

Borderless Islam and the modern nation state

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Abstract: Given the dichotomy of “Islam and the West” and its currency post-September 11, how do we respond to the question of a modern Islam? This is the key idea that this paper explores, by discussing what Islam represents, and what modernity entails, arguing that Islamic teachings and practices are not necessarily incompatible with modernity, and that the discourse on Islam and modernity and where the two are headed can be legitimately engaged in by Muslims given that Islamic societies are diverse and subject to global influences.

Keywords: Islam, modernity, Muslims, traditions, secularism

Abstrak: Memandangkan dikotomi “Islam dan Barat” dan insiden pasca-September 11, bagaimana kita menyahut persoalan Islam moden? Ini adalah idea utama yang ingin dikupas kertas kerja ini, dengan membincangkan apa yang digambarkan oleh Islam, dan apa yang dimaksudkan dengan pemodenan, dengan membahaskan bahawa ajaran dan amalan Islam tidak semestinya bercanggah dengan pemodenan, dan wacana Islam dan pemodenan, dan kemana keduanya menuju wajar melibatkan orang-orang Islam memandangkan masyarakat Islam yang pelbagai dan terdedah kepada pengaruh global.

Kata kunci: Islam, pemodenan, orang-orang Islam, tradisi, sekularisme

Islam represents a way of life that the media describe as incompatible with today’s world. The contradiction between Islam as portrayed by some parts of the media, and the scope and breadth of Islamic practice, raise the question of how a way of life described as

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anachronistic can have a billion followers. Although a singular Islamic polity no longer exists, nearly 60 countries have populations that are more than 50 per cent Muslim; around one in five people throughout the world claim adherence to Islam; and Islam is rapidly growing in countries where its followers are a minority such as the United States and Australia. Given the dichotomy of “Islam and the West” and its currency post-September 11, how do we respond to the question of a modern Islam? This is the key idea that this paper explores, by discussing what Islam represents, and what modernity entails, arguing that Islamic teachings and practices are not necessarily incompatible with modernity.

Defining modernity

To evaluate the argument that Islam and modernity are incompatible, it is necessary first to define “modernity.” Bacon’s view of nature as the source for scientific research, Descartes’s focus on procedure and rationality, and Locke’s elaboration on the autonomy of the self posit the birth of modernity in the late 17th century, with its crystallization and impact in the 18th and 19th centuries (Smith, 1998). The fundamental theme arising in definitions of modernity concerns technological progress.

Modernity can be described as hinging on the fascination with the new while at the same time divorcing (in terms of lifestyle and of society) from the old (Touraine, 1998). The ideal in modernity is economic, technological, political and cultural progress and development, while the set of characteristics that enables a culture or a nation to be “modern” (an advanced and growing economy, industrial competence, a robust democracy) could be seen as the outer manifestations of this ideal. Technological progress is one of the outward signs of a society attaining the state of modernity (Wallerstein, 1995). From a sociological view, modernity of technology is characterized by mobilization of information, people and resources brought about by advances in technology, transport and communication (Mouzelis, 1999).

In addition to the modernity of technology, modernity also encompasses development in the realm of human thought, or ideology. From about the end of the 18th century onwards, modernity was conceptualised as not only a state of technological advancement

but also as a state of unravelling thought from tradition, which was seen as an impediment to the progress of the mind. The modernity of ideology centred on a presupposed gulf between traditional thought and reason. The effects have been termed by Mouzelis (1999) as “institutional differentiation,” as the economic, political, social, cultural and religious spheres become discrete.

This cultural and social dimension of the modernity of ideology has also resulted in an increase in what Mouzelis refers to as “social Darwinism”: the reduced emphasis on social responsibility and a reduction of the welfare state (1999). Habermas (1990) was of the view that modernity arises from an evolutionary form of thinking which denotes reason as being distinguished by different values: analytical/scientific, moral/interpretive and aesthetic/expressive. Nation-states that have attained the state of being modern are perceived to be those who have delineated religion into public and private domains. The separation of church and state symbolises the break with tradition. This, of course, is an ideology that is at loggerheads with the Islamic viewpoint, which does not support the separation of church and state.

The Islamic worldview

The Islamic worldview sees human beings as God’s vicegerents on earth who have been given the gift of free will. Accordingly, the Qur’ān (2: 256) urges that “there be no compulsion in religion.” Those who opted for Islam covenanted with the Creator to associate none with Allah, to accept Muhammad as the last in a series of messengers sent by Allah, and to believe in God’s scriptures, the last scripture being the Qur’ān, the uncorrupted word of God. Because Islamic law originated some 1400 years ago, and because the rituals and practices which govern the Muslim way of life have remained for the large part intact since the time of Muhammad (SAW), it has been asked whether Islam as a system of regulatory beliefs is compatible with the modern world. This question arose in part because Islam has tended to be portrayed as a politicised faith, due to there being no separation between church and state of the type that took place within Christianity. The “church,” in Islam’s case, has always been a part of the state, and to claim that it should be otherwise is tantamount to refuting Islam’s teachings. Conversely,

Islam represents entirely different things to non-Muslims. Many of the beliefs held by Muslims appear linked to a bygone era based on societal values that have disappeared. Key ideas from modernity are coded to situate Islam in a position where it negates these ideas so that Islam and Muslims are seen as illogical, autocratic, and living in stasis (Al-Azmeh, 1996).

Differing viewpoints on the church and state alone are no indications that political Islam has no role to play in the modern era. Islam's effect on culture—for example, in Malaysia or Indonesia—is inextricably linked to some societies' conceptualisations of the nation-state. This does, however, differ from the notion put forward that modernity is “an internal reform of Christendom” in which modern Western countries “through the superseding of an earlier social imaginary, gain new possibilities for understanding themselves” (Houston, 2001, p.78). This paper contends that a similar reform could not be applied to the Muslim world, at least not without jeopardising some of Islam's core tenets (for example, the compulsory alms-giving, or *zakah* that financially-able Muslims must pay). Rather, the modernity of secular practice, according to a Muslim, must be foregone in favour of a recognition that in Islam the public vs private debate on the role of religion is moot, because every matter pertains to *īmān* (faith) and *'ibādah* (practice), irrespective of whether they are deemed public or private. In the nation-state lies the ground where the tenets of modernity will either clash with those of Islam, or operate in conjunction with it. While aspects of modernity can be—and have been—embraced by Muslims without compromising their *dīn* (faith), there are other facets of modernity that pose problems for Islamic societies. Modernity has been the focus of debate in Muslim societies from Turkey, to Indonesia and the Gulf states, where two of the main concerns amongst Muslims about the modernity practiced by Western countries are the focus on linear structuralism, and the concentration on the individual.

Both technological advancement and the emergence of civil society are the concrete signs of modernity to which the general population of predominantly Muslim societies aspires. However, where Islamic society and secular modernity might differ is the exclusion of faith from the equation. The seeking of discoveries and the gaining of knowledge, especially where such knowledge

acts to aid humankind, is particularly supported by Islam's tenets. Putting this into context is the way Muslims believe that the current re-embodiment of their religion began when Muhammad (SAW) was 40 years old and an angel revealed the word of God to him. The first verse of the Qur'ān (96: 1-5) ever to be revealed instructed Muhammad (SAW) to "read." Several of Muhammad's (SAW) most famous *aḥādīth* (traditions or sayings) are those to do with the pursuit of knowledge ("Seek knowledge even in China," "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" and "Verily the men of knowledge are the inheritors of the prophets," to name a few).

Being part of a holistic belief system, however, Islam asks its adherents to remember why it is that such discoveries are taking place as well as why human beings should study the world to begin with: the implication is that the pursuit of knowledge aids humankind, and aiding humankind pleases God. A modern society is a society where progress can be quantified, measured and observed in detached, clinical terms. It could be argued that the insistence on technological development, without acknowledging divine power, is an aspect of modernity that is far removed for Islam as a belief system that has as its foundation the religious relationship of human beings. At the same time that Islam discourages faith without reason (Arberry, 1977), it also rejects reason without faith.

Linear structuralism aside, the focus on the individual is modernity's second area of concern for practicing Muslims. Modernity denotes the historical period in which reason and science triumphed over dogma and tradition (Mouzelis, 1999; Tester, 2002), with the freedom-loving and knowing individual lying at the heart of modernity. This component of a modern nation-state is a citizen "whose experiments can penetrate the secrets of nature and whose work with other individuals can make a new and better world" (Appleby, Hunt & Jacob, 1994, p.201). Some tenets of individualism can be found within Islamic teachings—each person is accountable for his or her own deeds and will have to bear in mind the consequences of his or her own actions. However, individualism that is based on rights (at the cost of responsibility) and is practiced at the expense of the rights of society at large does not sit comfortably within a community-based society such as espoused by Islam. Within the faith there are individual obligations, such as the five daily prayers,

as well as important communal ones such as charity and the sighting of the moon for the fasting month.

Often seen as a sign of Islam's primitive, anti-individual, anti-modern stance is the Islamic criminal code's punishment for a person accused of theft. The secular modernist viewpoint would view this legal principle as a barbaric violation of the individual's human rights. Yet Islam's religious ethics are complex (Carney, 1983)—in this instance, Islamic law urges that the reasons for theft should be taken into account, and if the accused was found stealing due to hunger, the issue shifts to one of collectivist responsibility, and not an individual's rights. An incident that took place during the reign of 'Umar (the second Caliph or ruler of the Muslim community) involved a man accused of stealing bread during a year of famine. This case is often used as an example of how Islamic thought allows the welfare of society at large to override applying the strict letter of the law (Abdelkader, 2003). That incident resulted in a ruling against 'Umar's government, and not the accused man, for the government was held responsible for not taking care of the welfare of its citizens by denying one of them a fundamental human right (the right to be free of hunger).

It is easy to see how the Muslim world could be dismissed as not having grasped the concepts of modernity; what is not as easy to see is why Islam as a belief-system stands accused of being against it. Sadly, with few exceptions, many countries whose leadership and majority of the population profess adherence to Islam operate on a positively pre-modern scale (Al-Braizat, 2002; Tessler, 2002) with authoritarian governments, lack of awareness of civil and human rights, negligible scientific and technological developments, gender inequality, and lacklustre economic performance. Yet close examination of Islam's values and how they were practiced and put into place during the Muslim communities that existed during the life of Muhammad (SAW) and in the 400 or so years after his death would lead to the unexpected conclusion that Islam is not merely compatible with modernity but that some of its teachings are the very essence of modernity. Concerns about linear progress and the primacy of the individual aside, there is much in the modernity project that can be—or has been—appropriated by Muslims, and used within a religious framework.

Facets of modernity are wholeheartedly encouraged by the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. Market economics, gender equality and human rights, democratic principles, and promoting advances in science and technology constitute aspects of modernity that are fulfilled by the principles governing Muslim life found in the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth* and the opinions and rulings of Islamic scholars. For example, the idea behind capitalism is that the fair allocation of resources would be decided by the rules of demand and supply in an informed market setting. Islamic teachings on business and trade were not directed against capitalist enterprise but against the possibility of unethical business, and against the *unfair* allocation of resources and potential abuse of customers, partners or staff that result from, say, a monopolistic market. Not only did Islam recognize the need for the free movement of goods and services—after all, Muhammad (SAW) himself was a merchant who traded goods on behalf of his employer and future wife Khadijah—but it quite possibly was the first religion to introduce something akin to fair trading or consumer protection legislation. The Qur'ān states explicitly that “Allah has made business lawful for you.” (2:175) and it is via the Qur'ān and the sayings of Muhammad (SAW) that Islam laid down guidelines for honest and ethical business transactions. Muhammad (SAW) told his followers that it was not

...permissible to sell an article without making everything clear nor is it permissible for anyone who knows about its defects to refrain from mentioning them [in the course of selling the article] (cited in Hannan, 1997: np)

The Qur'ān urged, for example, the signing of contracts in front of witnesses to avoid business disputes. Islamic rulings defined what could and could not be legally sold according to values shared by those who professed to be members of Muslim communities: for instance, the provision of services of a sexual nature or substances of abuse contradict Islamic teachings. However, Islamic teachings also declare that the provision of some “services” were not to be conducted by private enterprise but were the collective responsibility of the community and its leadership—services such as welfare of orphans and the unemployed—through the collection of *zakāh* (a 2 per cent levy for charity) imposed on Muslim citizens. If these teachings were practiced, a society whose economy operated in line

with the principles of the Qur'ān would be similar in characteristic to many modern nation-states.

Human rights and gender equality are issues that are intricately linked with discourses of modernity and democracy (Faqir, 1997; McPhillips, 1999; Tester, 2002). Western articulations of human rights such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) are frequently invoked as a supposedly unanimous global treatise (Ignatieff, 2001; Sabet, 2003). The presence or lack of gender justice and human rights is seen as one of the most important parameters of how “modern” a society or nation is (Abdelkader, 2003). Many of the rights enshrined in the UDHR are found in Islamic legal principles (Shakir, 2003) if not in practice in Muslim-majority countries, such as the right to religious freedom: the Qur'ān (10:99) explicitly warns against forced conversions. Also included in Islamic teachings are rights that support the notion of gender justice (Ahmed, 1992), again in principle if not in practice. Muslim women, for instance, argue that modest dress is a way of retaining independence, that it empowers rather than oppresses them (Weiss, 1994). Lawrence (1998) suggests that Muslim women provide “the key index of Muslim identity.” Rights to freedom of religion, economic freedom, and holding rulers accountable for their actions, can all be found in the Qur'ān or in the *ḥadīth*. Muhammad (SAW) also taught his followers how prisoners of war should be treated—an example that was upheld by later Muslims such as Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ayyūbī (1138-1198).

The culture that surrounded early Muslim rulers was a democratic culture that encouraged people to have access to their rulers, in keeping with the principles of the Qur'ān regarding decisions of the Muslim community: “their affairs shall be decided through mutual consultation” (42:38). Some scholars have argued that the idea of ruling by the people for the people is alien to Islam due to the fact that Muslims believe in the supremacy of Allah. However, in the Islamic world there are a number of different viewpoints regarding democracy and its relationship with Islam (Goddard, 2002; Grant & Tessler, 2002). The Muslim perception of humankind is as “God’s vicegerent” (Qur'ān, 27:62; 2:30); who administers Divine concepts on earth (Kerr, 2000; Osman, 2003). The ethics and morality of leadership constitute an area to which much Islamic scholarly

reflection is devoted (Kerr, 2000), and the Qur'ān (3:159) urged Muhammad (SAW) to consult people in secular matters, or matters relating to the community. The implication is clear: that the gap between the rulers and the people was to be minimized (Rahman, 1983). As practiced by early Muslim communities, the concept of *shūrā* or consultation was democratic in its rejection of decentralization of authority, and encouraging of tolerance, openness and public discussion (Ahmad, 2000; Tessler, 2002). It is important to be skeptical of the idea that Islam shares a causal relationship with the lack of democratic states in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia or Pakistan (Ahmed, 1992; Al-Braizat, 2002; Tessler 2002). Within Islamic teachings, ideas of “*shura* (consultative body), *ijma* (consensus), and *masliha* (utility) pointed to an affinity between Islam and democracy” (Moaddel, 2002, p.365).

While the Qur'ān is not restricted in its focus to science, it is not against technological development and scientific progress. Rather, it calls for development and progress to take place within an Islamic framework: like the gaining of knowledge, the advancement of scientific pursuit is a means to remind Muslims that nothing was created except with a purpose. The Arabs are among those credited with the formulation of scientific method, used by Muslim scientists such as Ibn Ḥazm in the *Scope of logic* and Ibn Taymiyyah in his *Refutation of logic* that stresses induction as the only sure form of argument. In the Qur'ān itself, as pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal (Lari, 1989), the approach is inductive compared with the philosophy-oriented (deductive) method of the ancient Greeks: “the birth of the method of observation and experiment in Islam was due not to a compromise with Greek thought but to prolonged intellectual warfare with it” (Iqbal, 1930, p.90). Thus, the pursuit of science is not alien to Islamic culture and teachings. In practice, religious knowledge was often placed higher in the hierarchy than the worldly knowledge, causing scientific or technological pursuits to decrease in significance over time in Muslim societies. Yet, it can be argued that striving to excel in this world and the hereafter is not beyond the reach of the mortal humans.

A useful example of a Muslim majority country that has applied some principles of modernity in a manner attempting to retain the spirit of Islam is Malaysia. Earlier I stated that Islam could fully

embrace modernity's principles of market economics, gender equality and human rights, democratic principles, and promoting advances in science and technology. In many—not all—of these regards, Malaysia has embraced such ideals and supported them with Islamic touches, although problems remain with the freedom of its media, and its non-Muslim minorities and the part they play in the country's imagining of itself. In the economic arena, Malaysia combines a free market with state-owned enterprises, such as vehicle manufacturer Proton and petroleum firm Petronas, and has taken a leading role in the Association of South East Asian Nations trading bloc. Amidst this, the country has an established Islamic banking sector, a Muslim-operated alternative to insurance and a *Hajj* or pilgrimage fund (Nagata, 1994). An indication of the level of gender equality in the country can be seen in Kuala Lumpur, where the downtown district appears very similar to the CBD of a Western town with its proliferation of vehicles, skyscrapers and office workers. The difference, of course, is that many of the females are in *hijāb*. Malaysian Muslim women, it would seem, are on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Malaysia has also demonstrated its willingness to embrace advancements in science and technology while politically, elections are run along democratic lines, with an opposition party holding two northern states until the 2004 election (when they lost one of these seats), and the ruling coalition suffering severe blows in the 2008 elections.

Conclusion

According to the theory and not the practice, it would seem that there is no problem in a pluralistic Islamic society living and breathing modernity. Islam is a faith offering individual and collective freedom; with an emphasis on community building—communities, forged on shared values and accumulated insights, provide moral and practical wisdom beyond what societies of fragmented individuals can ever obtain. However, looking at the practice, freedom is conspicuous in Muslim societies because of its absence. According to Khuri (1998) this is the result of a “trivialised and diminished version of modernity” and of a revolt against this modernity by an “equally shallow version of Islam.” Muslim societies are caught in a double bind: on the one hand, the pragmatism of secular modernity calls but on the other, traditionalism's appeal still reigns—Malaysia

is an example of one such nation facing this dilemma (Nagata, 1994). Freedoms that were enshrined in the Qur'ān and demonstrated by Muhammad (SAW) and his followers have been diminished over time in the Muslim world. Modernity's insistence on a worldly version of science, reason and economic development has reduced these freedoms to one-dimensional terms (compared to the Islamic reading of science, knowledge and development, which argued for knowledge within the context of faith).

Yet what is most important to a Muslim is living in a state of Islam that has all the paraphernalia of a modern state. Remembering that modernity's single-minded pursuit of linear development may be incompatible with Islam's pluralism and holistic faith-based worldview, Muslims are wary of the wholesale adaptation of the modern nation state (Lawrence, 1998) because in its current incarnation it bears little relationship to the "state" of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)—which was a community organized on the basis of law and order, and shared rights and responsibilities. The discourse on Islam and modernity and where the two are headed can be legitimately engaged in by Muslims who want to further the cause of Islam, because Islamic societies are subject to global influences and Islamic societies are as diverse as those from other religious traditions. While Muslim societies can come across as hostile to the modern project, there is no reason why they cannot creatively manipulate modernity to nullify the influence of both extreme secularism and the destructive sabotaging of Islamic principles by rulers and nations claiming to be Islamic.

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