Islam, Modernity and Justice for Women[1]

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Understanding Islam

To understand the relationship between Islam and modernity, it is important to begin with an understanding of the religion itself. Generically, Islam is a religion which brings the mission of liberation and salvation. Islam came to the world in order to bring a set of new morality because of its metaphysical and humanitarian characters. It brings not only vertical dimension teachings, but also horizontal aspects for humanity. It is a teaching deriving from God and oriented toward humanity (Imarah 1998).

Thus, Islam highly respects the dimension of humanity. The presence of Islam as a moral source can be observed in its achievement in transforming pre-Islamic Arabic nomads into civilized communities with values and morality. With the presence of Islam, these communities, being used to living in open deserts and highly susceptible to inter-tribal wars and conflicts, achieved success becoming sensitized to elevated values and morality. Inter-tribal wars and conflict occurred because of their lack of values and morality, which terminated after Islam spread its teachings. The Koran, Muslims' holy book and reference, has manifested itself in a language laden with aesthetics, which has the power to influence the nomads' emotions and awareness in shaping society's humanitarian vision.

Linguistically, Islam derives from the root words implying the meaning of peace, salvation, *maslahah* (well-being) and justice. Islam is a metamorphosis of a three-letter root word (*tsulatsi),* i.e. *salima-yaslamu-salaaman,* meaning safe and peaceful. The four-letter root word (*ruba'i)* namely *aslama-yuslimu-islaman* means to save and to bring peace.

Linguistically speaking, Islam has a very fundamental concern for peace, justice, and well-being. These values should be inwardly internalized by each and every Muslim in the first place. The feeling of being secure and safe in the mind of every Muslim individual is a basic capital for transcending the same feeling to others, making them sensitized to society's needs and interests. This feeling generally grows along with the process of ritualism and ritual practices, which will strengthen one's commitment and vision on the equality of all human beings. Islam teaches that there is no hierarchical structure among Muslims, all are equal before God. The combination of spiritual and ritual practices will produce Muslims who have balanced personalities, inwardly and outwardly, vertically and horizontally.

Islam, modernity and modernization

Is Islam compatible with modernity? How do Muslims respond to the continuous change of the world which has grown at a rapid and unprecedented rate in the last

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century? How do we resolve the problem of maintaining the legacy of the past in our religious tradition and integrate change into society and our lives? How do we introduce change smoothly, which is rare and difficult, without disrupting societies and dislocating values? These are some questions that may trigger a discussion on the relations between Islam and modernity. There are various responses to this problem, depending on our point of view. An economist has one kind of answer, a sociologist perhaps another. A secularist has a certain type of answer, which may be different from a fundamentalist's.

Modernity and modernization are words that are continuously contested in contemporary Islamic discourse. Modernization, the introduction into society of the artifacts of contemporary life such as communications, technology, or household equipment, has permeated into virtually all societies including Muslims. But modernity, a way of thought and of living in the contemporary world and of accepting change, as part of political and cultural processes by integrating new ideas into society, may not always be present. One may be using modern technologies and modern communication system, but maintains a past-oriented closed mindset and resists new ideas of modernity such as democracy or pluralism. The opposite can be true; one may lack modern facilities and live traditionally but adopt the attitudes of modernity. These people assume an attitude of enquiry into how people make choices, be they moral, personal, economic, or political. This problem of rational choice is central to modern people. Choice, query and doubt—which imply rationality, debate, discussion and disagreement—are part and parcel of modern mindset.[1]

Muslims' responses to modernity

How do Muslims react to modernity? There are several forms of reactions, but for simplicity purpose they will be grouped into two: the reformist/modernist and the fundamentalist. The modernists are devout, knowledgeable Muslims whose mission is threefold: first, to define Islam by bringing out the fundamentals in a rational and liberal manner; second, to emphasize, among others, the basic ideals of Islamic brotherhood, tolerance, and social justice; and third, to interpret the teaching of Islam in such a way as to bring out its dynamic character in the context of the intellectual and scientific progress of the modern world.[2] The modernists sincerely endeavour to reconcile differences between traditional religious doctrine and secular scientific rationalism, between unquestioning faith and reasoned logic, and between continuity of Islamic tradition and modernity.

Reformists/modernists

Many consider Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) as the father of Islamic modernism. He was foremost a belief in in the transcendence of God and in reason. Independent judgment and interpretation, the so-called *ijtihad,* is a necessity and the duty of man is to apply the principles of the Qur'an afresh to the problems of the time. He extremely critical of traditional *ulama* (religious scholars) who discouraged any new and creative thought and convinced that this type of medieval mentality was primarily responsible for the decline of Muslim power and influence in the world.

Islam must be active and energetic. Al-Afghani supported this principle by quoting the Qur'an that "God changes not what is in a people until they change what is in themselves.' He argued that Europeans had integrated change, and Muslims must do it

in their own way by becoming better Muslims. He thought that Europeans had modernized because they were no longer really Christian; and Muslims, conversely, were weak because they were not really Muslims.[3]

He questioned the division of knowledge into two categories: Muslim knowledge and European knowledge. He argued that knowledge, which is a noble thing, has no connection with any particular group. Islam is the closest religion to knowledge and learning and there is no contradiction between (modern) knowledge and the basic principles of Islam. Al-Afghani strongly recommended acquiring Western knowledge, technology, and services, as long as borrowing from the West was selective and served the basic needs and aspirations of the Muslim people. In this undertaking, which he believed would raise the standard of living of all Muslims, al-Afghani struggled to initiate an Islamic reformation similar to the successful Christian Reformation sparked by Martin Luther.[4]

The seeds for *ijtihad* (logical reasoning) planted by al-Afghani were sustained by his most prominent Egyptian student and ardent follower, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), who insisted that Muslims could improve their lives and their society only by carefully studying the Qur'an in the light of reason and rationality. He taught that the Qur'an gives all Muslims the right to differ even with the *ulama,* if the latter were unreasonable or irrational. Abduh constantly encouraged Muslims to approach problems in the true spirit of Islam: through analysis, reason and logic. Because of his emphasis on reason and rationality, he considered Islam and constructive science twin offspring of reason, which "God gave to guide us in the right path."[5]

The reformers of Islamic thought and practice such as al-Afghan, Abduh, or the more contemporary like Mahmud Muhammad Taha of Sudan, Muhammad Abed Al-Jabri, Ali Shariati of Iran or Abdurrahman Wahid of Indonesia, are knowledgeable not only about Islam but also about modern non-Islamic Western ideas. They believe in the convergence of Islamic and universal ethics and eager to introduce them into their own societies. Hence, unlike the fundamentalists, modernists do not fear or dislike Western ideas and practices. On the contrary, they welcome non-Islamic ideas and practices that they consider beneficial to the progress and prosperity of Muslim societies. They imaginatively synthesize Islamic and Western ideas to produce a reasonable and relevant reinterpretation of Islamic thought with enlightened cosmopolitan, liberal, and realistic perspectives. Modernists believe that this tolerance for diversity and willingness to adjust rapidly to a changing environment contributes to the emancipation of the individual Muslim and to the progress of Muslim societies.[6]

Fundamentalism
Firstly referred to in the U.S. in the early 1920's in connection with the battles of leading evangelical Protestants against liberal and progressive spirits of the age, fundamentalism is now observed to exist in all religions. The term has recently been used reluctantly and apologetically to describe new radical Islamic movements, or to offer substitute terms such as 'revivalists,' 'religious nationalists,' 'Islamic radicals,' 'political Islam,' 'Islamists,' or 'extremists.'

For all the controversy, it is clear that fundamentalism can lead to superficiality and reductionism in one's understanding of the religion. Deeper spiritual dimension of the religion cannot be captured and reflected because fundamentalisms tend to refer to religious texts rigidly and literally. Fundamentalist thinking is no more relevant in the currently fast changing world because human problems are so complex and diverse.

Religious texts need to be reinterpreted by putting at the forefront the goal of the religion (*maqasid al-syari'ah)..*

Two tasks are relevant in understanding fundamentalism: to ascertain why it has emerged in the larger cultural-historical sense—what is the common cause with which fundamentalism is associated; and to explain the particularities of its emergence—why here and not there, why now and not then, why among these groups and not those, and so on (Almond 2003).[7] Almond et all categorize fundamentalist movements into four: 1) world conqueror, 2) world transformer, 3) world creator, and 4) world renouncer. To the first group they classify, on top, Al-Qaeda. Others include, *inter alia,* the Revolutionary Shi'ism in Iran, the Sunni radical movements in Egypt (Muslim Brotherhood), the Ulster Protestants (sparked by the entrenched ethnic conflict between Scot and English-derived Protestants and Irish Catholics), the Sikh militants, and the Sri Lankan Buddhist extremists. Meanwhile, the world transformer group comprises among others of the U.S. Protestant fundamentalism and the Pentecostalism in Guatemala.

Ideologically, fundamentalism is marked by several characteristics.[8] First, it reacts against marginalization of the religion. Fundamentalist movements form in reaction to, and in defense against, the processes and consequences of secularization and modernization that have penetrated the larger religious community. Protestants, Catholics, Muslim, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists are losing their members to the secular world outright or to relativism—the assumption that any given religion is culture-bound and thus relatively true or false. Second, fundamentalists demonstrate moral Manichaeanism, a dualistic worldview which uncompromisingly divides the world into two: the light (the world of the spirit and of the good) and the darkness (the evil). Third, they are selective. For example, they accept much of the modern science and modern technology such as radio, television, computer, and so on but refuse the concepts arising out of modernity such as democracy. Fourth, fundamentalists are absolutist and inerrant. They steadfastly believe in the infallibility of certain religious interpretation and oppose hermeneutical methods developed by secularized philosophers or critics.

Modernity is the common denominator of the outside forces, which is often viewed as an external threat by the fundamentalists. Failure of modernizing secular state is evident by political decay, the decline of politics into authoritarianism, patrimonialism, corruption, and the dissatisfaction with the project of the post colonial secular states. The growing saliency of religion in the politics of countries throughout the world is a struggle for cultural liberation in search for authentic identity, political representation, and more equitable development in third world countries.

The unbalanced pace of modernization and development has led many Muslim countries into developmental crises. The rapid changes through a process of technological, economic, political, social, and cultural innovation, however, have not been followed by the development of their people. In contrast to modernization, development denotes the relative welfare of a nation's population. In most Muslim countries, appropriate development has not happened because it is neither holistic nor healthy. Modernization and development have become paradoxical. Modernization has occurred rapidly, while appropriate development has not. In the West, modernization accompanied the growth of a middle class. Because of its relative success in the West, modernization has become identified with Westernization and secularization.

The unhappy predicament of the nation-building, modernizing, and secularizing Muslim world has given rise to a number of crises, afflicting the fragile nation states of developing world.[9] Of the five developmental crises—identity, legitimacy, penetration,

distribution, participation—the identity crises is often the precipitating crisis, triggering political chaos and national catastrophe. Rapid modernization has broken the familiarity of traditional society, uprooting people from their traditional communities and moving them to new social environments where they oft become victims of the development. These conditions are fertile grounds for the breeding of fundamentalism.

Needs to focus on women

During the last three decades the world has witnessed a growing process of Islamization or re-Islamization, the application of Islamic principles and values to personal and public life. Along with greater religious observance among many individuals of their prayer, fasting, dress code and so on, there grows as well as the creation of new institution such as Islamic banking, insurance companies, and finance houses. Although many speak of the failure of political Islam, a more widespread and significant reality exists. Islam is becoming a more visible and dynamic force in Muslim life and societies.

While this growing Islamization has had an impact on states, societies, and communities, women seem to be impacted the most. More than anything else, gender-related issues present some of the most difficult and complicated challenges to contemporary Islamic law. Islamic legal system regulating women-related issues, the family law *(al-akhwal al-syakhsyiyyah),* has remained static and immutable since its codification a thousand years ago. Time and space have changed, and Muslims are currently living in a completely different socio-cultural and political context, but the conventional *shari'a* on gender and women remain unchanged. This same law has been used as a reference on issues like gender relations, polygamy, divorce, inheritance, women's leadership role, etc. which, unsurprisingly, reaffirms the already patriarchal attitudes of many Muslim males. Under the guise of uplifting Islamic law, the war against women is launched demonstrating the misuse and abuse of God's authority in order to impose a suffocating patriarchy among Muslim society. It is imperative that Muslim legal specialists develop critical ways of dealing with these issues.

The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in the last decades has been signified most obviously by its perseverance in reviving Islamic doctrines on women's status. Fundamentalists appear to share a common sense of threat from changes in gender relations, triggered by the spread of capitalism and modern concepts of feminism. They believe in the doctrines that put restrictions on women. On the basis of *shari'a* and *kodrat* (nature) women have to be controlled, subjugated and live in the domestic sphere. Hasan al-Bana, founder of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, expresses his fear of women's liberation and equality by saying that women's place is the home, and their primary roles are mother, wife, and housekeeper. Social mixing between men and women is prohibited. Another fundamentalist Muslim, Abul A'la al-Mawdudi, founder of Jamiat-I Islami from Pakistan, says that one of the basic human rights is respect for women's chastity. To preserve chastity women must be kept household and in *purdah.*

Cases of discrimination and violence against women in the name of Islam can be documented from worldwide. Experiences of formalization of *shari'a* in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, and other gulf countries show that women are systematically marginalized, forced to veil themselves, may not go out without a guardian, or work in public places. Women are made to become detainees in their husbands' homes.

In pursuit of Islamic feminism

"Feminism" is a contested term even in their birthplace, the West. Historical literature is filled with different types of feminists who would certainly find difficulties identifying common ground. Likewise is the notion "Islamic feminism." Scholars and activists are divided in terms of acceptance of this term. Some consider it problematic as they find it impossible to reconcile between Islam and feminism. They believe that the power structure in Muslim societies is so male dominated that the epistemology of Islam is contrary to women's rights. Some activists who truly work to promote women's rights in Islam refuse to be called Islamic feminists because of their reluctance to be identified with Western feminism.

Increasing pressures on women following the Islamist movement have induced the birth of Islamic feminism. Contrary to secular feminists, Muslim feminists keep the faith in the religion and religious teachings while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female supportive verses of the Qur'an in their fights for women's rights, especially for women's access to education. In Iran the failures of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to deliver its promise to honour and protect women has led to the emergence of the Islamic challenge, or what the Iranian Muslim feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini calls "an indigenous locally, produced, feminist consciousness."[10]

In Indonesia, the emergence of Islamic feminism has been triggered by the growing conservatism in the last decades along with the growing Islamism that has threatened women's relatively good position and status in society. This movement neither adopts Western feminism nor follows Middle Eastern model of gender relations, refuses both secularism and Islamism, and is purely based on values and tradition of Islam prevalent in Indonesia. The ultimate goal of the movement is to pursue justice for women, justice that is promised by Islam to all humankind.

References

[1] John Cooper, et al. (eds.) *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond,* London: I.B. Tauris, 2000, pp. 2-3.

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[3] Derek Hopwood, "The Culture of Modernity in Islam and the Middle East," in Cooper et al (eds.), *Islam and Modernity,* pp. 1-2.

[4] Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani: A Political Biography,* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972, p. 141.

[5] Husain, *Global Islamic Politic,* p. 99.

[6] Ibid, p. 110.

[7] For further information, please refer to Gabriel A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms around the World,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[8] Ibid, pp. 93 - 97.

[9] Mir Zohair Husain, ibid. pp. 162-177

[10] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Women and Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran: Divorce, Veiling, and Emerging Feminist Voice," in Haleh Afshar (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World,* London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 142-69.