

Islam and the Crisis of Modernity

Modernity is facing a crisis today. And, it is a crisis not of power but of meaning, not of the efficacy of modern instruments but of the legitimacy of modern goals, not of the ability of modernity's champions to carry its project forward but of the ultimate beneficence and morality of the project itself. For modern societies are not helpless at facing the inner challenges of governance and economy, primary determinants of the human condition according to the modernist scheme of things, nor are modern polities vulnerable to any threats by external enemies. No, there are no slaves within the walls of modern Rome, or any hordes of barbarians at its gates. And yet, the denizens of the modern city are not celebrating, they are not jubilant and exultant but feel puzzled and chastised. Puzzled because their global city is not a city of humanity, chastised because of the realization that no city in history can ever incarnate perfect harmony, justice or truth. Thus, to their dismay, they have discovered that the promise of modernity to create its own Utopia, the *Cosmopolis* of humanity, will forever remain unfulfilled, that not all the modernity's men and horses will be able to put the Humpty-Dumpty of our humanity together again.

It is only in this sense, namely the inability of modern reason to redeem its promise of delivering a model of perfect historical order, that the expression 'crisis of modernity' has any legitimacy and it is to this intellectual impasse that the present reflection is devoted. The crisis, then, comes to light through the insight of contemporary philosophy that modernity is no longer able to function *as a doctrine*, that it can lay no claims to possessing any coherent worldview or meaningful cosmology. Or, stated differently, all the normative claims of modernity, its umpteen prescriptions for societal utopias and development projects, are no more than cultural and historical prejudices of the civilization in command. These are the arguments of power, by power, for power. The discourse of reason is no less of a historical construct than that of revelation and just as authoritarian and hegemonic.

History Sovereign over Theory

Paradoxically, modern (Enlightenment) reason, which prided itself on its discovery of *history* and made the grand metaphysical claim about historical existence and not some kind of trans-temporal eternity being the true home of man, is now humbled by the most disastrous upshot of its own truth. For the logic of *quis custodiet ipsos custodiet* (Who guards, in turn, the guardians?) compels it to acknowledge that reason itself is a product of history and not some trans-historical criterion of right and wrong! Or, that there exists not one universal Reason but a host of local, historical and contingent reasons. The eternal question of philosophy about the nature of the best regime, and the inescapable query of every human soul about the goal and end of human existence cannot, therefore, be settled within the courtroom of reason. However, this humbling of reason before the mystery of human existence is no cause for shame for the neo-orthodoxy of relativism. On the contrary, the failure of Enlightenment reason to overcome the recalcitrance of history against theory is taken as a proof of the intractable and arbitrary nature of all truth-claims. Truth according to the gospel of nihilism is nothing but the mask of reason that power wears; it is a verbal game, a discursive strategy to

maintain the hegemony of the powers that be. All universal schemes, all grand theories, all meta-narratives - religions as well as ideologies, political doctrines as well as methodologies of social engineering - have therefore no legitimacy for the enlightened post-metaphysical being.

Earlier, at the defining moment of modernity, there was no amazement at the mystery of human existence, no humility before the intractability of the human condition and no awe for the concealment (*ghayba*) of Being that inform all modernist and postmodernist discourses today. On the contrary, it was asserted that since philosophy's unmasking of the 'cunning of reason' revealed an identity of the rational and the real, a congruence of the normative and the empirical, history had come to an end and the timeless Utopia of mankind was at hand. All that a society needed to do was to emulate the example provided by the European spirit, to follow the curve of its progress and development in 'universal history', and the rewards of a perfect social order would be its. The discovery of history as a *system*, as a decipherable norm of reason and a predictable goal of development, thus transformed *history* into *sociology* and opened the floodgates of the utopian technologies of social engineering. All the suffering and misery that ensued in the wake of these experiments, indeed the legitimisation of the politics of genocide and ethnic cleansing that is also the gift of utopian modernity, can be attributed directly to the claims that human reason had, in the unfolding of the European *Geist* and in the march of the nation-state in history, discovered the true end of man!

Today we know that the moral and intellectual impasse that any 'universal' philosophy of history creates cannot be overcome by remaining faithful to the original claims of modernity, namely by asserting the ability of reason to prescribe a perfect norm for historical existence. Indeed, from the moral point of view, the antinomy of norm and history that is inescapable within the paradigm of Enlightenment can be abolished only if we say farewell either to universal reason or to universal morality. For a reason that determines the course of world-history is a reason that is also sovereign over moral will, just as a history that follows the dictates of the moral will necessarily renders superfluous any regime of a universal and sovereign reason. If morality be the exercise of free will, it cannot operate within restraints of any kind including those of reason; similarly, if reason be the essence of man, it cannot stop short of prescribing norms that are true for 'all times and climes'. Hence, this deadlock can be removed by any of the two strategies: Either one accepts the sovereignty of existence (history) over norm (theory) and banishes morality from the discourse of reason altogether, or one upholds the primacy of the norm, but then exiles history from this theoretical vision. Either a normless historicity or a ahistorical normativity, either a scheme of (trans-historical) reason or a disorder of (para-rational) history! Whatever the choice, morality is either subsumed by theoretical rationality or consumed by political contingency.

Paradoxically, then, the legacy of Enlightenment that causes the greatest *Angst* to the modern soul springs from the insight that the human condition, when eliminated of its transcendental moorings, appears 'beyond good and evil'. Either the goal of humanity, that renders its suffering bearable and meaningful, lies outside the horizon of history, or man is simply a 'meaning-creating animal' who is the source of her own morality. In actual practice, however, this crisis has merely paved the way for the rule of contemporary nihilism. For as the modern world finds it increasingly difficult to conceive a distinction between good and evil that is not grounded in human will and design, and yet discovers that normative judgments cannot be supported by empirical claims, it has begun to despair of the possibility of, ultimately, sustaining any distinction between right and wrong. By renouncing the possibility of transcendence and inaugurating the sovereignty history over theory, modern man has chosen

to live a world without norms. His is a cognitive universe that lacks the possibility of moral judgment.

From Doctrine to Anti-Doctrine

Today, modernity is metamorphosing itself from a *doctrine* to an *anti-doctrine*. Instead of claiming any 'truth' for its model of the inner and outer worlds, it is now pleading that the notion of 'truth' itself be abolished, at least within the domains of philosophy and science. Modernist (Kantian) philosophy was/is proud of its ability to demarcate a clear line between reason and non-reason. It posits an identity of reason and knowledge; what lies within the limits of reason is known or knowable, and what lies outside its domain is unknowable and hence conjectural. (Indeed, reason has now been reduced to experience, to pure sense-perception!) So, the dilemma before the modern man is that she could either remain within the bounds of reason and learn to coexist with the uncertainty of all truth and the partiality of all knowledge, or she may step outside the borders of reason and may create some sense of meaning by conceiving and imaging the whole, but she may do so only with the assurance that such a 'whole' would always be arbitrary and unverifiable. One is thus confronted with the frustrating incongruence of knowledge and meaning, the conflict between the method – rationality – of science, which by its very empirical nature is necessarily reductionist, and man's search for meaning, which is unable to shun the 'unscientific' questions of totality and ultimacy.

Significantly, reason now seeks refuge in the anti-doctrinaire modernism of modernity and conceives its task as that of the 'de-construction' of the modernist subject, the uncovering of the underlying metaphysical foundation of its discourses, and the de-divinization of all language and discourse. Indeed, according to Richard Rorty, the most outspoken spokesmen of this philosophy, 'truth is merely a property of language; that where there are no sentences, there is no truth; and that the idea that world decides which descriptions are true no longer makes sense.' Moreover, it also follows that 'since only descriptions of the world can be true or false, only sentences can be true, truth is contingent upon the ability of human beings to make languages in which to phrase sentences.' Positing an identity of truth and language, the debunker of modernity and its metaphysics then reaches a point where we humans 'no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as quasi-divinity, where we treat everything - our language, our conscience, our community - as a product of time and chance.'

Consequently, the anti-modernist utopia may now be spelt out as 'the culture of liberalism' that would be 'enlightened and secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human being should be responsible. It would drop, or drastically reinterpret, not only the idea of holiness but those of "devotion to truth" and "fulfillment of the deepest needs of the spirit". The process of de-divinization.... would, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meaning of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings.'

Modernity's main achievement, if you follow this logic, is to have advanced a set of claims, about reason, man and history, which, with the maturing of its reflection, she was able to dispose off as false! And it is this discovery, that the axioms and givens of modernity have

been fallacious, which is now hailed as reason's greatest contribution to our understanding of the human condition. Still, this failure does not dim the modernist light or cast any shadow on the modernist project. For the assertion is that it is not merely modernity that is unable to validate itself from its own criteria of rationality, but that all philosophies of the whole, all universal histories, all doctrines of salvation, all visions of an End are unverifiable/falsifiable and hence unscientific and non-rational. Modernity is, you may say, a spoilsport; if she cannot have it her way, she'll not allow anyone to play at all!

Reason seeks a Foundational Text

The crisis of modernity is most starkly encountered in the deconstruction movement that pulls reason down from its transcendent, and empirically unassailable, throne of universality and consigns it to a regime within history. Though it is not dissimilar to the strategy that modern rationalists earlier applied against the defenders of revelation, the application of the modernist method to the modernist truth has caused much panic in their own ranks. Visibly terrified and confounded by the devastation of their proud heritage which this assault has caused, the champions of modern reason have come to the realization that reason without a foundational text will always remain vulnerable to the nihilistic gaze of historicizing vision, that the corrosive solvent of its relativising epistemologies will always render the modernist truth as one among a multiplicity of contingent and dated untruths. Little wonder that in a last-ditch effort to defend its honour, one of the most outspoken champions of modernism has offered an apology on its behalf which is, most strikingly, nothing less than a panic-stricken plea for the adoption of a dogmatic and fundamentalist line of defence! Reason should defend itself not on the ground of logic and argument, but on that of the axiomatic – incontestable – superiority of its self-confessedly foundational text!

Given the realisation that the intellectual debates of our day have three, rather than the customary two, interlocutors, the late Ernest Gellner classified these primary epistemological orientations as those of: '1) Religious fundamentalism, 2) Relativism, 3) Enlightenment rationalism or rationalist fundamentalism.' (*Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London, 1992. p. 2.) What is remarkable about this apology is that in fighting the ghost of 'religious fundamentalism', Gellner's rationalism can defend itself only as a dogma; that it can meet the challenge of its putative adversary by producing a veritable *confessio*! For while Gellner is adamant that 'there is no and can be no Revelation' (84), he also proclaims, without a trace of diffidence or irony, that the 'epistemology of Enlightenment', as enshrined in the Kantian text, is absolute; that it is 'transcendent twice over', in 'being beyond and outside a culture or any culture, and being beyond and outside this world.'! (82). Needless to say that this, perforce incontestable and unfalsifiable, claim about the *a priori* authority of 'one's own text' is exactly what rationalism dismisses as dogmatic and arbitrary; it constitutes its principal argument against the claim of transcendence on behalf of Revelation! Thus, when Gellner, striking a manifestly sanctimonious posture, laments that 'the notion of a Revelation favouring and endorsing its own source' legitimises itself by a 'blatantly circular argument', he must be justifiably accused of inexcusable logical incoherence and plain moral duplicity, for his own claim about the cognitive authority of the Kantian text is as arbitrary and 'blatantly circular' as any other. Far from proving the cognitive superiority of his own text, Gellner merely lends support to the postmodernist claim that Enlightenment reason is merely one of the contingent texts of history that seeks to establish, in the name of universality and science, the regime of its own hegemonic discourse!

For all its propagation of the (transcendent) ‘cognitive ethic’ of Kant, Gellner’s desperate bid to confer Enlightenment reason a foundational text merely alerts us to the confessional nature of modernism! The authority of reason is thus not of a universal method but that of a transcendent text; for the method itself acknowledges its submission to the text and derives its legitimacy from it! More than anything, then, the ‘fundamentalist’ variety of rationalism is symptomatic of the gravity of the crisis which afflicts modernity today and which renders its discourse dogmatic but also self-defeating. It merits our attention chiefly because it typifies an extremist attempt to preserve the authority of *modernity as a doctrine*. However, by foreclosing the possibility of revelation, it proclaims the truth of a closed, deterministic universe and, as such, presents itself as an antithesis of religious faith. Needless to say, the fundamentalist and doctrinaire form of modernism cannot be reconciled with the dictates of Islamic faith and conscience and must therefore be dismissed as a falsehood that denies and distorts the ultimately transcendent truth of being, cosmos and man.

Islam’s Dialogue with Chastised Modernism

Fortunately, the intellectual and moral reign of modernist imperialism is over. Modernity has been chastised; it has been forced to become more modest in its truth-claims. Today, even the most outspoken apologists of modernity acknowledge,

- that the truth claims of Enlightenment reason are based on circular logic;
- that the notion of a sovereign, transcendent and ahistorical, subject whose reason is the touchstone of all knowledge is extremely ‘problematic’;
- that the doctrine of progress is ‘paradoxical’;
- that the cult of freedom which renders all ‘taboos’ illegitimate and unnecessary is inimical to the preservation of any kind of moral, and by extension social and political, order;
- that the charter of the modern political community, nay any political community, is always parochial and exclusive;
- that the universality of justice and rights is a metaphysical claim that cannot be redeemed within a socio-political context;
- indeed, that the jurisdiction of both reason and meaning extends far beyond the *cosmopolis* of modernity.

Whatever its other promises or discomforts, the delegitimation of modernity *at the level of doctrine* has undoubtedly opened a new intellectual space and created a different agenda for a dialogue between modernists and others, within the civilization of Islam as well as between Islam and the West. And, even if so far the true potential of this intellectual opening has not been grasped by any notable thinker on either side, the possibility of a future conciliation and accommodation (in default of a genuine synthesis!) between modernism and religious faith cannot be ruled out. The reasons for such a conjecture are not hard to seek: any debate between two doctrines that each promises a total salvation is not a dialogue; it is not a conversation that is open to the possibility of mutual adjustment. The vehemence of modernity’s encounter with Islam may be explained by the fact that the kind of modernism that was forcefully introduced and dispensed throughout the Muslim world aspired to being more than a mere apology for colonial rule; it presented itself as a universal doctrine of liberation! It had the pretension of propounding a new, scientific, cosmology and worldview, and by consequence, of rendering obsolete all ‘traditional’ worldviews and religions, Islam included, *on cognitive grounds*.

Modernism thus legitimated itself as the *epistemology of Reason* and advanced universal claims for its truth. Such was their faith in the power of reason and science that modernists earlier could confidently declare that not only were all the secrets of the physical universe within their grasp, but that a 'universal science of man', which eliminated the need for every kind of subjective and emotional judgment in societal matters, was going to be the logical end result of this enlightenment. Marxism, of course, was the most extravagant and revolutionary example of the kind of scientific positivism, which, in retrospect, appears so naïve and well-meaning and yet so unintelligent and inexorable. Be that as it may, modernism in its heyday was a supremely arrogant doctrine that claimed to provide a total account of 'all that is', and a salvation - the enlightenment of humanity - that ensued from the recognition of this all-inclusive truth. Little wonder, it did come in conflict with Islam with its faith in Allah, the Transcendent God Who is the ultimate source of all meaning and existence but Who, unlike the cosmos of science, cannot be fully comprehended by the faculties of human intelligence. For, God is forever 'greater than' any human effort to grasp His essence. He is greater than any account of His being, any image, any metaphor, greater than the cosmos and 'all that is' of the sensible and intelligible worlds. For Muslims, any compromise with doctrinaire modernity puts this sense of the Transcendent, and the existential commitment that flows from it, at peril.

It is for similar reasons that any 'dialogue' between Islam and 'Postmodernism', between a doctrine of Transcendence and Truth and an anti-doctrine that is fundamentalist in its rejection of truth, universality and transcendence, is a contradiction in terms. Not only would any 'conversation' between the protagonists of these two irreconcilable metaphysical systems be morally and intellectually pointless, it would also be, from the Islamic standpoint, tactically counterproductive. For such a move will only be tantamount to recognizing that postmodernism, a mere symptom of the crisis of modernism, is the true philosophy of our times, that its insights afford an edifying and emancipating account of our human condition today. No, only a chastised modernism that is cognizant of the limits of reason to produce a cosmology and a worldview, that knows of its complicity in the conception and execution of the imperialist project, but which does not renounce the utopia of a common humanity, can be a partner in the future dialogue with a universalist and 'non-fundamentalist' Islam.

Nor can there be any questioning that for all its misgivings and censure of the modernist project, Islam cannot turn its back on the vicegerency (*khilafa*) of Adam, it cannot renounce the mandate of humanity to act as the agent of Divine will. Thus, any vision of humanity, any philosophy of man, which seeks to improve the human condition, which aspires to extending man's significance and role in the cosmos, must not be dismissed out of hand as being utopian. The vocation of the Islamic intellect is not to reduce man to insignificance, which paradoxically both modern science and philosophy do, but to guard him against the lure of Prometheanism, to immunize him against the delusion of sovereignty. Within the limits of man's acceptance of a moral authority higher than his own whims, meliorism as a philosophy and way of life is not necessarily illegitimate. Accordingly, it is not enough that the Muslim thinker merely recognizes the reversal of modernity's epistemological stance and underscores the aporias, dead ends, of its discourse. No, Muslim thought must not only acquaint itself with the story of Enlightenment reason's fall from grace, it must also, without falling into the nihilistic abyss of 'postmodernism', bring forth a conciliatory vision of a single humanity, and hence renew its commitment to the moral unity of mankind. Whatever the perils of universalism within the ideologies of culture and politics, its indispensable role in the sustenance of a transcendent vision, the *sine qua non* of Islamic faith, must not be devalued.

Given the admission, within the courtroom of philosophy itself, that the ultimate meaning of human effort and existence is beyond the arbitration of reason, that its regime does not extend to the true home of man, it is but natural that any dialogue between Islam and modernism cannot be consumed by the 'contingent' issues of governance, economy, globalisation and so forth. Thus, inasmuch as there exists a compulsion, be it indigenous or foreign, to reduce Islam to governance and identify its essence with a 'state', it must be resisted and challenged. For it leads nowhere but to the moral and intellectual wasteland of fundamentalism, to sterile polemics between modernism and Islamism that, paradoxically, both inhabit an immanentist metaphysical universe. To assert this, however, is not to deny either the legitimacy of such a debate, or to minimise the desirability ideological struggle in matters of political actuality. Nevertheless, a debate on these premises, on grounds of political and civilizational loyalties, does not hold the promise of evolving into a joint reflection on the moral state of the world today. For only an Islam that is true to its calling of being the transcendent faith of humanity and a modernism which is cognizant of its vocation as the doctrine of a method, can summon sufficient humility and self-confidence to carry out such a dialogue on universal morality. Needless to say that for the partisans of civilizational purity, for those who identify Islam and modernity with given political constituencies, such a universalising project holds little attraction.

As for those for whom the universality of Islam and the moral unity of man are two sides of the same coin, there is a compelling urgency to initiate a new Islamic discourse that is more detached from the contingent concerns of Muslim polities and their putative others. Islam's non-negotiable commitment to the ultimately transcendent, and trans-existential, nature of man and his mission in life would further demand that the future Islamic discourse be fully alert to the immensity of being and matter that science has revealed to us. The task of Islamic intellect would be to not to disown this universe but to examine whether the world of science is a meaningful world, whether it can be conceived as a cosmos, universe or nature without the postulation of a transcendent other. Needless to say that any cogent and meaningful metaphysics that has Islamic pretensions will have to rescue science from scientism. The same goes for all other philosophies and worldviews that identify man with genes and posit the annihilation of his being within the world of history and time. Islam's dialogue with modernity, then, must have a philosophical and intellectual profile, and it must take full cognisance of the metaphysics, ethics and teleology of the Qur'anic revelation. All subsequent Islamic thought and reflection is premised on the accomplishment of this task, as is the integration of various disciplines and perspectives, philosophical, moral, utopian, even social and political, within a normative Islamic discourse.
