century, Islam is more in agreement with modernity than the other two monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, because of its universalism, its emphasis on reason and its dedication to following the law, or the *Sharia*, but, adds Gellner, Islam has proven to be the most resistant to secularism out of the three religions [4].

Herein is situated a basic insight which sheds light on this complex issue and on the dilemma which confronts most academics and social scientists when writing about contemporary Islam. Is this religion in agreement with the modern world? Is it traditionalist, its ideal social and political system situated in the past? Does it provide an example of a distinct exception to the worldwide trend of modernization and democratization? Why does this religion present a stark antithesis to the secularization theory which holds that as societies become modernized and urbanized cultural secularism usually follows?.

In the conventional secularization theory -sometimes called “modernization theory” - this happens because of a number of reasons chief among which is that as people become urbanized religion loses its social base and as science progresses and becomes able to answer more and more questions about the natural world religion loses its interpretive prerogative and, finally, as a result of the process of differentiation which happens with the spread of modernization. In Islam, if anything, the opposite has happened. Religious adherence and observance has increased phenomenally with the acceleration of modernization. In a remarkable observation Gellner says that Christianity has its bible belt but Islam itself is a Quran belt.

Islam’s unique relationship with modernity fits well into the new theorization about the paradigm of *multiple modernities* which implies that, in their endeavor towards modernization, non-western societies need not replicate the trajectory of western culture towards modernity. In other words, modernization does not require a normative commitment towards the Enlightenment project. This means that a particular culture may achieve progress and modernization without succumbing to cultural or political secularism. It is my contention that this applies only to Islam and not to other non-western societies. It can be argued that modernization for these non-Muslim societies entails a measure of cultural secularity. Moreover they do not form part of monotheistic religions where the political has been perceived as the major arena for the implementation of a transcendental, utopian vision. For in Hindu and Buddhist countries this paradigm has been much weaker [5]. The major point in this regard is that there is a certain degree of reciprocity between cultural values and the ensuing political system in any country whether western or non-western.

A proper functioning democracy cannot subsist without a set of cultural traditions which are deeply ingrained in the history and outlooks of the majority of the population in a particular country. It is this intellectual system which gives democracy legitimacy, stability and constitutes a final reference towards which people turn to resolve crisis, negotiate peaceful transfer of power and ensure people’s basic rights. If we attempt to retain a democratic system of government and choose to posit it on an alternative set of cultural values this is bound not to work. For these cultural values will ultimately have an impact on the political system and cause the country which embraces such a system to orient itself in the political field, especially foreign policy, in directions which would be seen by other democratic countries,

whether rightly or wrongly, as not conforming to the priorities and democratic countries. In this case there will be a great measure of dissonance between the hopes of the people whose ultimate aspirations will be that the political process reflects their cultural values.

The way Muslims are fashioning this new path of *multiple modernities* is through a resurrection of a dormant rationalistic tradition, not severed from revelation, which leads to a hermeneutical uncoupling between the original message and the culture which was woven around it and which was influenced by patriarchal, tribalistic society. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the sphere of the modern Muslim woman, her status and her rights. The case of the modern Muslim woman, which proves the validity of the *multiple modernities* paradigm, shows that she is educated, has agency and empowerment, not dictated to by her father or husband, conscious of her rights and duties, yet at the same time, committed to the religious principles and the cultural values of Islam. It is precisely this commitment to the ethical system of Islam which allows the Muslim woman to be modern while averting the pitfalls to which her western counterpart has been subjected to.

To illustrate how the deviation from the *multiple modernities* paradigm presents distinct perils to Islamic culture in general it is important to focus on two leading contemporary Muslim intellectuals- the Iranian dissident thinker Abdolkarim Soroush and the late Algerian Islamologist Mohammad Arkoun from the angle of the intellectual discourse and one example from the side of the political project as embodied in the trajectory of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey after becoming the governing party there. The examples mentioned above present major concessions to the paradigm of modernity as would lead to either “humanizing” religion or the absorption of the regime in question within the hegemonic western political system.

Abdul Karim Soroush and “Humanizing” Religion:

Soroush is the leading dissident Iranian thinker today engaged with theorizing about Islam’s engagement with modernity. He has attempted to find a rapport between Islam and modernity at both the level of intellectual discourse and political project. At the intellectual level Soroush advanced the thesis of the *Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Sharia* in the early 1990’s where he rightly claims that we have to distinguish between religion and religious knowledge and that the former is eternal, infallible and absolute while the latter is relative, in flux and influenced by developments and

discoveries in the natural and human sciences in a particular era. Such a separation, Soroush claimed, would make Islamic thought dynamic and more conversant with intellectual subjects and concerns thus opening the way for the entry into modernity [6]. At the level of the political project Soroush put forward the conception for a *Democratic Religious Government*. In it he advances the claim that a system of government consists of three components: rights and duties; the scientific management of society and cultural values and that the first two components should be drawn from secular sources while religion should provide the source for the third one. In this way he argues, rather simplistically, that we can have a democratic religious government and thus find a consonance between Islam and modernity [7].

In his late writings Soroush seems to have come to the conclusion that a proper engagement with modernity would not be successful without a kind of giving in to the cultural discourse of modernity which entails cultural secularism. Thus he moved from the stage of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge to that of the expansion of religion itself. According to this development in his thought it is not Islam's intellectual tradition which should be re-examined but rather it is our very understanding of the principles of religion which should be re-assessed. As an example of this rupture in his thought Soroush claims in his *Expansion of Prophetic Experience* that parts of the Quran reflect the moods, spirits and psychological conditions of the prophet and that his relationship to revelation is somewhat akin to the ecstatic or religious experience of mystics or poets and to the inspirations which may follow as a result.

This is a kind of rupture which would usher a kind of humanism and historicism of the religion as a necessary epistemological step for the entry into modernity. Thus in his *Expansion of Prophetic Experience* Soroush claims that the prophetic experience, a name which he give to revelation, is an elevated form of the experience which poets and mystics encounter when they produce their creative uttering. In the words of Forough JahanBaksh, a significant Soroush scholar: "prophecy and prophethood are understood and valued as the most exalted expression of "religious experience". Yet this unique "prophetic experience", with all its exaltedness, is not completely out of reach of common humanity. It is expansive in the sense that individuals can enjoy, to a certain degree, similar experiences of the divine" [8].

Because the issues raised above are of a delicate nature since they have relevance to the whole edifice of the faith of Islam and in order to avoid misrepresentation

of the thought of a major modern Muslim thinker it is important to listen to the very words of Soroush on this very important topic. With regard to the similitude of poetry to the Quran Soroush says: "just like a poet the Prophet feels that he is captured by an external force. But in fact- or better at the same time- the Prophet himself is everything: the creator and the producer" [9]. This is in regard to the content of the revelation. As regards the form of the revelation Soroush says: "the prophet is also the creator of the revelation in another way. Like a poet again the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the style he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses" [9]. Finally, as if to leave no doubt in mind about the human component of revelation Soroush has this to say: "His personality (meaning the Prophet's) also plays an important role in shaping the text. His personal history: his father, his mother, his childhood and his moods. If you read the Quran you feel the Prophet is sometimes jubilant and highly eloquent while at other times he is bored and quite ordinary in the way he expresses himself. All these things have left their imprint on the text of the Quran. That is the purely human side of the Quran" [9]. From what is said above the implications are clear- for a successful engagement with modernity religion has to be humanized and historicized.

Mohammad Arkoun and "Applied Islamology": A thinker with a different approach but with the same implications for Islam as a religion and culture is the late Algerian Islamologist Mohammad Arkoun. Arkoun, who died in 2010, was a Muslim intellectual of Algerian origin who was well versed in the Islamic intellectual tradition and had an intimate knowledge of the methodological developments in the humanities, most importantly for our purposes, semiotics, discourse analysis, anthropology, deconstruction and archeology of knowledge. It is this epistemological arsenal which he attempts to bring to the field of Islamic studies. He calls his approach Applied Islamology which implies a critique of both classical Islamic studies undertaken by the traditional *ulama* because of the inability of their methodology to go beyond Islamic postulates and the field of orientalism which method is confined to philology and history.

Although Arkoun stresses that his main focus in this approach is the critique of Islamic reason it is obvious that his principal concern is not the critique of Islamic thought or Islamic law, which it is obvious to any serious researcher of Islam is not free from partisan and socio-political considerations. Rather his main emphasis is on

revelation itself which he terms the Quranic fact/event and how this revelatory speech was transformed into a written text thus constituting a “closed official corpus”. Arkoun claims that there is a dialectical relationship between the mental structures of Islamic reason and the corresponding socio-cultural conditions which lead to a “dogmatic enclosure” as regards this process of transformation of the revelation from speech to text. The term “dogmatic enclosure” according to Arkoun applies “to the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of belief and unbelief to operate freely without any competing action from inside or outside. A strategy of refusal, consisting of an arsenal of discursive constraints and procedures, permits the protection and, if necessary, the mobilization of what is presumptuously called faith... No green light has ever been given to a deconstruction of the axioms, tenets and themes that hold together and establish the adventurous cohesion of any faith” [10].

In Arkoun’s view, what happened along the way to the Quran becoming a written text and the issues related to the nuances, developments and possible additions or omissions in this process was manipulated by Muslim orthodoxy in conjunction with the powers that be at that time became among the topics of the “unthinkable” or “unthought” in Islamic thought. According to Ursula Gunther, who did a PhD about Arkoun’s thought, the unthinkable “contains all that is forbidden historically or politically to be thought or expressed. This ban ensues in the name of the truth determining Islamic thought. The *unthinkable* corresponds to a storage tank of taboos that might be explained in terms of the cognitive bounds of the respective socio-cultural system, or the fact that, by means of self-censorship, the regulations of the dominant ideology have been internalized” [10].

According to Arkoun the storage tank of the *unthought and unthinkable* include: “the history of the text of the Quran and the hadith, the historical and cultural conditions of the *Sharia*, the phenomenon of revelation, the question of the creation of the Quran, the transformation of religious symbolism into state-power, the legal codex, the status of the person, the legal status of women, tradition and orthodoxy.” [10].

It is for this distinct purpose that Arkoun borrows the concept of *episteme* from continental, deconstructionist philosophers, so that the historical a priori that grounds knowledge and its discourses and thus represents the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch, become known and thought about.

In the same vein the method of deconstruction helps to illuminate the correspondence between the genesis of this discourse and the proclivities and interests of the powers that be. Also the *archeology of knowledge* sheds light on the elements and themes which were marginalized, denigrated and excluded in this process of transformation from speech to text.

A common approach shared by both Soroush and Arkoun when addressing the subject of the veracity of the Quranic revelation is to avoid a direct answer in this regard with Soroush claiming that through grasping the process of the expansion of prophetic experience the issue of whether the experience came from inside (meaning inside the Prophet’s consciousness) or outside, (meaning divine source) becomes irrelevant and Arkoun referring the reader or questioner to an incomprehensible *mélange* about the closed official corpus, the unthought and the unthinkable and the dogmatic enclosure.

The Justice and Development Party in Turkey and “Conservative Democracy”: With regard to the engagement of the Justice and Development Party’s with the political project of modernity it is important here to give a brief historical overview of how Turkey attempted to come to terms with modernity in the contemporary period.

Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey, understood modernity as a comprehensive project as there can be no separation between its cultural and political aspects. In fact he considered the former as a prerequisite for the latter. For him secularism is an integral process, which meant not only the separation between the state and Muslim religious institutions but also liberalizing the individual Muslim mind from attachment to Islamic norms and precepts. For Ataturk and his henchmen modernity was “a total project: one of embracing and internalizing all the cultural dimensions that made Europe modern” [11]. They took aim at Islam being directly responsible for impeding Turkey’s entry into modernity. Thus they attempted to erase traces related to adherence to Islam from such important arenas in the public sphere as schools, the media and official discourse so that its hold on the individual Muslim mindset would be diminished. Conversely western cultural norms were introduced into Turkish society as the yardstick for civilized behavior whether in the domain of dress codes, gender relationships and even aesthetic taste.

The vision elaborated above, apart from being flawed, suffered two major problems. The first was that the majority of the Turkish Muslim people did not share a belief in the intellectual discourse of modernity which entailed cultural secularism. This led Ataturk and his secularist henchmen to embark on bizarre measures like forced unveiling of women and eradication of any outward manifestation of adherence to Islam. The second major problem was that his drive towards modernization was authoritarian in the sense that the modernizers in his regime were a distinct governing group who wielded state power and were not interested in the full unfolding of the modernization and democratization process lest it gives rise to other contenders for power. It was modernization from above, a controlled process which did not perceive the modernization process as a mechanism of social transformation. The emphasis was more on the western-oriented manifestation of cultural modernity.

The dissatisfaction of the Turkish people with the Kemalist ideology over the decades led to the formation of political parties which were more responsive to the aspirations and religious outlooks of the majority of the population. This culminated in the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party in 2002. This party made the correct diagnosis that Islam represented for the majority of Turks the principal constituent of their identity and that any form of government, in order to gain legitimacy and acceptability among the Turkish people, has to take this into consideration and to be seen by them as embodying Islamic ideals and principles. Its vision consisted of basing the intellectual discourse of the ruling ideological system on Islamic values and principles while retaining the political project of modernity, democracy being its major manifestation. It was thought, by theoreticians and intellectuals aligned with the Justice and Development Party, that this burgeoning system would constitute a rapport between Islam and modernity and would act as a model for Islamic societies aiming at doing away with backwardness and dictatorial regimes. This paradigm was termed by the JDP as “conservative democracy” and was aimed at reconciling a democratic system of government with values and social practices derived from the Islamic intellectual heritage [12]. There was a rather inflated appraisal among the leaders of the JDP about the party’s envisioned role in the Muslim world and that it will usher in a historic age for the Muslim world reconciling it with modernity.

It is obvious from the exposition given above about modernity, especially with regard to the integral nature of the modernist project and the reciprocity between its two

essential components -the intellectual discourse and the political project- that the project of the JDP would not be destined to succeed. It was telling in this domain that the former French president Jacques Chirac made the following comment about the pre-requisites for Turkey’s entry into the European Union. Chirac said that in order for Turkey to be admitted it needed no less than a “major cultural revolution” [13]. Yes, nothing less than the adoption of cultural secularism would do for Turkey to be considered a democratic country. Also this dissonance between the cultural components of the ruling ideology of the JDP and its eagerness to be counted among the democratic western countries would not allow it to pursue policies and initiatives in foreign policy which advocate the interests of the Muslim world or follow a policy with any consistency which is independent from the general orientations of western interests in the Muslim world. Any objective observer of Turkey’s foreign policy, especially since what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, would not fail to see the confusion in this domain as it maneuvers between NATO priorities and the aspirations of the Muslim people in various countries.

CONCLUSION

Ever since the Muslim world came in contact with a powerful west in the early 19th century there have been attempts by Muslim scholars to study the causes which led to intellectual and material decline among Muslim nations. Many of them, including Afghani, Abduh and Iqbal have argued for a restructuring of Islamic thought in order to retrieve an original understanding of the message, detached from tribalistic, pre-destinarian and sectarian influences which have rendered the Muslim world lethargic, decadent and superstitious. A new trend among more contemporary thinkers as represented by the two examples mentioned before seem to have the orientation that it is not sufficient to direct the critique towards Islamic thought or the Muslims’ understanding of religion in order to enter into modernity, rather it is necessary to go to the foundational sources and impart an understanding of them, through the application of modern epistemological and hermeneutical tools, which would result in nothing less than the “humanization” and “historicization” of religion. In fact the doctoral thesis of Arkoun was entitled the Humanist Trend in Arabic Thought. It is obvious that this tendency would not take root among Muslims since it contradicts what they believe about revelation and the principles of religion. This approach has its counterpart in the political domain

where the JDP in Turkey is attempting to adopt western-style democracy while basing this system on Islamic norms and precepts with the result that it is becoming increasingly absorbed within the international western political system. In brief, giving in to either the intellectual discourse of modernity or its political project would create problems for Muslim countries both at the level of creed and politics. An alternative path which some scholars term *multiple modernities* whereby a particular culture or community of faith pursues empowerment, progress and reformation without giving in to the two constitutive components of modernity seems to be the more appropriate and promising option.

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