

Liberal Islam: An Analysis

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Abstract

In recent years, the focus of research and public perception has been on liberal, moderate, and modernist Islam. Liberal Islam advocates liberal solutions to the problems of religion and society, namely, interpretations of Islam that have a special concern for democracy, women's rights and empowerment, freedom of thought, and other contemporary issues. Its adherents also forcefully assert that liberal Islam is authentic, not just merely a western creation, and therefore genuinely reflects the true Islamic tradition. In addition, they claim that the ummah (the Muslim world) should think and act in terms of adoption, reconciliation, and accommodation vis-à-vis the West to solve its problem of continuing undevelopment. I contend that the liberal perception and prescription are unrealistic and imaginative, that they contain inherent weaknesses, and that the liberal prescription is irrelevant to the ummah's development.

Introduction

In contemporary times, several trends have emerged in the Muslim world (e.g., liberalism, modernism, revivalism, and secularism) that seek to solve its complex problems. Their proponents claim that liberal and modernist solutions to the problems of religion and society are important and receiving popular support. In addition, many Muslims are said to adhere to liberal principles. The resulting liberal and modernist interpretations of Islam deal mainly with democracy, feminism, secularism, women's rights and empowerment, and similar current concepts. Thus, they advocate liberalism, modernism, and humanism. Furthermore, they are supposed to enable Muslims and non-Muslims to benefit from such liberal reforms that, eventually, may

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lead to a more open society. Finally, they assert rather forcefully that liberal or modern Islam is authentic, not merely a western creation, and thus genuinely reflects the true Islamic tradition.¹

Liberal Muslims begin their discourse by proposing that the ummah is facing western modernity, modernization, globalization, information technology, and many other external challenges. Given the ensuing assertion that it lacks the power of science and technology, they stress that the ummah should focus on overcoming these challenges and that Muslims should interact with the developed West and take from it whatever is good and applicable. In other words, they are led to think and act in terms of adoption, reconciliation, and accommodation. Thus, Islam and modernity are compatible.

However, an in-depth exploration and analysis reveals that this perception lacks both depth and accuracy. In fact, I posit that this claim seems to be unrealistic and imaginative, for it is the result of the profound influence of such ideologies as modernity, realism, pragmatism, and secularism. Furthermore, the liberal perception has caused more destruction to the ummah than any external challenges have. Therefore, I intend to examine the views of liberals and modernists concerning the threat of external challenges and the need to borrow and adopt from the West. This examination will reveal the inherent weaknesses of liberal perception and prescriptions, show that the liberal prescription is neither relevant nor useful to the ummah's development,² and that the perceptions of a nation's leaders and intellectuals play a fundamental role in any nation's rise and fall. I begin with a brief discussion of the linkage between leadership and development and then move on to a critical analysis of these issues.

The Link between Leadership and Development

Ibn Khuldun, author of *Al-Muqaddimah*, and Seyyid Mawdudi, author of *The Islamic Movement: Dynamics of Values, Power and Change*, contend that nations and civilizations rise and fall mainly because of their leaders and scholars, and assert that history proves this. They also contend that these same leaders are responsible for any decline. This contention is fully supported by empirical evidence from the West and the Muslim world. The West's "development" is rightly attributed to its dynamic intellectuals and leaders, whereas the ummah's decline is associated with the traditionalist and imitative role of its intellectuals and leaders. In the case of Malaysia, for example, full credit for its current development is rightly given to the nation's dynamic leadership. If all of this is true, then Umar ibn al-Khattab's words seem to be empirically confirmed. Zaiyad ibn Hudayr said:

Umar asked me: “Do you know what will destroy Islam?” When I said that I did not, he replied: “It will be destroyed by the mistakes of scholars, the arguing of hypocrites using the Book, and the government by leaders who are in error.”³

This is further supported by the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) tradition: “There are two classes in my ummah. If they are right, the ummah is set right; if they are wrong, the ummah goes wrong. They are the rulers and the scholars.”⁴

The Ummah Today

The ummah stands at present at the lowest rung of the ladder of nations. In this century, no other nation has been subjected to comparable defeats or humiliation. Muslims were defeated, massacred, double-crossed, colonized, and exploited, proselytized, forced or bribed into conversion to other faiths. ... This occurred in practically every country and corner of the vast Muslim world. ... They enjoy the worst possible “image” in the contemporary world.⁵

The extensive literature on this subject reveals the above observations. The problem is that since the dawn of independent Muslim nation-states, the ummah has become independent of Islam’s worldview, culture, and civilization. In addition, comprehensive secularism and modernism have replaced its worldview. The majority of Muslims talk about secular systems and culture, the ummah’s new destiny. The Islamic faith and civilization, which for centuries have provided an underlying unity epitomized by a common profession of faith and acceptance of the Shari`ah, are no longer relevant to economic and political development. The Islamic worldview that provided the basic ideological framework for the ummah’s political and social life, that was always a source of guidance, identity, and legitimacy, has been replaced by comprehensive secularism. The ummah’s missionary role, ordained by God, has been lost and forgotten.

Liberal and Modern Perceptions and Prescriptions: An Analysis

Who is responsible for this undesirable state of affairs? My investigation shows that the existing intellectual and political leadership is to blame for this pathetic predicament. Any sincere and objective observer can see that for the last six to seven decades, the secularized and modernized leadership

has ruled the ummah and claimed that it can lead the Muslims further along the path of development. To assist this leadership, liberal, moderate, and modern intellectuals have developed a discourse that is said to be a giant collaboration and a master plan for the masses' welfare. According to them, the ummah cannot overcome its present undevelopment and backwardness unless it responds to the above-mentioned collectively.

My assessment, however, reveals that the ummah's decadence and undevelopment are mainly caused by internal challenges. This is fully supported by the fact that for at least the last seventy years, the modernist and secularist leaders at both the political and intellectual levels have led the ummah. However, their prescriptions and programs were neither effective nor useful, for the majority of Muslims remain illiterate, poor, and unable to understand the true reasons for their lack of development. The following analysis will illustrate and judge the soundness of my assessment.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, when the ummah began its political disintegration and social and moral decline, some concerned Muslim intellectuals observed that it was suffering more from the growing threat of European and imperialist forces than any internal threat. Therefore, they realized that the military, political, cultural, and ideological challenges posed by Europe were the real ones; and that the West had brought rapid and unprecedented change to the world. For many of them, the largely unresolved problem was how to bring about social change,⁶ for they argued that any change that is not integrated smoothly can disrupt society, dislocate values, and hasten further decadence. Hence, during colonialism, the major question was how to bridge the gap between Islam and modernity.

"Other, more moderate, Muslim thinkers still struggle with the concept of modernity and the need to integrate the Muslim world. To them a Muslim has to coexist with modernity."⁷ As a result of their "realistic" observation, they started to present what they considered realistic and pragmatic solutions based on the principle of expediency. Therefore, they sought to offer Islamic responses to European colonialism and modernization. As a result, Islamic liberalism and modernism emerged and provided an ideological framework for the "enlightened" western-oriented reformist actions taken by Muhammad Ali (d. 1849) in Egypt and Mustafa Kemal (d. 1938) in Turkey.

Within a very short time, many such Alis and Kemals mushroomed all over the Muslim world. These were the historic moments when liberal and modern leaders and intellectuals took the ummah's reins into their own hands and, based on their conceptual and epistemological conceptions, raised the issues of reinterpretation, reconciliation, and the compatibility of Islam with modern western thought and values. "In many modern Muslim

states, governments used Islamic modernist thought to justify reform measures and legislation.”⁸ Now we find moderate, liberal, and modern “Islams” and solutions. The proponents of these schools of thought have been urging the ummah toward learning, borrowing, adopting, reconciliation, accommodation, cultural synthesis, and compatibility vis-à-vis the West.

The ummah’s present condition, however, reveals that all of this supposedly wise and intelligent leadership has only produced various forms of imitation, subordination, and dependence. Consequently, a kind of slavish and defeatist mentality now rules the Muslim world. The majority of scholars, intellectuals, leaders, and students suffer from an inferiority complex. Murad Hofmann, complaining about the Muslim mentality, points out that doctoral theses in Muslim countries are accepted and awarded high grades without containing a single new thought,⁹ and that their authors demonstrate an apologetic and defensive attitude in their thinking and actions. Features such as creativity, innovation, contribution, construction, and excellence no longer appear in our discourse.

Hofmann rightly concludes that this attitude has engendered a slavish mentality and that this “mental deficit rather than being caused by it [colonialism] actually survived colonization.”¹⁰ Hence, he concludes that this mentality is the major cause of much of our undevelopment. “If this assumption is correct” he states,

... the key to better development is to be found in a change of mentality – one of the most difficult things to achieve¹¹ ... Without this effort, much of the Muslim world will not only remain undeveloped and utterly dependent on Western culture. Worse: we will all become ‘globalized,’ i.e., colonized once more. This time, the Muslims will not become political slaves but cultural ones.¹²

However, he laments that formerly “undeveloped” Muslim countries are now euphemistically labeled “developing” ... but developing in which direction and for which purpose? No doubt some Muslim countries have made considerable progress in imitating the industrialized and affluent First World. But where is our own originality and identity?¹³

All of these supposedly moderate, liberal, modern, and enlightened interpretations of Islam finally took the form of a secular and western-oriented discourse advocating the separation of religion and politics. The establishment of western-style modern secular nation-states was welcomed, and western-style political, cultural, and economic models of development were adopted. Initially, the adherents of these discourses blamed the ummah’s decline on the masses’ blind and unquestioned clinging to the past

and the ummah's inability to respond to modernity effectively. They stressed internal reform through reinterpreting Islam and internal self-criticism. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), and other intellectuals rejected the passivity, fatalism, and otherworldliness of popular Sufism. However, facts remain facts.

All of them, being liberals and modernists, were basically responding to the demands of modernity. They attempted to interpret Islam in terms of modernity and developed several doctrines (e.g., public interest in terms of utility and consultation in the context of parliamentary democracy). They called for a reworking of Islamic thought to include western science, democracy, and constitutional government. "The liberals called for the adoption of the modern Western outlook in its totality."¹⁴ Their acceptance of the West and adoption of western ideologies forced them to neglect the development of original political, educational, and economic theories based on the Islamic worldview.

These intellectuals were so obsessed with modernity that they forgot that it needs to be approached critically. In many areas, they became its blind and loyal followers and "generally look[ed] to Western scientific thought, as well as to the newly discovered scientific knowledge, as the core needed for a new and modern interpretive discourse of the tradition of both Islam and the Qur'an."¹⁵ They asserted that medieval thought, medieval theology, and philosophy were unscientific in nature. Just as medieval thinkers had made extensive use of speculative philosophy in their exposition of Islam, so this new generation of intellectuals rejected the past and advocated adopting all new things from the West. "In other words, the modernists have been instrumental in opening up the closed intellectual circles to the need for rearguing traditions and modernizing Islamic interpretations by using all possible tools at hand" used in the West.¹⁶

While modernists reject numerous medieval Islamic theories, they were not theoretically antagonistic to western principles and theories. Nor did they pinpoint any basic inherent animosity between Islam and the West. As a result, they have had no hesitation about adopting western political and scientific theories.¹⁷ Adopting the modern secular education system, science, technology, and models of economic and political development are the best empirical examples and undeniable evidence of this outlook. But this adoption caused them to ignore an important fact: The development of new theories, thoughts, and skills is absolutely necessary for development.

Ahmad Moussalli concludes that we must understand that the modernists' main goal has always been to bring the West and the East together, both scientifically and religiously. This is why liberals and modernists never

shied away from western adopting ideas.¹⁸ They were so overwhelmed by the desire to integrate modernity that they could not see that new knowledge, science, and even technology are products of a particular worldview. The International Islamic University - Malaysia, established on the basis of the Islamic philosophy of education, is a practical example of how knowledge and education are products of a civilization's particular worldview, as well as a realistic refutation of the prescriptions proposed by liberals, secularists, and even reformists.

A dispassionate analysis reveals that the ummah's adoption of western models has only caused its further degeneration and that learning, borrowing, reconciliation, and compatibility are not the real issues in a civilization's life. The whole exercise of such cosmetic responses to modernity has proven to be utterly futile. In reality, this attitude of responding to external challenges reflects the tendency of submission and subordination to a superior authority. The history of revolutionary thought and movements provides several examples to show that revolutionaries never thought in terms of reconciliation or adoption. The emergence of modernity itself is an empirical example of refusing to reconcile with tradition.

During modernity's process of the development, its founders did not think in terms of compromise or reconciliation with traditionalism. Fully aware of the social laws of a given civilization's rise and fall, they realized that any compromise at any stage would cause them to lose. Therefore, without borrowing anything from anywhere, they continued their struggle according to their own worldview and agenda. But Muslim intellectuals and leaders, who claim to be great modernists, learned nothing from modernity's revolutionary spirit. Rather, both in the past and in the present they have worked for and according to other people's agendas. Sayyid Qutb's (d. 1966) words here deserve our attention:

In the world of economics an individual who has private means does not resort to borrowing before he has examined his means to see what resources he has there; nor does a government resort to importing until it has scrutinized its native resources and examined its raw materials and their potentials. And so in the case of spiritual resources, intellectual capabilities, and moral and ethical traditions – are not these things on the same level as goods or money in human life? Apparently not, for here in Egypt and in the Muslim world as a whole, we pay little heed to our native spiritual resources and our own intellectual heritage; instead, we think first of importing foreign principles and methods, or borrowing customs and laws from across the deserts and from beyond the seas.¹⁹

Liberals and modernists emphasize political rather than intellectual independence. Even if they talk about intellectual independence, they actually mean independence from historical Muslim traditions and subservience to western intellectual traditions. The net result of this has been that the Muslims' sense of borrowing increased and their sense of creating their own world and history declined. Although many people talk about external challenges, borrowing, and reconciliation, this is no more than a manifestation of mental slavery. No nation, civilization, or individual can develop itself with this attitude. It is a historic fact that large civilizations are not built and developed on such slavish and apologetic attitudes; rather, they are carved out and developed on the basis of creativity and daring attitudes. In short, liberals, modernists, secularists, and reformists have adopted and carried on the legacy of a defeatist mentality, and thus contributed toward the ummah's continued undevelopment and backwardness.

The real problem was not that of reinterpreting or accepting the unquestioned authority of the past and present, but was – and still is – a question of a civilization's worldview and mission. Those nations and civilizations that overlook their own worldview and mission have always remained undeveloped and backward. It is not a question of a right or a wrong worldview and mission, for those who work to realize its mission march toward development. This is one of the social laws of a civilization's rise and fall.

Liberal and modernist Muslim intellectuals ignored their own worldview and its mission and so developed a mistaken understanding of borrowing and adoption. They assumed that by developing “a formula that permits the assimilation of Western civilization while proclaiming a strict loyalty to Islam,”²⁰ the ummah could achieve development. But this did not happen. It is empirically evident that the ummah is still undeveloped. This formula proved to be apologetic, as it reflects

... a readiness to define Islam in terms of whatever appears fresh and persuasive in Western civilization. It is argued, for example, that rationalism, democracy, parliamentary government, female emancipation and even evolution are to be found in Islam – found, indeed, in their most perfect form ... Even writers of some insight claim that the “values” of the twentieth century are confirmed by Islam.²¹

For example, Ameer Ali's *The Spirit of Islam* (London: Christophers, 1935) is devoted to “proving” that Islamic and western values are spiritually the same. William Montgomery Watt asserted that this book “was essentially a presentation of Islam and its founder as embodying all the liberal values admired in Victorian England. Ameer Ali saw Muhammad as a ‘great

Teacher,' a believer in progress, an upholder of the use of reason and indeed 'the great Pioneer of Rationalism,' in short as a thoroughly modern man."²² Azzam S. Tamimi says that Rashid Ghannouchi leads a school of modern Islamic political thought that advocates democracy and pluralism.²³ Ghannouchi developed a theory of compatibility between democracy and Islam and said that borrowing and learning from the West is legitimate.²⁴ In fact, he posited three established rules to legitimate this assertion: "Wisdom is a believer's long-cherished objective," "Religion has been revealed for the benefit of humanity," and "The Shari'ah is fully compatible with the vital interests of the human community."²⁵

As regards borrowing, Ghannouchi feels that power-sharing becomes a necessity because it "would be the best option in order to guarantee respect for civil liberties, human rights, political pluralism, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the press, and freedom for mosques and Islamic institutions."²⁶ According to him, there are some universal values for which Islam and the West both stand. Tamimi concludes that based on the theory of learning and borrowing, Ghannouch "began to realize that a comprehensive reading of Islam would lead one to conclude that economic, political, sexual, and social factors had already been sufficiently emphasized in the Quran, and therefore denying the effect that such factors have on people's lives, as he used to do, was a mistake."²⁷ The new approach of borrowing and learning helped him correct his "mistake" and

... see the significance of the fact that an entire Qur'anic chapter, Surat Yusuf [chapter twelve], was dedicated from beginning to end to the narration of a love story. This story, he discovered, ended with the triumph of noble values against lust but without denying the existence of the latter. Instead of ignoring such lust, Islam, through the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, provided humans with guidelines to help them fulfill their sexual desires in a manner conducive to the development and preservation of the human race. He was fascinated by the fact that the Qur'an refers explicitly to, and discusses at length, such sensitive issues as love, puberty, menstruation, marriage, and sexual intercourse.²⁸

Tamimi concludes: "As part of the development of his discourse, he no longer rejected completely the notion that the economic and sexual factors influence the conduct of humans."²⁹ This change in his discourse took place "as a result of interacting with other forces, especially the Marxists ... Marxism was incorporated into his analysis as an element."³⁰ Tamimi says that on the basis of the above, "Ghannouchi admits that, initially, his critique was radical; it rejected almost everything that came from the West,"³¹ but

finally, thanks to his new approach, “his critique became more moderate and refined.”³² Furthermore, according to him, this new approach to critical analysis suggested that the absolute rejection of western philosophy is wrong, for it does possess some element of truth and is not entirely false.³³ He is eager to stress that “the Islamic analysis of the Western thought had been based on the reaction of Islamists to what was perceived as a Western threat to their own culture ... the Islamists rejected everything that came from the West.”³⁴

Is Ghannouchi’s claim true? Seyyed Hossein Nasr sees something else. He opines that during the past few decades, the Islamists have begun to write extensively

... to explain the realities of Islam to the West. These thinkers have also sought to provide answers to the challenges of the West whether they be philosophical, scientific, economic, social, or technological, basing their response not on emotional reactions or simply juridical opposition, but upon a veritably Islamic intellectual perspective. They have gone to the very roots of the various Western ideologies and schools of thought which stand opposite to the Islamic worldview and yet have influenced Muslims ... It has tried to rethink, on the basis of the Islamic worldview, the foundations of Western science and technology and to confront the challenges of modern thought, science and technology in depth rather than simply through emotional response.³⁵

In the same manner, Abdelwahhab Elmissiri seems to see something else. According to him, the Islamists “had their first encounter with modern Western civilization at a time when Western modernity had already entered the stage of crisis, and when many Western thinkers had begun to realize the dimension of this crisis and the impasse Western modernity had reached.”³⁶ In other words, they were able to see, from the very beginning, the darker aspects of western modernity. According to him, several anti-humanist intellectual trends emerged after modernity’s collapse, such as fascism, Nazism, Zionism, and structuralism. These reached a climax in post-modernist thought. By the mid-1960s, the critical western discourse on modernity had crystallized, and the works of the Frankfurt School had become widely available and popular. Many studies that criticized the Enlightenment were published, as were other studies that were radically critical of development theories.

Thus, whether on the level of practice or theory, it was not difficult for “Islamists, those who studied Western modernity in the middle of the twentieth century, to recognize many of its shortcomings and to see it in its total-

ity.³³⁷ He goes a step further and states that they were able to see that the weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) industry has grown to become the most important industry of “our enlightened rational times” and that the “enlightened elected governments of the West” were, for the first time in history, allocating more funds for producing WMDs than food.³⁸

But the liberal, moderate, and modernist scholars of Islam found many positive aspects in western modernity. As a result, the main “issue for them was basically how to reconcile Islam with Western modernity, and even how to make Islam catch up with it, and live up to its standards and values. This was the core of Muhammad Abduh’s project, which predominated until the mid-sixties.”³⁹ They became advocates of western modernity: “Efforts were directed at catching up with the West and at competing with it according to its own terms. The liberals called for the adoption of the modern Western outlook in its totality.”⁴⁰

As Elmissiri understands it, the Islamists actually developed a radical critique of western modernity. But their critique differs from others, for they reject the West’s presumed centrality and universalism, as well as its imperialism and hegemony, which are closely linked to its claim of centrality. They stand on their Islamic ground and view developments in the West, opening up to it, simultaneously criticizing and interacting with it. Unlike the western, Third World, or Marxist critiques, which are nihilistic and pessimistic, the Islamic critique is optimistic because it proposes an alternative project for reform and new construction. Elmissiri further observes:

They have developed a radical exploratory generative discourse that neither attempts to reconcile Islam with Western modernity, nor does it preoccupy itself with searching for the points of contrast or similarity between the two. Rather, it sets forth to explore the main traits of Western modernity, presenting a radical, yet balanced critique. In the meantime, they go back to the Islamic world-view, with all its values and its religious, ethical and civilizational specificities ... the Islamic discourse, issuing forth from an Islamic framework, opens the door of *ijtihad* regarding both the modern Western world-view and the Islamic religious and cultural heritage.

While at the grass roots level the Islamic discourse raises the slogan “Islam is the solution,” at the philosophical level it raises a more complex one, “Islam is a world-view.” This is a discourse that stems from a comprehensive world-view from which different ethical, political, economic and aesthetic systems are generated. It is an Islamic discourse that deals with architecture, love, marriage, economics, city planning, the philosophy of law and history, modes of analysis and thinking, etc. ... Actually,

the Islamic discourse claims that it is addressed not to the Muslims only, but also to “all humanity.” In other words it claims that its project for reform is an answer to the crisis caused by Western modernity.⁴¹

Ghannouchi’s interpretation and analysis reminds me of Watt’s observation that until 1945, the assessments and criticisms of such Orientalists as Sir Hamilton Gibb about the achievements of Islamic modernists and liberalists were, to a certain extent, correct. Whatever weaknesses in terms of approach and methodology were identified, those “have largely been remedied by the latest generation of liberal Muslim thinkers represented by Fazlur Rahman and Mohammed Arkoun. They have fully accepted Western historical criticism and are prepared to apply it in the interpretation of the Qur’an and in a review of the history of Islamic thought.”⁴²

This acceptance of the western criteria of criticism and analysis is not limited only to liberals and modernists. Unconsciously, scholars like Ghannouchi have become the victims of western intellectual strategies. In his case, he failed to understand that borrowing and reconciliation is more dangerous than *taqlid* (blind imitation), for it denies the possibility of reconstructing the world and leads Muslims to abandon some principles and accommodate others. In addition, it reduces the spirit of creativity and assumes that the old, which cannot be renovated, must be destroyed. He is unable to see that the liberals’ fascination with and adoption of western ideas led people to abandon their Islamic understanding in the political and moral domains. People lost all self-confidence and imagined that the only way to achieve technological progress was to abandon their own laws and beliefs.

Such an attitude is closer to fatalism and against the spirit of *ijtihad* (independent effort). *Ijtihad* was first confined to *fiqh* and then neglected in practically all other areas of life. Although all major modern revivalist thinkers, regardless of their sect and place in the spectrum of thought, such as Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), Mohammad Iqbal (d. 1938), Sayyid Mawdudi (d. 1979), Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahbab (d. 1792), Hasan al-Banna (killed in 1949), Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad Qutub, Yusuf al-Qardawi, Imam Khomeini (d. 1989), Ali Shariati (d. 1977), Badiuzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960), Sayyid, and Othman dan Fodio (d. 1817), argued that restricting *ijtihad* had been disastrous and that its scope must be thrown wide open, their voices were not heard properly and were practically ignored.

From the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, all other traditions (including reformist) restricted *ijtihad* to reinterpreting early legal sources and applied it only to reinterpret these legal precepts in line with modern circumstances. The revivalists’ broader view was practically marginalized by

the liberal and modern intellectual movements, as they were advised by their western allies to learn from countries that had adopted modern systems and developed, such as Israel. These countries' sociopolitical order is based on a modern ideology that encourages the growth of industrialization and values rational inquiry. "Arabs must follow suit, separating religion from politics and adopting modern, liberal ideas. Several Muslim writers have accepted this line of reasoning and argued for restricting the public role of Islam."⁴³

After removing religion from the state and the government, these schools of thought opened the door for despotic regimes and became the source of social injustice, economic stagnation, and intellectual decline. Therefore, they are responsible for destroying the ummah's inner vitality and purposefulness and are unknowingly contributing to its undevelopment by miring it in backwardness and foreign domination. The slogan of finding Islamic solutions within the parameter of the Islamic worldview was ignored, for their lack of interest in developing a purely Islamic framework made them incapable of deriving pure Islamic solutions. They are, in fact, repeating the same mistake made by those classical-era Muslim philosophers who were enticed by the supposed maturity and perfection of classical Greek philosophy. "Instead of constructing an Islamic discourse, according to the general rules of religion, they used the general rules of philosophy in order to construct the Islamic discourse."⁴⁴

Now, liberals and modernists are suggesting the rules of modernity for dealing with the issues faced by the ummah. However, one should note that the ummah's development cannot be kindled by imitating other civilizations; instead, it must depend on its own worldview. What worries the Islamists most is that Muslims are imitating western civilization in its worst forms: destruction, degeneration, sectarian division, civil war, and racial discrimination. They see that such imitation goes beyond these characteristics and subjects the Muslim world to the West's scientific, industrial, commercial, and political dominance.⁴⁵ In the beginning, the liberal and modern schools criticized the traditional ulama; now they are criticizing the revivalists for having promoted their own interests over those of the ummah – and this criticism has been used to diminish the influence of Islamic movements.

The issue here is not how and what to borrow. Rather, the real issue is how to develop an individual and society on the basis of the Islamic worldview. How one's worldview affects his/her perception may be illustrated through the following commentary of Surah Yusuf, referred to earlier when discussing Ghannouchi. Mawdudi identifies the following main objectives and themes of the chapter, which are totally different from those identified by Ghannouchi:

The story was revealed to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, to provide proof for the prophethood of the Prophet Muhammad. The second purpose is to highlight the close resemblance of Prophet Yusuf [Joseph] and his brothers' story with the situation then pertaining in Makkah ... This story reveals that whatever God wills to happen, does indeed come to happen. By his own scheming man can neither succeed in defeating God's plan, nor alter it. This story reminds its readers that they should not transgress the bounds laid down by God while pursuing their objectives or devising strategies for their life.⁴⁶

The above commentary suggests that the ummah's true path is following the line of action prescribed by the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The following quote further illustrates this point of view. Commenting on the ulama's negative role, Mawdudi observes:

Our religious leaders must accept much of the blame for this dangerous situation, for it was their duty right at the outset of the revolution to try to comprehend the principles and essential features of the West's new civilization and to go there to study the intellectual and scientific foundations upon which it was being built. With the help of *ijtihad*, they should have striven to persuade Muslims to accept and press into service the useful practical knowledge and scientific discoveries that had enabled the West to achieve such remarkable progress. Moreover, they should have sought to fit these new instruments of progress, in keeping with the principles of Islam, into the Muslims' educational system and social life.⁴⁷

A careful analysis of this observation reveals that Muslim students should study everything with an open mind for the sake of developing their own framework of life. This study must be deep, profound, and objective in order to reach the roots of a civilization's principles and essential features. In other words, they must be able to see how far that civilization is based on sound intellectual and scientific foundations and determine its understanding of the scientific and intellectual approach. For example, is it based on sound sources of knowledge or on conjecture, speculation, imagination, assumption, and ignorance? This analysis should be based on the students' own analytical tradition and scientific methodology. For Muslims, this means developing a framework based upon *ijtihad*, which implies that they should focus on God's guidance, as contained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, with the sole aim of engendering the value system emphasized therein.

For example, a profound study of the Qur'an and the Sunnah will highlight such fundamental values as life's spiritual dimension, a sense of fear (respect) and love of God, success in both worlds, justice, sacrifice, commit-

ment, moral character, and excellence. Khalid Ishaque clarifies this when he says that every prophet, was, in his time, a revolutionary. We distinguish them from ordinary reformers and secular revolutionaries by the quality and extent of the social change they brought about and the moral means they adopted. For example, Prophet Muhammad was known as “the truthful and the trustworthy one.” His people were willing to make him a king if he would only give up a part of the revelation. However, he refused to do so.

He sought to change the entire priorities within the community, and to establish a community based on egalitarian principles incomprehensible to a mind brought up in tribal traditions. Power was henceforth to be harnessed for completely novel uses. Honours were to go not to nobility of birth but of conduct, and superiority in knowledge. Increase in the power of an individual ... meant only an increase in his responsibilities. The weak and the needy within the community were given [the] right to be protected and provided for. The members of the community of Islam were henceforth required to act as vanguards of an abiding international revolution in the cause of justice aimed at protection of the weak and the oppressed.⁴⁸

In contemporary times, Islamists seek to offer a way of life and thought based on *tawhid* (the unity of God). Their ideology refutes the notion of an ultimate human authority as well as that of humanity’s possessive nature. Thus, they uphold the need to establish virtuous, just, and peace-loving societies. Based on this value system and on the basis of empirical understanding, they strive to persuade Muslims to accept and implement the useful aspects of any civilization. But their main emphasis is that no one can develop a civilization without being creative and innovative. Therefore, they urge Muslims to eschew imitation, blind following, and borrowing so that they can develop a dynamic civilization. According to them, accepting a secular worldview and neglecting God’s guidance, particularly in collective matters, generates destruction and chaos instead of peace and prosperity.

Liberal and modernist intellectuals want to restore recognition of the West as a source of greatly needed expertise. Hence, they seek to counter, as their western allies wish, the influence of contemporary Islamic thought and its associated movement by asserting that its adherents have adopted an ideological scale that divides Muslims. In other words, such thought engenders the rise of *jammatism*, which is equivalent to tribalism. In this way and at this stage of history, when humanity is suffering from crisis and chaos, liberals and modernists are raising artificial and insignificant issues that are irrelevant to the Islamic worldview and the development of its civilization. Their purpose seems to be to divert attention from fundamental issues.

Instead of analyzing and criticizing the materialist and secularist approach to life and civilization, they now target the Islamists. These intellectuals contend that Mawdudi was less extremist and radical than Sayyid Qutb, that the Islamic movements' leaders and scholars are not realistic and pragmatic, that their views are more idealistic, and that they lack practical wisdom. Unless they borrow and learn from the West, liberals contend that the Islamists' thought cannot develop. In fact, the Islamists have no concept of development, as Watt claims. According to Watt, the Islamists' lack of historical awareness contributes to the absence of a concept of development.⁴⁹ Their "unwillingness to admit the existence of borrowing where it had in fact taken place" is a huge mistake, as understood by Watt and echoed in the writings of these "more enlightened and moderate [Muslim] intellectuals" of Islam.⁵⁰ He further contends that earlier Muslims accepted borrowings from non-Islamic cultures, namely, classical Greek intellectual culture and Iranian culture, in the early centuries of Islamic civilization.⁵¹ But

... [t]he belief in the self-sufficiency of Islam, together with the suspicion of all that is not Islamic and the reluctance to borrow from alien cultures was a latter development which still continues at the present time ... Muhammad is reported to have said, "Seek knowledge, even from China," but, as has just been seen, Muslims were unwilling to seek knowledge even from the alien cultures within their empire.⁵²

What strikes one here is that Watt fails to see that while the Islamists do seek knowledge from every corner of the world, they reject ignorance, conjecture, speculation, assumption, fallacy, and other "knowledge" garbed in the name of "scientific knowledge." They seem to be more capable of differentiating between scientific truth and speculative falsehood, as they are better equipped with scientific tools than are Watt and his disciples. However, this "greatest mistake" of contemporary Islamists has now been corrected by liberals, modernists, and all of Watt's faithful and loyal disciples. The Islamists, "by shutting themselves off for centuries from the intellectual life of the West, knew nothing about important new developments taking place there," as Watt has said.⁵³ His disciples echo the same sentiments, saying that the Islamists are more concerned with seizing power than developing intellectual frameworks, for they cannot deal with intellectual issues without any complex or *a priori* prejudice. For example, since they fail to see the compatibility of Islam and democracy, they regard the latter merely as a western, and therefore alien, import.⁵⁴

But the ground reality reveals something quite different. The surface reality is that these Islamists never simply submit to the idea that democracy,

as crystallized in western political institutions, is the ideal norm of government, especially as regards its western version. They know that popular participation in government has always existed in the Islamic world, but not in the form of voting. They contend that the Islamic world must be given its own space and freedom of choice to develop its own political institutions in conformity with Islamic principles and social structures.

However, liberals and modernists still contend that these Islamists lack any deep intellectual understanding of current issues and thus have developed a populist and highly politicized discourse.⁵⁵ Moussalli asserts that most scholars of Islamic activism differ with each other. Thus, they ignore these movements' comprehensiveness as well as their diverse concerns. According to him, they focus more on the Islamists' political role.

But the too concentrated emphasis only on the political aspect of the movements misses much of the significance of religious movements in the modern world. That these movements are treated as only political dilutes the metaphysical role of Islam in its making and development. The truth of the matter is that these movements are not limited to political action but deal with a diversity of aspects and issues that make them a way of life and a philosophy and a critique of existing ways of life and philosophies.⁵⁶

Islamists, therefore, should not be studied only as a set of political movements, but also as a set of intellectual discourses and critiques of philosophy, political ideology, and science. Their philosophical tradition includes both a belief in the existence of an objective and ultimate truth and a claim of limited human subjective understanding of that truth.⁵⁷

However, liberals and modernists deny this and insist that the ummah's future depends on its ability to produce a new generation of leaders who are fully equipped to confront modernity and the West.⁵⁸ Nobody dares to disagree with this urgent need. But in my view, a new generation with a new vision as well as high caliber and credentials must be able to elaborate its own worldview, relevance, framework, and structures to develop not a new civilization, but one that is fresher and more energetic. Yet liberal and modernist intellectuals ignore this fact and focus on such issues as the relationship of Islam to modern western thought and the need to reinterpret Islam in light of modern realities and western thought. They look at the West uncritically and demand that Muslims learn and borrow from it. According to John Esposito, the main question for them is how to establish continuity between Islam and modern western thought.⁵⁹ According to these intellectuals, however, the best way is to borrow and assimilate the West's new ideas and val-

ues, for emphasizing Islam's dynamic, progressive, and rational character will enable new generations of Muslims to embrace modern western civilization more confidently.⁶⁰

Quite contrary to this unrealistic perception, Nasr suggests that

Islamic social institutions within the Islamic world must be evaluated by critics Islamically and not on the basis of modern criticism against them because most of these modern criticisms are based on certain assumptions concerning human nature and the final end of human beings which are both false in reality and opposed explicitly to the teachings of Islam. The modernists attacks made against the traditional family structure, relation between the sexes, the rapport between various generations and the like in the Islamic world must not be accepted passively and with a sense of inferiority by young Muslims as if they were established truths or scientifically established criteria of judgment. On the contrary, every few decades fashions and criteria for judgment that emanate from the West change. In fact, such criticism must be viewed as issuing from a worldview which is totally alien to that of Islam, from a society which itself is in the process of rapid change and in danger of dissolution.⁶¹

Therefore, he suggests that the western criteria of criticism come from another and, moreover, a false view of humanity and of human society that is based on individualism, humanism, rationalism, humanity's divorce from the sacred, rebellion against authority, the loss of a sense of transcendence, the family's atomization, the quantification of life, and the reduction of society to no more than the quantitative sum of atomized individuals.⁶² In short, the Muslims' criteria of judgment must be based on the Islamic worldview itself, not on what happens to be fashionable in the modern world, precisely because what is fashionable today will be unfashionable tomorrow.⁶³

But liberals and modernists, who overlook such advice and insights, argue that Islam can adapt itself to new challenges and situations. What a beautiful and excellent interpretation of Islam! This means that Islam does not have its own scheme of life, culture, and civilization, but that it was simply revealed to adjust itself to the dominant mode of living. In other words, it does not want to alter anything according to its own criteria and worldview, for its nature is submission and surrender to any authority, mode of living, or existing conditions.

The Need for an Islamic Worldview

Based on the above analysis, the modernist discourse generated by these liberal and modernist intellectuals and leaders is neither based on the Islamic

worldview nor directed toward developing the ummah and Islamic civilization. Rather, this discourse's main objective is to reconcile Islam with modern western thought in the mistaken belief that this is the only way that the ummah can develop. Empirical understanding indicates that following this way will lead not to development, but to subordination and dependence, which will ultimately result in undevelopment and backwardness.

Their argument is baseless as well as false, for it is not supported by anything in Islamic history; rather, this history tells us that wherever Islam spread, it first changed individuals and then society, thereby creating its own human personalities and civilization. What a wonderful coincidence that this historical fact is not realized by those who "sincerely" and "objectively" follow the "most authentic" method of historical criticism. In essence, their assumption is based on a major illusion: the superiority of western thought and civilization and its challenges to Islam and the ummah. Hamid Algar, who differs with this view and considers it fallacious, states:

Far from being threatened by any intellectual challenge from modern civilization as typified by the Western World, Islam itself might be said to constitute a serious challenge to the declining standards and values, and the increasing confusion of that world. The philosophically fragmented and dichotomous West has little to offer to a religion whose strength lies in its unity of faith and life, thought and action. To the secularism of the West Islam opposes its notion of the sovereignty of God. It challenges the relative with the absolute; the limitations of materialists and rationalist awareness with its consciousness of transcendent reality. Nor does the challenge lie simply in an aggregate of opposites; rather in the choice of a radically different alternative. The strength of such a challenge would be all the greater if Muslims themselves demonstrated more positively and convincingly the consequences of this choice.⁶⁴

Unfortunately, the recent history of Islamic thought is presented purely in terms of responses to the West. A dispassionate approach to this topic demonstrates that much has happened in the Muslim world due to entirely independent developments. But at the same time, however, it is a fact that due to the liberal and modernist intellectuals' false perceptions, a considerable portion of the ummah's intellectual energies have been directed to confronting the alien intrusion that is modern western civilization.

An observer of western civilization may ask if modern civilization has the capacity to mount some intellectual challenges to Islam. Without a doubt, Muslims have been subjected for decades to the pressures of a civilization that is evidently superior to their own as regards the accumulation

and manipulation of material power. Thus, their reaction could not have been other than largely defensive, apologetic, and unsure.⁶⁵ Should this pressure be considered a defeat by an intellectual or philosophical challenge? Either Islam is facing intellectual challenges posed by modernity or modernity has the capacity to pose an intellectual challenge to Islam.

“Such a view of modern civilization and Islam respectively is false,”⁶⁶ writes Algar, who contends that modern civilization is losing much of its cohesiveness and confidence. The naïve faith in the pseudo-religion of progress, in the adequacy of rationality as a means of cognition, in the supremacy of western civilization as the apex of human history – all of this is fading as the realization grows that society and the individual in the modern world are confronted by apparently infinite and insoluble problems.⁶⁷

The assumption that the development of western civilization will enable humanity to enjoy an unprecedented opportunity to find happiness in this life proves to be an illusion, for it is based on several illusions, the most serious of which is the denial of spirituality. People wrongly assume that after rejecting God’s guidance, both they and their societies can attain development and happiness. They also overlook another important factor: The West achieved scientific and technological progress, which is not the first or even the fundamental ingredient of life, by neglecting God’s guidance. It cannot, by itself, establish a sound human life.⁶⁸

Bertrand Russell (d. 1970) was quite realistic when he posited that humanity could benefit from science and technology only by purifying itself from ignorance and then following wisdom. If not, he thought, science and technology would become sources of authoritarian rule and destruction.

Man hitherto has been prevented from realizing his hopes by ignorance as to means. As this ignorance disappears he becomes increasingly able to mould his physical environment, his social milieu and himself into the forms which he deems best. In so far as he is wise this new power is beneficent; in so far as he is foolish it is quite the reverse. If, therefore, a scientific civilization is to be a good civilization it is necessary that increase in knowledge should be accompanied by increase in wisdom. I mean by wisdom a right conception of the ends of life. This is something which science in itself does not provide. Increase of science by itself, therefore, is not enough to guarantee any genuine progress, though it provides one of the ingredients which progress requires.⁶⁹

Nor can it be said that a mere increase in the production of material commodities is in itself a thing of great value. To prevent extreme poverty is important, but to add to the possessions of those who already have too much is a worthless waste of effort.⁷⁰

He predicted that in the future, all aspects of life would be controlled by totalitarian states and authoritarian rulers. Forms of democracy might be retained, but real power would be wielded by a small group of people who would be fully supported by scientific experts. The economy, along with education, reproduction, and entertainment, would be centrally regulated with the help of scientific propaganda techniques. Contemporary observers can see rather easily that this prediction has become a reality. Today, with the rulers controlling the machinery of propaganda, forming any independent public opinion seems to be impossible. Most people have been sterilized, and sexual relations among the sterilized has become unrestricted. Children are educated to become either governors or workers. Finally, Russell contended that the danger lies with the leaders who have no sense of tradition and history:

Our world has a heritage of culture and beauty, but unfortunately we have been handing on this heritage only to the less active and important members of each generation. The government of the world, by which I do not mean its ministerial posts but its key-positions of power, has been allowed to fall into the hands of men ignorant of the past, without tenderness towards what is traditional, without understanding of what they are destroying. There is no essential reason why this should be the case.⁷¹

Algar takes his argument further by suggesting that Islam, in its aspect of disinterested truth, is impervious to any challenge; rather, in its aspect of combative truth, it challenges all systems of thought and belief.⁷² Although liberal and modernist intellectuals claim that they are devoted to Islam, they maintain double standards, for they are not courageous enough to pull themselves out of the pit into which they have fallen. They do not understand that civilizations do not emancipate themselves only by attaining political freedom; rather, real emancipation is achieved by the freedom of the mind, which is the secret of any civilization's development.

The above discussion and observations further confirm the fact that liberal and modernist intellectuals and leaders are responsible for the ummah's deplorable condition. Whatever injustice, exploitation, and oppression the ruling elites commit in the Muslim world is shared in fully by these intellectuals, who provide false perspectives to the ruling classes and divert the Muslims' attention from the Islamic worldview to imitating the West. Models based on liberal, modernist, moderate, and secular perspectives have failed to take the ummah out of the darkness of humiliation, illiteracy, and poverty. These intellectuals and leaders have failed to guide the ummah toward the path of peace and prosperity and to govern it accordingly. The

models they have developed and applied to the ummah have turned it into a passive spectator in a drama that is mere play-acting, a shadow of reality. As a result, the ummah is unable to play any significant role in its own political and intellectual affairs. Thus, AbdulHamid AbuSulayman cautions Muslims:

What is required of us is that we understand the intellectual and cultural dimensions of the imported foreign solutions. If we can accomplish this, then we will not waste any more time on imitation and parody, and therefore spare ourselves and the rest of the Ummah more suffering and pain. It is certainly neither fair nor just that the Ummah continue to be led by the political and intellectual leadership, be they nationalist, secularist, Marxist, or whatever, who have failed it so badly over the centuries. Why should they be allowed to direct the Ummah along the same useless path?⁷³

Serious, committed, and sincere Muslim intellectuals and leaders must come forward to commit themselves to the path that is truly open to them, regardless of realism and pragmatism. They must ensure that their agenda originates from their own worldview, homeland, and history, and that they use it to confront the challenges facing them in a steadfast manner. “If this is not done, the bitter failures suffered by the Islamic world over the past several centuries will pale in comparison with the new problems that it will have to face.”⁷⁴ What is seriously needed is a change in our present ways, means, and modes of thinking. In other words, we must search for an alternative based on our own worldview.

The Challenge of Creativity, Innovation, and Excellence

The most important aspect of the Islamic worldview as regards the ummah’s development is that its members understand the fundamental factor that guarantees its development. God created humanity and endowed each human being with the capacity for cognition, reflection, and understanding; the ability to distinguish between good and evil; the freedom of choice and volition; and the power to exercise his/her latent potentialities. People can produce new knowledge that is, in fact, the source of development, peace, and prosperity. The Qur’an presents humanity’s history as a means of obtaining knowledge. In fact, its general spirit tells us that those civilizations that carefully and critically watch the development of human thought, maintain an independent position, and develop their own point of view march toward development, as such activities produce new knowledge. On the

other hand, those who borrow and adopt remain undeveloped. Thus, both development and leadership depend on the production of new knowledge.

According to Islam, knowledge raised humanity's status to that of serving as God's vicegerent on Earth. Thus, God endowed human beings with the faculties of seeing, listening, and perceiving so that they would be superior to all other species as well as among fellow human beings. Similarly, a civilization that is more advanced in knowledge acquires development and the most eminent position in the world.

Here we ask a fundamental question: Is knowledge developed by way of being critical and creative or by borrowing and learning with a sense of superiority over others? In my view, borrowing and learning are not the true means and methods of knowledge. The Qur'an mentions several important terms, such as *basr* (seeing), *sama`* (listening), and *fu'ad* (perceiving) as the faculties of knowledge. These terms are not used in their literal sense. For example, *basr* means acquiring knowledge through keen observation, which implies serious reflection and judgment based on God's guidance. The Qur'an says that without such guidance, one's observation and reflection may go in a wrong direction. Therefore, in order to avoid confusion and error, all human beings are advised to observe everything in the light of divine guidance. *Sama`* includes all sorts of existing knowledge and valuing it according to the light of divine guidance through research and investigation. *Fu'ad* means reaching conclusions as independently and as objectively as possible. Whoever uses these faculties and excels in such undertakings achieves development and eminence and assumes the role of a guide. The same is applicable to a society and a civilization.

The ummah is no exception. Unless it shows its capacity to produce new knowledge in all domains of life, it cannot become developed. And for excelling in knowledge, the ummah requires some kind of motivation from a visionary and committed leadership, one that can inspire Muslims to pursue the knowledge handed down to them from the past as well as from the present. Moreover, this leadership must be able to undertake the quest of adding new dimensions to the ummah's knowledge so that Muslims can reach their own conclusions by reordering the knowledge thus acquired. Such a process purifies traditional knowledge of the impurities and irrelevances it has acquired through the light of its own findings and deductions, and improves knowledge with new facts that have been discovered empirically. Thus equipped, the people can begin to restructure the ummah's order of life so that justice, peace, prosperity, and all sorts of development will ensue.

When a civilization thinks in terms of imitating and borrowing, its forward march is restricted. This state of affairs is followed by decadence,

because its enthusiasm for producing new knowledge slackens and its academic pursuits are confined to imitation. Finally, it lapses into the misconception that what has been achieved by others is sufficient, relevant, and compatible.

Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, I assert that development is achieved by those civilizations that make the best use of their members' faculties of seeing, listening, and perceiving, regardless of whether their people believe in God or not. A civilization that produces new knowledge is blessed with development and prosperity. Given this, one can deduce correctly that unless the ummah gets rid of its slavish mentality and creates its own knowledge, there is no possibility of it ever becoming developed. Every one of its members should stand for creative and innovative productions in each area of life. Muslim intellectuals need to develop their own models and structures that not only differ from the existing ones in the "developed world," but they must also be superior to those existing models. All of the Muslims' energies, therefore, must be directed toward creating this sense of creativity, innovation, and excellence.

To achieve this target, the ummah needs to create an environment that values hard work and personal excellence in its societies and institutions. In these institutions, those who are serious and creative must be acknowledged and rewarded. To create a culture of knowledge and excellence, the ummah must understand that new knowledge and a culture of excellence cannot develop unless the existing leadership is replaced by committed and courageous people at both the political and the intellectual levels. No violent or secret activities should be accepted in Muslim societies. Thus, fair and free opportunities must be guaranteed to all social groups and sections that are ready to work within the country's constitutional framework. No party should be banned, and all print and electronic media should have an equal chance to cover important parties at the national and state levels. Any government that denies these rights should be considered illegitimate.

Within the existing system and with the support of the majority of people, everyone should have the right to replace the existing government and its leadership. No group or party should be considered absolutely indispensable. Committed and conscious intellectuals should be courageous enough to contribute to creating this environment. Healthy criticism must be taken as a source of consensus for obtaining something good for society. Governments should not only talk about transparency, but should generate a real

transparent culture. Every move to make government more open and accountable should be accepted as a principle of good governance. If the ummah fails to accept this challenge, then no one can change its fate of continued injustice, exploitation, and oppression.

Endnotes

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