

Tradition and Modernity within Islamic Civilization

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism has impacted on Islamic Law as well as Islamic civilization. Islam has a dissonant relationship with modernity in that it agrees with central aspects of this epochal phenomenon and parts ways with others. The compatibility issues were raised by the Muslim thinkers. Many Muslim scholars have contributed to give an original understanding of message of Islam detached from sectarian influences. Traditions are considered to be the vehicle for the transference of factors to modernity with a strong role in determining power and culture of a civilization. Thus, they pave the way for the power tools of a civilization. The theories of Muslim scholars from Asia and Egypt are discussed to elaborate the Muslim understanding of facing the challenges of modernity. The contemporary scholars' views are also added with an analysis of their observation on compatibility of Islam with modern era challenges and the criticism on it due to their modernity conception.

Keywords: *Islamic Civilization, Modernity and Islam, Traditions*

Colonialism and Islamic Law

Colonialism had a significant influence on Islamic Law in the sense that it did brought up a new face of law for the Muslims residing in different parts of the world.¹ It was, no doubt, the rule of colonizers and they tried to impose their laws and culture in the colonized lands but were met with resistance and this resistance forced them to ponder about finding the middle path between their laws and Islamic law. The middle path was in fact an effort to come to terms between the colonizers and the colonized ones. Though their intention was still the same i.e. to rule the lands but it could not have been possible if they had been rigid in implementation of their own laws. So flexibility was the only option left for them to exercise.²

Islamic law was not the only domain affected by the colonizers but they also had influence on the values and culture of the colonized people. Being the rulers, they brought their own cultural values and identity with them which was most of the time incompatible with the natives of the colonized lands.³ The hub of all Islamic values and culture was deemed as the Islamic law and it was believed that all values and culture of these Muslim colonized lands emanated from Islamic law. The compatibility issues were raised by the Muslim thinkers. Also the aftermath of colonialism was the globalization which marked the expansion of Muslim communities but still in contact with each other by the ever-growing advancement of technology. It broached about the controversial topics in the west such as the covering of head of females. In fact the questions were raised regarding the reformation of Muslim law for facilitating the Muslims as it was the need of the hour.⁴

The concept of Islam as a religion was very differently perceived by the colonizers. The Orientalist Cromer perceived Islam as based on Holy Qur'an which was the cause of rigidity in society. He believed that as Islam is rigid in nature so its teachings cannot be made consistent with the changing times and those who are striving to make it compatible are wasting their energy on it. For him, Christianity was a perfect religion and hence he gave no space to any other religion. More or less, similar views were held by the other Orientalists of his time.

Islamic law had enjoyed strong hold in the pre-colonial times and it was exercised as the major law of the states. It was a law with broad outlook and hence, matters related to social, economic, political issues along with those disputes and cases of criminal law were dealt within its broad jurisdiction. After the invasion of the colonizers, the scenario altogether shifted from Islamic law to colonizers' law and they were good at finding faults with Islamic law; they were expert at labeling Islamic law as outdated law with no hope for reform. Their basic purpose was to introduce their own laws in the colonized states. It resulted in favoring only the colonizers but led to the degeneration of morality upheld by the Muslims. Evil practices were prevalent and laws were non-curbing to snub such activities as state herself was patronizing it indirectly. The moral degeneration was meant to weaken the society so that no one complains about the law and all are indulged in their own affairs. It paved the way for introducing and implementing the law by the state by use of force. It also had a drawback that the state had the authority to intervene in the law and also the religious leaders. The state only favored its own interests and same was followed in the post-colonial era even by the Muslim countries. For example the right of *qisas* was not the prerogative of heirs and other criminal laws that offer broad spectrum of punishments were deemed obsolete.⁵

Some of the western colonizers also study the translations of the Islamic law in their language for their own knowledge. The Muslims also began to

follow those translations as the basis of Islamic law without bothering to look into the original sources which deprived them of the real essence of this law. As a result, they implemented these Muslim laws in their countries but later it was realized that these Muslim laws were not meeting the demands of the modern world. So the attention was focused on the original texts for the interpretation in accordance with the changing times. Anthropologist Asad Talal has viewed family law as the one patronized by the state for its own aims, thus depriving the family life from the essential rights and privileges and a distorted picture of family law is deemed to be pertinent for the society.⁶

The law in the post-colonial period influenced the morality and it had, in fact, introduced its own very idea of a new age morality was founded. Muslims of India put an effort to conform the Islamic law to the English law. Similar efforts were being put forward in Egypt as well. Some scholars of India put an effort to make the family law consistent with the changing times to accommodate the challenges to it. Some *ulama* approved of it and strived for accommodating new changes in the law while others did not approve of it. Those who approved of it were paving the way towards modernizing *Shariah*. A new improved version of *Shariah* was being developed and it was a major step towards ushering into the modern era with all the essential tools of compatibility. It can be concluded that colonialism had its pros and cons. Pros were the steps towards modernizing Islamic law while cons included the ignorance of the law makers to bother to have profound study of Islamic jurisprudence while formulating laws in the post-colonial period.⁷

Impact of Colonization on Islamic Civilization

Islamic civilization was met with defeat at the hands of the colonialist powers and its major empires, Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires also encountered downfall due to colonialism.⁸ This civilization was up-to-date in its own time but the decline initiated the lagging behind phase and it suffered this phase due to incompatibility issues with the rising colonial powers. It could not cope up with the challenges of the modern times. These challenges were at the cultural and political fronts and these needed to be addressed in a more logical manner by minimizing the gap between the traditional Islam and the modern world.

No doubt Islamic civilization enjoyed the peak of glory but still it could not survive after the invasion of colonial rulers. Perhaps the role of tradition matters and it is to be understood in a more neutral manner. This concept of tradition is perceived in the west with a negative connotation⁹ as something incapable of growing and possessing rigidity which hints towards its obsolete nature. But traditions do need to be taken in the positive context. Traditions should be taken as the means of social bond and it is with these traditions that pass through different phases and eventually give rise to modern societies. Cultural traditions pave the ground for the modernity. Still this concept has two divisions i.e. good and bad tradition. Good tradition favors the progress while

the bad tradition hampers the progress so the division is on account of its contribution to the modernity.¹⁰

Tradition and Modernity:

Traditions are considered to be the vehicle for the transference of factors that contribute to modernity.¹¹ These traditions are thought to have a strong role in determining power and culture of a civilization.¹² So they cannot be considered as neutral as they pave the way for the power tools of a civilization. The modern societies are better known to be modern for the power they are exercising and the traditions themselves have to struggle to survive in these societies. The nature of traditions and their diversity helps to draw a comparison between the modern societies. Talal Asad has given the concept of religion as a separate arena rather than entangled into power and culture; for him power and culture were not be associated with religion as religion had its own domain.¹³

Max Weber was more concerned with the contributions of different religions to the human social lives and the laws and rules and regulations that were brought forward for human living and interaction.¹⁴ His approach has aided the humans in drawing a relationship between Islam and modernity and hence, such help has been of great significance to bridge the gap between Islam and modernity.¹⁵ Also, the emphasis on how Islam is different has opened avenues for more research in this arena regarding the very concept of Islam as a creed.¹⁶

Different factors triggered the study of Islam in Europe. One of these factors is the incorporation of the concept of religion in the law making institutions which not only helped in the shaping of laws but also helped to regulate human conduct within the domains of that law.¹⁷ Another factor is the criticism to which Islam was subjected by the Christian scholars as they stressed on their own religion and were adamant in proving Christianity as the only religion that was perfect for humanity. So they felt it imperative to argue against Islam and this whole striving put Islam in to the limelight for further research and Islam also grabbed attention of Europe.¹⁸ Even the concept of Islam as an emerging civilization was distinct on grounds of unique cultures embedded in it. Islam also emphasized the spiritual upheaval of man and hence, it presented the ideal religion compatible with human needs and societies. Hence, Europe had begun to delve in to the profound study of Islam to map out and draw positivity from it for the benefit of their societies.¹⁹

Europe had embarked upon the research on Islam and the objectives to accomplish met a halt when the conflict between traditional Islam and the political powers of the societies arose. It was felt that Islam had certain rules that were prerogative only of the past and no room could be spared in the modern societies to accommodate them regarding the power balance. In fact, the gap was more obvious in the Muslim societies with non-uniform political developments.²⁰

When the history of modernity is traced in Islam, it dates back to the conflict between traditionalists and rationalists on the employment of subject of reasoning.²¹ So the concept of modernity becomes part and parcel of the study of religion and hence, the religion holds the middle grounds between tradition and modernity. The changing times urged the need to focus on the solutions from traditions that could address the challenges of the modern times.²²

Modernists Voices in Islam: Contributions from Islamic World

Some of the important personalities from Asia and Egypt had the honor of contributing to Islamic modernism, include the following.²³

Asian Islamic Modernists

Allama Iqbal (1877-1938): Allama Iqbal is a very renowned name when the subject of modernity in Islam is broached about. He possessed radical ideas. He believed that Muslims had to come at par with the modern and changing world and it would have been possible if they resorted to *ijtihad*. He considered *ijtihad* as the vehicle for the process of evolution for the Muslims in their way to adapt and accept the modernity within the confines and domains of Islam. He was revolutionary in the sense that he wanted the Muslims to open their hearts towards the advancing challenges and instead of mere getting stuck, he wanted them to march towards embracing modernity in a more positive manner that is amicable to the Muslims.²⁴

For him the only factor that could help the Muslims deal with this modernity issue was none other than *ijtihad* and he deemed *ijtihad* as the life and soul for the survival of Muslims in the upcoming fast paced world. In fact, *ijtihad* was their one way ticket to facilitate the Muslims to make this world a better abode and it could save the Muslims from the fuss of falling prey to modernity issues. *Ijtihad* could act as the rescue force for the Muslims in the combat against the modernity issues and it could come up with more acceptable solutions for the Muslims.²⁵ On the whole, Allama Iqbal was the well-wisher of Muslims and he laid great stress on *ijtihad* for the bright future of Muslims so that they might not suffer the repercussions of the not coming at par with the modern world.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898): He was considered as an Islamic modernist on account of the fact that his ideas were more advanced than others in matters of religion. He used to ponder over the issues and challenges that were confronted by the Muslims of the subcontinent. His vision was broadened by the issues of Muslims confronted on the political, cultural and political fronts. These issues awakened his sixth sense and he developed the sight for not only delving into the subtleties of the issues but also the means and ways to solve and handle them.²⁶

He believed that the so-called religious leaders of the Muslims, the *ulema*, were narrow-minded and therefore, were incapable of leading the Muslims to the right path. The need for research was not emphasized and it was considered

a taboo topic by the *ulema*; they believed to follow the transmitted traditions without ever bothering about the authenticity. No doubt that Divine Revelation was there in the form of the Holy Qur'an but due to the narrow vision of the *ulema*, the interpretation of Holy Qur'an were not available and accessible to the Muslims of the subcontinent as language was a barrier and Holy Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic language while layman didn't possess knowledge of this.

As a result, the Muslims were left with no option but to rely on the *ulema* for the understanding of the word of Allah Almighty in the form of the Holy Qur'an. He believed that they didn't understand the challenges confronted by the Muslims in the intellectual arena. He blamed *ulema* for the backwardness of the Muslims and their political, religious and cultural deterioration. Therefore, he was against the *ulema* for their narrow sightedness with regard to the betterment of the Muslim community.²⁷ For him, the laws of nature held more importance than anything else and hence, he tried to establish a relationship between the laws of nature and the laws of Holy Qur'an. He believed that the laws of nature had a direct link with the laws of the Holy Qur'an because laws of nature speak none other than the Divine laws. Similarly, the laws of Holy Qur'an were the word of Allah Almighty but with the purpose of balancing human lives and societies without chaos. The human nature was held in high esteem and hence, the injunctions of the Holy Qur'an were revealed for the human beings and it was close to the laws of nature. Therefore, Sayyid Ahmad Khan agreed to this so much so that he believed that both the laws are the representative of each other; when the law of nature is discussed then it implies law of Holy Qur'an and vice versa.

Moulavi Chiragh Ali (1844-1895): He was a contemporary of Sayyid Ahmad Khan. He believed that Islamic law was not fully compatible with the changing times. He pointed the domains of *Shariah* which required modification in order to make them more compatible with the advancing times. For example, he suggested the modification in the areas of divorce, marriage, political issues, etc. In fact his suggestions marked his sense of understanding *Shariah* in its true spirit. He fully acknowledged the problems confronted by the Muslims and realized that Islam had to be made more compatible with the changing times to keep pace with the time and not to lag behind; it would also produce ease for the Muslims and they would be able to lead with their lives in a better way. He clearly differentiated the Revealed Law and the Common Law. Revealed Law is the law given by Allah Almighty that cannot be changed and it is to be followed without any doubt in its authenticity. No alteration in this law is acceptable as is divinely ordained. Muhammadan Common Law is the law pertaining to the conduct and matters regarding the social lives of human beings. It is not rigid in nature but there is room for flexibility in it for the sake of humanity. The purpose of this flexibility was to make it easy for the believers to lead their lives according to the teachings of

Islam.²⁸

‘Allama Shibli Nu‘mani (1857-1914): He was the one more concerned when any Orientalist raised voice against Islam and criticized it. He was more prone to defending Islam from the attacks of Orientalists and hence he felt morally obliged to come up with the defensive attitude towards Islam. In this context, his best effort is in the work on the life of the Holy Prophet.²⁹ He detested the very idea of European writers criticizing Holy Prophet, so he made up his mind that he would strive to refute the allegations and false justifications of the Orientalists against the life of Holy Prophet. It was an up-hill task but he was determined and hence, he succeeded in his aims and came up with his masterpiece on the life of Holy Prophet. He employed the methodology of western historiography though he did not acknowledge and approve of western modernity.³⁰

Syed Amir Ali (1849–1928): He belonged to the traditional *Shi‘i* and was a prolific writer. His writings encompassed the religious theme and he was more concerned with the comparative religions. Thus, he felt it imperative to compare Islam with the other religions. He was very much concerned in delineating the theological differences between *Sunni* and *Shia*. He probed the History of Islam from a theological perspective. He not only discussed the issues for which Islam was being criticized but also came up with defensive arguments that how Islam had been successful in providing the ideology different from the existing ideologies of other religions and how it helped to shape their lives in a more positive manner.³¹

Egyptian Islamic Modernists

Some of the major contributors of Islamic modernism from Egypt are listed as follows:

Rafi’ al-Tahtawi (1801-1873): He is considered to be the very first one among the modern Islamists of Egypt. Whatever he had written clearly marked his inspiration from the West. He deemed education to be the part and parcel for the development of a nation and considered it mandatory for the public so that they could be able to contribute their part and express their views in the law making.³² Also, he emphasized that laws prevailing in a country are designed according to that country’s needs but applying the same laws in a different country would not be feasible as the needs and circumstances of regions vary from each other. Even the time factor is also crucial in implementation of laws of one area to another without taking into account the time and space dimensions of the other area. The repercussions could be devastating.³³

He was much conscious regarding the religious matters and hence, he stressed the need for study of religion but simultaneously he differentiated between the sciences and the theology. For him theology was purely religious in nature while sciences involved the human reasoning and intellect so sciences were a separate category than theology.³⁴ He argued that modernity is marked

by knowledge and this knowledge implies the sciences. Hence, reasoning is an important factor that leads to modernity. The traditional Islam needed to accommodate the sciences to have tinge of modernity in it.

Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897): He is one of the famous Islamic modernist. He is associated with Middle East rather than of a specific country as he did not stay at one country for a long time. For him, the development of human society was dependent upon the right employment of human reasoning and intellect. If reasoning and intellect is not used rightly, then the society lags behind in terms of progress and a stage of stagnation is evident.³⁵ He further argued that true connotation of Islam does not render it as a religion of rituals and practices but rather it is a complete civilization in its true sense.³⁶ This notion of civilization was upheld by him to emphasize the diversity of cultures in Islam and how Islam had spread with this diversity. Also, he was vocal whenever the Orientalists attacked Islamic beliefs or practices.

Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905): He was a staunch supporter of educational reforms because he believed that education was the only means that could create awareness in the society and among the people which eventually leads to the change of mindset of people.³⁷ Education also inculcates in the human beings the consciousness of being a responsible citizen and hence, they do participate in the government for the well-being of the state. He was also inspired from the vision of western writers and was a revolutionary in his ideas. His main inspiration had its origins in French Revolution. He also believed that Islam had the capability to accommodate the eastern and western civilization without losing its essence.³⁸

Muhammad Farid Wajdi (1875-1954): He was of the view that modernity in Islam was not an alien phenomenon, in fact it was already mentioned in the Holy Qur'an and the need was to ponder on the verses and develop more of a rational thinking. He believed that the purpose of the teachings of Islam was the well-being of humanity and the same very objective if illustrated in the modern values renders those values to be acceptable. Also, the modernity issue is to be dealt wisely within the premises of the Holy Qur'an so that no contradiction results between the two.

Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966): His name is associated with his work on Islamic political theory as he had added a new perspective to it. His approach was secular regarding the concept of caliphate in Islam. He argued that the concept of caliphate does not exist in the sources and the caliphate institute was only exploiting the people and manipulating the position of caliphate. He did not approve of the caliphate by delineating the motives of the Holy Prophet and how the political state came in to being as a result concerning the welfare of the society. In fact, the establishment of a political state was a liability and not the primary objective of Holy Prophet. So he disapproved of the caliphate institute.

Contemporary Islamic Modernists around the Globe

Muslim scholars and intellectuals have shown concern and taken up the challenges of modernity to explain the position of Islam in the global scenario. A few of them are mentioned below:

Jamal al-Banna (1920 –2013) was an Egyptian liberal scholar, and an ardent critic of Canonical Hadith Literature books (*Saheehain*) rendering them contradictory to Quran.³⁹ Al-Banna was a supporter of separating state and religion and considers that politics harms religion and state both by misuse of power.⁴⁰ Jamal al-Banna was a strict egalitarian, and many of his views were controversial to traditional Islamists; like he regards all human beings equal regardless of their religion. He also supported the stance of Woman to lead the prayer as *Imama*.⁴¹

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (born 1952) is a Pakistani Muslim scholar, theologian, and a modernist who follows the principles of Amin Ahsan Islahi as his teacher. He worked for Islamic Ideological Council of Pakistan but later resigned after his controversial remarks on sensitive issues of faith. He received strict criticism from traditional Muslim scholars and later left Pakistan due to strong criticism. He questioned male female interactions as discussed in Quranic verses as well as raised objections on Islamic Penal Laws specially *hudud* and *Diyat*.⁴² His views on women testimony also didn't come in congruence with the traditionalist Islamic teachings. His interpretations of Islamic commandments on punishments were strongly disapproved by majority of people in Pakistan. He considered that fiqh is a human exercise and can be defected, so one is not under any obligation to follow the schools of fiqh.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (born 1925) is a renowned Islamic scholar and peace activist from India. His work received international recognition as well as received many privileged National awards as well. He developed a unique understanding of Islamic principles in the modern world to create a harmonious balance between state and the Muslim minority without conflicting with one another. Being a member of Muslim minority in India, he primarily made contextual analysis of on the issue, but his writing were got international recognition as well where he addressed Muslim *Ummah* as a whole.⁴³ His 'rediscovering' Islam set him the gola of presenting Islam to the West that would appeal the "Western educate-mind."⁴⁴

Tariq Ramadan (Born 1962) belongs to Switzerland and is a distinguished Islamic voice among reformers and modernists of present era. Being an eminent philosopher and a writer, he worked on senior positions in Oxford University and other prestigious universities of the world. Many of his views on Islamic theology also face strong criticism from Muslim world.⁴⁵ He emphasizes that interpretation of Quran having a priority over reading the text itself. He considers himself as "Salafi Reformist". He rejected many concepts of Law of Siyar, raised objections on *hudud* and all kinds of capital

punishments.⁴⁶ He says, “There is no place for modernization of Islam, but only for Islamization of modernity”.

Conclusion

Modernity is a term usually associated with challenges that have inspired the Muslim intellectuals and scholars to explore the terms and challenges and try to bring a concept of reconstruction of Islamic thought to bring compatibility between traditionalist and modernists theories. The concept of modernity in the opinion of Muslim scholars around the globe from Asia, Egypt and in the contemporary era from different parts of the world are discussed in order to construe to an original understanding of the message, detached from tribalistic, pre-destinarian and sectarian influences which have rendered the Muslim world lethargic, decadent and superstitious. Modern Muslim modernism has inspired scholars to present to the world that how Islam can play a positive role in the globalized world. Some theorists have given some interpretations which are controversial and not unanimously agreed upon but it the need of time to survive in the changing environment and modernity under the umbrella of Islam to be more pertinent way to adopt than to be inspired by western modernity and follow it.

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