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Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah's Discourse on Religious Thought in Response to The Challenges of Modernity

Adibah Abdul Rahim *

Abstract

This paper will explore Irfan's views on diversified philosophical trends which represent main qualitative characteristics of modernity. The author emphasizes the effort made by Irfan to answer what are the intellectual challenges of modernity posed by the West, and what are the major religious responses to modernity. A qualitative methodology in which the textual analysis and comparative study was employed to analyse textual materials related to the writings of Irfan and other figures. Findings indicate that the discussion on religious thought and the challenges of modernity is still relevant to contemporary time. It exerted impacts on the West particularly in Jewish and Christian religions, as well as the Muslim world. It led Irfan to take an initiative to deliberate it in an objective manner.

Keyword: Irfan, Modernity, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Religious thought.

Introduction

Irfan Abdul Hamid Fattah (1933-2007) was one of the contemporary Muslim scholars in Islamic thought and Comparative Religion. Irfan was born in the city of Karkuk on 25th December 1933. Being graduated from the university at the early age, Irfan had a wide experience in both academic and administrative positions. He received a bachelor degree from the Department of History, Faculty of Education, Baghdad University, Iraq in 1959. His first career was a secondary school teacher which he served a job from 1959-1962. Upon his resignation as a

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teacher, he pursued his study to doctorate degree in Islamic Studies at the Cambridge University and completed it in 1965. Irfan served the University of Kuwait from 1972-1978. Besides being an academic, he also involved in administrative posts in which he hold the position of Head of Department of Philosophy in the Faculty of Education, Baghdad University from 1975-1989. In addition, he became the Advisor to the Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs in Iraq. In 1995, Irfan was appointed as a Professor at the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). He was attached to Department of *Usul al Din* and Comparative Religion. Irfan served the university until 2007 and passed away in the same year. He left many writings on Islamic thought, religious thought, Sufism and comparative religion. Among his remarkable works are *Dirāsah fī al-Firāq wa al-‘Aqā’id al-Islāmiyyah*,¹ *al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyyah: Dirāsah wa Naqd*,² *al-Yahūdiyyah*,³ and *The Religious Thought and the Challenges of Modernity*.⁴

General Overview of Modernity

The ideal of modernity consists of two distinctive aspects. The first is technical, relating to production and organization skills and techniques. The other aspect of modernity is normative, associated with the values and beliefs of a specific culture⁵. Irfan in his discussion focused on the second aspect of modernity. He explained about the intellectual challenges of modernity and its repercussions on traditional thought in general. Both the Western and the Muslim world have had to deal with the challenges posed by modernity.

There are three main qualitative characteristics of modernity mentioned by Irfan, namely, man is the measure of all things, reason is

¹ Irfan Abdul Fattah, *Dirāsah fī al-Firāq wa al-‘Aqā’id al-Islāmiyyah* (Amman: Dār al Bashīr). The book was published in various editions; the first edition in 1968, the second edition in 1977, and the third edition in 1984. It has also been translated to Turkish language.

² Ibid, *al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyyah: Dirāsah wa Naqd* (Bayrūt: Muassasah al Risālah, 1984).

³ Ibid, *al-Yahūdiyyah* (Ammān: Dar ‘Ammar li al Nashr wa al Tawzī’, 2001)

⁴ Ibid, *The Religious Thought and the Challenges of Modernity (Al-Fikr al-Dīnī fī Muwājahat Taḥādiyyāt al-Ḥadāthah)* (Research Center, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia, 2002).

⁵ Louay Safi, *The Challenge of Modernity: The Quest for Authenticity in the Arab World* (Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America, 1994), p. 12.

the measure of all things, and scientism is the measure of all things.¹ Irfan highlighted few philosophical trends of modernity which reflect those qualitative characteristics. One of them is scientism which is the belief that scientific methods and instruments alone are capable of providing an accurate description of truth and reality. It regards science as the only reliable source of knowledge, thereby, negating intuition, spiritual insight and Divine Revelation. It also avoids dealing with metaphysical, philosophical, and religious claims, as the truths they proclaim cannot be comprehended by the scientific method.²

Scientism became dominant in the eighteenth century with the rise of Newtonian description of the universe. This description posed a serious challenge to religion because it professed to describe universal laws that govern the cosmos solely by scientific methods, such as, through mathematical principles. The religious claims that the heavenly bodies obeyed the Will of God became unpopular. Irfan quoted the views of Max Weber that

‘both the natural and the human world came to be regarded as void of any sacred values, there are in principle no mysterious forces that come to play, but rather one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.’³

Scientism believed that science has no limitation and it knows or will know all the answers. It means that scientific knowledge is unlimited where there is no question whose answer is in principle unattainable by science. Scientism therefore, unjustifiably extends the authority of science beyond its proper limits. It assumes that science is the only source of genuine knowledge about the world,⁴ and it can solve all of the problems of humankind.

The other philosophical trend of modernity discussed by Irfan is positivism as a methodology and a human made system.⁵ It is a philosophical system that holds that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that such knowledge is strictly based on strict

¹ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p. ii.

² Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science* (London and New York: Routledge Publications, 1991), p. 1.

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p. 23.

⁴ See Tom Sorell, *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science*, p. 7. See also John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1980* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), p. 95.

⁵ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p. 7.

adherence to the testimony of observation and experience, interpreted through reason and logic. Positivism was developed in the mid-19th century¹ by the French sociologist Auguste Comte (1798-1857).² He claimed that scientific method as an absolute and true method of acquiring knowledge and truth.

Another category of philosophical trend of modernity highlighted by Irfan is European enlightenment³ which advocated the supremacy of human reason as a means to establish knowledge. Anything which cannot be understood by rational knowledge was defied as meaningless or superstitious.⁴ John Locke (1632- 1704) is considered generally as the founder of Enlightenment movement in philosophy. Modernity clearly presents its materialistic worldview independent of Divine guidance or Revelation⁵. Having devoid of Divine Revelation, man himself became the center point of measurement where there is nothing higher than human reason. Reason supersedes Revelation in any argumentation.

¹ See Eric Vogelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), p. 3.

² Comte was born in Montpellier, France. Although his family was ardent Catholic, he at the age of fourteen, announced that he had ceased believing in God. During the years 1814-1816, he studied at the Ecole Polytechnique, a school whose approach to science was focused on practical, technical applications. While he was there, his intense study of the work of famous scientist inspired his lifelong devotion to scientific knowledge. Beginning in 1817, Comte served for seven years as the secretary to Saint Simon., the noted socialist. During the years 1830-1842, Comte published his major works, the six volumes Course in Positive Philosophy, which he developed from a series of lectures he gave on his philosophical ideas that was attended by a number of prominent scientists. It set out a vision of human knowledge and human society built on nothing, but observable scientific facts. William F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical to Philosophy* (London: Wadsworth Group, 2002), pp. 434-435. For interesting biography of Auguste Comte, refer to Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Comte's idea on positivism is also known as 'The Law of Three Stages'. Each branch of knowledge passes in turn through those three different theological stages; the theological or fictitious, the metaphysical or abstract, and the scientific or positive. The first is necessary point of departure, the second merely transitional, and the third is fixed and final. C.L Ten (edit), the *Nineteenth Century: Routledge History of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge Publication, 1994), vol. 7, p. 152. The comprehensive explanation on Comte's positivism can be referred to Gertrud Lenzer (edit), *Auguste Comte and Positivism: The Essential Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p. 9.

⁴ Ibid, pp.11-12.

⁵ Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1994), p. 98.

Truth or reality is only possible to be perceived empirically through human reason. When the truth or reality has been reduced to the material or profane level, human nature also has been reduced to only its physical and psychological aspects, thereby, stripping man of his divine and sacred potential. Therefore, modernity is the loss of the sense of sacred.¹

Modernity, according to Irfan, is also associated with extreme subjectivism and excessive individualism.² Subjectivism is the doctrine that knowledge is merely subjective and that there is no external or objective truth. It is the belief that reality is not a firm absolute, but a fluid, indeterminate realm which can be altered, in whole or in part, by the consciousness of the perceiver. i.e by his feelings, wishes or whims. Meanwhile, relativism means that points of view have no absolute truth or reality, having only relative, subjective value according to differences in perception and consideration.

Another philosophical trend of modernity is the implementation of the theory of evolution. It was founded by Charles Darwin (1809-1882). In his theory of evolution, he claimed that all living things have evolved by natural processes from pre-existing forms. The appearance of various species and the historical development of the universe is solely the result of a gradual evolution from within that space-temporal material matrix which existed at the origin of the physical cosmos without the intrusion of any transcendental causes.³ This theory was applied not only in natural sciences but also in human sciences as well i. e anthropology, sociology or psychology. All realms of life should take its essential lessons from the findings of science. This obviously has considerable effects on the way one shapes his life. For example, he will believe and act only on those things, which are in line with scientific conclusions. Irfan highlighted that this theory was opposed to the Quranic teachings that all species are created by Allah, and that the origin of man is not some prehistoric animal, but the divinely created primordial man who is

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 4.

² Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.12.

³ The original exposition of the theory of evolution can be found in Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (London: John Murray, 1959). The new edition about the theory is well presented by G.G Simpson, *The Major Features of Evolution* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1955), and *The Meaning of Evolution: A Study of the History of Life and its Significance for Man* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1966). See also Edward Craig (edit), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3, p. 795.

called Adam. This theory, according to Irfan, destroys the spiritual meaning and sense of sacredness of Allah's creation. In addition, it destroys the awareness of the presence of Allah as the Creator and Sustainer of all living forms. Most importantly, the theory of evolution has separated science from religion and allows man to study the world of nature with no religious sense.

In addition, Irfan discussed the perception toward religion perceived by modern Western intellectuals. Religion, in general, is the product of socio-historical situations. It is a reflection of different social setting and historical perspectives.¹ For example, Karl Marx (1818-1883)² saw religion as merely a reflection from the material world and derived from the hopes of human beings. He criticized religion as a tool in the hands of the ruling class from keeping the masses under control. Religion was just to pacify humans, and reconcile them to the oppression that they suffered under capitalist society. His famous quotation is 'religion is opium of the masses.'³ For Marx, religion seemed to promise people with illusionary happiness. Therefore, the abolition of religion as the illusionary happiness of the people is required for their true happiness. Apart from assuming religion as the product and a reflection of social historical situation, modernity also regards religion is entirely unscientific worldview. Sigmund Freud,⁴ for example, claimed that religious ideas are only the outcome of psychological process.⁵ An impotent man creates god for himself like a helpless child seeks comfort

¹ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.18.

² Karl Marx was born in 5th May 1818 in Germany. He was the father of Communism. He was a philosopher, political thinker, and economist, and one of the most influential thinkers of the West. Marx spent much of his life time in England studying contemporary society and actively working for revolution. In 1848 Marx published his famous work *The Communist Manifesto* together with his friend Friedrich Engels. He also published the first volume of *Das Kapital* in 1867.

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.14.

⁴ Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis. He was born in Freiberg, Moravia. When he was three years old, his family moved to Vienna, and in 1873 Freud entered the University of Vienna, where he studied medicine. He specialized in neurology and contributed to the field valuable laboratory research, which was published in 1885 and 1886. He also published several clinical studies. Under the influence of some of his friends, Freud turned his attention to the psychological aspects of neurology. See Paul Edward (edit), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3 & 4, p. 249. The main writing is *The Future of Illusion*.

⁵ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.17. For further understanding, refer to Sigmund Freud, *The Future of Illusion* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1961).

in the parent.¹ The origin of religion, in this sense, is a form of wish fulfillment of mankind. For Freud, religion is both illusion and error; an illusion because it is a man's wish fulfillment and error because religious truths cannot be independently established on rational and scientific grounds.²

Last but not least, Irfan highlighted about the philosophical trend of modernity in the method of the study of scriptures. It is mainly concerned with the historical and human interpretations of scriptures. The interpretation of scripture, according to Irfan, was mainly a product of changing historical influences. This method was known as socio-historical textual criticism. It denounces and rejects the inerrancy of both the Old Testament and New Testament as divinely inspired revelations. Revelation is regarded as a human authored document; it is composite work from multiple sources and different periods.³

The combined effects of these philosophical trends have led to the development of a society that has lost faith in the existence of transcendent, metaphysical, and spiritual realities. As far as all of these orientations are concerned, concrete facts and physical phenomena are to be the sole subject of human inquiry. The concepts of God, soul, and the Hereafter are not part of the conceptual framework of modernity. Therefore, the ideological foundation of modernity is clearly separated from religion. Modernity has associated itself with the empirical and natural sciences, and developed various methods of thinking which often sought to replace the truths of religion. It has led to the emergence of a culture largely secular in character.

Major Religious Responses of Modernity

Irfan has classified three categories of religious responses to modernity each with its peculiarity and specified characteristics.

a) Absolute rejection of modernity.⁴

¹ See Hans Kung, Edward Quinn (Trans), *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), p. 128.

² Patrick Masterson, *Atheism and Alienation: A Study of the Philosophical Sources of Contemporary Atheism* (New York: Grill and MacMillan, n.d), p. 128.

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.18

⁴ The traditionalist ideas of the group can be best referred to the famous movement in Arabia in the eighteenth century which was known as Wahhabi movement. By accepting only the Qur'ān and the Sunnah as the material sources of religion, the Wahhabis inevitably resulted in almost absolute fundamentalists and literalists as far as

As far as Islamic thought is concerned, this group is represented by the anti-westernization or west-intoxication groups or those generally known as blind imitationists or ultra-traditionists.¹ The idea of absolute rejection of modernity has been proposed by some of the conservative or traditionalist Muslim thinkers. They denied all values of modernity and saw it as the root cause of modern troubles. In addition, they felt that an adaption of Islam to changing of modern society is *bid'ah* (deviation from Islamic tradition). Thus, they criticized all religious, legal, educational and social reforms in the light of modern knowledge as anti-Islamic. For them, any form of cooperation with the West or adaptation of its culture is betrayal and surrender. In this sense, they advocated a policy of cultural isolation. The basic orientation of this group was traditionalism, that is, it derives its inspiration and strength from a historically evolved tradition and in its intellectual attitude, and it always assumed a backward-looking stance. For the traditionalists, the past was the locus of the Golden Age.² Change is to be rejected, thus, they believed that human structures have not undergone any basic changes especially since the time of the Prophet (p.b.u.h), and there is no possibility of such a change in the future either. Irfan described this group as

“A traditional imitative stand, a forthright absolute rejection of Western modernity, affirming that what is worth knowing is in the accumulated and amalgamated historical traditional sciences. Therefore, knowledge of another sort, under auspices bore no value. It was an ideology which confiscates both the present and the future for the sake of the past.”³

In Judaism, this group is called Jewish orthodoxy or Orthodox Judaism.⁴ It followed a strict adherence to traditional Jewish law codes, and to classical Jewish theology resisting of any modification and reinterpretation. Irfan wrote;

the body of the Qur'ān is concerned. They even rejected *qiyās*, the analogical method of reasoning. The Wahhabi movement can be seen as prototype of fundamentalism that is part of the twentieth century Islamic experience.

¹ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al- Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.v.

² Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875-1914*, (United States: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p.6.

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Islamization: The Meaning, Purpose and Process of Islamization*, unpublished paper, p. 1

⁴ For further elaboration of the views of this group, refer to Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Modern Times: An Introduction and Reader* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), pp. 52-67.

“Jewish orthodoxy insists the inerrancy of the dual Torah as divinely revealed word of God, and resists vehemently any modification or reinterpretation or the mandates therein. The previous premise argues that Jew either accepts the Torah without if’s and but’s, or better to give up being a Jew, since, whatever is worth knowing is in the Torah; and knowledge of another sort, under other auspices bore no value, there are no avenues for meaningful and authentic spirituality for Jews outside orthodoxy, security unavailable elsewhere.”¹

Irfan further quoted the statement Jacob Neusner;

“The new is forbidden by Torah, change not only was not reform, it was the work of the devil inclination and self-hating tendencies and product of evil.”²

Meanwhile in Christianity, this position is called Catholicism and Evangelical fundamentalism. It is also called Orthodox theology. It attempted to repeat a traditional theology or version of Christianity and saw all reality in its own terms, with no recognition of the significance for it of other perspectives or of all that has happened in recent centuries.³ Irfan wrote;

“A stand represented in Christianity by Catholicism and Evangelical fundamentalism, who, in against to biblical critics confirm the ‘inerrancy’ of the Bible, and maintain that the Bible is non-other-than the voice of Him. Every book of it, every chapter of it, every verse of it, every word of it, every syllable of it, every letter of it, is the direct utterance of the Most High.”⁴

b) Absolute acceptance of modernity (An unconditional, absolute and comprehensive assimilation of modernity)

Irfan highlighted that this group has urged a comprehensive assimilation in the Western culture or the spirit of modernity. According to Irfan, as far as Islamic thought is concerned it was the attitude of the assimilationists or the advocates of full- westernization without any

¹ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.iv.

² Ibid, p. 46.

³ Refer to F. Ford (editor), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1977), p.2.

⁴ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.iv.

reservation¹. The idea of absolute assimilation of modernity is best referred to as a group of extreme Muslim secularists who demanded on uncritical adoption of Western norms and methods in all areas of life and endeavored to prove the supremacy of modern Western thought. This group passed judgment upon Islam solely on the basis of those ideas imported from the West which they consciously and unconsciously assumed superior. This means that they derived their central assumptions from the Western thought. Although they never rejected the truth of Islam as a religion, their attraction to Western ideas of science and civilization prompted them to reject the civilization of Islam as the ultimate in human advancement and progress. Irfan defined this group as;

“A comprehensive assimilationist group, which is generally characterized by two qualifications; a) absolute surrender to Western civilization without reservation, criticism or examination. It represented a forthright assimilation or complete surrender to Occidentalism; b) this unconditional assimilative stand was usually coupled with a severe self-hate, belittling and depreciatory attitude to the inherited legacy which is combined as outlandish, outdated and anachronistic, insisting to relinquish what no longer possess which has been forgotten. The falsity and invalidity of this trend of thinking, i.e, total assimilation is recognizable in that it does not take into consideration the fact that nations have personalities, cultural continuity which distinguish one group from another and preserve inner integrity. Assimilation turned out to be in practice, psychologically unnatural, ethically damaging and practically useless.”²

Irfan referred the group of absolute acceptance of modernity in Judaism as Jewish reformism. It is also called Reform or Progressive Judaism. According to Irfan, this group rejected all proscriptions enjoined in both Torahs, written (OT) and the Talmud i.e the oral Torah, considering them as irrelevant to modern times and wholly anachronistic, medieval and outdated, hence must be reinterpreted and modified in accordance with the spirit of the time. This is to say that Torah has to be judged by the criteria of modernity.³ Therefore, it can

¹ Ibid, p.v.

² Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Islamization: The Meaning, Purpose and Process of Islamization*, unpublished paper, pp. 1-2.

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.v.

be affirmed that this group denied the Divine authorship of the Torah, declared that only the ethical biblical laws are binding and stated that the rest of *halakha* or Jewish law is no longer normative for the Jews.¹

In Christianity, Irfan associated the attitude of full and unquestionable surrender to modernity with Christian liberalism. It is also known as liberal theology who reinterprets the traditional dogma from a historical evolutionary perspective.² This group gave complete priority to some modern secular philosophy or worldview and Christianity in its own terms is only valid in so far as it fits in with that. For this group, parts of Christian faith and practice may be found true or acceptable, but the assessment was always made according to criteria which are external to faith and which claim superiority to it.³

c) Mediating Position between the two extremes (a syncretic or a symbiosis amalgamation)

Irfan mentioned that the exponents of this group, while accepting the worldview as it has been molded by modernity and scientific outlook, they tried vigorously a process of reconciliation between revelation and modernity, between received traditions and general culture of European enlightenment.⁴ According to Irfan, in Islamic modern thought it was a general attitude of the school of restoration and revivalism expounded by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani⁵ and his followers and in Malaysia by Kaum Muda group.⁶ The approach of this group is to show the compatibility of Islam with modernity, thus, asserted the need to revive the Muslim community. This can be done through a process of reinterpretation or

¹ See Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Modern Times: An Introduction and Reader*, pp. 73-93.

² Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.v.

³ See David F. Ford (editor), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, p. 2.

⁴ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.vi.

⁵ Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897) is the father of Islamic modernism. He believed that Muslim strength and survival could be achieved not by ignoring the West, but by direct, active engagement and confrontation. Muslims could claim and acknowledge the Western sources because those sources had also been part of their Islamic heritage as witnessed by the past contributions of Islamic civilization in philosophy, medicine, science, and mathematics. Therefore, al-Afghānī strongly recommended acquiring Western learning, technology and services as long as borrowing from the West was selective and served the basic needs and inspirations of the Muslim people. Refer to Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al Din al Afghani: A Political Biography* (Barkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 141.

⁶ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al- Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.vi.

reformulation of Islamic heritage and thought to accommodate the intellectual, educational, political, cultural, and social challenges of the West and modern life. This group wished to reinterpret Islamic thought in the light of modern knowledge and rebuild Muslim society accordingly to cope with the changing needs of time. It is in opinion that for living intellectual traditions, the task of reinterpretation, reform, and revival is necessary to make them relevant and sensitive to the changing circumstances. Irfan associated this group with Muslim revivalist who attempted to establish continuity between their Islamic heritage and modern change. On the one hand, they based their principle arguments on the Revelation and Islamic history, and identified themselves with their pre-modern Islamic revivalist predecessors. On the other hand, they applied selective values of modern Western thought and institutions. Therefore, not simply restoring the early Islamic practices, Muslim revivalists advocated an adaptation of Islam to modernity, and so, possessed an outlook toward both the past and the future. Irfan wrote;

“A revivalist renews, rediscovers the true condition of the faith, selects, out of a diverse past, that age and that moment at which the faith attained its perfect definition and embodiment. He turns not only back to a golden age of uncorrupted religion but also forward to a golden age in the future.”¹

According to Irfan, such a reconciliatory approach in Judaism was represented by Conservative Judaism which was launched by Samuel Hirsch's² (1815-1889) renowned motto 'Torah with the law of the Time.'³ This position regarded change to be inevitable historical fact which tradition should remain open to. The Conservative Judaism allowed changes, reinterpretations, and modifications in its religious forms or laws. It believed that the law of Torah and Talmud are of Divine origin, but at the same time it recognized the human and historical elements in them, which make change and development possible. Stressing the historical development of Judaism, Conservative

¹ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Qaḍāyā 'Asāsiyyah fī Adyān al-'Alam*, unpublsh paper, p. 8.

² Samuel Hirsch was a religious philosopher, rabbi, and a leading advocate of radical Reform Judaism. He promoted a radically liberal form of Judaism. He also contributed to the early volumes of *The Jewish Times* (1869-1878). His principle works were first used in Germany, among them *What is Judaism* (1838), *A Collection of Sermons* (1841), and *Religious Philosophy of the Jews* (1843)

³ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.vi.

Judaism argued that Jewish law and tradition or *halakha*, can, and at times must change. It is not static, rather has always developed in response to changing conditions.

Meanwhile, in Christianity, the mediating position is advocated by a group of theologians known as Christian neo-orthodoxy who confirmed the reconcilability or compatibility of faith and reason¹. This group argued that to meet the challenges of the modern world, the key concepts of faith have to be redefined and reinterpreted. Christian neo- imposed the approach of subjectivism on the study of Bible, and they reinterpreted it according to scientific knowledge and the historical-critical methods.

Conclusion

In his reaction to the challenges of modernity, Irfan seemed to emphasize on the role of religion in modern life. He stressed the need for reconstructing religious thought, and the need for Islam to deal with all the subjects that challenged it. He rejected the rigid and static views of traditional scholars and emphasized on a dynamic religious thought that kept in touch with modern knowledge. Religious thought, according to Irfan, is based on human product of thinking. It is an open avenue for drawing analogies and references to convergences, between the different systems evolved in world religions. He mentioned the barriers in religious thought which should be avoided, such as, the meaningless speech, preventing people from talking, and preventing people of confronting each other. Irfan claimed that the reconstruction of religious thought requires strong courage, and not to be afraid of differences. It can be done with an open minded and compromising with contradictions. Human beings in nature, according to Irfan, are always changing in minds and opinions. Therefore, they are at times close to the truth and at times far from the truth.

In his study, Irfan presented a synthetic approach in which he combined his thought with the classical traditional Islam and modern Western scientific and philosophical thought. Irfan successfully analyzed the philosophical trends of modernity. In his argument, he obviously referred to many views of modern Western thinkers and philosophers to show their weakness, defaults, and their contradiction with the principles of Islam, and at the same time, as a means of proving the validity of

¹ Irfan Abdul Hameed Fattah, *Al-Fikr al-Dīnī*, p.vi.

Islam. Therefore, Irfan did not reduce his approach in defense of Islam to only a one dimensional method, namely, Islamic traditional thought, but felt that the challenges of modernity needed to be answered intellectually. Since Irfan had an intimate knowledge of both modern Western philosophy and Islamic religious tradition, he had a tendency to differentiate between the positive and negative facets in each. For example, he criticized the rigidity of thinking in Islamic religious thought and the loss of sacredness of Western modernity. Therefore, the most important aspect of Irfan's mind was his critical approach towards both cultures. In this sense, Irfan's approach to modernity was in the same direction with the reformists' ideas of Afghani, Abduh and Iqbal. Their main concern is to free Islam from the rigidity of thinking and to show Islam as a religion adaptable to the demands of modern life. Among the similar point of views they shared are issues on the reconciliation between religion, science and reason as well as the application of *ijtihad* as the means to the intellectual development of Islamic thought.

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