

A brief analysis of the views of the Muslim reformists on the issue of Islam and its compatibility with modernity

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ABSTRACT: In many Muslim societies, there is still an on-going debate on the issue of Islam and the notion of modernity among many Muslim scholars. The problem centres mainly on what relationship could possibly be there between the religion of Islam and Modernity. Many Muslim scholars who call themselves as reformists attempt to find out if there is any compatibility between Islam and modernity. This Article tries to analyze the views of some Muslim reformist scholars on the issue of Islam and its compatibility with modernity.

KEYWORDS: Modernity, Islam, compatibility, Muslim reformists.

1 INTRODUCTION

Today, it is obvious that the civilization of the west is the current and dominant civilization to which people are heading to for guidance and inspiration on progress and development, and Muslim societies are faced with the dilemma of how to adapt to this civilization without diluting their Islamic traditions. This article seeks to answer this central question: Is there any kind of compatibility between Islam and modernity, the civilization of the Western world.

It is crystal clear that the debate between Islam and modernity continues to echo in Muslim societies. “Modern”, “modernity” and “modernization” are facing us a lot these days in mass media as well as in many political and social discussions. These abstractions seem to be interrelated and revolve around the notion of change, from the ancient to the new. However, the concept of modernity is still ambiguous and has many different interpretations. It is not a clear unified coherent phenomenon, but it is rather a complex and multidimensional one. It has different schools of thoughts moving in many directions.

2 MODERNITY AND RELIGION

The term modernity derives from the word “modern” which stems etymologically from the Latin “modernus” which means new, latest, recent or just now. In the Western history, the word “modern” was first used in 490-500 which shows the displacement of the old Roman period to the new Roman period. Generally, modernity designates a change in culture from the old to the new. It is always associated with the sweeping changes that take place in a certain society. It involves implicitly a comparison between times: past and present. Therefore, modernity, in this context, means novelty, progress and innovation. However, according to Heller (1999), as the emphasis of modernity is on novelty and better future, everything in modernity is open to be questioned and tested everything is a target to be investigated in order to obtain advancement; and everything is assessed, if accompanied by rational and empirical arguments. Therefore, modernity is always seen as a continuous effort to improve the lives and to achieve progress.¹

The principal goals of modernity are change, development and improvement. It is an ambitious project that is based on the central idea that today must always be better than tomorrow. In his definition, the Swedish social theorist Göran Therborn (1995) claims that Modernity is frequently associated “with words like progress, advance, development, emancipation, liberation,

¹ Heller, Agnes. (1999). *A Theory of Modernity*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publisher.

growth, accumulation, enlightenment, embitterment, [and] avant-garde” (p. 4).² On the other hand, Wagner (2008) sees it, until recently, “modernity was associated with the open horizon of the future, with unending progress towards a better human condition brought about by a radically novel and unique institutional arrangement” (p. 1).³

The birth of the concept “modernity” is generally dated back to the middle of the eighteenth century. It was the fruit of the enlightened humanism, the industrial and technological expansiveness and the emergence of political, economic and social change. It also represents the transformation of the Western society and culture which was the product of bloody revolutions and of brilliant ideas. As a matter of fact, modernity originated from the American Revolution (1763 – 1789) and the French Revolution (1789 – 1799) which openly called for individual’s rights, emancipation, liberation, individuality and rationalism. Hence, modernity was a project of enlightenment of Europe and North America with an emphasis on rationality, regularity, effectiveness of the state, control and trust on progress.

Modernity is understood by many experts as a revolt against traditions and authority of all kind, especially the religious one. Since modernity owes its origins to the rise of science as an intellectual and social force, the existence of religion seems to be ignored and marginalized. In fact, in the process of modernity, divine revelation and religious authority as the interpreter of God have been lost in many western societies, and human life no longer relies on the intervention and action of God alone, but it rather leans primarily on science and rationality. Modernity has come to replace all the patterns of thinking that are irrational and unscientific with more rational and scientific ones. Therefore, human, in the process of modernity, has become independent from the religious doctrines and authorities; human has become as the centre and not God as the centre. A modern society, which is based on scientific method, industry and technological advance, has created new principles and rules that bind all, a secular morality and a rational system that substitute for the religious principles. Nowadays, in many modern societies in the developed countries, (especially, in Europe, North America and Japan), religious authorities are no longer able to dictate religious morality and social control over issues like abortion, sexual orientation, the necessity of marriage before the birth of a child and so on and so forth.

3 MODERNITY AND ISLAM

A number of Muslim reformists think that modernity and Islam converge at certain points. The Muslim scholars such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Abd El-Razzak El-Sanhuri, Syed Ahmad Khan, Ali Abdel Raziq and others believe that Islam is compatible with modernity and with many western social values. They argue that the issues of democracy, civil rights, gender equality, rationality, social justice, human rights, freedom of thoughts and expressions, good education, development of science and technology and etcetera do not contradict with Islam. They go further than that as they advocate that Muslim societies should copy and adopt these issues since they are not against the tenets of Islam and they are in no way form hindrance to the practice of the Islamic faith.

In his book, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, Tariq Ramadan says:

“Nothing in Islam is opposed to modernity and we can firmly state that the Muslim thinkers and ‘ulama’ (savants) who are opposed to this notion and to the idea of change and evolution that it covers often confuse it with the model which is current in the West». Clearly, they confuse modernity with Westernisation. Thus, they justify an attitude versed in traditionalism and forms which are sometimes sombre and rigoristic, and which presents Islam as opposed, by essence, to any social or scientific progress. Hiding behind the “drifts of the West”, they deduce that faithfulness to the Message is achieved by an “absolute” and definitive interpretation of the sources.”⁴

To overcome this dilemma, Tariq Ramadan calls for reinterpretation of the Quran and the Sunna in the light of modern context in order to respond to the needs of the time and place. For him, Islam is a universal message and it fits every place at anytime, and therefore it never contradicts with modernity, but rather, some scholars’ misinterpretations which are opposed to our modern time. He holds that Muslims, today, should no longer rely on scholars of the text, as he believes that they limit themselves by the literal meaning of the text and neglect many contemporary challenges and issues such as social sciences, education, women, economy, philosophy and politics.

On the other hand, those Muslim reformist scholars who believe in compatibility between Modernity and Islam focus only on some social issues and institutions which they feel define the modern Western societies. Concerning the issue of politics, Ali Abdel

² Therborn, Göran (1995). *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945-2000*.

³ Wagner, Peter (2008). *Modernity as experience and interpretation*. Cambridge: Polity.

⁴ Ramadan, T. (2000). *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity: Which Project for Which Modernity?* Leicester, U.K.: Islamic Foundation.

Raziq claims that Islam has never been against democracy and democratic institutions and values. He points out that Islam is a religion and a message of God and not a government or a state. Abdel Raziq argues that the message of Islam was not concerned with the issue of governance and politics in the first place, but rather it had to do with religious and spiritual matters. Although Abdel Raziq admit the fact that the prophet Mohammed had some kind of control over his followers because “the Message in itself obliges [him] to have some kind of leadership and authority over his people”; he says that this “is nothing like the leadership of kings and the authority they have over their subjects.” Therefore, the prophet’s leadership should not be compared with presidency or leaderships of kings that exist in many political systems because:

“The Messenger’s trusteeship over his people is a spiritual trusteeship whose origin is faith from the heart, and the heart’s true submission followed by the submission of the body. On the other hand, the trusteeship of the ruler is a material one. It depends on subduing bodies without any connection to the heart. While the former is a trusteeship leading to God, the latter is one for managing life’s concerns and populating the earth. While the former is religion, the latter is the world. The former is divine, the latter is human. The former is a religious leadership, the later a political one – and there is much distance between politics and religion.” (Abdel Raziq, p.30)⁵

Hence, Ali Abdel Raziq insists on the idea that Islam is a message and a religion from God like any other religions. On this basis, Islam should not be interpreted in any political sense. According to him, politics is an affair that should be left to people who are “free to manage it in the manner that their minds, knowledge, interests, desires, and tendencies would guide them.” (Abdel Raziq, p.35). This indicates that Muslims are free to choose which ever system of governance suits them and is in their interest, including democracy which Abdel Raziq believes is compatible with Islam.

There are also some Muslim scholars who argue that Muslims have to accept and adopt democracy as means of governing and running their states and societies. They believe that democratic principles and values have nothing to do with the tenets or fundamentals of Islam. Indeed, the majority of these scholars hold that the concept of “Shura” is compatible with democracy, as they have many principles in common. They are both based on the notion of consultation and popular will or choice of the people.

Muhammed Khalaf is one of these scholars who claim that there is compatibility between the concept of “Shura” and democracy. After conducting a comparative study on the concept of “Shura” in Islam and the legislative arm of government in Western nations and democracy, he comes up with the following findings:

1- On the issue of law: “They [the Europeans] say that the umma is the source of laws. We [Muslims] say the same thing with regard to matters for which there is no Qur’anic reference or mention in the sunna, as the Imam [Fakhr al-Din] al-Razi has stated. And very few things have such references [in the Qur’an]

2- On the issue of representation and election: “They [the Europeans] say there must be those who would represent the people so that what they decide would be as if the people had decided it. We too say the same thing. They say that this is known as elections, and that they have different ways of organizing them. We have not been limited by the bounteous Qur’an to a specific way. We have the right to follow in every age the way we feel will achieve what is intended. [God] called those who represent the people “those in authority, ” which means those who are distinguished among the people, to whom people’s interests are referred, whom the people feel safe in following. They may be confined to the center of government at times, as they were at the beginning of Islam.

3- On the issue of obedience and change of government: “They [the Europeans] say that if [the representatives] agree, the government must execute that which they agree upon. And the people must obey. They have right to bring down the ruler if he does not execute their law. And we say the same thing. This is the real consensus which we consider to be one of the fundamentals of our law.”

4- On the issue of the majority: “They [the Europeans] say that if they disagree, the opinion of the majority should be followed. We know that the Prophet acceded to the opinion of the majority, even if it was incorrect, as occurred during the battle of Uhud. And this position on his part, peace be upon him, trained us. The opinion of the majority is not the correct opinion – but it is the one on which people with real interests agree.” (Muhammed Khalaf, p.35-45)⁶.

Therefore, Muhammed Khalaf strongly believes that democracy as a principle does exist in the religion of Islam and it is perfectly compatible with its fundamentals and principles. This claim is supported by Sadek J. Sulaiman who says “ [a] s a concept

⁵ Ali , Abdel Raziq “Message not government, religion not state”, in Liberal Islam: a source book, Charles Kurzman, ed., (New York: Oxford University Press 1998)

⁶ Muhammad Khalaf-Allah, “Legislative authority”, in Liberal Islam: a source book, Charles Kurzman, ed.; Sadek J. Sulaiman, “Democracy and Shura” in Liberal Islam: a source book, Charles Kurzman, ed.

and as a principle, "Shura" in Islam does not differ from democracy. Both "Shura" and democracy arise from the central consideration that collective deliberation is more likely to lead to a fair and sound result for the social good than individual preference. Both the concepts also assume that majority judgment tends to be more comprehensive and accurate than minority judgment." (Sadek J. Sulaiman, 1998) ⁷

On the other side of the coin, the issues of human rights and social justice, which are considered as essential elements of democracy, need to be questioned in many Muslim states. In fact, there are many laws and traditions, in the majority of Muslim countries, violate the universal declaration of human rights in the United Nation's charter, limit the rights of people and consequently contradict with the core principles of democracy and modernity. In this context, we can list some examples of these laws and traditions as follow:

- 1) Under the Islamic law, it is forbidden for Muslim women to marry a non-Muslim whom they love.
- 2) Until recently, it was forbidden for women to drive a car in Saudi Arabia.
- 3) In Iran, women are officially supposed to wear a headscarf.
- 4) In Syria, marriage contract is signed by the future husband and the father of the bride.
- 5) A non-Muslim cannot inherit a Muslim and vice versa.
- 6) Concerning inheritance rights of women in Islamic law, a woman has been allocated only half of the share of the man.
- 7) It is illegal for a Muslim to change her/his religion from Islam to other religion such as Christianity or Judaism.
- 8) Although slavery is abolished in practice in Muslim societies, it is still recognized by the "Sharia".

These are just a few examples that illustrate the situation of human rights and social justice in many Islamic states, but the list is endless. According to Muslim reformists, these kinds of laws and traditions are no longer tenable and relevant to today's modern world. They repeatedly call for reforming these laws and changing these traditions by urging Muslims to use the tool of "Ijtihad" to correct this situation. Abdullahi Ahmed Naim says that the "discrimination on grounds of religion and gender under shari'a ... violates established universal human rights." He believes that such discrimination is behind a lot of conflicts and wars. For this reason, Naim sees that "discrimination on grounds of either gender or religion is morally repugnant and politically untenable today." ⁸

In his comment on the issue of slavery in Islam, Abdullahi Ahmed Naim says that "In continuing to recognize slavery as a lawful institution, even if only in theory, shari'a is in complete violation of the most fundamental and universal human right. It is very significant that slavery was abolished in the Muslim world through secular law and not shari'a and that shari'a does not object to the reinstatement of slavery under its own conditions regarding the source of slaves and conditions for their treatment." ⁹

As far as the issue of freedom of thought and expression is concerned, many Muslim reformist scholars as well as human rights activists long for the freedom of thought and expression similar to the one that exists in the modern Western societies. They vehemently advocate for the right of the people to speak their minds freely and express their thoughts without prior censorship, and without fear of reprisal. They hold that the freedom of thought and expression is one of the fundamental rights of people that are provided for in the universal declaration of human rights of the United Nations' charter, and since most of the Muslim nations are signatories to the charter; they have to respect and protect these rights. They also consider the freedom of thought and expression as one of the basic principles of democracy. For this reason, many Muslim scholars insist on implementing the democratic political system in the Muslim societies because they believe that the rights of the people will be better protected under the principles of democracy. Since they believe that democracy is compatible with the principle of Shura in Islam, they hold that the democratic system will not be an impediment to practicing the Islamic faith, but rather it will guarantee the rights of Muslims (male and female), and non-Muslims under one common law and a fair justice.

Another controversial social issue which is still under a daily discussion and has created a lot of heated debates among Muslim scholars is the issue of women's rights in the Muslim societies. While women in most of the Western modern societies are given rights to work and compete with men in all spheres of life, enjoy equal rights to the participation in sports and recreation activities, enjoy equal status and exercise equal rights in political and public affairs; Muslim women are still suffering from gender discrimination and are still restricted by the clause that they are different or the weaker sex compared to their male counterparts. This has pushed many Muslim women and reformist scholars to voice out their displeasure in the way women are treated by the Muslim men especially in the dominant Muslim societies. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons says:

⁷ Sadek J. Sulaiman (1998), *"Democracy and Shura"*, Ed. Charles Kurzman (New York: Oxford University Press)

⁸ 'Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *"Shari'a and basic human rights concerns"*,.

⁹ Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *"Shari'a and basic human rights concerns"*,.

“When women are going on space missions and walking on the moon, flying F-16s, performing heart transplants, and so on and so on, can we continue talking and preaching about woman being created from a rib and that this has determined that she is too emotional and mentally fragile to work outside the home or to pursue a meaningful career? The facts on the ground dispute these contentions, resolutely. We must let these myths go. We must bring the best of Islam into the twenty-first century and stop dragging those antiwoman perspectives and interpretations of medieval men into our masjids, our classrooms, our homes, and our hearts.”¹⁰

Other scholars, like Zoharah Simmons, choose to remain Muslims and struggle for the cause of women’s rights in their Muslim societies. They reread and interpret the Quran and Hadith of the Prophet Mohammed in the light of the modern context and come to the conclusion that it is not the holy text that is biased against Muslim women, but, rather, it is the patriarchal interpretation of the holy text by the Muslim males which is responsible for the glaring discrimination against women. In her comment on the patriarchal interpretation of the message of Islam, Benazir Bhutto says.

“It is not religion which makes the difference. The difference comes from man-made law. It comes from the fact that soon after the Prophet died, it was not the Islam of the Prophet (s.a.w.) that remained in place. What took place was the emergence or the re-assertiveness of the patriarchal society, and the religion was taken over to justify the norms of the tribal society, rather than the point that the Prophet (s.a.w.) had made in replacing the tribal society with a religion that aimed to cut across narrow loyalties and sought to create a new community, or umma, on the basis of Islam and the message of God.” (Benazir Bhutto, 1998)¹¹

Also, a host of Muslim scholars and activists like Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud and others share the same view, and they therefore reject the strict patriarchal interpretation of the holy text which restricts Muslim women from doing so many things. They assert the rights of Muslim women to participate actively in their societies, to live free from violence and discrimination; to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health; to be educated; to own property; to vote; and to earn an equal wage.

Concerning the issue of education, the Muslim reformists hold that Muslims should reform their educational system in order to catch up with the modern western societies. Instead of recycling and glorifying their past heritage and achievements, Muslims are urged by some scholars to think of a new educational system that copes with the challenges of globalization, the continuous world changes and the industrial and technological advances, and also to suit their modern time. Other reformists call for a complete adoption of the educational system of the Western modern societies as they believe that this educational system has led to a great success especially in the fields of philosophy and science; and this, according to them, has brought about a high quality of livelihood, peace, security and unity; good governance and rule of law; a well educated and learning society; and a strong and competitive economy.

Muslim reformists consider adopting the modern Western method of education and knowledge as the only solution for the Muslims progress, and they insist “on the idea of independent, innovative thinking as an important element in dealing with socio-economic problems because the Qur’an encourages... man to think, to reflect, to use his reason, and to exploit nature for beneficial human ends.”¹²

On this basis, Muslim reformists believe that the pursuit of knowledge and science never contradicts with Islam, but rather Islam, as a religion, urges people to read, to learn, to think about the creation of the universe and to use their reason to seek the truth. So, according to them, Islam and modernity converge at the level of education and knowledge. Therefore, the Muslim reformists claim that since the modern western societies have achieved a lot of success and progress in different fields through ‘independent’ and ‘innovative’ thinking, Muslims should follow the same path to develop their societies. Some scholars, like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, call for the reinterpretation of the Qur’an in the light of the modern sciences and the new discoveries. He says, “...truth cannot contradict truth; therefore there cannot be any discrepancy between the truth of God, of the Qur’an and of science. Further, the word of God and the work of God as we get to know it better by the advancement of Science cannot contradict each another or be at variance.”¹³

Mohammad Abduh also suggests that the system of education and knowledge in Al-azhar should be reformed so that it can be compatible with the modern Western educational system. He says, “... since the nation has developed, times have changed, and new ways of life need a new type of education. It is a duty, in the interest of Egypt and the Islamic world, to reform the subject

¹⁰ Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, “Are we up to the challenge? The need for a radical re-ordering of the Islamic discourse on women” in Progressive Muslims: on justice, gender, and pluralism

¹¹ Benazir Bhutto, “Politics and the Muslim woman”, in Liberal Islam: a source book, 109.

¹² Abdul Wahab Saleh Babear, “Intellectual currents in contemporary Islam”, 242.

¹³ Christian W. Troll, Sayyid Ahmad Khan: a reinterpretation of Muslim theology, 165.

and themes of sciences. The reformation should include the content of the books and even the names of the sciences themselves. It could even change the content of specific sciences. The only thing that remains, then, is a title to be applied to this totally different content.”¹⁴

It seems clear that Muslim reformists are impressed and influenced by the educational system of the modern Western societies that is why they vehemently insist on the idea that the educational system in the Muslim societies should be fashioned on the pattern of the Western world. They argue that the system of education in the Islamic world is still traditional, “passive and receptive rather than creative and inquisitive.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, the modern western educational system encourages critical thinking, enables man to respond adequately to new challenges, and generates a creative and well educated society.

Related to the issue of education and knowledge mentioned above, Muslim reformists are also concerned with the issue of science and technology. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani holds that Muslims have to accept and to adopt the Western science and technology in order to develop their nations. He claims that there is something wrong in the Islamic religion that hinders the development of science and philosophy. He says, “In truth, Muslim religion has tried to stifle science and stop its progress. It has thus succeeded in halting the philosophical or intellectual movement and in turning minds from the search for scientific truth.”¹⁶ However, he thinks that this hindrance to science and technology could be easily overcome through the reinterpretation of the holy text and through a real reform of many wrong perceptions in the Islamic traditions. Al-Afghani supports his idea by giving the example of the Christian religion as it posed the same obstacle to the development of science and philosophy, and it was eventually overcome by the Western thinkers, scientists and philosophers. He says,

“If it is true that the Muslim religion is an obstacle to the development of sciences, can one affirm that this obstacle will not disappear someday? How does the Muslim religion differ on this point from other religions? All religions are intolerant, each one in its way. ... Realizing, however, that the Christian religion preceded the Muslim religion in the world by many centuries, I cannot keep from hoping that Muhammadan society will succeed someday in breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of civilization after the manner of Western society, for which the Christian faith, despite its rigors and intolerance, was not at all an invincible obstacle.”¹⁷

For, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, the development of the Islamic nations is dependent on the reform of their religion. He holds that the progress will be inevitable if the Muslims free themselves from the tutelage of their religion. This view had a strong influence on his student Muhammad Abduh who called for a complete overhaul of education in the Muslim world. He holds that “nation has developed, times have changed, and new ways of life need a new type of education.”¹⁸ Sayyid Ahmad Khan also agrees with al-Afghani’s point of view and he suggests a complete reinterpretation of the Islamic text in order to conform to modern scientific discoveries. He also advises Muslims to hasten to learn and adopt the modern scientific knowledge so that they can catch up with the modern Western societies. In this regard, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani says: “...those who forbid science and knowledge in the belief that they are safeguarding the Islamic religion are really the enemies of that religion. The Islamic religion is the closest of religions to science and knowledge and there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and the foundation of the Islamic faith.”¹⁹

4 CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the majority of the Muslim reformists are aware of the fact that the Islamic nations are lagging behind in many aspects of life, and they attribute this to the misinterpretation of the holy text and to some traditions and laws which were constructed by “the medieval men”. For this reason, they believe that a reformation of Islam becomes a must, and they hold that this reform should take into cognizance the present modern trends, the way of living in the contemporary time and the new knowledge and modern science and technology. In theory, they try to show that Islam is compatible with modernity and they give many examples such as the compatibility of Shura and democracy, the pursuit of knowledge and science in Islam as well as the condemnation of discrimination on ground of colour in Islam and so on and so forth, but in reality, many practices in Islam still contradict the notion of modernity as they violate some basic human rights, perpetuate discrimination on grounds of gender and religion and encourage hatred and violence.

¹⁴ Muhammad ‘Abduh, “The necessity of religious reform”, in *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam*, 46 – 47.

¹⁵ Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and science: religious orthodoxy and the battle for rationality*, 124.

¹⁶ Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, “Religion versus science” in *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam*, 25.

¹⁷ Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, “Religion versus science” in *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam*, 25.

¹⁸ Muhammad ‘Abduh, “The necessity of religious reform”, in *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam*, 46.

¹⁹ Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, “Lecture on teaching and learning and answer to Renan”, 106.

It seems that the majority of Muslim reformists see the backwardness of the Muslim societies as the outcome of their failure to open up and learn from the successful experiences of the modern Western societies which have benefited a lot from the changes that are brought about by modernity. They believe that Muslims tend to reject anything new that comes from the west including modernity and its ideological purposes. Therefore, these scholars have done much effort to convince Muslims to borrow and adopt modernity assuring that the principles of modernity are not against the tenets of Islam and they are in no way form hindrance to the practice of the Islamic faith. They advise Muslims to open the gate of "ijtihad" in order to interpret the Islamic percept in the light of their contemporary time.

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