

# Looking Backwards into the Future: a Critique of Islamic Modernism

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*The theoretical and practical implications and ramifications of divine revelation are evaluated as the hegemonic epistemology underlying the paradigm of Islamic modernism. Contrary to the suppositions of the Islamic modernists, tensions and contradictions result between, on the one hand, revelation and, on the other, reason and science which they include in their scheme of reform. Consequently, the Islamic modernism discourse entails a backward-looking strategic approach to current and future situations. The way out of such a trap is to confine Islamic revelation to spiritual matters and deal with secular matters through reason and scientific method.*

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### *Introduction*

To claim that the West acts and the rest of the world reacts is mere platitude. Since the beginning of the 19th century, at least, the West has been the leader and pacesetter in world affairs. A combination of technological-military superiority, efficient economic organization, and a resilient civil society characterizes its apparent strength. The wealth which has accumulated in the West since the industrial revolution is staggering, and although it is distributed unevenly, citizens enjoy civil and political rights and welfare benefits hitherto unknown in history. This success story can be attributed to modernity; undeniably a complex value-laden "measure" of development in social science with many ramifications. It should not be surprising that such pre-eminence causes considerable consternation among intellectuals of non-Western cultures. In particular, the Muslim world with its own proud belief that Islam is the final and complete message and guide for dealing with matters of this world and those of hereafter has had great difficulty—emotional, philosophical, conceptual and theoretical—in coming to terms with the objective fact of Western advancements. In response, an alternative Islamic paradigm is put forth by Muslims to solve all problems—spiritual and temporal—of the present and of future in the light of revelation.

This essay evaluates the theoretical and practical implications of the Islamic modernist paradigm. As a preliminary critique, it is argued that the Islamic modernist discourse entails a backward-looking strategy to reform and progress. It results in a reverse cycle of looking backward whilst inexorably moving forward. These aspects are elaborated, beginning with a brief review of Western modernity that serves as the main point of reference for the formulation of the Islamic paradigm.

### *Western Modernity*

The origins of Western modernity can be traced to the cumulative impact of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Although the processes which brought it about are extremely complicated and scholars continue to debate perennial questions of cause and effect, it is enough to say that modernity wrought an intellectual transformation that resulted in the materialist, senseperception-based scientific method supplanting the reigning biblical creationist theology with its concomitant cosmology and eschatology for analysing the materialist world. The subversion of the authority of the church was deeply traumatic, shattering scholastic

intellectualism, which in turn reacted furiously with all the means at its disposal. The excesses of the Inquisition against suspected heretics need not be recounted. However, some great scientists such as Isaac Newton were also good, believing Christians. They assumed that science was simply a different way of discovering divine will and truths. By doing so they were able to create a scope for dualism, a change which enabled spiritual and material truths to be cultivated separately, although not always without an inherent tension between them (Popkin & Stroll [1969] (1995)).

The ontological and epistemological presumptions upon which the scientific method rested prescribed a theory-oriented empiricism as the only reliable and valid mode of gaining knowledge about the materialist world. It progressed through the testing of hypotheses and theories against sensory data. Such an approach can be described as hypothetico-deductive in that the propositions of such an approach are universal but they can be tested against sense data only a limited number of times; hence such hypotheses or the theories they constitute are "true" only as long as they are not proven wrong with the help of better hypotheses and theories. Consequently, the truths of science are never absolute. Needless to say, such an orientation of science opened new vistas for the discovery and mastery of nature (Popper 1972). Most centrally it was the theory of evolution propounded by Charles Darwin which undermined creationism effectively and, one can say, irreversibly.

### *The Social World and Modernity*

The increasingly instrumentalist nature and purpose of science resulted in manipulation of nature by human beings on a scale which dwarfed previous technologies of the natural economy and created an inflated belief in scientism. The most ambitious attempt to adapt science to the study of society was Auguste Comte's (1798-1857) positivism. He sought to create a master science of society, sociology, which would adhere to the same strict rules and procedures as were applied to the study of natural phenomena. The underlying premises of positivism allowed that only observable social or human phenomena were the concern of scientific study. A systematic study of observable behaviour would provide reliable and valid knowledge about social affairs which could then be used to identify regular patterns or even social laws. Such knowledge could then be used to fuel predictive theory to introduce corrections and improvement in the organization of society.

Over time, the absolute faith in the efficacy of the positivist methodology as the only scientific means of acquiring knowledge about the social world has been significantly challenged since the factors affecting human behaviour are now considered to be far more complex than what observations alone can discover. However, the basic assumptions remain the same: the social world moves, changes and transforms because of materialist stimuli and processes. In other words, cause and effect are to be found within the motion of matter and not outside it. Therefore miracles and other forms of spiritual factors are irrelevant in the scientific understanding of human behaviour, either individual or collective.

### *The Question of Morality, Ethics and Law*

However, science still could not provide sufficiently reassuring answers to the existentialist and metaphysical concerns of individuals and groups. Moral philosophy deriving from Christian beliefs and secular humanism therefore evolved as a separate branch of knowledge and helped human beings find anchor in a world perceived increasingly to be directionless and in flux. In general people did not cease to be Christians by conviction or culture, however (McManners 1993).

This situation has not changed fundamentally since then. In contemporary Western societies, the emphasis is on some sort of pragmatism and intellectual scepticism rather than on seeking an overall connection between the spiritual and materialist truths and processes. In any case, post-Reformation Western Europe has more or less extricated itself from the neo-Platonic theology which described life on earth as a mere trial and thus not worthy of positive engagement.

### *Secularism, Democracy and the State*

In political terms, the distinguishing feature of Western modernity is the high premium it puts on the individual who is conceived as a rational being capable of making intelligent choices. Such an idea was most successfully elaborated by a number of liberal thinkers and was presented in the form of various inalienable individual rights and the individual's autonomy vis-a-vis state and society. John Locke argued forcefully for the rights to life and property. His "labour" theory of value was a spirited defence of the rights of the evolving bourgeoisie constituted by traders, bankers, master artisans and manufacturers, in short for emerging capi-

talism (Locke [1924] (1990)). Adam Smith and others widened the intellectual base for capitalism, which henceforth became the organizing basis of Western economies. Such rights were given constitutional recognition: most dramatically in the US Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1790).

The ideas and doctrines of liberalism were subsequently challenged by both left and rightwing critics. From the left, the main criticism was directed at the negative type of freedom conferred upon the individual; something which benefited the strong and gifted. Social liberals therefore stressed the need for positive freedoms, which meant that the weak and disadvantaged sections of society should be enabled to enjoy freedom through welfare inputs from the state. Thus welfare rights of the 20th century, which are today taken for granted were added to the list of rights or benefits that a citizen could claim (Marshall 1963). More radical thinkers tried to theorize beyond capitalism and identified a classless society of free individuals called socialism and communism as the future panacea for the emancipation of humankind from oppressive cultures and structures. On the other hand, rightwing critics deplored the rationalist bases of liberalism which depreciated the role of traditions and customs and thus threatened the organic community formed through a shared sense of common origins. Among them a respect for religion, church, monarchy, aristocracy and a general belief in a natural hierarchy among human beings were widely held (Honderich 1991).

### *Modernity and the Limitations of Rationalism*

Perhaps the most glaring failure of Western modernity has been its inability to transcend the irrational drives for domination and national-self interest which drove European powers to bitter intercontinental competitions for markets and colonies and the wars such urges entailed (Toulmin 1992). The First and Second World Wars caused suffering to humanity on a scale that completely eclipsed the religious fury of earlier conflicts. Needless to say, the Second World War resulted in the defeat of the rightwing opposition within the West to liberalism while the fall of the socialist Eastern bloc has effectively weakened those forces seeking to replace capitalism with socialism. One can say that The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which recognizes a whole range of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, is a triumph of the mainstream liberal and social-democratic ideologies. The intellectual system

of the contemporary liberal West is based on a suspicion of final truths. The rise of Christian fundamentalism in the wake of the election of George W. Bush as the President of the United States in 2001 might adversely affect the liberal foundations of that superpower, but it is too early to assess its full implications. Most recent trends suggest, however, a withdrawal from hard modernity to some sort of post-modern cultural pluralism (Heelas 1998). This development in itself would need to be fully grasped, but by and large the Western paradigm describe above remains very much in tact.

As regards projections of the future, whereas natural scientists approach their problematic in terms of millions of light years, the political scientists limit their prognosis to the immediate or foreseeable future. No branch of science, natural or social, refers to the biblical Doomsday in its futuristic projections. As far as current futuristic political science scenarios are concerned, we can note two quite different projections. The first was presented by Francis Fukuyama (1992), who announced the end of history some years ago. According to Fukuyama, after the fall of the Soviet Union the world has only one successful model to emulate: that of the liberal market-economy—at which the whole world will eventually arrive. His views were challenged by a more suspicious and pessimistic prognosis about the “Clash of Civilizations” by Samuel P. Huntington (1998) who predicts instead strife and conflict between the dominant Western liberal civilization and the Islamic and Chinese civilizations which he regards as fundamentally anti-individualistic and anti-democratic.

### *Modernity and the Islamic World*

The Muslim apprehensions of the West have been compounded by the historical memory that it successfully overpowered the Muslim peoples of Asia and Africa between the 19th and first half of the 20th century. In a nutshell, the intellectual problem is posed in terms of the need to modernize in an authentic Islamic manner. Unavoidably it has induced a state of mind that harks back to a golden age in search for a model of regeneration for the present and the future. While not denying its psychological importance for enhancing self-esteem and confidence, such a mindset obfuscates rather than facilitates an understanding of the present and future. Democracy, constitutionalism, human rights in general and the rights to freedom of belief and expression, scientific inquiry, equality between the sexes and a universal, non-discriminatory citizenship in particular are values and practices which are conspicuous by their absence in

many parts of the Muslim world. The Islamic modernists wish to establish them, but on an Islamic basis. The merits of such an approach and some specimens of such thinking are examined below, but first we need to understand the golden age model.

### *The Islamic Golden Age*

The origins of the Islamic golden age are to be traced to the religious and social movement that accompanied the advent of Islam in 610, and which culminated in the establishment of the Medinese state by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632). The Prophet ruled as an exemplary administrator, judge and law-giver. He claimed to conduct his affairs in the light of revelation, which has been preserved in the Our'an by his followers. According to Muslim belief, the Our'an is the speech of God. The structure of the Our'an is not easy to grasp because besides clear and explicit formulations there are many expressions which are understood as allusions and symbols. There are some portions of the Our'an which are interpreted as binding legislation, such as the rules of worship and inheritance. Also, some offences such as theft, highway robbery, adultery, fornication and false accusation of adultery are mentioned in the Our'an and many pious Muslims consider them also of an obligatory nature. In general the tone of the Our'an is replete with humane concerns for justice and fair treatment. There are, however, explicit verses recognizing the institution of slavery—although freeing a slave is considered a meritorious act and one that Allah would reward generously (Ahmed 2001). The Our'an presents a creationist theory that is a variation of the Judaeo-Christian theory. It confirms the coming of Doomsday and a life after death with hell and heaven as the two places where each person would end up. It might be useful to point out that some of the verses in the Our'an contradict each other and even orthodox scholars of Islam admit this. Various interpretive techniques have been devised to overcome such tensions, but dissenting opinions exist on such matters (Ali 1982).

The life of the Prophet is considered an elaboration of the Our'an message and he is the model par excellence for every Muslim. A reading of his sayings and doings preserved in the various books of Hadith shows that the accounts are contradictory and often times unreliable. The result is that one can cull an enlightened socio-political message out of a selective reading of the sacred sources which can in a rudimentary manner seem to support modern ideas about equality and democracy. Equally, one can use the same sacred texts to derive a repressive, combative and

intolerant message that leaves little scope for equality and progress within Muslim societies and lasting peace between Muslims and non-Muslims.

In any case, it is the Islamic polity established by Muhammad which is idealized by his followers. The high standards set by him are believed to have been sustained by his first four successors, known as the pious caliphs, by the overwhelming Sunni majority. The pious republic lasted some 29 years altogether. It was followed by hereditary rulers and dynasties, and some of them continued to call themselves caliphs. Islamic civilization achieved remarkable success in spreading to different parts of the world through conquests in the first hundred or more years after the death of Prophet Muhammad (d. 632). Thereafter flourished a grand civilization centred on Baghdad whose achievements equalled or even excelled that of Christian Europe. The main achievements of that period included the elaboration of Islamic law known as *Shari'ah* by various scholars. Ultimately four schools of orthodox Sunni jurisprudence or *fiqh* became established in different parts of the world. The Shia minority developed its separate legal system. Apart from the development of Islamic law and jurisprudence, the Islamic civilization saw the flowering of great intellectual debate (Ahmed 1987). Followers of anthropomorphism clashed with exponents of free will; rationalists with dogmatists; and Greek philosophy, especially of the masters Plato and Aristotle, was synthesized with Islamic beliefs and doctrines. However, the main paradigm which came to dominate the intellectual sphere was that established by Imam Ghazzali (died 1111). He concluded after years of reflection and mystical endeavour that in case of a clash between revelation and reason one had to submit to the superior authority of the former (Ghazzali no year of publication given). Hence a scholastic rather than experimental methodology attained hegemonic pre-eminence among Muslims (Hoodbhoy 1991). Impressive developments did continue in Muslim Spain where Ibn Rushd concluded that in case of a conflict between the apparent meaning of the Qur'anic message and the findings of philosophers the knowledge of the latter should be considered authoritative and the Qur'anic verses interpreted in allegorical terms (Arnaldez 2000).

For a number of reasons, intellectual development in the Muslim world was arrested from around the year 1258 when the sack of Baghdad took place at the hands of the Mongols. Up until then, the Arab-Islamic civilization was the leading light in social development and was envied by the Christian powers in the North (Hitti 1970). It evolved rather advanced standards of tolerance and pluralism. Jews and dissident Christians sought refuge in Muslim Spain, North Africa and later in the Ottoman Empire.



Many such non-Muslims attained positions of eminence (Nasr 1997). Thereafter dogmatic versions of Islam became entrenched and free thought was superseded by conformity to traditional interpretations of the elder generations of scholars of Islam. The medieval model became a standard and one does not find any major reform of law taking place from within.

On the whole, Islamic societies practised some common rules. A distinction was drawn between Muslims and non-Muslims. The non-Muslims were designated as *dhimmis* or protected people. The Ottoman Millet System based on that principle provided very wide latitude of internal autonomy to the non-Muslim communities living under its protection (Kymlicka 1996). Muslim societies also practised segregation of men and women; the latter being confined ordinarily to the private sphere. Slavery, recognized in the Qur'an as a legitimate institution, was prevalent all over the Muslim world.

### *Encounters with Western Modernity*

The Islamic *weltanschauung* continued to reproduce itself on its own sluggish momentum for several centuries, but when Napoleon landed at Alexandria in 1798 and defeated the Muslim army that had gone to stop his advance, the world of Islam was rudely awakened to face the trauma of European ascendancy and dominance (Tibi [1981] (1997)). The Muslim responses were basically of four types. Among the elite some were converted to notions of rationality and progress on the lines of European modernity and the Enlightenment which Napoleon wanted to bring to the East. They supported secularization of society and polity. At present only modern Turkey has become a full-fledged secular polity. Then, there was the totally negative response of the traditional *ulema* (religious scholars). They rejected out of hand all modern ideas, insulating themselves emotionally from their surroundings and took refuge in the memory of bygone glory. There was also a belated third response of a proto-fundamentalist type. It sought a revival of pristine 7th century Islam. In recent times ideologues such as Maududi (Pakistan), Khomeini (Iran), Hassan al-Banna (Egypt), Syed Qutb (Egypt), Hassan Al-Turabi (Sudan), Abbasi Madani (Algeria) and others represent this tendency. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Sudan are based on such a totalistic model. Finally, there is the very large and variegated string of modernists who seek synthesis between Islamic and modern values. Most states in the Muslim world are dominated by such elites. This paper critically examines the intellectual system of Islamic modernism.

### *Jamaluddin Afghani and his Followers*

The founder of Islamic modernism was the mysterious Jamaluddin Afghani (1839-97) who roamed all over the Muslim world during the 19th century looking for a grand unity of the Muslim *umma* (community) that could stand up to the apparently invincible military and cultural might of the West. A great champion of pan-Islamism, he constantly looked for ways and means of forging Muslim unity. He chided the *ulema* whose doctrine of *taqlid* (unquestioning adherence to the elaboration of Islam by the earlier generations of Muslims) had resulted in intellectual stagnation and a conservative attitude towards contemporaneous life conditions. Instead he emphasized that reason was always needed to elaborate upon the hints and symbolic references in the Our'an. The door of *ijtihad* (application of independent judgement to the understanding of the Our'an) was not closed as the *ulema* believed, and it is the duty of Muslims to apply anew the principles of the Our'an to the problems faced by them in their own time (Hourani [1962] (1983). His emphasis thus changed from Islam as a religion to Islam as a universal forward-moving civilization. In doing so, he followed an eclectic method choosing freely from Western and Islamic sources ideas and practices that he believed would wrought an Islamic political resurgence. Albert Hourani remarks:

*He was not a constitutionalist on principle; his ideal of government was rather that of the Islamic theorists - the just king recognizing the sovereignty of a fundamental law. By temperament he was autocratic and impatient, and all his life was spent in search of a Muslim ruler with whom he could work for the regeneration of Islam, as in that partnership of ruler and philosopher which al-Farabi has suggested as a substitute for the ideal philosopher-king, who appeared but rarely (Ibid: 116-7).*

His conception of Islamic modernism proceeded on the assumption that a synthesis between revelation and reason could be easily achieved. Whilst agreeing with the judgement of European free thought that Christianity was unreasonable and therefore an enemy of science and progress, his understanding of Islam was just the opposite: Muslims had failed to develop an advanced civilization because they strayed away from true Islam—True Islam for him being a belief in a transcendental God who was the creator of the whole universe and therefore man had to obey His will. He was very critical of the materialist types of Islamic movements. For example, he condemned the radical naturalist movement launched in In-

dia by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-98). Sir Syed asserted that only the Our'an was an authoritative source of Islamic religion. Other sources such as the Shari'ah, or dogmatic Islamic law were not. More important was his position that there cannot be any contradiction between reason and revelation and therefore the Our'an should be interpreted in accordance with reason and nature (Hourani [1962] (1983)). Such reasoning was found to be totally unacceptable by Afghani since it meant that nature and reason were to determine the validity of all knowledge. Consequently he wrote a long work, *al-Radd ala'l-dharbhriyyin* (The Refutation of the Materialists). He asserted that God had absolute powers over all creation:

*The first pillar on which the religion of Islam is built is that the idea of divine unity should burnish the human mind and cleanse it from the weakness of illusion. Among the most important of its bases is the belief that God is alone in the disposition of beings, single in the creation of things which act and those which are acted upon, and it is an obligation to cast aside all belief that men or inanimate bodies, whether higher or lower, have any influence for good or evil upon creation. (quoted in Hourani: 126).*

### **Muhammad Abduh**

Afghani's disciple the Egyptian Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) continued to argue that Islam was a religion of reason and progress but opposed secularism. He repeated the formula that the Prophet Muhammad had been sent as the final messenger of God because mankind had fully grown up and was capable of understanding all that was necessary. He argued that in areas in which the Our'an and *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) were silent, reason must step in to provide answers. *Ijtihad* was allowed but a pre-condition for its exercise was that it should not explain away what the Our'an and *hadith* lay down (Hourani [1962] (1983)).

### **Allama Dr Sir Muhammad Iqbal**

The most famous exponent of Islamic modernism is the poet-thinker of the Indian subcontinent, Allama Dr Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938). Beginning as an Indian nationalist and singing praise for his homeland, the Indian subcontinent, Iqbal later becoming the most influential proponent of Muslim separatism and is generally considered to have con-

ceived the idea of an independent Muslim homeland in the Muslim-majority north-western zone of India. He expressed his views mainly in Urdu and Persian poetry in a style quite inimitable and thus profoundly influenced the educated sections of Muslim society. Such a medium gave him the freedom to assert things in an emotive rather than analytical manner. Thus his only mature work in prose is the six lectures delivered in 1928 to Muslim audiences in different parts of India. Published under the title "The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam" (1960), the six lectures constitute a multi-faceted argument for a thorough reform of Islamic theology in the light of reason and scientific knowledge, but not in the sense that theology should accept a separate role for itself in the spiritual or ethical realm. Rather, Iqbal strives to prove that critical philosophical as well as the empirical scientific inquiry are necessary but not sufficient conditions for acquiring knowledge about the ultimate truth which is spiritual and which can be grasped only intuitively through faith and mystical experience.

Addressing the problems of his own time, Iqbal supports the general idea of *ijtihad*. He positively assesses the various reforms undertaken by the Turkish nationalists, such as abolition of the caliphate, which he erroneously believed was being carried out with a view to establishing a modern Islamic state. At another point, he declares that *ijtihad* which abrogates the Our'an was not permissible, *What exactly* that means he does not elaborate what that means. Obviously a complete abrogation of the Our'an could not be possible without destroying the basis of the Islamic faith. On the other hand, he does not distinguish between the eternal core message of the Our'an and those elements which might be of immediate relevance at the time when the revelations were taking place. He admits that evolution is a fact, but typically asserts that in essence evolution is spiritual. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith [1946] (1963), a famous scholar of South Asian Islam, the problem with Iqbal's argumentation is that he could never really explain why, if evolution and dynamism are the essence of social life, how Islam and its social order could not be superseded by new knowledge and experience. Thus, there exists a static approach underlying his vision of Islamic society. This is clearly stated in the following verses:

*Whoso would master the sun and stars,  
Let him make himself a prisoner of Law!...  
The star moves towards its goal  
With head bowed in surrender to a law...*

*O thou that art emancipated from the old Custom  
 Adorn thy feet once more with the same fine silver chain!  
 Do not complain of the hardness of the Law  
 Do not transgress the statutes of Mohammed! (quoted in Smith [1946]  
 (1963: 149))*

Also, Iqbal followed the traditional system of selectively quoting verses of the Our'an as the legitimating principle for his assertions about natural and social phenomena. Consequently, unfettered reason and critical inquiry are subordinated to the rulings of the Our'an. He sums up his idealistic programme for the contemporaneous world in the following words:

*Humanity needs three things today - a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis. Modern Europe has, no doubt, built idealistic systems on these lines, but experience shows that truth revealed through pure reason is incapable of bringing that fire of living conviction which personal revelation alone can bring. This is the reason why pure thought has so little influence men while religion has always elevated individuals, and transformed societies... the Muslim, on the other hand, is in possession of these ultimate ideas on the basis of a revelation, which, speaking from the inmost depths of his life, internalizes its own apparent externality. With him the spiritual basis of life is a matter of conviction for which even the least enlightened man among us can easily lay down his life; and in view of the basic idea of Islam that there can be no further revelation binding on man, we ought to be spiritually one of the most emancipated peoples on earth... Let the Muslim of to-day appreciate his position, reconstruct his social life in the light of ultimate principles, and evolve, out of the hitherto partially revealed purpose of Islam, spiritual democracy which is the ultimate aim of Islam. (Iqbal 1960: 179-80).*

It is quite clear that Iqbal's idea of reform is intrinsically anti-secular, akin to the conservative thinkers. In spite of all the concessions to free thought and experience, Iqbal denies the possibility of a superior order in the present or the future coming into being through the exercise of universal reason and scientific knowledge. In particular, his anti-secular convictions come across easily in the above passage and one can find a tendency to legitimate a fanatical belief in religion. One can of course consider the whole passage rhetorical rather than considered reasoning, but

the problem is that the six lectures are interspersed with specimens of rhetoric as well as profound reflections. They are therefore ornamental prose, very much in the spirit of his poetic genius: easily playing upon the sentiments and passions of Muslims but not helping them find concrete, practical guidelines to establish a "spiritual democracy."

### *Contemporary Islamic Intellectuals*

The Pakistani Islamic feminist Riffat Hassan (2002) has been a leading light in the struggle for the emancipation of women in the Muslim world. Although a proper work on this subject has yet to be published, Hassan has been actively engaged in recent international human rights conferences. Most of her written work comprises short essays. Although she openly declares her intellectual debt to Iqbal, in her major life-long struggle for equal rights of Muslim women she ironically cannot draw upon Iqbal for inspiration because he remained rather traditional on the question of women. In her main article "Are Human Rights Compatible with Islam? The Issue of the Rights of Women in Muslim Societies" she argues that the UDHR of 1948 without any reservations is compatible with religion, but objects to its Western, secular-humanist foundations. She admits that, "Based on their life experience, most Muslim women who become human rights advocates or activists, feel strongly that virtually all Muslim societies discriminate against women from cradle to grave" (Ibid: 2). However, such women are not comfortable with identifying with Western, secular values and therefore need to find a basis for human rights in their own culture. Proceedings on lines of cultural legitimacy for human rights she evaluates the different sources that contribute the Islamic tradition. She chooses to rely only on the Our'an and writes:

*To many Muslims the Our'an is the Magna Carta of human rights and a large part of its concern is to free human beings from the bondage of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, political, economic, or any other). Tribalism, racism, sexism, slavery or anything else that prohibits or inhibits human beings from actualizing the Our'anic vision of human destiny embodied in the classic proclamation: "Towards Allah is thy limit." (2002: 3)*

She then goes on to argue that God-given human rights cannot be abolished by temporal rulers. Thereafter follows a long list of general

rights: rights to life, respect, justice, freedom, to acquire knowledge, to sustenance, to work, to privacy, to protection from slander, backbiting and ridicule, to develop one's aesthetic sensibilities and enjoy the bounties created by God, right to leave one's homeland under oppressive conditions, and a right to good life. The rest of the essay is a spirited defence of the equal rights of Muslim women. She severely criticizes existing practices of discrimination against women prevalent in Muslim societies and tries to prove that it is the male chauvinist interpretations of men which have denied equality to women when the Our'anic message is in the opposite direction: towards equal rights for women.

Any critical analysis of Hassan's argumentation would show that her interpretations reject the whole historical evidence of the practice of Islam as a grand conspiracy of men to distort the real meaning of Islam. It is replete with circumlocutions. For example this is what she writes about slavery:

*The institution of human slavery is, of course, extremely important in the context of human freedom. Slavery was widely prevalent in Arabia at the time of the advent of Islam, and the Arab economy was based on it. Not only did the Our'an insist that slaves be treated in a just and humane ways, but it continually urged the freeing of slaves. (Ibid: 5)*

She then resorts to rhetorical devices to rationally conclude that the real intention of the Our'an was to abolish that evil institution. In criticism one can say that the Our'an could have simply solved the problem of slavery by categorically demanding its abolition. It did not do so and slavery was practised by Mohammed's immediate family members, the pious caliphs and the generations after them. Slavery was prevalent in the Arabic peninsula until the 1920s, although some people believe that it exists even now in some Muslim countries such as Mauritania.

Another modernizer who has been writing on the themes of human rights, democracy and constitutionalism is the Sudanese lawyer, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim. In his major work, *Toward an Islamic Reformation* (1990), he champions the cause of constitutionalism and human rights but within an "Islamic state" and an "authentic" Islamic theological system. He rejects the idea of secular democracy as something alien and unacceptable to Muslims. Reviewing the historical *Shari'ah* and the Islamic state based on it he shows that it is incompatible with contemporary constitutionalism and universal human rights. The pious caliphate was not based on popular will in the modern sense because the incumbent could remain

permanently in power. There was no popular participation in government and the caliphs not only followed the examples of the Prophet but also exercised their own discretion freely. There was no notion of popular sovereignty in the *Shari'ah* system. Inequality of women and non-Muslims was institutionalized. The rights of Muslims to freedom of conscience were not recognized and apostasy was considered a major crime. Slavery was widespread.

Arguing thus, the author divides the Our'an into two qualitatively different types of messages. The first consists of verses revealed to the Prophet in Mecca. These contain the essence of Islamic universalism and are of eternal import. Goodwill, peaceful coexistence, equality between the sexes and freedom of religion and conscience are strongly emphasized. On the other hand, the Medinese portion of the Our'an, revealed after Muhammad fled from his hometown Mecca to Medina where he became the ruler of the state, contains ideas and injunctions which promote confrontation, inequality and serious limitations on individual freedom. Discrimination against women and non-Muslims is also sanctioned. The historical law of Islam, the *Shari'ah*, is based on these Medinese verses and the actions of the Prophet as ruler of Medina. The way forward, according to him, is to rely upon the universal message of the Our'an revealed at Mecca and to put aside those portions of the Our'an revealed in Medina because the latter was meant to deal with a specific type of social conditions. Now, the problem with An-Naim's scheme is that he does not argue convincingly why Muslims should accept a methodology which bifurcates the Our'anic message: declaring one relevant and the other redundant. It is very much doubtful that all the verses of the Meccan period and all those of the Medina period are neatly separable into universal and time or context bound particularistic verses. No attempt is made to address this question. In any case, if such radical eclecticism is permissible it should be equally possible to argue in favour of separation of religion and state as a principle of democratic dispensation. It is clear that his whole work is an exercise in novelty hunting rather than a coherent and innovative attempt at radical theorization.

### *A Critique of Islamic Modernism*

The review of Islamic modernism shows that its attempts to synthesize revelation and unfettered reason derive from a non-empirical methodology. At its core is a firm conviction that there cannot be any



conflict between revelation, reason and science (Jamaluddin Afghani). In case it happens, it is a failure of human cognition to grasp the reality because all reality is ultimately spiritual, Iqbal argues. One need not labour hard to prove this point as it is wholly scholastic and can only be sustained by rejecting both critical enquiry and empirical testing. Some psychological advantage does accrue from such a mode of reasoning, but in terms of a practical strategy for a forward-moving reform it remains confusing, contradictory and essentially reactionary. If the Islamic revelation is to enjoy supremacy over reason in all spheres of life, including that of scientific knowledge and politics, then the Islamic state must observe those rules, regulations and practices which are sanctioned in the Our'an. This would mean accepting the creationist theory as well as the various laws about inheritance, crimes, distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens and other such matters. Arguments such as creating a sphere for rational law in areas in which the Our'an is silent (Muhammad Abduh), or an *ijtihad* which does not abrogate the Our'an but enables other modernistic changes (Allama Iqbal), or a feminist re-interpretation of the Islamic tradition (Riffat Hassan), or relying on the universal portion of the Our'an revealed in Mecca and not on the time and place specific portions revealed at Madina (Abdullah An-Naim) only indicate that among the modernists too there is no agreement on how to demarcate the spheres of revelation and those of reason. Reason is applied by all of them to define their understanding of revelation. In strictly traditional or fundamentalist understandings of Islam, the modernists are heretics. Ultimately, the choice is between a secular, democratic, open society and one based on pre-modern religious ideology. The middle way is not a coherent model of organizing society.

Consequently, in the foreseeable future the Muslim world will have to sort out for itself the exact relationship between science and religion and politics and religion. There is no doubt that there will be no peace in the world until the war between religions comes to an end. The contemporary world is too variegated in religious, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic and symbolic terms to allow scope for any one "truth" to prevail over all others in a complete sense, without necessitating the wholesale destruction and annihilation of all "deviations" from that truth. Christianity and Islam have always been global movements marked by their zeal for proselytizing the whole world to their version of the truth. Post-war Christianity has thus far seemed reconciled to democratic pluralism and seeks a dialogue with other faiths. The rise of Christian fundamentalism in the US may alter this situation. Already the belief of the Christian fundamen-

talists that before the second coming of Christ all Jews must assemble in Israel has furnished the Zionist lobby with strong religio-ideological rhetoric to justify punitive action and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

On the other hand, Islamic fundamentalism, after it succeeded in ousting the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, developed an inflated and unrealistic (because most of the funding, training and armaments were provided by the US) optimism among the diehard cadres about the efficacy of *jihad* (holy war) as a means of liberating Muslims from the yoke of non-Muslim rule. Consequently, an international movement came into being which hoped to liberate Muslims in Israel, Kashmir, Chechnya, South Philippines, and so on. It was until recently able to exercise coercive influence in many parts of the Muslim world. However, after the infamous terrorist attacks on some US cities on 11 September 2001 things have changed significantly as the US and other powerful international actors compel governments in the Muslim world to weed out the extremists. Thus the fundamentalist menace will have much greater difficulty in advancing its reactionary agenda.

However, such a changed world still not prepare a viable basis for democracy in the Muslim world. For some time to come it would be the confusion prevailing among Muslim intellectuals, educationists and power-wielders over the proper role of Islam in the polity that would prove to be the main hindrance for the development of democracy. The challenges of the future will probably compel Muslim societies to choose between democracy and cultural fascism deriving from religious extremism. Contrary to the projections of Huntington that a conflict between the West and Islam will dominate the world stage in the future, it is more likely that the main centre of political conflict will be within the world of Islam. For the next fifty or more years, Muslims are likely to experience serious social and political convulsions. Democrats and free-thinkers within Muslim societies will inevitably clash with rightwing Muslims, whether of the Islamic modernist or fundamentalist variety. Looking at the present balance of power within Muslim societies it seems that without strong international support and solidarity the battle of democracy may be lost. On the other hand, an Islamic variety of fascism will always be a threat for non-Muslims and would certainly result in a worldwide conflict.

The decisive factor which would determine the future course of Muslim societies is whether intellectuals will be able to make a paradigmatic shift away from a religious approach of cognizing, analysing and changing the material world to a more scientific one. Contemporary extremist Muslim writings available on the Internet talk of an imminent war be-

tween Muslims and non-Muslims. There is also a reference to an international conspiracy of Jews, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists against Islam. It is argued that Islamic sacred forces prophesied about such a conspiracy and a final battle between Muslims and non-believers is soon to take place. For Muslim governments and intellectuals the task before them is to what degree they will allow dogmatic versions of their faith to determine their politics. It is true that no civilization or culture in the long historical process adheres strictly or consistently to the holy texts, and governments are able to circumvent religious strictures in favour of pragmatism. This is additionally made possible by the fact that sacred scriptures are not works of consistent and logical thought or argumentation. Contradictions abound in the texts and multiply in the practices of their followers. It is nevertheless important that intellectual and political leadership does not simply act in an ad hoc manner but take more determined steps to release itself from the fetters of dogmatic tradition.

It would not be wrong to suggest that to a great degree the backwardness of Muslim societies is due to their reliance on revelation as the framework for social and political order. While remaining faithful to the spiritual message of Islam, the vision and courage to separate revelation from mundane matters would be necessary. At present, the opposite is true. The political and intellectual hold of the Islamic modernist remains steadfast on the university campuses and especially the academic faculties. Consequently there is not a single Muslim country, with the possible exception of Turkey, where social science—which critically studies societies as they actually are and function rather than according to some idealistic and normative standards—as a discipline is well, established. The Afghani-Iqbal scholastic paradigm intellectually incapacitates path-breaking critical analysis. Similarly, in the field of natural sciences there is little serious accomplishment—unless making of an atomic bomb by Pakistan is considered a great achievement.

In practical terms it would be necessary that matters dealing with the physical and social world are dealt with on a flexible, empirical basis. Laws and rules that apply to society should be retained only on the basis of their usefulness and effectiveness. Thus for example it would be necessary to compare the Muslim laws of inheritance with modern developments in the field and decide which one is most useful for creating a democratic society of equal men and women. In the Muslim world, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of Turkey laid the foundations of a modern state. He separated dogmatic Islam from the legal and constitutional basis of the state. Although Turkey has not graduated to a full democracy it has been able

to attain greater equality of women and thus laid the foundations of egalitarianism in a substantial sense.

Most crucially, instead of looking upon human history as having gone astray from the time of the Prophet and his pious successors—as seems to be the implicit assumption from which all arguments about remaining faithful to a pristine past emanate—it would be fruitful to consider that golden period as a source of inspiration for adopting a proactive and flexible attitude towards the present and future. This means that Muslims will have to accept and internalize an evolutionary conception of nature, human history. Unless it is presumed that mankind has arrived at the end of time, there is no reason to despair simply because in the last few hundred years Europe or the West provided leadership to social and political transformation. The future can be seen as uncharted and therefore open to contributions from all cultures and societies. If Muslim societies opt for a liberal, rationalist education which can facilitate a culture of intellectual scepticism to prosper there is chance that they will emerge as winning group of the future.

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