The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Islam and Modernity: Intellectual Horizons
        Aziz Esmail

Reference

Abstract

In this essay, Dr. Esmail reviews the question of Islam's destiny today by linking it to essential questions and doubts about the destiny of the western world as well. Against the background, he re–visits the history of Islam to enlarge on an essential distinction between history as a story of fixed, stable entities or systems and historicity as the index of fluid and open–ended development in time. The modern situation makes it imperative, he believes, to re–visit the facts of Islam from the second rather than the first point of view. Refusing to "identify the ideology of Islamic revival with the revival of Islam", he makes the case for an approach different from those of traditionalism, modernism as well as fundamentalism. He emphasises that this need is not particularly Islamic; rather, it is one of equal concern to all the Abrahamic faiths and cultures. Such universalism, however, does not negate the integrity of particular communities or ways of life. It calls, in his concluding words, "for an opening of windows, not a demolition of homes".

Keywords

Some Fundamental Questions of our times

It is now more than 60 years since Sir Hamilton Gibb, one of the father figures of Islamic studies in the West, reflected on the prospects of the Muslim world by raising the question: 'Whither Islam?' Since then the world has undergone profound change. But at the close of the century the question itself remains as meaningful as it was in his day. But, if the world has changed, so indeed has the context of the question. This transformation is best highlighted if we reflect for a moment on the following fact. Today we can hardly consider the question of the destiny of Islam without also asking in the same breath: 'Whither the West?' For, despite the fact that this latter question would have been only too pertinent in 1932, a year before the election of Hitler to the chancellorship of Germany, nothing less than superhuman clairvoyance could have discerned, in the storm-clouds then gathering on the horizon, the shape of things to come: the dissolution of Muslim European empires and the corresponding

loss of supremacy in the world; the rise of America to the position of superpower; the Cold War and its impact on the entire political, economic and cultural map of the world; the end, decades later, of communism and abrupt termination - practically overnight - of the Cold War; and the rise, in the meantime, of Islamic revivalist ideologies in sections of Muslim societies throughout the world. Neither in the 1930s nor in the ensuing decades - not until close to our own time - did the idea of the West transform itself from an assumption into a question or a problem. Nor do the questions, 'Whither Islam?' and 'Whither the West?' stand by themselves. They arise side by side with several fundamental perplexities of our time. Thus, we may ask: 'Whither the state?' or 'Whither society?' Or again: 'Whither science and technology?' Or indeed: 'Whither the world of human meanings and values?' Like the chords of a piano, each of these questions invites or solicits, by the logic of resonance, the others.

It is a commonplace nowadays that the nations and peoples of the contemporary world are largely interdependent. Several key features of modern life have contributed to this fact: the revolution in modern communications brought about by electronic media; the increasing susceptibility of national economies to currencies and trade cycles abroad; and the steady eclipse of the nation-state, owing partly to the foregoing features, partly to the movements of populations, and partly to the role of the international media in the moulding of political opinion and sentiments. Thus, the state is increasingly dwarfed both by supra-territorial entities (such as the European Common Market, the North American Free Trade Association etc.), by a political culture led by the media, and by an international language and ethos management.

Islam: Fact and Idea

If we were to confine ourselves, for a moment, to the subject of Islam, we could safely make the following assertion at the outset. There is no proper way to understand the position of Islam today unless we grasp, first of all, that it is complicated by positions adapted, in contemporary Muslim societies, *about* Islam. One might put it in this way: the question of Islam is, at bottom, a question of 'Islam'. What this means is that in the first instance we must learn to put aside the habit, common to religious realists or essentialists, of treating 'Islam' (or 'Christianity' or 'Judaism' or whatever) as an entity independent of the mental constructs of the society in which the term is invoked. The *fact* of Islam is constituted, in large part, by the *idea* of Islam. It is best approached, therefore, as a phenomenon (or better still, phenomena - for there is today, just as there has always been, a plurality rather than a singularity of expressions which go by this name).

History vs. System

The first few centuries of Islamic history demonstrate a certain plasticity of religious identity. They exhibit a series of cultural endeavours, debates and confrontations, which may be compared to chemical reactions, as opposed to the precipitate left once the reactions have followed their course. In other words, it represents not the crystalline deposit but the process, under way, of crystallisation. And it is as erroneous to treat the precipitate as an original essence rather than the contingent product of a reaction of specific combinations, as it is to treat a world view, a system of doctrines, evaluations, and practices, as anything but an outcome of specific historical forces.

Furthermore, one of the most striking characteristics of this period is the immense variety of forms of thought and expression, of style as well as substance. They represent not just different interpretations of life, of which Islam was the horizon.

Islam is part of the interpretation of Muslim societies of who they are. It is part of their way of being, which includes the totality of their institutions, practices and, above all, the self-image and world-image embedded in their way of life. The interpretation of life that Islam represents is, moreover, a changing, evolving, developing phenomenon. This is vividly borne out by the first four centuries of Islamic history. What is noteworthy about this period is the scarcity, in Muslim literature of the time, of definitions or reminders of, and references or appeals to 'Islam'. Why should this be so? The reason would be obvious, if one were to set aside the assumption of Islam as an *entire system* handed down from its inception from one generation to another, and to substitute instead a historically formed outlook. Many a historical account, however competent in detail, however original in dating, placing, and discovering new or disputed materials, is rendered lame by failing to question and analyse the unit of its study. Thus, there are histories of Islam which take the term 'Islam' simply for granted, and which are thus oblivious, for instance, to shifts in the *use* of the term over time and space. It is only fair to add that this problem is endemic to historical study and by no means confined to scholarship on Islam.

In scholarly terms, we think of Islam as an entity, a system, subdivided historically into a number of branches - Sunnism, Sufism, Law, Philosophy and Theology, these being so many different 'interpretations' (in the static, self-contained sense) of the Quran and Hadith. In a word, we *objectify* it. The defectiveness of this objectifying outlook becomes apparent if we reflect on the fact that, in actual history, none of these 'sects' or 'interpretations' sprang into existence as a complete, codified organism. They evolved, but to note this is hardly enough. For it was not only their ideas, their inner content, that underwent a process of development; it was also their sense of boundaries - their self-image as people within the Muslim *Umma*, and a people within the world. This is not to say, for example, that there are no distinctively Shia beliefs or traditions. It is only to say that these traditions are neither static nor self-contained. The ethos which forms their background is one of continual and shifting overlap with a vast variety of ideas and sensibilities, reflecting the variety of languages, cultures, and social classes which was a feature of the lands of classical Islam. For this reason, 'Shiism' and 'Sufism' are, in the last analysis, unsuitable as topics or units of study, though obviously the history of Safavid Iran cannot be written without any analysis of the state's appropriation of Shia ideas or loyalties, just as the sociology of Islam in West Africa cannot be written without the important role of brotherhoods or *tariqas*. But in this latter case the units of study are other than 'Shiism' or 'Sufism' as holistic, homogeneous entities. There is, of course, an overarching, unifying ideal. And this ideal is the Islamic faith. But Islam in this sense is the horizon, the framework within which the thought, the habits of feeling and conduct - the self-interpretation (again at the deepest, pre-reflective level) - of the particular society in question, are shaped and organised.

But, if this were true of classical Islam, there is every reason to expect that it would be true of contemporary Islam. The term contemporary Islam is only a vague, unsatisfactory shorthand for a set of highly complex realities.

Modernity: Prospects and Predicaments

The challenge facing Muslim society overlaps largely with the challenge facing the world as a whole, and that a response defined in terms of supposedly peculiar or idiosyncratic to Islamic culture at his juncture in our history is bound to be off the mark. It may be said that the problem of contemporary secular modernity is a western problem, and that Muslim societies need not be bothered by it. But this would be sheer make-believe. In fact, the best of Muslim thought for many years has grappled credibly with this very problem. Modernity is now a global phenomenon. It used to be thought, as late as half a century ago and even later, that all that the new nations of Asia and Africa needed to do for their development was to take the best that the West had to offer - its technological know-how, for instance - and, for the rest, simply maintain their own traditions. But this is possible only up to a point. Reality defies such neat expectations. There is no 'know-how' which does not embody in itself a particular interpretation of the world. The material as well as cultural constituents of modernity are now omnipresent on the globe. And they pose both common opportunities and common predicaments before the citizens of the world at large.

Commonality of problems implies commonality of response. In turn, this implies commonality of historical memory and foundations. For some time now, there has been conceptualisation of Islam in the West which casts it in terms of not only a dissimilarity but of antithesis to itself. This conclusion is sustainable only through several intellectual manoeuvres. One of these is to ignore subtle or even substantial variations between different expressions in different parts of the Muslim world, and to sum them up under the heading of the 'protest of Islam against the West'. Another tactic is to ignore all those expressions and viewpoints by intellectuals or others in Muslim societies that do not conform to the established stereotype, and to brand them as somehow idiosyncratic, minority or 'secular' in character, thereby excluding them from what is defined as 'Islamic'. It is as though to extend the same hearing to these other views would be to complicate things. It would mean being obliged to confront the complexity and untidiness of the real world as opposed to the neatness of fiction; to discriminate and differentiate where otherwise one may well get away from clinging to handy generalisations. It is only at the price of this oversimplification that the image of a revival of Islam as a diametric opposite to literally every ideal associated with the European Enlightenment can be credibly sustained.

There is an important reason for refusing to identify the ideology of Islamic revival with the revival of Islam. And this, in a nutshell, is the fact that 'revival' is a misnomer. Fundamentalism claims to be returning to fundamentals. In fact, what it proposes is something new. The language of fundamentalism is nothing if not polemical; polemics implies a rival against whom to react; and reaction to a new rival has new characteristics not to be found in what went on before the new rival came onto the scene. The new phenomena with which modern Muslim societies have to reckon are: first, the nation-state; second, the culture of modernity - the joint product of modern economic practice, urbanisation, demographic mobility and global communications; third, the predominance of Western power and influence in this new culture. Each of these novelties is of immense and far-reaching magnitude. An Islamic response to them cannot, of necessity, correspond to the Islamic response to an earlier, substantially different world. An invocation of the past is not necessarily a restoration of the past. Whether the new phenomenon is an adequate response to the new challenge is a separate question. What is important to note first is the novelty beneath

its effect to antiquity. It will be seen that, in this respect, fundamentalism joins with traditionalism, and is therefore open to the same criticism.

The vagaries of modern communications are such that fundamentalism, receiving a regular press, has crowded out all subtler expressions of Islamic piety. Among those which have been thus overshadowed is the endeavour of reinterpretation. The modern tradition of reinterpretation owes itself to the work of figures of the later nineteenth century and the first half of the present century. Impressed by modernity in the form incarnate in Western civilisation, then at the peak of its imperial triumph, these individuals - men like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, al-Afghani, Mohamed Abduh, and Sir Mohamed Iqbal (See Ch.33) - sought, on behalf of their societies, to avail themselves of the fruits of modernity while fortifying their own traditions, so as to ensure their independence from the West. To do this meant on the one hand to be selective about the modern world so as to be masters of their fate, and on the other hand to revivify loyalty to their past. This in turn meant linking modernity to tradition. The task of which they conceived was not simply to bridge the two experiences, but rather, more substantially, to make the first flow from the second. This meant interpreting classical Islamic history in such a way as to show that the fruits of modernity were already contained in it - that they had indeed once flowered impressively, to be nearly blighted, since by a frost for which post-classical Muslim societies were themselves to be blamed. But slumbering under centuries of neglect were the seeds of the old blossoms, dormant but not dead. Would Muslim societies rise to the occasion and turn cultivators of their land, transforming the battlefield that the West had made of it into an orchard ripe with the fruits that had once brought so much joy and vigour? This was the challenge that they saw before them.

The Need of the Hour

The appropriate starting point for Islamic thought today is the need of the hour. At the same time, by definition, Islamic thought must be rooted in its past. It must grow organically out of it. Each of the systems of thought falling under the broad categories of traditionalism, modernism and fundamentalism in the Muslim world today is fuelled by the needs of the moment, and, in the process of answering to them, operates with different images of the past. But in each case there is a summons to *return*: to return to tradition; to bygone but recoverable dynamism, or to an erstwhile military and political glory. Is there a way forward which is not a simple return? A way with a built-in dialectic between past, present and future?

A coherent theology is intellectually of the utmost importance. Such a theology would entail a systematic elaboration, on the basis of tradition as well as reason, of pivotal concepts like the word of God, interpretation, etc. Being guided by tradition, a theology of this kind will not be the prisoner of modernity. Being guided by reason, it will be relevant to the issues of modernity. 'Relevant' here means informed but not dictated. For a criticism of the times - that is to say, a reasoned argument against them rather than a rhetorical denunciation of them - is as relevant to the times as an enthusiasm for them.

A crucial question, then, which a modern theology has to take up is how to realise what, following Charles Taylor, an important contemporary philosopher of religion, one can refer to as the question of meaning in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition - "the central promise of divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided, while guarding against the suppression, in the name of the divine, of the affirmation of the human spirit, intellect and imagination."

The Power of Aspiration

If historical and religious consciousness are to come together rather than go their separate ways, it is essential to recognise the historical dimension *within* religion and, conversely, the religious imagination *within* history. Religious life is the vehicle through which the ideal makes its appearance in human affairs. By definition, the ideal surpasses what exists. It is what immediacy is not. It holds a rebuking mirror to the way things are. In the mirror of the ideal, the real is humbled. What the ideal releases in human culture is the power of aspiration: a vision of what might be, what could be, in place of what happens to be. It is, in a word, counterfactual. A moment's thought will suffice to show how close we are, in these reflections, to the pulse of religious experience. Consider the Book of Isaiah, or the Gospels, or the Quran. What is at the centre of these texts if not the juxtaposition of warnings with glad tidings, of a critique of what is with a promise of what shall come to be?

The doctrines of monotheistic faiths are specific propositions. But the impulse to transcendence to which they attest is far more general. It seems to be inherent in the human condition that its drive for meaning must travel the path of a vision of radical otherness. This 'otherness' answers to unrealised possibilities and unresolved contradictions in the here and now: the frailties, wounds and iniquities which are part and parcel of the human estate on earth. This is vividly symbolised in the notion of the hereafter. So important was this notion in the evolution of society that it has persisted, as though in unconscious mimicry and in an altered form, in secular culture. The materialist philosophies of the nineteenth-century European sociologists Auguste Comte (died 1857) or Karl Marx (died 1883), contesting preceding theologies, succeeded only in part by dressing old figures in new clothes. Comte's dream of the eventual victory of reason over magic, theology, and metaphysics is a religious hope, not a scientific prediction. Clearly audible in the ideas of Marx are nearly exact echoes of the tenets of monotheistic faith. Thus, the story of the rise of alienation through the division of labour repeats, at an abstract remove, the scriptural narrative of Adam's error and descent from Eden. Again, the dream of a distant time when the state shall wither, and the war of man against man give way to universal harmony, recalls the kingdom to come. No philosophy, whether religious or secular, has ever succeeded in yielding effective meaning without envisaging a beyond, first revealed in symbols of faith. Total immanence, it would seem, is the arch enemy of meaning.

An Islamic thought or theology equipped to master the challenges of contemporaneity would thus need to discover its past anew, not as a legacy, not as a deposit, not even as a body of tenets and principles, but as a vision of which the principles were in their time and place an expression. Undoubtedly, the vision does not exist anywhere else but in the destiny of a culture - in definite ideas, institutions, practices, in legal, social, and artistic traditions. The sacred is always mediated. The mediations are symbolic, which means that the sacred remains inexhaustible, and never finally and concretely formulated or epitomised.

Abrahamic Commonalities

The way beyond these entrenched habits of cultural imagination is not a way for one group or community alone. It can only be a common project, embracing in particular the 'Abrahamic faiths', the three monotheistic traditions which draw their inspiration, directly or indirectly, from the Abrahamic paradigm. Of Islamic thought, this principle requires a renewed appreciation of its universalist potential. This, in its turn, would mean a critical revision of all assumptions which identify the pursuit of ethnic or cultural identities - whether Arabian,

Turkish, or Indo-Pakistani - with an Islamic cause. In the politics of identity, Islam and ethnicity become fatally intertwined. And, in effect, Islam comes to be an 'Eastern' religion, separate from, even antithetical to, the 'West'. But why could future Muslim generations in the West not remain true to their spiritual vocation while achieving a harmony with their cultural surroundings, with the languages and the scientific and humanistic knowledge of modern times at their disposal - and indeed, placing these resources in the service of the spiritual and ethical vision of their faith?

Sir Hamilton Gibb, whom I quoted at the outset, had this corrective word to say to his Western audience: 'We are so accustomed to think of Islam as an oriental religion and of its culture as an oriental culture that we are apt to overlook the real character of Moslem civilisation and to miss its true place and significance in the history of human society. From the very first it belonged, in consequence, to what we may call - in contradistinction to the Indian and Chinese religious groups - the western group… To call it "oriental" is a misnomer; it is oriental not in the absolute sense, but only in its local extension - and it has at all times been shared by Jews and eastern Christians as well as Moslems.'

The salutary lesson in this remains as pertinent today as it was for Gibb's contemporaries. By the same token, it is of relevance to Muslim societies lest, by too absolute an identification of the faith with ethnic and regional mores, its universal potentialities become occluded. And lest that surplus of possibilities which we identified above with the very nature of faith become truncated by the victory of determinate forms over the primordial vision. It may be objected that universalism, while inspiring as a sentiment, is in practice an impoverishment rather than an enrichment. Is it not conclusive, ultimately, to a levelling of sorts, hereby all identities are lost in a *mélange* of cultural superficialities?

But universalism, in the perspective argued for in this essay, need not imply erosion of particular identities. A pluralistic, universalist point of view, which the conditions of the modern world seem to call for, does not necessitate the abdication of particular viewpoints and commitments. Breadth is not incompatible with depth. For the community of man flourishes nowhere but in and through communities of particular men and women. It is true that, when locked in its own specificity, a culture is liable to retreat into isolation. But escape from introversion lies not in the obliteration of specific memory but in an enlargement of its intellectual horizons. Universal awareness is a movement from the inside to the outside. It is not a cancellation of inwardness. It calls for an opening of windows, not a demolition of homes.

References

Gibb, Sir Hamilton, *Whither Islam? A Survey of Modern Movements in the Moslem World* New York: AMS Press, 1973

Raison, Timothy ed. *The Founding Fathers of Social Science* Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969

Taylor, Charles, *Philosophy in An Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, Edited by James Tully. New York: Cambridge University, 1994