

Modernity in the discourse of Abdelwahab Elmessiri

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Abstract: Adapting Western self-critical discourse, the Arab Egyptian intellectual Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008) attempted to Islamize modernity; however, he did this ironically via Western critique itself. This paper follows a comparative approach to show how Elmessiri's construction of the duality of immanence (Western modernity) and transcendence (Islamic monotheism) is based on the critiques introduced by Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) and Zygmunt Bauman (1925-). However, while Bauman saw the role of critical theory as the modest comment on human experience, Elmessiri and Voegelin uncovered the dominance of immanence in Western modernity so as to contrast it with Islamic monotheism and the Christian humanistic legacy, respectively. The critiques introduced by Elmessiri and Voegelin reach their climax when modernity is compared to a form of heretical Gnosticism.

Keywords: Enlightenment, modernity, immanence, transcendence, Gnosticism

***Abstrak:** Dengan mengadaptasikan wacana kritikan sendiri Barat, cendekiawan Mesir Arab Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008) berusaha untuk mengislamkan pemodenan; namun, ironisnya, beliau melakukan ini melalui kritikan Barat itu sendiri. Kertas kerja ini mengikuti pendekatan perbandingan untuk menunjukkan bagaimana Elmessiri membina imanensi berkembar (pemodenan Barat) dan transendensi (monoteisme Islam) berdasarkan kritikan yang diutarakan oleh Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) dan Zygmunt Bauman (1925-). Manakala Bauman melihat peranan teori kritis sebagai komentar sederhana tentang pengalaman manusia, Elmessiri dan*

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Voegelin mendedahkan dominasi imanensi dalam permodenan Barat untuk membezakannya dengan monoteisme Islam dan legasi kemanusiaan Kristian. Kritik yang diutarakan oleh Elmessiri dan Voegelin mencapai klimaks apabila permodenan mereka dibandingkan dengan bentuk Gnostisisme sesat.

Kata kunci: kesedaran, pemodenan, imanensi, transendensi, Gnostisisme

In earlier Arab discourse, modernity is usually equated with the lofty ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly the promise of nature, reason and progress to establish a rational and progressive system. This perspective changed to a large extent after the Second World War with the development of a very sophisticated Western self-scrutiny discourse, heightened by the works of the Frankfurt school. In his attempt to deconstruct the Arab perception of modernity, the Arab-Egyptian intellectual Abdelwahab Elmessiri (1938-2008) benefited from this legacy and traced the reversals of idealism and materialism, of transcendentalism and immanentism in Western discourse. Elmessiri's opposition between immanence (the essence of the secular modern) and transcendence (usually interpreted as the Islamic worldview), has led many scholars to identify him as one of the proponents of a new Islamic discourse. Elmessiri's awareness of the decline of leftist movements and the rise of political Islam enabled him to envisage the possibility of a break with modernity. This paper argues that Elmessiri's critique of modernity can be seen as an attempt to Islamize modernity but, ironically, he does so via Western critique itself, especially the construction of the duality of immanence and transcendence. To support this argument, a comparative approach will be employed and Elmessiri's discourse will be discussed in reference to the critiques introduced by the German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-1985), who conceived modernity as a form of immanentism or secular Gnosticism, and the Polish-born British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1925-), who saw modernity as the transformation of metaphysical transcendence into secular transgression.

Elmessiri's sojourn in the United States during two separate periods (1963-69/1975-79) led him to discover that American society in the mid-1960s was extremely conservative but that the rise of the free love movement gave rise to an unparalleled disintegration

(Elmessiri, 2005). This period signalled the beginning of the celebration of the body rather than such logocentric categories as Reason, Nature, and Science (Elmessiri, 2003a). It also witnessed the eclipse of the very problems of modernity, self and history, celebrating instead the world of structuralism, a world that simply repudiates the notions of time and selfhood, or embracing a mystique of post-modernism, which foregrounds expressiveness, play and sexuality (Berman, 1982). Elmessiri conceives of the celebration of sexuality as a radical turning point in which sensual pleasure was no longer the monopoly of a particular group or class and it became available to all in the name of the "democratization of hedonism" (Elmessiri, 2003a). The obsession with pleasure has infiltrated people's dreams, shaped their images of themselves, and controlled the very direction of their libidos (Elmessiri, 1996). It is true that Christianity persisted in the consciousness of Western man and provided him with the ethics necessary to manage his personal and social life but culture industry and state security have controlled man's dreams and even the "direction of his libido" (Esposito, 2000).

In an Arab Islamic context, the story was different. The 1970s witnessed the rise of political Islam which managed, after the Arab defeat by Israel in 1967, to fill in the vacuum left by the leftist movements and their rhetoric of technological progress. The period from 1970 to 1982 can be seen as the charismatic period of political Islam which was embraced as a vehicle of popular contestation and national liberation by prominent Egyptian leftists, including Hassan Hanafi, Tariq al Bishri and Adel Hussien (Zubaida, 2000). Elmessiri himself expressed a deep sense of belonging to this Arab and Islamic intellectual trend that attempted to contribute to human civilization, taking into account the cultural and historical specificity of the Arab and Islamic worldview. Other prominent names associated with this trend are Anwar Abdel Malek and Galal Amin (Elmessiri, 2001).

This identification is very crucial not only to the development of Elmessiri's critique of the secular modern but also to his reception in the Arab world. It is true that his former identification with Marxism and its worldview provided him with a big arsenal of critical terminology but the persistence of traditional ontology in Islamic thought helped establish a dualistic opposition between immanence (Western modern worldview) and transcendence (Islamic worldview).

This opposition was crystallized only in the 1990s when Elmessiri perfected the paradigm of “immanentism,” one which could explain the problem with and consequences of all modern ideologies, including capitalism, Marxism, communism, Social Nationalism and even Zionism. Only then he set immanentism in contrast with Islam, which he saw as expressing the purest and loftiest form of monotheism and transcendence (Elmessiri, 2005). In his critique of modernity, Elmessiri set the “epistemologically defined ontology” of the post-Renaissance Western worldview against the “ontologically determined epistemology” of the Islamic principles of *tawhīd* and *tanzīh*. The Islamic monotheistic framework makes epistemology dependent on ontology, whereas the secularization of knowledge makes ontology dependent on epistemology and leads, in the final analysis, to an atmosphere dominated by “the relativity of ontology” and the “relativity of ontological transcendence” (Davutoğlu, 1994).

Elmessiri was aware of his ideological, religious and cultural bias as a former Marxist and an Arab Egyptian Muslim living in a region dominated by Western imperial legacy and Israeli occupation. He expressed his astonishment at the fact that before the late 1980s, Western scholarship had hardly recognized or approached Nazism and Zionism within the framework of a value-free, rationalistic and imperialistic modernity. He, however, lavished praise on Bauman and his critical writings, particularly *Modernity and the holocaust* (1989), which was among the most important references he drew upon (Elmessiri, 2001). The significance of Bauman lies in the fact that he is a Jewish intellectual who recognizes the rise of Nazism and Zionism within the map of Western modernity and its contradictions, thus, uncovering the dark sides that lie beneath modernity’s joyful glittering surface (Elmessiri, 2005). Bauman was a victim of the nationalistic drive of modernity and when he was stripped off his Polish citizenship, he was forced to leave for Israel, where he stayed for only three years. His wife, Janina Bauman, attributed their decision to leave Israel to their discovery that it, too, was a nationalistic country that offered no better option (Bunting, 2003).

As for Eric Voegelin, Elmessiri never refers to him but this paper will show that both of them use the same discourse on modernity. Voegelin was born in Germany and received his education in political

science in Austria at the University of Vienna. In 1933, the aggressiveness of Nazism did not deter him from writing two important monographs repudiating racism and nationalism.¹ After the annexation of Austria, he fled to the United States where he developed his critique of modernity in defence of the true Christian legacy. This critique is Islamized in the writings of Abdelwahab Elmessiri.

Ontological hermeneutics and metaphorical truth

In spite of the differences in their religious, ideological and cultural backgrounds, Elmessiri, Voegelin and Bauman devoted their critiques to the mitigation of the arrogance of nature-centred cosmology and the anthropocentric epistemology of the natural sciences. Their critiques are accompanied with a serious call for establishing a new science which is given different designations but whose target is the same: the new science of politics (Voegelin), critical sociology (Bauman) and *Fiqh al-tahayyuz* or the science of understanding bias (Elmessiri); all of which call for an ontological hermeneutics that goes beyond the objectivism/relativism dichotomy.

Throughout the 1990s, Elmessiri devoted much of his critical concern to the analysis of epistemological bias. In 1995, this effort culminated in the publication of a two-volume work entitled *Ishkāliyat al-tahayyuz: Ru'yah ma'rifiyyah wa-da'wah lil-ijtihād* (*The problem of bias: An epistemological vision and an invitation for ijtihād*). The third edition of this work includes a long introduction entitled *Fiqh al-tahayyuz*, in which Elmessiri explained dynamics of bias, rejected the myths of objectivity and subjectivity and replaced the terms "subjective" and "objective" with the terms "more explanatory" and "less interpretative," thus making interpretation a continuous process of *ijtihād* (generative and creative interpretation). Elmessiri also called for a new science that does not aspire for a full control of human phenomena and does not dismiss the ontological and epistemological dimensions of metaphoric language. Elmessiri repeated this view in a recently published volume in English entitled *Epistemological bias in the physical and social sciences* (2007).

Elmessiri was aware that the dichotomy between Islam and Western modernity could not explain the nature and the dynamics

of hermeneutics. It is ontology that can be both a foundation of hermeneutics and a tool that uncovers the limits of positivistic epistemology. Ontological hermeneutics treats signs, texts, narratives and phenomena in the light of a grand theory of human existence, with particular emphasis on the relationship between the ontological hierarchy of God, Man and Nature. To this end, Elmessiri introduced the concept of “paradigm,” which he defined as an “epistemological map that the human subject abstracts...out of the events that he encounters, or the phenomena he examines, or the texts he reads” (Elmessiri, 2005, p.9). Paradigms revolve around three grand issues: (1) man and his relation to nature/matter, (2) the *telos* of existence and (3) question of the ultimate point of referentiality (Elmessiri, 2003b). Elmessiri, however, does not equate the term “paradigm” with the world or reality because a paradigm is just a model of how ideas are interrelated to one another to form a conceptual pattern or a symbolic representation of one’s mental framework (Elmessiri, 1999). Elmessiri’s emphasis on the ontology of paradigms, images and symbols raises the very old hermeneutical problem of truth, especially when Elmessiri suggests that a paradigm is almost synonymous with the major and abstract theme or the major metaphor that endows a literary work with its unity and coherence (Elmessiri, 2002a).

This position is similar to that of Bauman, who believes that the challenge of hermeneutics to social sciences consists of two problems: that of consensus and that of truth (Bauman, 1978). Positive sciences established a disinterested commitment to truth and eliminated extra-scientific commitments on the grounds that they belong to “the world of fantasy, unrealism, and utopianism” (Bauman, 1976, p.75). Their success entailed a “relentless separation of scientific, moral and aesthetic discourses” (Bauman, 1987, p.21).² The fascination with solid, objective and scientific facts is an attempt to exorcise “Descartes’ malign genie,” “the ghost of relativism” and the “inner demon” of uncertainty (Bauman, 1987). This “positivist restrictive epistemology” or “positivist imperialism” is entirely rejected (Bauman 1973).

Critical sociology repudiates the analogy between a living organism and human society and dismisses the biological approach in the analysis of socio-cultural systems. Human societies and

phenomena are neither biological organisms nor merely static or functional structures. Not surprisingly, Bauman repudiates extremist behaviourism and fundamentalist sociology because their approach is based on the assumption that "human behavior posits no problems essentially different from those encountered... in the exploration of flies' conduct" (Bauman, 1976, p.41).

As for Eric Voegelin, his position supports the Anglo-Saxon model and the re-theorization of political science which came into the fore after the First World War so as to transcend the domination of nineteenth-century positivism. The prominence of natural value-free sciences led to the belief that they were models possessing some "inherent virtue." Ontology was the scapegoat and consequently ethics and politics could no longer be understood as sciences of the order in which human nature reaches actualization (Voegelin, 1952). Voegelin criticized this view and argued that any analysis without an ontological orientation remains unscientific because political science goes beyond the validity of propositions to the truth of existence and the prerequisite of analysis is still the perception of the loving openness of the soul to its transcendent ground of order (Voegelin, 1968).

Elmessiri based his critique on the equation of epistemology with both ontology and metaphysics. Therefore, his analysis can be seen as basically Voegelinian (Islamic) as it opens itself to a transcendent ground of order and observes the ontological hierarchy of God, Man and Nature. This ontological epistemology is supported by two major methodological decisions: (1) the perception of both "matter" and "nature" as two signifiers referring to the same signified, and (2) the use of metaphor as a hermeneutical tool of interpretation and paradigm construction.³

Though the idea of nature can be represented, from an Islamic perspective, as an aesthetic form reflecting the perfection of a divine paradigm, Elmessiri coded and decoded nature as the ideology of progress. This act renders the terms "nature" and "matter" (thus naturalism and materialism) in a negative light and prepares the reader to suspect this ideology which places both human and non-human nature at the disposal of humanity as material to work on (Connolly, 1993).

Elmessiri argues that modernity oscillates between two major paradigms or metaphors: the mechanistic and the organismic. The former represents the world as a machine whose motion is given by an external force, whereas the latter portrays the world as a living organism whose growth is directed by an internal force.⁴ Both of them, however, exclude human potential for transcendence and celebrate the world of matter/nature (Elmessiri, 1999). The “dominant paradigm” in modern Western civilization oscillates between two major metaphors (Elmessiri, 2002b). The turning point in the intellectual history of the West came when the image of organic life development emerged in place of the image of the watchmaker. It led to the disappearance of the split between subject and object, one which is inherent in human consciousness and in the Cartesian opposition of man to a surrounding world (Arendt, 1958). The focus on these changes in perception and worldviews is meant to show that the appearance of secularism is related to a deep structural and epistemological transformation of Western societies and their perception of man, nature and history.

In his attempt to uncover the cultural prejudice and epistemological bias of the metaphor of mechanistic and organismic progress, Elmessiri argues that it presupposes the existence of a linear universal human history and introduces the accumulation of knowledge and the control of human resources as the *telos* of human existence (Elmessiri, 2002a).

Neither mechanical movement nor organismic growth is goal-oriented or teleological; both are monotonous operations indifferent to the unique notions of value, success, failure and choice (Elmessiri, 2002a). This perception is not restricted to capitalist societies as it has also penetrated the worldview of Marxists, socialists and communists. Not surprisingly, Elmessiri, the formerly Marxist intellectual, draws our attention to the horrible fact that Marx, who repudiated injustice and exploitation and whose writings are littered with expressions and terms such as “human essence,” “alienation” and even “transcendence”, applauded the British colonization of India, and that Engels applauded the French colonization of Algeria. Elmessiri’s critique of the notion of progress in both its capitalist and Marxist versions distances him from his former affiliation with Marxism and brings him closer to cultural bias as an Arab Muslim

amidst Western imperial legacy and Israeli occupation. It is hardly surprising that Elmessiri did not exclude Zionism from the ideology of materialist progress, especially when its adherents claimed that they had turned the desert green, thus, justifying the injustice and oppression of the entire Palestinian nation (Elmessiri, 1999). Progress is almost equated with a movement with a direction towards full control, perfect harmony, earthly felicity and, in short, the end of history (Elmessiri, 2006). Elmessiri's position led many of his students, friends, colleagues, Arab scholars and sympathizers to identify him as a proponent of a new Islamic discourse, a defender of Arabs and Muslims on the fronts of imperialism and Zionism.⁵

The same critique of the idea of progress is embraced by Bauman, thus, distancing himself from his former affiliation with Marxism. The socialist critic of capitalism, in Bauman's view, was "modernity's most faithful and effective friend" (Bauman, 1991, p.265) and whatever the ugliness of its capitalist edition, modernity need not be disparaged. This ideology of progress is closely related to the "end of history" thesis; it is nothing but a linear "unstoppable movement" against ambivalence as if "full clarity means the end of history" (Bauman, 1991, p.11). It represents a "radical break in universal history" and became "the reference point for the interpretation of the *telos* of history" giving itself the legitimacy and the right to "colonize the future in the same way it had colonized the surrounding space"; all other temporalities are seen as "retarded, underdeveloped, immature, incomplete or deformed, maimed, distorted and otherwise inferior stages or versions of itself" (Bauman, 1987, p.111).

This repudiation of the progress metaphor was also one of Eric Voegelin's major critical concerns. He was never a Marxist, and he launched a fierce attack on Marxists and communists alike because they took part in the modification of the Christian idea of perfection. Perfection was no longer conceived as a supernatural realm that could be reached only through grace in death by sanctification, a notion which is clearly related to the notion of the pilgrim's progress. Modern perfection tends to immanentize the teleological and axiological components either separately or together.⁶ The idea of progress is the best example of the immanentization of the teleological component (Voegelin, 1968).

Critique of the Enlightenment

Les philosophes or the Enlightenment intellectuals turned metaphysical eschatology into a secular version immanent in history; they were obsessed with the idea of progress and their excessive materialist philosophy usually led to comic reductionism.⁷ They, especially Diderot, regarded themselves as educators who were capable of teaching magistrates the meaning of justice, soldiers the meaning of patriotism and priests the nature of God (Dupré, 2004).

Not surprisingly, Elmessiri saw the myth of Prometheus as the “fundamental secular metaphor” that could truly describe the orientation of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment (Elmessiri, 2002a). Prometheus stands for the heroic rebellion against metaphysical powers and for the human will that can dominate Nature and achieve unimaginable scientific advances. Elmessiri, however, underscores the main contradiction in the Enlightenment, affirming that its idealistic vision “was accompanied, paradoxically, with the perception of man as a child of nature. The dream of the human self that can apprehend reality and dominate and reshape it was replaced by a self that had been deconstructed and reduced to material elements. Man becomes an indivisible part of a material becoming with no fixity, unity, transcendence or meaning... [M]aterialist rationalism leads, in the final analysis, to materialist irrationalism” (Ali, 2008, pp.195-196).

The Enlightenment as a metaphor for light, reason and freedom is mitigated and modernity at large is represented as a secular transgression against both God and man. Elmessiri explicitly refers to *les philosophes* as “dark enlighteners” and “seductive carriers” of mechanistic and/or organismic ideas (Elmessiri, 1996). Though aware of the existence of differences, discontinuities and ruptures, Elmessiri attempts to go beyond them to find a paradigmatic foundation that supports his thesis. It is true that Elmessiri’s cultural bias as an Egyptian Arab Muslim who is fully aware of the atrocities of the West and its imperial legacy in the Middle East is a key element in the inclusion or the exclusion of details in the representation of the Enlightenment. However, Elmessiri’s mapping of the Enlightenment can draw support from 20th century historiography and also from many Western revisionist critics and historians. There

were two trends in the Enlightenment movement: radical *philosophes* and moderate *philosophes*. The latter attempted to counter the former's ambitions to put an end to the entire system of social pressures by making Reason and Nature the ultimate points of reference but the radical mainstream dominated the intellectual scene. The Enlightenment's moderate trend "simply proved unable clearly and cogently to win the intellectual battle" (Israel, 2006, p.12).

Elmessiri's critique of the Enlightenment has much in common with the fierce attack launched by 20th century historiography against the materialists in general and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751) in particular. *Les philosophes* as a group, has been accused of being responsible for the rise of the totalitarian state, the ills of the 20th century and nihilism which denied man a special place in the universe (Wellman 1992). The Enlightenment legacy is reduced to a materialist view that shows perfectly in La Mettrie's fundamental works on the philosophy of nature: *L'Histoire naturelle de l'âme*, *L'Homme machine*, *L'Homme plante* and *Le Sys-tème d'āpicure*. The repudiations of materialists as "purveyors of scandalous ideas" are attributed to the fact that they were singled out by Karl Marx, thus making it easy for historians to hold them accountable for the ills of the 20th century, the practices of communist regimes, the rise of totalitarian governments and even the Holocaust (Wellman, 1992).

This view might be seen as nothing but a reduction of modernity to the "dark side of modern society" which was anticipated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in 1944 under the title "Philosophische Fragmente." This critique was later taken to an extreme by Herbert Marcuse in his *One-dimensional man* (1964), in which he stresses that capitalism has managed to eliminate the distance required for critique between culture and reality (Delanty, 2000). Elmessiri might easily be accused of being influenced by the tragic and pessimistic cultural critique of the Frankfurt School, the Weberian critique of rationalism and the metaphors of the "iron cage" of modernity and the "disenchantment of the world." As Bernstein suggests, we can see clearly that 20th century critiques of the Enlightenment and rationalism "can be understood as variations of Weberian themes" (Bernstein, 1991, p.40). It comes as no surprise then that Elmessiri has devoted an entire chapter in his book *Epistemological studies in*

Western modernity to the representation and analysis of Weber's theory of rationalization. Elmessiri is thus close to all Western critiques that prophesied that the 20th century would be the era of rationalization that colonizes and reshapes our everyday life.

Elmessiri, however, lavishes praise on Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) on the ground that he managed to transcend the Enlightenment era and to foreshadow the emphasis of the Frankfurt School on the significance of critical reason rather than instrumental reason. Kant considered his own writings as an integral part of the project of Western Enlightenment that rejected the existing traditional authenticities and he submitted everything to critique. Kant, however, submitted reason itself to critique and pointed out its limited horizons, thus underlining the rationality of instrumental reason and the rationality of critical reason (Elmessiri, 2002c).

The attack against *les philosophes* can also be traced in Bauman's writings. They are portrayed as legislators who set the rules of secular truth-seeking and legitimized the centralized power of the state and its civilizing mission (Bauman, 1987, p.69). As a modernizing elite, they launched a "cultural crusade" to redefine all cultural values and styles that they saw as signs or stigmas of backwardness, retardation or, in extreme cases, of insanity (Bauman, 1991). *Les philosophes* aspired to establish "the Kingdom of Reason" but their "enlightened radicalism is revealed as the drive to legislate, organize and regulate, rather than disseminate knowledge" (Bauman, 1987, p.74). The Enlightenment was thus very crucial to the "enthronement of the new deity, that of nature, together with the legitimation of science as the only orthodox cult, and scientists as its prophets and priests" (Bauman, 1989, p.68).

Modernity and Gnosticism

In his childhood, Elmessiri used to go to the library and he first saw the word "Gnosticism" in one of Abdul Rahman Badawi's books. The sound and strangeness of the word made him tremble to the extent that he kept thinking of it throughout his life (Elmessiri, 2005). In the second volume of *Mawsū'at al-falsafah (Encyclopedia of philosophy)*, Badawi included entries on monism and pantheism and devoted a four-page entry on Gnosticism, which he defines as a "mystic religious and philosophical orientation... Gnosis of God is

the way to salvation because God is man; the basis of gnosis is man's realization of himself as God; this knowledge leads to man's salvation" (Badawi, 1984, p.86). Perhaps this definition helped Elmessiri distance the Islamic worldview from Gnosticism, throwing modernity and secularism back to the legacy of heresiology in ancient Christianity.

Elmessiri saw Gnosticism as the most prominent form of both immanentism and pantheism; both of which are represented as inconsistent with a purely monotheistic worldview. Gnosticism is said to have started as a form of spiritual pantheism till the eighteenth century and then transformed into materialistic pantheism in the Kabbalah, the philosophy of Spinoza and Hegel and contemporary comprehensive materialistic secularism (Elmessiri, 1999). In the early stages of writing his encyclopaedia on the Jews, Judaism and Zionism, Elmessiri devoted only a few lines to Spinoza but when the paradigm of immanentism was crystallized in the 1990s in Elmessiri's mind, the entry on Spinoza was enlarged and extended into many pages (Elmessiri, 2005).

"Gnostic heresies"⁸ in ancient Christianity were resurrected with the Reformation and the rise of extremist Protestants along with the spread of Kabbalah (Elmessiri, 1999). This argument is very close to that of Voegelin who launched his attack against the proponents of the Reformation and prominent protestant figures such as Luther and Calvin. Unlike Voegelin, who referred *en passant* to the Israeli idea of the chosen people, Elmessiri foregrounded the role of the Kabbalah and argued that it transformed Judaism from a monotheistic into a "Gnostic immanentistic system" that puts an end to the distance between God and nature, signaling the end of history and the immanence of God in the Jewish chosen people. Even Jewish mysticism is said to have been transformed into a Gnostic immanentistic aspiration to be one with God (Elmessiri, 1999). Elmessiri's argument and terminology, except for the part on Judaism, are very close to the Voegelinian perspective on Gnosticism and the general revolt against modernity in the early 1950s.

Voegelin's understanding of Gnosticism and immanence as the essence of modernity was first introduced in his book *The new science*

of politics (1952) and was later deepened and extended in *Science, politics and Gnosticism*, which first appeared in German in 1959, and was later translated by Henry Regnery in 1968. Our understanding of modernity, according to Voegelin, will gain a new depth if we can understand the contemporary critical struggle between the Enlightenment, Positivism, Progressivism, Marxism, Communism, and National Socialism on the one side, and Christianity on the other side, not as a struggle between “modern” ideas and Christianity but as a renewal of the old struggle between Christianity and heretical gnosis (Morse & Thompson, 1998). The expected conclusion is the depiction of ideologies as expressing nothing but the “realm of human action” and “will to immanentization” because all Gnostic movements attempt to abolish the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and to replace it with a world-immanent order of being (Voegelin, 1968). Modernity thus renounced vertical or other worldly transcendence and celebrated horizontal transcendence (immanence) or worldly salvific doctrines (Voegelin, 1968). This Voegelinian opposition is a major motif in Elmessiri’s attempt to Islamize Western critique of modernity.

Bauman’s critique is said to have much in common with that of Voegelin who saw modernity as a process or an orientation that necessarily deifies man and leads to the “immanentization of the Christian eschaton,” giving rise to every modern movement from the Reformation to Nazism and Communism (Delante, 2000). Modernity is an act of ontological separation, or rather an ontologically inauthentic escape from of our worldliness or *Dasein* (being-there), that has led, in the final analysis, to the indifference to the sacred and more generally to our concern with other-worldly eternity (Bauman & Vecchi, 2004a).

Bauman refers to this idea of immanence as the celebration of the “one and onliness,” arguing that the death of God thesis and the “so-called secularization” have given rise to new secular gods, including not only the Nietzschean superman but also Nature, Laws of History, Reason and Progress (Bauman & Tester, 2001). As for Bauman’s position, he seems to be suspicious of both theological and philosophical authorities. Nevertheless, he proposes a strong critique of the so-called secular modern. The signifier “God” acquired new implications and connotations that go beyond the theological

dispute on the existence or non-existence of God. God has not been secularized and he has incarnated in such non-personal categories as Reason, the Laws of History, the invisible hand or Historical Inevitability (Bauman, 1995). Monism has never left the scene:

God stands for the idea of the 'one and only', for the 'thou shalt have no other gods before me' idea in all its countless renditions and costumes: of ein *Volk*, ein *Reich*, ein *Führer*, of one party, one verdict of history, one line of progress, one way of being human, one (scientific) ideology, one true meaning, one proper philosophy. In all such cases 'one and only' conveys the one and only message: the right to the monopoly of power for some, the duty of total disobedience for others (Bauman, 1997, p.201).

Like Voegelin and Bauman, Elmessiri saw modernity as a paradigmatic sequence that starts with partial immanentism and culminates with comprehensive immanentism. He repudiated all reductionist and monistic paradigms that attribute the movement and the end of history to only one force, whether spiritual or materialistic. Elmessiri saw the whole process of immanentization/modernization/secularization in terms of secular incarnations of God in mankind as a whole (humanism and the solipsistic subject), in one people (racism and imperialism), in a leader (fascism) and in nature (pantheism), affirming that there is no lack of other incarnations and signifiers (Elmessiri, 2000).

Elmessiri, Voegelin and Bauman repudiated all nationalistic and ideological movements as forms of immanentization and organismic/mechanistic paradigms. Elmessiri's position and analysis, however, are more explicit, decisive and comprehensive when he affirms that such movements promise their adherents with the "end of struggle and the establishment of technocratic utopia, whether in Zion, the Third Reich, the Welfare society or the communist society" (Elmessiri, 2002a, p.56).

Elmessiri's position is close to Voegelin who understood the modern age as the definite breakdown of imperial Christianity and the rise of national states. The domination of the organic metaphor reached its climax by the end of the 18th century when the concept of the natural organism could be applied to the state which could be seen as "bearing its formative principle within itself just like a living

being, and thus the state was completely detached from the unity of the *corpus mysticum*” (Vondung, 1997, p.139). Solidarity among members of the Christian community was thus perceived only within the secular context of the nation (Vondung, 1997).

The secular modern, in Voegelin’s view, is not a single sudden explosion that led to the separation of state and religion but a long process that developed from the “partial immanentism” of 15th century humanism to the “total immanentism” of the 20th century (Wiser, 1998). Immanentism is set in sharp contrast with the emphasis on transcendence, that is, the relevance of a transcendent ground of being.⁹ Profane history does not have an essence or direction; it is a “waiting for the end; its present mode of being is that...of an age that grows old” (Voegelin, 1952, p.118). This perception of history is very close to the Islamic worldview and anticipates a convergence of the Islamic and Christian views of the modest role of man on Earth. Voegelin rejected all biological and organic doctrines of community and opposed it to the *corpus mysticum* or the mystical body in Christianity.¹⁰ The idea of the mystical body is “not simply a metaphor, not merely a symbol, but a real idea” (Vondung, 1997, p.138). All modern post-Christian community development followed the schema of particularist community, a chosen community, possessing not just blind faith but also all scientific insight to launch its “just” and “true” war against the evil enemies, spirits and criminals who fail to adapt to its norms or those who show resistance (Vondung, 1997).

Elmessiri’s understanding of Western modernity, as well as his dualistic understanding of the distinction between immanence and transcendence, is based on his repudiation of pantheism, which appears in different names in Arabic and Islamic lexicon, including *wihdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), *hulūl* (indwelling) and *fanā’* (literally, annihilation), all of which aim at the “complete absorption of the human into the divine,” a stage that Elmessiri describes as the “embryonic state” and the ultimate “organic monism” as opposed to the state of full and complex humanity (Elmessiri, 2000). Elmessiri refers to these variations as the unconscious, yet pleasurable, “fetal stage” which stands for the biological and utopian comfort of the mother’s womb. The problem is that the contours between the

microcosm (fetus-placenta) and the macrocosm (political structures) are blurred. Elmessiri does not hesitate to describe political and technocratic utopias as a “real and sincere desire to find final solutions to all problems, to create a worldly paradise and put an end to history” (Elmessiri, 2002b, p.149).

The devastating consequences of modernization and rationalism gave rise to Romanticism and absurdist modernism. The latter protested against the alienation of modern man and the disappearance of solid logo-centric human potential for transcendence. However, the protest of Romanticism and modernism, according to Elmessiri, remained marginal, transient, and insignificant (Elmessiri, 2006). Romanticism, on the contrary, celebrated an organismic paradigm and informed many racist nationalistic movements with ideologies that celebrate an immanent organic trinity (God, territory and the people), which became the most fundamental element in secular organic nationalisms (Elmessiri, 2002a). Nazism was thus a form of secular transcendence (immanence), a process which involved devotion to the *Führer*'s will and to racist nationalistic impulses.

The modern absolute state was a gardening state, a therapeutic/surgical state, a space-managing state (Bauman, 1992). Modern man was submitted to such secular absolutes as *raison d'état*, “the interest of the state” and “the will of the *Volk*” (Elmessiri, 2002b). The state became the “secular absolute itself in both the literal and the metaphorical sense” (Elmessiri, 2001, p.48). Like Bauman, who suggested that the advent of modernity witnessed the “birth of the (un)holy trinity (territory, nation and state),” Elmessiri holds that the emphasis on the notions of *Blut, boden und volk* as sacred and absolute facts is a good example of “immanent materialist monism,” one which is reminiscent of the pantheistic immanent trinity: God-Nature-Man. One of the most devastating consequences of this worldview is that non-national nations or nations without a state are viewed as strangers, vagabonds, pariahs and even sub-men (Elmessiri, 2002b, Vol II, p.53).

Since the mid-19th century, France, England and Russia directed their efforts at eliminating the increase in the numbers of the so-called poor, uneducated, backward and uncivilized Jewish immigrants who had two major options of salvation: Zionism and

socialism.¹¹ In Poland, Bauman's homeland, the situation was much worse because there had been a strong belief that the Jews were an alien and poisonous body in the emerging Polish national organism (Bauman, 1996). The failure of assimilation of Jewish communities, rather than the resurrection of the Judaist tradition and the love of Zion, has led to the emergence of political Zionism and its programme of a new Jewish liberal state (Bauman, 1991).

The absolute state is conceived metaphorically as a gardener who gives only useful plants the chance to thrive and condemns harmful weeds to death so as to guarantee the highest degree of order and the best quality of production.¹² Unlike Bauman who argues that the best image that can be used to describe the existential nature of Jewish communities within modernity in both capitalist and communist societies is that of the "prismatic group" (Bauman, 1989, p.43), Elmessiri opts for the metaphor "functional group" as a more explanatory paradigm of the emergence of non-national nations. In the Third Reich, Jewish communities were thus described by both the Nazis and Zionists as pests, bacteria and pariah *Volk*. Zionist literature itself is loaded with metaphors intended to "productivize" the Jews in order to make them "less parasitical," "less marginal" or "less dependent" (Elmessiri, 1977). Both Nazism and Zionism seek to make Europe *Judenfrei* (having no Jews). The only difference, however, is that Zionists prefer Balfour-like solutions to Hitler-like final solutions for the Jewish question (Elmessiri, 2001).

The determinism that dominates phrenology and physiognomy gave rise to "scientific racism" (Bauman, 1989). It was aggravated by the advent of the modern nationalistic state and the emergence of the "stateless person," the *sans papiers*, the idea of *unwertes leben* (useless life or being), and the later-day reincarnation of the ancient institution of *homo sacer*, whose destruction is devoid of all ethical or religious significance (Bauman, 2002).

As designers of the perfect society, the Nazis conceived of *unwertes leben* as the fundamental target that had to be distanced from the *lebensraum* or even exterminated.¹³ Bauman, however, conceives of the Holocaust neither as a Jewish affair nor as a German problem but as one of the possibilities of modernity at large; it is

also more than a “cancerous growth on the otherwise healthy body of the civilized society” (Bauman 1989, p.7). *Unwertes leben* included the Gypsies, communists, the mentally-retarded and all those who were perceived as harmful weeds threatening the harmony of the garden of modernity; the six million Jews were among more than 20 million people annihilated at Hitler’s behest (Bauman, 1989). Other victims were thrown into oblivion simply because they lack the means to publicize their cause (Bauman, 1998).

Voegelin, Bauman and Elmessiri attempted to offer a way out of the contradictions of modernity but their proposals remain within a critique that aspires to confront modernity with its contradictions rather than abandon it altogether. Voegelin chose to re-examine ancient civilizations to prove that religious consciousness of a transcendent ground of being dominated all societies and the very attempt to ignore this fact is nothing but an obvious escape from reality. Bauman had great expectations and saw human salvation in post-modernity but later he realized that modernity entered into a new stage that liquefies all logocentric categories; therefore, he abandoned the term “postmodern” altogether and used the term “liquid” to refer to contemporary liquid modernity and its celebration of consumerism and materialism. As for Elmessiri, he never saw postmodernity as a promise but always as threat and a manifestation of contemporary liquid non-rational modernity, which is always equated with secularism, materialism, and immanentism.

Conclusion

Elmessiri’s construction of the duality of immanence and transcendence has much in common with the critiques introduced by Eric Voegelin and Zygmunt Bauman. Like Voegelin and Bauman, Elmessiri repudiated the dominance of positivist epistemology and modern ideologies that deify man and attempt to put an end to History. While Bauman saw the role of critical theory as the modest comment on human experience, Elmessiri and Voegelin uncovered the dominance of immanence so as to contrast it with Islamic monotheism and the Christian humanistic legacy, respectively.

Western self-scrutiny discourse, as introduced by Bauman and Voegelin, had a great impact on Elmessiri’s deconstruction of the Enlightenment and modernity at large. The binary opposition

between immanence and transcendence helped Elmessiri interpret almost all modern ideologies within the paradigm of immanentism. Though belonging to different religions, ideologies and cultures, Elmessiri, Bauman and Voegelin mitigated the conceit of the natural sciences, the deification of man and the perception of the world as a machine or as a self-sufficient organism. Elmessiri's critique was enhanced by establishing a relationship between the secular modern and Gnosticism, thus rendering modernity as form of heresy inconsistent with the purely Islamic monotheistic worldview. This leap might be seen as a manifestation of the dominant polemic discourse against modernity, especially when it recalls a large reservoir of negative associations that have been established by heresiology.

While Bauman does not offer any alternative and sees the role of critical theory as the modest comment on the present and human experience, Elmessiri and Voegelin uncover the dominance of immanence so as to contrast it with Islamic monotheism and transcendence (Elmessiri) and the true Christian humanistic legacy (Voegelin). Elmessiri and Voegelin, however, did not go beyond this contrast and they, like Bauman, did not fall into the trap of offering a project or an alternative, thus staying on the fronts of critique and leaving readers to make their decisions.

Endnotes

1. Both monographs were published in German. The first is entitled *Rasse und Staat* (Race and state) and the second *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte* (The idea of race in the history of ideas).
2. This explains why Bauman (1976) repudiates "neutral technology" and the authority of technical-instrumental interests which reinforces the already existing split between the subjects and objects of action, the controllers and the controlled, the superior and the subordinated.
3. As Dupré (1993) suggests, the terms nature and matter can be traced back to the Greek notion of *kosmos* and the Roman *natura*, both of which promoted the idea of a self-moving organism or an all-inclusive whole reflecting the magnificence of *energeia* and *logos*. There had been a radical break once the human subject became the source of meaning, reducing nature to subordinate and instrumental position. Alchemists saw the possibility of reshaping

parasitical growth into organic matter and mechanist philosophers promoted the belief in the atomistic nature of the universe, the general passivity of matter, and the self-supporting and self-moving cosmos.

4. The rise of mechanistic philosophy went beyond the metaphysical connotations that Aristotle and the Scholastics attached to matter and nature because it did not attempt to appeal to teleological arguments or final causes, emphasizing instead mathematical deduction. In other words, mechanism is a closed, auto-dynamic and self-generating system indifferent to any external influence, even though all that occurs within it is effected by a transcendent source of motion. This philosophical orientation conceived of the possibility that the human mind as the single source of meaning can capture all reality, one which is governed by identical mechanistic laws (Dupré, 2004).

5. In 2004, this view was endorsed in a two volume-work edited by Ahmed Abdel Halim Atiyah and entitled *Fī ʿālam Abdelwahab Elmessiri: Ḥiwār naqḍī ḥaḍārī* (In the world of Abdelwahab Elmessiri: A critical civilizational dialogue). Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq.

6. Voegelin enumerates the examples of the movements that celebrate this idea: Kantianism and the notion of the unending progress of mankind, and Condorcet and his idea of the unending progress of history and its acceleration through a directorate of intellectuals. As for the immanentization of the axiological component, it shows in the detailed description and assumption of an ideal image of the world, which can be traced back to Thomas More's Utopia. The third type of immanentization is referred to as 'activist mysticism' which shows clearly in the Comtean idea of a "final state of industrial society under the temporal rule of positivist intellectuals" and the Marxian notion of a final state of the classless realm of freedom through the rise of the communist man (Voegelin, 1952, pp.61-63).

7. D'Holbach, for example, conceived of human history as part of the biologically and chemically determined *histoire naturelle*, arguing that the spread of Islam can be attributed to Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) physiology, i.e., the particles of his blood, the texture of his fibres, the salts and the proportion of fluid in his system (Dupré, 2004, p.204).

8. Elmessiri seems to side with Voegelin in his approval of the role of the Catholic Church in the battle against its enemies when it realized the danger of "heretic Gnosticism," especially against pagan and Jewish doctrines of millenarianism. Like Voegelin, he usually refers to Saint Augustine and his fight against such immanentistic perceptions of history, though introducing a temporary immanentistic moment (the coming of Christ, his crucifixion, and rise, the Catholic Church as the spiritual Kingdom of Christ but still within a normal, undetermined, chaotic tracks of history till the second coming).

9. Voegelin was impressed by St. Augustine's theoretical distinction between transcendental history and profane history. This distinction kept human beings, to borrow Bauman's metaphor, "gamekeepers" rather than "gardeners and legislators." Eschatological fulfilment is confined to the transcendental history whereas profane history lacks such a direction. The projection of a radically immanent fulfilment grew slowly, in a long process that Voegelin roughly called 'from humanism to enlightenment.' This process reached its radical point in the 19th century; Feuerbach and Marx interpreted the transcendent God as "the projection of what is best in man into a hypostatic beyond; for them the great turning point of history, therefore, would come when man draws his projection back into himself, when he becomes conscious that he himself is God, when as a consequence man is transfigured into a superman" (Voegelin, 1952, pp.118-125).

10. If Christ is the head, we are the members of the body. The members are the church, thus Christ and Church are one and the same thing. *Corpus mysticum* is also a "comprehensive organism [that] has a rank for the rich and the poor, for the priest and the layman, for the prince and the subject, for the educated and the uneducated, for the heroic ascetic and the weak sinner, for the warrior, the tradesman, and the peasant. By virtue of this comprehensiveness the church could penetrate a civilization with its spirit" (Voegelin, 1998, p.142).

11. Bauman draws the readers' attention to the fact that Herzl himself held traditional Judaism responsible for the backwardness and the retardation of the Jews. Here lies one of the most important points of convergence between Bauman and Elmessiri; both are aware of the difference between Judaism and Herzl's Zionism. The latter is a consequence of a secular historical condition, i.e., the failure of the assimilatory efforts and the collapse of European liberalism (Bauman, 1991, p.148).

12. The gardener metaphor is not restricted to the geographical contours of Europe; and therefore, the Western adventure, at the zenith of its expansive imperialism, saw the whole globe as nothing but "vast lands...waiting to be discovered," "an empty planet," "an empty playground," "an empty stage for countless heroic exploits and glorious unheard-of feats" and "no man's deserted, under-populated, fallow and undercultivated land." Thus under the pretext of the "civilizing mission," the rest of the world was transformed into a "vacuum" that should be "discovered" and then designed in the best way (Bauman, 2004b, pp.10-77).

13. In order to support his argument, Bauman referred to a scientific movement called the "Monist Society." The movement was led by one of the leading scientists in the 19th century, Ernest Haeckel, who promoted the authority of modern science and German's heredity resources, which could be maintained by the merciless physical destruction of criminals, the genetically disabled,

the bodily deformed, the mentally inferior and their "bad genes." All these ideas promoted "Nazi eugenics" (the attempt to eliminate haphazard forces of heredity by means of selection and classification) and they were embraced by a radical and positivistic organization called the German Monist League of Hackel.

14. Janina Bauman argues that the *Gypsy holocaust* has been thrown into the background or completely ignored because the Gypsies, unlike the Jews, do not have many professors, writers and journalists to advocate their rights and condemn their persecution (Bauman, 1998, p.51).

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