Modernism and Traditionalism in Islam: A Plea for Realism¹

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The benefits of modernisation cannot be ignored any more than its failings. Nothing should be accepted or rejected merely because it is modern. Likewise, nothing should be accepted or rejected merely because it is traditional. There is much that is good in modernity, and much that is good in traditional societies. There is much that is bad in modernity, and much that is bad in traditional societies.

In practice, any politically active movement that opposes Westernisation and calls for the enforcement of Islamic law is termed “Islamic fundamentalism.” One must be careful to distinguish so-called fundamentalists from traditional Muslim groups, for there are Muslim groups that have been anti-intellectualist, anti-philosophical and rather outwardly oriented throughout the history of Islamic civilisation. On the other hand, there are some revolutionary Muslims who have been philosophers and mystics.

Loss of the Sacred. ‘Modernity’ is the period of European history from the aftermath of the Reformation through the twentieth century, as well as being a cultural condition. During the modern period European society acquired a number of striking interrelated characteristics: *economically*, the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy; *politically*, the institution of the nation-state appeared, liberalism and secularism gained ground against the allied powers of the nobility and the Church; *socially*, individualism and social mobility began to take precedence over family and community, and technology came to play an ever more important role in the emerging private and public spheres; *philosophically*, Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism became dominant; in *science*, new methods of exact measurement and applied mathematics were developed; in the *arts*, there was a shift from iconic art to naturalism and then expressionism; and in *theology*, historical method and an emphasis on religious experience became prominent. When conditions such as these come to characterise a society, whether European or not, the society is said to have become ‘modernised’.

‘Traditional’ is an even more vague term than modern and is generally understood in contrast to modern. Whatever was deeply ingrained in society prior to modernisation is traditional. In traditional societies we find an integrated worldview centred upon religious belief, while in modern societies this integration has been lost. Indirectly the traditional is understood in terms of European history being defined in contrast to the modern, which in turn can only be understood with reference to European culture. To call a non-Western society Traditional

is therefore to claim that it is similar in important ways to Europe before the Reformation. In contrast to Modernism, Traditionalism accepts the view that pre-modern societies are superior to modernised societies. It highlights the faults in modernity: the loss of the sacred with the rise of secularism, the loss of intrinsic value with the rise of instrumental rationality, the loss of art and genuine vocation with industrialisation and automation, and the loss of a coherent world view with the emergence of pluralism and specialisation.

European modernisation took place as European societies became increasingly industrialised. The changes wrought by industrialisation led to shifts in political power and authority, and these shifts are reflected in modern political philosophies. Traditionalists often glorify pre-modern social structures because they are seen as products of true Traditional beliefs. However, the *reactions against changes* that accompanied industrialisation are no less modern than the European positivistic glorification of modernity. Yet Traditionalist reasoning is valuable when it points out aspects of modern culture and technology that conflict with Islamic principles in ways that would ordinarily pass without notice.

The Inescapability of Modernity. Traditionalists offer no alternative to modernity because they fail to come to grips with its dynamics and instead wallow in nostalgia and insist on a return to fundamental principles embedded in the Qur'an and *hadīth*, and their emphasis upon the *Sharī'ah*. The question that remains unanswered by Traditionalists is how to apply such principles in the present circumstances of modernisation. It is reasonable to assume that modernisation, along with all its benefits and injuries, will continue to spread. The challenge that faces Muslims today is how to minimise the injuries, how to ride out modernisation so that it does not take the same form among Muslims as it has in Christian society: how to preserve the sacred norms and values prescribed for us by Islam in these rapidly changing times.

Compromise is necessary because the traditional institutions and cultural forms are not sufficiently flexible to accommodate the changes with which contemporary Muslim societies are faced. Moreover, there is much in the traditional institutions that is not worth preserving. Loyalty to Islam requires a realistic appraisal of the environment in which we seek to live as Muslims and foster the flourishing of Muslim communities. Change in traditional societies tended to be gradual and rather slow, largely because of technological limitations.

Consider the concept of *shūrā* (consultation). In the small community of believers at the time of the Prophet of Islam consultation could be carried out through direct conversation with recognised leaders of tribal groups. When the community of believers comes to include millions and tribal affiliations have been erased centuries ago, it will be appropriate to adopt democratic institutions and apparatuses, even in the absence of any endorsement of democratic political

theory. Another example is punishment. In Islamic sources there is no precedent for the collection of fines or prison sentences. Traditional authorities introduced prisons and dungeons, and the conditions in such Traditional institutions were notorious. It is neither practical nor moral to attempt to regulate traffic with threats of Traditional forms of punishment. Tradition is of no help in such matters. The example of traditional Muslim societies may help us to understand how Muslims sought to live in accordance with their religion, and in what ways they succeeded and failed in this effort, given the circumstances in which they lived.

Balance and Truth-Seeking. Instead of trying to build a sense of self-worth based on the ruins of an idealised past, we need to seek whatever truth becomes available to us in our changing circumstances, regardless of whether they are enshrined in our own traditions or come from modernity or anywhere else. Where we do have an opportunity to effect change or to modify its direction in some way, we need the humility to admit that the results of our interference in social, political and other cultural affairs are often other than we would predict. This, however, should not be cause for timidity, but for submission to Allah in obedience to His commands, knowing that in the ordinance of His prescriptions, He knows better.

We need to increase our sensitivity to how religious principles are reflected in various areas of culture, and *how modernisation may do violence to the integral character of traditional cultures*. Elements of traditional society cannot be imported from the past with the expectation that they can play the same integrative role in the new environment as they did in their original context. Our thought has been shaped by modern scientific, rational, and historical assumptions. We participate in the age of which we are a part. The fact is that new paradigms cannot arbitrarily be created or chosen; they emerge gradually replacing older paradigms that have lost their power.

Nothing should be retained solely for the reason that it is traditional, and nothing can be rejected solely because it is modern – whether in doctrine, economics, social institutions, and various forms of cultural expression. Consider computerisation. There is much about computer use that clashes with Islamic aims and values; yet to a large extent it is unavoidable. On the other hand, there is much in computer use that serves Islamic aims, e.g., accessibility to information and facilitation of research, not to mention specifically Islamic applications like Islamic software, Islamic internet groups and magazines, or searchable databases of *ahādīth*. In our enthusiasm for Islamic software, for example, we might overlook the fact that Islamic education through a computer program, no matter how detailed, is impersonal in the worst way.

Today we have to find ways to live in accordance with Islam that are appropriate to the exceedingly different circumstances in which we live. Social transformation

is being driven by rapid changes in technology that give no one time to adjust. This gives modern society an ugly mismatched quality. While certain measures can be taken to try to preserve some sort of proportionality, integrity becomes more of a utopian ideal than a realistic aim. The hope for Muslim societies is that they may move beyond modernisation while maintaining their faith and sense of the sacred, and without suffering all the injuries modernisation has brought in the West. In this effort, we can only rely on Allah and His aid as we seek to sort through the social, political, cultural and theological problems that face us.

Notes

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- 1. Abridged from 'Why I Am Not a Traditionalist', © HAJJ MUHAMMAD LEGENHAUSEN, 2002. The title of this extract–rearrangement has been added by the Editor.