Modernity, tradition and modernity in tradition in Muslim societies

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Guest Editor

In the 14th century, the North African Muslim political sociologist, Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), made a distinction between *badāwah*, desert nomadic life of simplicity, and *ḥaḍārah*, the life of sedentary urban civilization. He stressed the inevitable transition from *badāwah* to *ḥaḍārah* with the consequent transformation of society and human habit (Dawood, 1969). This distinction is maintained in contemporary social and political discourse with varying terms and concepts including tradition and modernity. A good deal of research in the area of modernization dealt with identifying qualities, traits and characteristics assumed to belong to "modern societies" in contrast to qualities found in "traditional societies." Tradition, to Edward Shils (1981, p.12), "is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present." It includes material objects, beliefs, images, practices and institutions. "It is the *traditum*, that has been and is being handed down or transmitted. It is something which was created, was performed or believed in the past, or which is believed to have existed or to have been performed or believed in the past" (Shils,1981, p.13).

Traditional society is characterized by the predominance of ascriptive, particularistic, diffuse patterns, a relatively simple occupational differentiation, a deferential stratification system and a limited spatial mobility (Sutton, 1963, p.71). In contrast, the term "modern" refers to the era that began politically with the French Revolution and economically with the British Industrial Revolution. This has led many social scientists to identify modernity with the West and to refer to modernization as Westernization. To David Smith

and Alex Inkeles (1966, p.353), "Modern generally means a national state characterized by a complex of traits including urbanization, extensive mechanization, high rate of social mobility and the like." Talcott Parsons (1974, pp.353-56) considered a political system based upon a Western model of democracy as compatible with modernity. Implied in the modernization literature is the belief that traditional societies have to change their social and cultural systems to join the modern. Change, according to Nisbet (1969, pp.115-6), is natural, necessary, continuous, directional and immanent. The change from traditional to modern has been described as the process of "social mobilization" which is defined by Karl Deutsch (1961, p.494) as "the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for new patterns of socialization and behaviour." Thus, social mobilization entails breaking away from the old patterns of belief and behaviour to be followed by induction into new and relatively stable patterns (Deutsch, 1961, p.494). Clearly, modernity and tradition are seen as mutually exclusive polar opposites.

Weaknesses in the modernization framework

Despite the popularity of the modernization framework, it has received a fair amount of criticism, two of which require reiteration. A major flaw in the modernization framework is the claim that modern Western values and practices are the basis for modernizing traditional societies and assisting them to become self-sustaining. As Ali Mazrui (1968) points out, the modernization thesis is a product of Western philosophy and hence could not escape a Western cultural bias. Traditional societies were characterized as exotic or different and also as reflecting lower stages of evolutionary advancement. The traditional societies must look to the Western model of modernity and pattern their society like the West in order to progress and become modern. This idea of development in the image of the West was frequently taken by American social scientists and policy-makers to justify their intervention in the politics of developing areas. To be sure, modernization has given the poor an entitlement to progress but it has been used as an instrument for sometimes brutal forms of intervention.

A related shortcoming of the modernization framework is the assumption that modernity and tradition are mutually exclusive polar opposites. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph in *The modernity of tradition* argue that the idea of modernity and tradition being in contradiction to each other "rests on misdiagnosis of tradition as it is found in traditional societies, a misunderstanding of modernity as it is found in modern societies, and a misapprehension of the relationship between them" (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967, p.3). Tradition and modernity need not be polar opposites. A society will contain both traditional and modern elements, and individuals may operate with remarkable effectiveness in two discrete worlds of experience through a process of compartmentalization. A Malay businessman, for instance, may have the required "modern" entrepreneurial attitudes but in his or her home setting, operate according to the "traditional" mode of behaviour. Modernity, in such a case, does not replace tradition but is added to it. To Appelbaum (1998, p.92), a contrast between tradition and modernity is a false dichotomy. Tradition and modernity intermingle and affect each other.

Modernity in Muslim countries: The imitators

The Muslim world has been battling with modernity since the 19th century. Muslim encounter with the West as the source of modernity has its roots, among others, in colonial enterprise, in Muslim student's immigration to the West for the acquisition of modern knowledge, in wider and more effective means of communication, and faster and better means of transportation. The westernized Muslim political elites eager to develop their backward countries adopted what AbuSulayman (1993, pp.7-17) calls "the imitative foreign solution" by which he meant attempts at solving problems besetting the country as a result of following the "cultural (secular and materialist) experience of the contemporary West" (AbuSulayman, 1993, p.3). These elites acquired Western education and culture, and believed that modernization requires Westernization. Efforts were directed at catching up with the West and at competing with it according to its own terms. The Turkish Ottoman empire under Salim III imitated Europe to halt their declining position by importing foreign technical knowledge, establishing military academy for training officers along Western lines, killing the traditional military corps—the Janissaries—

for resisting modernization, and by sending a large number of students to Europe to acquire Western education.

The Westernization of Turkey was pursued more vigorously by General Mustafa Kamal Ataturk who ended the Ottoman sultanate and constitutionally abolished the title of the Caliphate in 1924. Mustafa Kamal and his military clique analyzed the institutions and constitutions of France, Sweden, Italy, and Switzerland and adapted them for use in the Turkish nation. They abolished all Islamic laws, adopted secularism as the state policy, replaced the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, and even banned religion-based clothing such as the veil and turban, making Western suits with neckties along with Western style hats compulsory. "Still, all that this imitation accomplished was the further weakening of the Turkish state and its eventual complete domination by the Western powers" (AbuSulayman, 1993, p.9). To this day, Turkey remains the "sick man of Europe."

Other Muslim states which imitated the West did not fare any better. AbuSulayman (1993, p.10) summarizes this as follows:

> If we look closely at the Egyptian experience from the time of Muhammad Ali, from the outset of the nineteenth century AC/thirteenth century AH until the present time, and if we look at the experiences of Islamic countries in Arabia, Asia, and Africa, we will find nothing new to add to the experience of Turkey and its painful results. Over the centuries, the Islamic world has remained, owing to its adherence to the principle of imitating whatever is foreign, a sick and fractured entity. And it remains so during a time when the civilizational gulf separating it from the developed nations continues to increase.

The failure of the imitators in modernizing the state they led is evident in the political decay, in the emergence of authoritarianism, patrimonialism, corruption, and in the dissatisfaction with the project of modernization.

Traditionalists in the Muslim world

The imitators of modernization have been castigated by many Muslim scholars, especially by the traditionally-trained scholars, the *'ulamā'*.

Some of the imitators have even been declared to be outside the pale of Islam. Initially, the traditionalists' rejection of modernization stemmed from the colonialist's insistence on using English as the official language in the colony, and prescribing Western dress code and cuisine. Even the nationalist, Westernized elites were unhappy with the colonial imposition of their language on the natives. Hence, in the post-colonial era, the elites attempted to replace the imperial language with indigenous language. Thus, for instance, Arabic replaced French in North Africa and Urdu supplanted English in Pakistan.

The initial traditionalists' hatred of the West gradually extended to everything including science and technology, industrialization, urbanization, and diverse occupational structures. Most of the efforts of the traditionalists have been spent in denouncing modernity which is characterized as an insidious form of worldliness denying God and the hereafter. They perceived secularism as atheistic, negative and alien and considered rationalism and individualism as threatening the faith of the Muslim. Hence, they denounced modernity, on the one hand, and took refuge literally within the confines of the mosque, on the other. They established religious institutions where they studied and taught religious texts using classical Arabic as the medium of instruction. They refused to rely upon a rational and analytical approach (*ijtihād*) to seek solutions to problems confronting the Muslims on the basis of evidence (*dalīl*) found in the authentic sources of Islam arguing that the "door of *ijtihād*" was closed. According to AbuSulayman (1993, p.27), "...*ijtihād* never had a door to close. Rather, 'closing the door' was a metaphor for the stagnation of thought." The consequence of "closing the door" was the emergence and persistence of what is known as *taqlīd*, i.e., unquestioning obedience to the decisions arrived at by religious authorities in the past. It may be argued that religious scholars were behaving with the noble intention of protecting and preserving the *Sharī'ah* from "misguided" elements that may destroy the fabric of the faith. However, the resistance to change, which *ijtihād* implies, may as well be due to the fear of losing the leadership role traditional institutions bestowed upon the *'ulamā'*.

The religious scholars were living in the past and insisted literally on returning to the golden age of Islam without considering the

changes that have taken place in the world. They believed that Islam's glory depended upon following the revealed truth as practiced in the past. They encouraged literalism, *taqlīd*, and superstition without feeling the need to update traditional institutions and plan policies for development of the Muslims. The classic example of such a mentality, in recent times, was provided by the Taliban who, after having fought valiantly against the Soviet Union and subsequently other powers, came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. Leaders of the Taliban came from a very traditionalist social stratum and did not enjoy support from any established institutions in the Muslim world.

The Taliban, led by Mullah Umar, believed that they were following *Sharī'ah* in letter and spirit. The leader assumed the traditional title of *Amīr al-Mu'minīn* (Commander of the Faithful) and all residents of Afghanistan were required to obey the Emirate and the orders of the *Amīr*. They ruled brutally and hanged many former rulers in public; stoned, caned and hanged to death men and women on charges of adultery and other crimes, and disallowed fully-covered women from appearing in public. At a time when women in the Muslim world filled positions as doctors, teachers and even the chief executive of states, women in Afghanistan were beaten for approaching a pharmacy to buy medicine for their sick children. They clamped down on knowledge and let ignorance rule. Their policies violated many of the basic principles of human rights enshrined in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah. The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 by the US led forces, avowedly to protect American and allied interests, brought an end to the Taliban rule.

The Muslim world: Modernity in tradition

The Taliban and the traditionalists have been accused of distorting the noble truth of Islam. They, in turn, accuse the modernists of surrendering Islam to the West. They have been carrying on a rancorous war of words against each other without displaying an understanding of either Islam or modernity. Consequently, the Islamic Fiqh Council of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) recommended that "on the question of Islam vis-à-vis modernism … the OIC should form a committee of Muslim intellectuals who would tackle the phenomenon of modernism and its effects and study it both scientifically and objectively" (Islahi, 1999, p.19).

However, before the OIC's call, a new Islamic discourse had emerged which assumed a definite form in the 1960s, providing an Islamic answer to the challenges posed by modernization. Interestingly, Western discourse on modernity and its critics also crystallized in the mid-sixties. Many studies appeared that pointed out the defects of the modern secular project and the colonial pillage of the lands belonging to the peoples of Asia and Africa. Muslim reformists with a critical bent of mind found many positive aspects in Western modernity. Sheikh Muhammad Abduh found Islam in the West but no Muslims, but in the Arab world, he countenanced many Muslims but no Islam. In other words, non-Muslims manifested many of the ideals of Islam in their conduct, unlike many Muslims whose conduct was non-Islamic.

The issue for the new Islamic discourse was basically to find an answer to the question of the ways to return to the sources of Islamic belief and civilization in order to generate a renaissance from within. Those involved in the new Islamic discourse aimed at opening the door of creative thinking regarding both the modem Western worldview and the Islamic religious and cultural values. They reject the presumed centrality and universalism of the West; its imperialism; and the practices of spoilage, pillage and repression—characteristics of colonialism and neo-colonialism. They understand Western philosophy, have acquired computer skills, apply various management theories, and live within the broad horizons opened up by Western modernity. They know the advantages of this modernity just as they know its anti-humanist implications. They explain fundamentals of Islam with emphasis on such ideals as Islamic brotherhood, tolerance, and social justice. Their explanation aims at bringing about the dynamic character of Islam in the context of the intellectual and scientific progress of the modern world. (Husain, 1995, p.95).

Muslim reformers such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal admired the role of reason and science as sources of Western progress and dominance, yet they did question the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of science and technology. Iqbal demonstrated that Islamic conceptions of God, time and space are compatible with modern Western conceptions as found in the writings of Hegel, Fichte, Bergson and Nietzsche. Later

revivalists such as Hassan al-Bannā, Sayyid Quṭb and Sayyid Mawdūdī were much more critical of modern ontological and epistemological presuppositions. Mawdudi's discussion on the sovereignty of God as opposed to the liberal notion of popular sovereignty is in fact a critique of an ontology that excluded Transcendence in the political and moral realms. His idea of distinguishing democracy and *shūrā* (consultation) is an attempt at incorporating democratic procedures within the Islamic value system. Similarly, Quṭb's denunciation of modernity as an Age of *Jāhiliyyah*, an Age of Ignorance, is a critique of modernity's implied repudiation of the authority of metaphysical truths.

Another serious critique of modernity came from what is popularly known as the Islamization of Knowledge (*Islāmiyyat al-ma'rifah* in Arabic) project. This movement, popularized by Ismail R. al-Faruqi, aims at integrating Islamic and modern knowledge, thus renewing the link between knowledge and values. For al-Faruqi, it means a systematic reorientation and restructuring of the entire field of human knowledge in accordance with a new set of criteria and categories squarely based on the Islamic worldview. According to al Faruqi "to recast knowledge as Islam relates to it, is to Islamize it" (Al-Faruqi, 1982, p.15) This means

> … To redefine, and reorder the data, to rethink the reasoning and relating of the data, to reevaluate the conclusions, to re-project the goals and to do so in such a way as to make the disciplines enrich the vision and serve the cause of Islam (Al-Faruqi, 1982, p.15).

At institutional levels, a similar concern is evident. The International Islamic University Malaysia, for instance, presents its vision as integrating Islamic revealed knowledge and values in all academic disciplines and educational activities (Hassan, 2009). One of its missions is to "produce better quality intellectuals, professionals and scholars by integrating quality of faith (*īmān*), knowledge (*'ilm*) and good character (*akhlāq*) to serve as agents of comprehensive and balanced progress as well as sustainable development in Malaysia

and in the Muslim world" (Hassan, 2009, pp.19-20). Many other universities in the Muslim world are promoting the idea of approaching knowledge both from Western and Islamic perspectives.

At the societal level, too, attempts were made to tackle the phenomenon of modernism and its effects. They adopted a process of sifting, filtering and reconstruction as against wholesale rejection of modernity and its institutional manifestations. An Islamic spirit of renewal gained increasing visibility in the final quarter of the 20th century. Iran, under Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, adopted an egalitarian program of social justice. The constitution of the new Islamic Republic created a system that survived a series of major political crises, including a long and costly war with Iraq (1980-1988) and the death of Khomeini in 1989. Even in Turkey, where religion-based political parties are illegal, the Welfare Party, which advocated a greater formal Islamization of Turkish life, won more than 20 per cent of the vote in national elections in 1996, and its leader, Nejmettin Erbakan, served as Prime Minister until 1997. A similar programme is being pursued by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who established the Islamic-leaning Justice and Development Party, and eventually became the Prime Minister in 2003. He, among others, introduced democratic reforms and market liberalization policies which were not un-Islamic or anti-Islamic; reduced the powers of the 1991 Anti-Terror Law which had constrained Turkey's democratization; and abolished many restrictions on freedom of speech and the press. In Malaysia, the successive government leaders have been engaged in actively and creatively attempting to make modernity fit within the framework of Islam. The Constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion of the country and as a fundamental parameter for the legal definition of a Malay. The Malaysian government's "Vision 2020" seeks to follow the economic successes of Western and Eastern societal modernization and make Malaysia a modern nation by 2020 but the project did temper the excesses of individualism.

The governments in the Muslim world have been implementing many policies and programmes that are considered modern as well

as *Sharī'ah*-compliant. The most visible symbol of such integration is found in the world of banking and finance. It is estimated that there are around 500 financial institutions, in about 70 countries, that operate according to a modern Islamic system. Islamic banking and finance is also highly visible in Malaysia, Indonesia and other parts of Asia. Malaysia is recognized by many to be an Islamic financial hub at least for the Muslim World.

Islam, modernity and tradition in the *Intellectual Discourse*

This brief survey of attitudes and approaches to tradition and modernity is designed to illustrate both the contemporary nature and the vitality of the debate, and is very well-represented by the contributions included in the special issue of the *Intellectual Discourse*. Khoo Kay Kim carried out a historical analysis of how the traditional Malay society over time changed and absorbed some of the values espoused by modernization. Malay society produced vernacular elites who did not consider modernity and tradition as mutually exclusive polar opposites. They, therefore, acquired English education and aspired to be modern without abandoning their traditional ways of looking at and doing things. Kerstin Steiner analyses the discourse between tradition and modernity in Islamic religious education in Singapore and shows how the traditional religious institution is being transformed. Based on documentary study, Steiner shows how the government of Singapore is trying to modernize the *madrasah* system through bureaucratic control, curricular reforms and through a quality control framework for teachers. These efforts were aimed at uplifting the conditions of Muslims so that they could enjoy the benefits of the "Singaporean dream" of a better way of living. *Madrasah* nevertheless continue to provide "religious" education.

The two papers that follow explain how scholars in Egypt responded to modernity and how the tradition survives in a society trying to be modern. Haggag Ali's comparative philosophical discourse aims at showing how a Muslim Arab-Egyptian intellectual Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008) adapted Western self-critical discourse to Islamize modernity. Ali analyzes Elmessiri's construction of the duality of immanence (Western modernity) and transcendence (Islamic monotheism) which was based upon the

critiques introduced by Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) and Zygmunt Bauman (1925-). Elmessiri uncovered the dominance of immanence in Western modernity in order to contrast it with Islamic monotheism. He repudiated the dominance of positivist epistemology and modern ideologies that deify man and attempt to put an end to History. He established a relationship between the secular modern and Gnosticism, and consequently rendered modernity as a form of heresy inconsistent with the worldview of Islam. Elmessiri, however, did not go beyond the critique and refrained from providing an alternative. Jacquelene Brinton studies the survival of tradition in a society becoming modern. Modernity in Egypt led to the curtailment of the functions of the *'ulamā'* and the downgrading of their responsibilities as guardians of the law. These developments, during the modern era, have threatened the authority of the *'ulamā'* those trained in religious sciences. The *'ulamā'* nevertheless retained their status by adapting their past discursive forms and by using the modern media. Based upon interviews and textual analysis of the sermons, her study found that the *'ulamā'* in Egypt use the medium of preaching as a means of instructing the public. She uses the case of Muhammad Mitwalli Sha'rāwī (1911-1998) of Egypt to prove her point. Sha'rāwī, the most popular preacher and religious guide, remained steeped in the Islamic hermeneutical tradition yet exercised effective religious authority in a modern context. Called "the father of Islamic television preaching", Sha'rāwī used to instruct millions of viewers on how to merge their particular circumstances with Islamic belief and practice. He included contemporary issues and language into his articulation to increase religious adherence. He also used metaphors to make theological knowledge relevant to the daily lives of the people. Through these mechanisms, Sha'rāwī stressed the importance of theological knowledge vis-à-vis secular science, substantiated *'ulamā'* necessity and displayed modern *'ulamā'* authority.

The paper by Isiaka Abiodun Adams is an illustration of how tradition is absorbed by modernity. Muslims living in secular societies, especially in the West, face the problem of finding food, especially meat from animals slaughtered following Islamic regulations. Islamic prescriptions for eatable meat (*ḥalāl* meat) are not included in the Western dietary practice which is based exclusively on nutritional and hygiene considerations. Faced with

the resurgence and reawakening in religious identity and the demand for ritually slaughtered meat, many Western as well as Muslim countries have adopted the *ḥalāl* product labelling regulation. These regulations safeguard the Islamic cultural and religious prescriptions for slaughtering but also ensure food hygiene and safety and good working conditions. In this way, modernity accommodates certain aspects of tradition. The *ḥalāl* regime is definitely facing challenges from many quarters but the demand for *ḥalāl* food is on the rise. Malaysia is the pioneer and the hub of *ḥalāl* food regulation, in terms of policies, institutions and research activities which have been globally acknowledged. In many countries, *ḥalāl* food labelling is not debated because the norm has largely been institutionalized.

In addition to the five full-length articles, the special issue of the *Intellectual Discourse* contains two short notes. Nasya Bahfen analyzes the Islamic worldview and compares it with ideals and practices of modernity and found that, barring few elements, Islamic teachings and practices are not necessarily incompatible with modernity. A similar conclusion is arrived at by Samiul Hasan, who analyzes some basic Islamic socio-economic and political principles under three headings—power, property and philanthropy—and found that Islamic tradition has embedded principles and concepts which are similar to those considered "modern" by many in contemporary times.

Conclusion

Many scholars argue that Islam is incompatible with modernity and hence many in the West insist on theory of clash of civilizations. Tradition and modernity, as argued by contributors to this special issue, need not be looked upon as two polar opposites. Islam and modernity do not clash. Muslims are cultivating sciences, working in factories and developing advanced weapons. Turkey is a modern state. Malaysia is a modern parliamentary democracy. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is a nuclear power while the Islamic Republic of Iran is pursuing a powerful nuclear programme. Iraq was a modern state before the U.S.-led coalition forces bombed the country into the Stone Age in 2001. The *Sharīʿah* is not opposed to mass education, rapid communication and increased urbanization. Tradition has accommodated many modern elements and modernity has absorbed

some of the principles dear to Muslims. Tradition is in the process of transformation and modernity is not averse to accommodating tradition. Evidently, there is modernity in tradition and vice versa; they interact and affect each other.

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