

Tracing the origins of Modernism: A Religious Point of View



Syed Farooq Mohyud-din¹

Dr. Uzma Saffat²

[<uzmasaffat@yahoo.com>](mailto:uzmasaffat@yahoo.com)

Dr. Musferah Mehfooz³

¹Visiting Faculty Lecturer, Department of Arabic & Islamic studies, GC University Lahore

²Assistant Professor, Department of Arabic & Islamic studies, GC University Lahore

³Tenured Associate Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus

ABSTRACT

Nations that dominate the face of the earth at a time implement their system and ideology throughout the globe. The contemporary age is the age of the West and it has implemented its system and ideology through Modernism and its manifestations. Unfortunately, they have reaped more harm to the world than benefits. Resultantly it is humanity at stake and the World that is slowly dying. According to the western approach the modernization theory is concerned, development is simply a matter of knowledge and technology transfer that is unproblematic and straightforward, context-free, and not disruptive of existing social and cultural arrangements in developing countries. But indeed, Modernism is not just a political theory, but a way of life strengthened by the very beliefs which are ingrained in the world through a process of slow poisoning. In this research article, we trace back the origins of Modernism, its evolution, and how it has changed over the course of history. Without understanding all these things in chronological order, we can neither challenge Modernism nor rectify any harms that it is inflicting on our society. The methodology applied in the discussion is a critical analysis based on inductive and deductive approaches. The conclusion arrived at in the article is that we should understand that Modern education, technology, and scientific advancement is the need of the hour but at the same time we cannot reject the centuries' norms, culture, religious observations, and system of their values..

Received:

15-Dec-22

Accepted:

28-Jan-23

Online:

30-Jan-23

KEYWORDS

Modernism,
Contemporary
World, History,
Colonialism,
West

Introduction

The glorification of the Past is but a mere memory in the eyes of the nations. The only thing that matters for the nations is the present and the future because, with this, the very foundations of their ideology and Survival are attached. The contemporary world is the world of Modernism. Unfortunately, it has done more harm than good. The world is dying physically and morally. Physically by the pollution and havoc that we as humanity have unleashed on this planet Earth. Morally by the destruction of the values and wisdom for which humanity once stood for historically. An anti-thesis or the counter-narrative to an ideology is created when the ideology has a principled stance or a worldview. The biggest problem that is being faced by humanity is understanding the concept of Modernism because it exists in multiple facets and is continuously changing itself with the given time. Moreover, our biggest challenge is that there is no principled perspective or worldview of Modernism, thereby making it much more difficult to understand. This is also the case for the Muslims across Globe. The imperative reason for their continuous descent is not understanding the root of the problem. Modernism is not just a theory but a perspective that is being led by the west and has successfully changed everything. From our Individual life to our social and political life, everything has been transformed.

Therefore, to understand the problems we face, we need to understand the source of the problem. This article tries to solve this very puzzle by pointing out the origins of Modernism. So, we can thereby understand its formations and try to figure out how it has reached its current form in the modern world. We also need to understand how religion has been systematically negated or subjugated throughout this world by Modernism. As Fredrich Nietzsche stated: “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him”.¹ An additional challenging aspect of Modernism is that it takes one step forward and tends to change the religion. It is trying to dictate nation-states to limit religion, therefore drawing a boundary to its role. This is the complication that Muslim countries are facing on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, on a broader level, we discuss the adverse effects Modernism has inflicted on our society, and politics, and how it has established new societal standards.

¹Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Anti-Christ*. Cosmo, Inc., 2005. PP: 569–574

Another complication is understanding the concept of human beings. How the definition of human beings has been just reduced to material and rational beings? For traditionally human beings were also an aesthetic and emotional being. This has created several problems like anxiety, depression, general disorders, and traumas. These things are not only just being experienced in the west but also Muslim countries. Having no Binding and guiding principles the Modernism stands as the biggest challenge for the humanity and generations to come. But indeed, the struggle has to continue for a better world in which values, morality, and the rightful status of human beings are upheld.

Evolution of Modernism

Evolution of Modernism took different stages, and through the work of centuries, it was ingrained in the minds of people. We try to track down historical records in the chronological orders and discuss only the important periods, which are as follows:

- Age of Faith (3rd Century-13th Century)
- Renaissance (13th – 16th Century)
- Age of Reason (15th Century-16th Century)
- Age of Enlightenment (17th- 18th Century)
- Colonialism
- Post Colonialism or Neo-Colonialism

Age of Faith

The age of Faith marks the rise of Christianity in the Byzantine empire. The birth of the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) and eventually his establishment of the State of Madinah. This started a glorious era of Muslim Civilization. Expansions took place during the lifetime of Hazrat Muhammad (P.B.U.H) 622–632. Expansions also took place during the khalifate Rashida 632–661. Islam further embraced other lands during the Umayyad Caliphate, 661–750. As Hugh Kennedy writes “In the year 632, Islam was confined to Arabic-speaking tribesmen living in Arabia and the desert margins of Syria and Iraq. Most of the population of Syria spoke Greek or Aramaic; most of those in Iraq, Persian, or Aramaic; in Egypt, they spoke Greek or Coptic; in Iran, they spoke Pahlavi; in North Africa, they spoke Latin, Greek, or Berber. None of them were Muslims. In Egypt and North Africa, lands we now think of as clearly Islamic, there were no Muslims and effectively no Arabic speakers, and the same was true of Iran and Afghanistan. The scale and the speed of the transformation are astonishing; within a century of the Prophet's death, all these lands, along with Spain, Portugal, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and southern Pakistan (Sind), were ruled by an Arabic-speaking Muslim elite, and in all of them the local population was beginning to convert to the new religion.”¹

¹Kennedy, Hugh. *The great Arab conquests: How the spread of Islam changed the world we live in*. Da Capo Press, Incorporated, 2007. P: 3

The last Muslim Caliphate was established by Ottomans along with the Mughal Empire at that time. This time also saw the climax of Christianity with the Catholic church gaining much power in Europe. But according to Will Durant in the *Story of Civilization*, it's difficult to comprehend the events taking place during this period as he says: "The obligation to cover the economic, political, legal, military, moral, social, religious, educational, scientific, medical, philosophic, literary, and artistic aspects of four distinct civilizations—Byzantine, Islamic, Judaic, and West European—has made unification and brevity difficult."¹ According to Will Durant, the age of faith ended or started to fade away in the 13th Century with the emergence of the Renaissance.

Renaissance

Renaissance was a period of the break for the European nations and the west from the traditional knowledge they had been understanding and propagating. Renaissance brought a significant social change within the masses as they now questioned everything based on the humanist approach. Most of the scholars of this era studied humanities, and subjects like literature, philosophy, and history were promoted. Now, these studies are also known as Liberal arts. Islamic world helped create the renaissance because Muslim Scholars were the source for the writings that the renaissance scholars studied. For centuries Muslim scholars had been working on the translation of Greek writings. Muslims had especially translated Aristotle and Istanbul was one of the best places for Greek writings to be found. As the *Cambridge History of Islam*, while discussing the renaissance states: "There are three institutions or factors which appear to be the characteristic of this Medieval Muslim science: the libraries and translation centers, the hospitals and finally the instruments for observation."² The literature of Muslims was full of rationale. Even the Islamic texts of Muslims talked about different logic for the different commandments which have been given by Islam. Even the philosophy behind Muslim poetry at that time was: "Reason and Mysticism must go hand in hand".³

This authentication by an orientalist shows that even in mysticism and poetry, Muslims considered that there should be some reason or logic. This meant that the poetry of Rumi or the writings of Imam-e-Azam Abu Hanifa and Imam Ghazali was full of wisdom and contained a meaningful purpose. The purpose was to emancipate mankind from their selfish

¹Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, The Age of Faith*, Volume 4, Simon, and Schuster, 1980, P:6

²Holt, Peter Malcolm, Ann KS Lambton, and Bernard Lewis, eds. *The Cambridge History of Islam*. Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, 1978, P:747

³ Karen Armstrong, *Islam a short history*, Modern Library New York, 2000, P:91

worldly pursuits and help them think of a bigger and higher purpose in life. This is something that is willfully missed by the Europeans and not highlighted.

Age of Enlightenment

Age of Enlightenment was a direct result of the renaissance movement in Europe. Ideas such as Liberalism, Individual Liberty, and opposition to the fixed dogmas of the religion were challenged during this time. The emphasis of these movements was kept on Scientific methods, rationalism, reductionism, and increased questions on the religious orthodoxy. Schools, Universities, encyclopedia, and dictionaries were established throughout the west. Age of enlightenment directly led to a new era for humanity at large. In the book *Age of Enlightenment: A history from beginning to end*, it is defined as: “The Enlightenment was born of the idea that all human beings share the same basic needs and as such should enjoy the same rights and privileges. Enlightenment philosophers believed that human reason, rationality, and benevolence would lead to the natural progression of society and the betterment of life on Earth. Intellectually, the Enlightenment gave birth to the disciplines of political science, economic theory, anthropology, sociology, and modern philosophy—disciplines that still form the basis of how we attempt to understand life in the twenty-first century. The Enlightenment can be understood as a direct challenge to the status quo at a time when intolerant and superstitious religious beliefs dominated most people’s lives. Set free from the restraints of the church, the state, and the monarchy, according to the enlightenment, human beings would be able to improve society by focusing on developing the quality of material and social life.”¹

The seventeenth-century volume should contain excerpts from all these big philosophers of the time who were the beacons of knowledge in that century. Even their books are read today especially in literature like; Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, Gassendi, Spinoza, Pascal, Hobbes, Malebranche, Newton The eighteenth century is the century of revolution for the enlightenment. This was a time when people like Voltaire used their intellect to even convey their ideas to different kingdoms. Kings, monarchs, and even literary people discussed these writings. Famous philosophers of that time are as follows: Berkeley, Hume, Reid, Adam Smith, Kant, and Voltaire.

Perhaps the biggest idea of the Age of Enlightenment was to bring forward the arguments in favour of the separation of Church and State. This then further formed the very basis of modern Secularism that we see in the nation-states. “The concept of separating church and

¹ Evans, Bette N. *Divided by God: America's church-state problem-and what we should do about it.* (2005). P:29

state is often credited to the writings of English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704).¹ John Locke is famous for his ideology throughout the world. He talked about Liberalism and freedom for everyone. That is why he is called the father of liberalism because he talked about enlightenment. “John Locke was an English philosopher and physician, widely regarded as one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers and commonly known as the Father of Liberalism.”² According to John Locke, the mind of humans is a blank slate, and the state or any individual should not be given any liberty to dictate their conscious. His theories of religious tolerance gained much importance throughout Europe and America. The ideas of the Age of Enlightenment spread through coffee houses, debating societies, schools, and universities, book industry, encyclopedias and dictionaries, salons, and learned academies.

Immanuel Kant further attacked the religion and the clergy in his widely published essay of 1784. He believed that civilian freedom is contingent on arguing everything, thereby challenging all the beliefs. As he writes: “I have placed the main point of enlightenment - the escape of men from their self-incurred tutelage - chiefly in matters of religion because our rulers have no interest in playing guardian concerning the arts and sciences and also because religious incompetence is not only the most harmful but also the most degrading of all. But the manner of thinking of the head of a state who favors religious enlightenment goes further, and he sees that there is no danger to his lawgiving in allowing his subjects to make public use of their reason and to publish their thoughts on a better formulation of his legislation and even their open-minded criticisms of the laws already made. Of this, we have a shining example wherein no monarch is superior to him we honor. But only one who is himself enlightened, is not afraid of shadows and has a numerous and well-disciplined army to assure public peace, can say: "Argue as much as you will..."³ Thus, this was the phase that religion was being criticized throughout the world. For Muslims, this was nothing new because of two reasons:

1. They believe that the enlightenment had already been given to Muslims through the Holy Quran and Sunnah of Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H).
2. Secondly Muslims of that time were already significantly advance and were one of the superpowers of the world. Their economic position was much strong, and they exported different products throughout the world. Muslim merchants travelled throughout the

² Nancy J Hirschmann, *Gender class and freedom in Modern Political Theory*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2009, P:79

³ Immanuel, Kant, Reiss Hans, and H. B. Nisbet. "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?." *Kant's Political Writings* (1991): 54-60.

world to sell their finished products. “Islam was to have a particularly powerful influence on the development of Europe especially, though by no means exclusively, via Islamic Spain. Above all the Islamic world constituted no less than the Bridge of the World, across which many Eastern ‘resource portfolios’ as well as trade passed through to the West between 650 and 1800.”¹

The Holy Quran categorically declares that the basic source of guidance can be derived from Allah. As Holy Quran states:

فَدَّ جَاءَكُمْ بَصَائِرُ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ ۚ فَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۚ وَ مَنْ عَمِيَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۚ وَ مَا أَنَا عَلَيْكُمْ بِحَفِيظٍ²

“Signs of Guidance are from your lord. So, anyone who perceives them brings benefit to his own self, and anyone who is blind about them brings loss to himself. Is Allah not the guardian of you.”

For the Muslims criticism on their religion in particular and faith, in general, was nothing new. They had challenged the west both physically and ideologically. This meant that Age of enlightenment had no big affect on the Islamic Ideology. On the other hand, it was a period of downfall for Christianity, which was fast losing its control from not only Europe but also around the Globe. This decline is still sharp and not just restricted to west but around the globe. As the Guardian writes: “The decline of Christianity is an ongoing trend in the west and north Europe.”³

Colonialism

Modernism and its facets were propagated throughout the world using colonialism. Colonialism was a time of exploitation by the Europeans and the Britishers. The aggressors were called colonizers while the captured lands were called colonies. For example, Britishers were the colonizers of the Subcontinent while the subcontinent was a colony.

Europeans nearly controlled all big countries, including Subcontinent, North America, the Caribbean, Africa, Brazil, and Latin America. “Historian Philip Hoffman calculated that by 1800, before the Industrial Revolution, Europeans already controlled at least 35% of the globe, and by 1914, they had gained control of 84% of the globe”.⁴ The effects of Colonialism were horrendous for the colonies. Firstly, the colonizers now controlled everything in these colonies

¹John Hobson, *The eastern origins of Western Civilization*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, P: 38

²Al-Anam, 6:105

³Sherwood, Harriet. "Christianity as default is gone": *The rise of a non-Christian Europe.* *The Guardian* 21 (2018).

⁴Hoffman Phillip, *Why Did Europe Conquer the world*, Princeton University press, 2015, P: 2-3

and did not even care about the people. The people were heavily taxed and had to go hungry while the invading forces filled their coffers. Secondly, The raw material was taken from all these colonies and was then shifted to the respective countries of the colonizers. Then it was resold in the form of finished product back to the colonies. This meant that the people of colonies were buying their own product back but at least 10 times higher rates. This strengthened the very capitalism that stands as the economic model of the west today. Their culture of colonies was uprooted while their religion was subjugated. But this was not the end. People were forced to accept the very values of Europe and the west to ensure that they sustained. As the excerpt shows the situation clearly:

“Colonial practices also spur the spread of colonist languages, literature, and cultural institutions, while endangering or obliterating those of native peoples. The native cultures of the colonized peoples can also have a powerful influence on the imperial country”.¹

For Ensuring that the Modern western values were inculcated in people of colonies, certain institutions of education and development were established throughout the world. The essential purpose of these institutions was to create a class of students who not only adopted western society but could also rule their colonies. Institutions such as Aitchison College Lahore, Government College Lahore and Calcutta College are a prime example of this systematic change. The students who passed out from these institutions were then placed on important seats like civil bureaucracy. This is how Modernism was ingrained from the very top and then transferred to the bottom.

Post-Colonial Dilemma

Most of the countries who were the colonies of their masters are passing through a period of Postcolonialism. This is a period of an identity crisis when all these nations do not know which path they need to adopt. Post colonialism is not just about ideology but about culture, our way of living, societal standards, our model of education, our judicial system, and our system of governance.

Countries like Pakistan are trying very hard to challenge the taboos that have been created by Colonialism. But this seems an unending task, as Farooq Yousaf states: “Postcolonialism provides effective tools to analyse the issues faced by former colonial states such as Pakistan.

¹ Olumide, Yetunde Mercy. *The Vanishing Black African Woman: Volume One: A Compendium of the Global Skin-Lightening Practice*. Vol. 1. Langaa RPCIG, 2016., P: 934

Through these tools, in the form of a postcolonial critique, the paper discussed how even 70 years after independence, Pakistan still maintains some of its colonial legacies.”¹

These are the evils that Modernism has inflicted on our society. Thus, the real question is whether we can challenge this dilemma and situation we live in? Whether there is a solution to all this in religion? How are Islam and its teachings even relevant today? Can the Islamic teaching challenge the modernity and its various forms?

Survival of Islam amidst these Waves

On the other hand, Islam has sustained to its ideological ground to a bigger extent. It continues to grow as the biggest religion in the world. Many people convert to Islam yearly, while millions are born as Muslims. The biggest population of Muslims lies in Indonesia (225 Million) while the second biggest population in Pakistan (200 Million) followed by India (182 Million) approximately. According to the Pew Research centre of Religion and Public Life: “By 2030 Muslims are projected to represent about 26.4% of the global population (out of a total of 7.9 billion people)”² The Muslim population is expected to rise to 2.2 billion while they would form 26.4 percent of the world population.

But the biggest issue is that Modernism is slowly and steadily also inflicting its damage on Islam. But still, the real question is, how many of these Muslims are practicing Muslims? Do the Muslims still believe in their fundamentals, or their religiosity is just restricted to few events? We have recently witnessed how religion is just being curtailed to some rituals or worship practices, while the real essence is being snatched away. We have also seen how Muslims especially within the educational institutes and elite class are becoming increasingly atheist and they even question the concept of GOD. If this trend continues, it will have an everlasting effect on the transformation of religion we all will witness in the next 20 years to come.

Conclusion

While we should understand that the Modern education, technology, and scientific advancement is the need of the hour. But at the same time we cannot reject the centuries-old

¹Yousaf, Farooq. "Pakistan's colonial legacy: FCR and postcolonial governance in the Pashtun tribal frontier." *Interventions* 21, no. 2 (2019): 172-187.

²Lugo, Luis, Alan Cooperman, Erin O'Connell, and Sandra Stencel. "The future of the global Muslim population." *Pew Research Center, USA* (2011): 1-209.

human experience and system of values. This will be a crime that will not be washed away easily. Maulana Rumi says:

بند بگسل، باش آزاد ای پسر
چند باشی بند سیم و بند زر

O son burst your chains and be free!

How long will you be a bondsman toe silver and gold?

At the same time, we need to understand that the decline of Muslims cannot be just hampered by using the name of Islam. Just using the references of historical glories can also not save us from the humiliation that the Muslim world faces at the hands of the west. Practical steps must be taken to turn the Position of Muslims to a point that the can again regain the reins of the world in their hands. For this change four things are needed: 1-Domination within the field of knowledge and intellect to ensure that Muslim world does not just relies on west for information. 2- The ability to apply this knowledge in all the fields of work so we are no longer dependent on other countries for Expertise. 3- Direct challenge to Modernism and its facets to ensure that we do not just blindly follow them, and we can again be the ones who are followed. 3- Supremacy of Muslims in ethical and Moral Values to the extent that we become role model for the world. These are some things that our forefathers practiced in true essence and that is why they were able to make a history. Truly the starting point must be the understanding of history and how we have reached the times that we live in today.