Islam, Reason and the Challenge of Decaying Modernity

Dr. Muqtedar Khan

This article was published in Turkey Agenda on April 25, 2015.

For over three hundred years, Islam like other faiths has had to face the challenge of European enlightenment that privileges reason over revelation and secularism over theocentrism\(^1\). While compared to other religions, which have changed and discarded many of their beliefs and traditions, Islam has remained less amenable to the affects of modernity and globalization\(^2\).

While the significance of nearly all religions has receded to the private domain or even into vestigial customs and occasional rituals, Islam has experienced a major resurgence in the twentieth century and continues to dominate the Muslim public sphere; but at a cost. While other religious communities wear the rewards of modernity in the form of democracy and prosperity and relative peace, the scars of modernity, however, are easy to see on the face on the Muslim World\(^3\).

There are modern nation states in the Muslim world, but many of them are failing. There are many states seeking to democratize, but democracy is faltering in more places than those where it is taking root\(^4\). Even Muslim intellectuals who are seeking authenticity are compelled to succumb to modernist discourses, thereby furthering the agenda of modernity at the expense of traditional Islam\(^5\).

Islam and modernity, one must remember are not necessarily antithetical. Indeed one could argue that the genesis of enlightenment and modernity can be found in
thriving medieval Islamic civilization. However modernity has taken many wrong
turns in the last century by corrupting its own foundational principles. The value of
freedom, understood by many as freedom to do good, is now understood as freedom
to do anything. Reason has been displaced by instrumental reason. Knowledge has
become the servant of power. Wisdom has been replaced by public opinion. Even as
Muslims enjoy the fruits of modernity, Islam continues to struggle against the dark
side of modernity.

As a contemporary Islamic philosopher, living in the dusk of modernity and in the
heart of the West, deeply nostalgic for a divinely ordained order of things that is
consistent with reason and justice, full of compassion and mercy, I am fascinated by
the systematic deconstruction of modernity by the very forces it engendered and
unleashed upon itself. The normative structure of boundless freedom and a culture
of irreverence that modernity has deliberately fostered to subvert God has now
turned upon its creator. War, xenophobia, racism, corruption, staggering wealth
inequality, terrorism, poverty continue to plague more and more people in the
modern world.

Even as the interlocutors of modernity demand of Muslims to demonstrate the
compatibility of Islam and democracy, they are shying away from answering the
question as why racism and liberalism have remained so compatible for so long? Even
as they demand an explanation of the relationship between Islam and violence,
they do not reflect on the appetite for war demonstrated by modernity, or the
appetite for imperialism that democracies satisfy.

Skepticism based on the assumed infallibility and universal sovereignty of reason
was the constitutive character of modernity. It was designed to eliminate faith and
re-channel Man’s inherent compulsion to submit and worship. New Gods and new
traditions were invented, new prophets were proclaimed and new heavens were
imagined. But religion has not only survived the five hundred year assault on God
and his messages, but has returned with an increased fervor that baffles the
postmodern being.

The postmodern being, whose heart without faith is empty and mind without reason
is perplexed, can destroy the fragile foundations of modernity, ridicule the
memories of tradition but can neither comprehend and nor deal with the
postmodern resurgence of faith.

Those waging a losing battle for Modernity against Postmodernity reject the
resurgence of faith as a return to backward pre-modernity. Their shortsightedness
precludes them from imagining the resurgence of faith not as a return but as a leap
forward.

For those who were always with God and comfortable with reason, in the tradition
of Al Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Rushd, the resurgence of religion is merely the
continuation of the divine way. Islam never succumbed either to modernity nor is
losing out to postmodernity. The decline of Islamic empires and nations is misunderstood as the irrelevance of faith. The entire musical chairs of authority, God, Reason, Conventions, Text, and Nothing, is Western and limited to those societies who have succumbed to the forces of modernism completely.

Islam was from the beginning comfortable with reason. Recognizing its immense potential and necessity but also remaining acutely cognizant of its limitation. The Al Ghazali-Ibn Rushd debate on the nature of causality is an excellent chronicle of Islam’s position on reason. Islam simultaneously recognized the absoluteness of Truth as well as the relativity of truth claims. For nearly 1400 years Muslims have believed in one Shariah but recognized more than five different, competing and even contradictory articulations of this Shariah (madhahib).

Islam has survived the experiment called modernity and will survive the bonfire – postmodernity -- that is threatening to burn down the lab along with the experiment. There is sufficient play within Islam in terms of epistemological pluralism, whether it is recognition of the validity of different legal opinions based on different contexts or time or based on different discursive epistemes that will allow Islam to negotiate postmodernity’s epistemological rampage.

END NOTES


7https://www.academia.edu/5489562/Seyyed_Hossein_Nasr_on_Tradition_and_Modernity
8 http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/27/how-liberalism-and-racism-are-wed/?_r=0