

## The Call of Modernity & Islam

### Excerpts

The word 'modernism' was first used to describe certain tendencies in late 19th Century Protestant Christianity. Ever since then considerable progress has been made in the philosophy, sociology and semantics of religion. Thus modernity in religion now signifies something more than modernism in the original Christian sense, namely;

1. Emphasis on rationalism and the scientific method,
2. Abjuration of dogma and supernaturalism,
3. Higher criticism of the Bible.

Religious modernity in the contemporary sense is a development of the above line of thinking.

All Islamic modernists accept in varying degrees the first three foundational points of Western religious modernity. But in general they are much more cautious and conservative than their Western counterparts, whatever the reason may be.

All Islamic modernists have put a question mark against the traditional or popular Islamic thought system. Sir Syed's Quranic exegesis and commentary represents his attempted reconstruction in the religious thought of Islam, under the impact of Western science and rationalism. Iqbal and Azad also reconstruct the thought-cum-value system in the light of modern conditions.

The approaches of Sir Syed, Iqbal and Azad in this matter show significant differences. Sir Syed assumes, on the one hand that the Quran as the word of God, could not contain any error and, on the other, he also holds the scientific propositions of his time as indisputable. Consequently, he tried to reconcile any apparent conflict between the two as best as he could. Iqbal and Azad, on the other hand, were never bothered by any such problem, since they held the Quran to be primarily an inspirational document rather than a textbook of physics or geography. The portions of the Quran dealing with facts of nature deliberately presupposed the scientific frame of reference prevalent in the age of revelation. Any deviation from that framework would have baffled and mystified the people concerned, instead of helping, them in their religious quest. The spheres of revelation and of scientific knowledge being different, no clash arises between the two. The Quran is the infallible source of value judgments and the fount of wisdom, while the scientific method is the source of all factual judgments and the laws of nature. The later modernists like Sindhi and others accept Azad's standpoint.

Valuable and ambitious as these reconstructions are, they nevertheless fall short of the depth and range of the reconstructive essays of a Whitehead or a Tillich etc.. Perhaps one of the reasons for this general shortcoming of Islamic modernism is the lack of pure and professional practitioners among the Islamic modernists. Sir Syed, Afghani, Abduh, Iqbal, and Azad, all were public figures, engaged in extensive political work, unlike their much greater counterparts in the West or classical Islam. Perhaps no Islamic modernist with the exception of Sindhi would accept all the implications or rather the philosophical foundations of the Western concepts of democracy, spiritual autonomy and sovereignty of the people. In the full Western sense of these terms, they cannot be reconciled with the traditional Islamic concept of revelation. The modernist reconstruction of this concept at the hands of Sir Syed, Azad and even Iqbal fails to overcome the conflict or incompatibility between the claims of revelation and man's spiritual autonomy, which are the basis of democracy and the sovereignty of the people. Possibly only Sindhi comes to grips with this very delicate problem. May be Waliyullah in the 18th century had also done so. But unfortunately my very meager study of Waliyullah prevents me from being positive about it. However, the thought system of classical Muslim philosophers like Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd etc., embraced this

delicate theme of revelation. The concepts of Nous, Agent Intellect, and First Intellect etc., and the grades of emanation and illumination etc., were nothing but their bold and honest attempts to construct a critical theory of revelation and its relationship with reason. In this respect these medieval Muslim thinkers are much more modernist than Islamic modernists like Abduh, Sir Syed, and Iqbal, etc.

The main tasks that Islamic modernists have set for themselves are concerned more with a critique of the status of Hadith on the one hand, and on the other, with the implications of the distinction between the core and gestalt of Islam. Here their approach and achievements are creditable. Let us consider these two points separately.

All modernists concede that while Hadith is very important for living the good life, it is not binding in the sense in which the Quran is. All Islamic modernists would perhaps vacillate in their attitude, should any part of the Quran may contradict plain commonsense, clear observation, or one's conscience. But they would not hesitate to reject any Hadith that may come in this category even if it satisfied all the canons of authenticity prescribed by the science of Hadith.

The towering liberal thinkers who had ushered in the 'Enlightenment': Locke and Hume in England, Rousseau and Voltaire in France, Kant and Hegel, Goethe and Schiller in Germany, among others; were neither materialists nor atheists, nor were they Christians in the traditional sense. They held on to Christianity or rather to Christian Deism, in their own way, remaining highly sensitive to the order and beauty as well as the chaos and sordidness of the universe. They also remained deeply committed to the spiritual and moral values of Christianity. In other words, they had 'liberated' Christianity from the stranglehold of theology and canon law but did not repudiate the basic 'Idea of the Holy' and the sense of inscrutable mystery underlying the universe. This constituted the nucleus of the liberal Christianity, as distinct from the traditional version of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant.

To sum up, religious liberalism does not reject the function and the power of religion to nurse, purify and elevate the human spirit; it merely rejects the iron grip of religious authoritarianism on every aspect of human life. Religious liberalism, thus, stresses the crucial importance of cultivating the spiritual dimension of life along with other human concerns or needs: material, social, intellectual and aesthetic. Religious fundamentalism stresses the crucial importance of having faith in the infallibility of some scripture or person and of unquestioning obedience or submission to the said authority.

It is pertinent to point out that while the prefix, 'liberal', is quite illuminating in the literal sense, the other prefix, 'fundamentalist', is rather ambivalent. It illuminates but at the same time it also misleads those who may not be aware of how the term 'fundamentalism' became current coin. The word 'fundamental' means, as we all know, the essential part of a larger totality or whole. In this sense the 'fundamentals' of any religion, system of thought or discipline would mean the basic or essential core of the said religion or thought system. In this sense, therefore, all those Christians who stick to the essentials (as they see them) of the Christian faith but reject the secondary or tertiary detailed interpretations and institutions of the Church could be said to be 'fundamentalist Christians' with must greater justification than those Christians who do not bother to separate the essentials or fundamentals of Christianity from Christianity in the concrete historical sense. The actual usage of the word, 'fundamental Christianity', however, is quite different. The actual use stipulates that a 'fundamentalist Christian' is one who accepts the fundamental importance and supreme authority of a religious authority in every walk of life and rejects the view that there may be some spheres of human activity where independent reasoning and spiritual autonomy may be more desirable, rather necessary for the pursuit of truth and human welfare.

The predicament of Muslims in the modern age is that their religious tradition stands for the unity of religion and state, while the modern mind stands for the separation of religion and state. The Islamic tradition is that Islam is not merely a spiritual discipline, but a complete way of life, including a polity (shariah). Though not inspired like the Quran, the shariah is deemed as all embracing and sacrosanct. Only the ulema are empowered to modify it according to a definite procedure. But it would be absurd to claim or expect that the shariah should be binding on the Parliament of a sovereign secular state. Muslims in general hold that a sovereign secular democratic state is bound to fall headlong into 'Satanic' politics and the amoral pursuit of power. In other words, they equate the separation of religion from politics with immoral politics. They honestly tend to hold that the secular approach to politics destroys or erodes true Islam, which is a seamless and complete map of conduct according to Divine guidance. This is the spiritual predicament of traditional Muslims all over the world including the followers of Mawdudi's school of Islamic thought that is, relatively, liberal, but falls short of the fully integrated and spiritualized religious sensibility of the modern mind.

Sir Syed remained firmly rooted, as ever, in the essentials of the Islamic faith. However, he reconstructed some of its basic concepts as philosophical theologians routinely do to keep the faith alive and relevant to the needs of the believers in an ever changing and evolving human situation. Sir Syed took up the following main themes: (a) the traditional belief concerning the mode of Divine revelation through the mediation of the angel, Jibreel (Gabriel), or the Roohul-Quddus (Holy Spirit), (b) the traditional belief that the prophets of God, (including Prophet Muhammad) performed miracles, (c) God sometimes permits nature to depart from its course, (d) the occult powers of the Sufi saints, (e) the over-riding authority and infallibility of Quranic texts in all matters including natural science, (f) the basic principles of Quranic exegesis, (g) the status of Hadith, (h) the proper jurisdiction and scope of religion. I shall deal with the above themes in the given order.

Other philosophical developments were (a) the rise of Pragmatism in America and Philosophical Analysis in Britain. The movements gave us the crucial insight that there are several types of truth-claims and there are different ways to test them rather than one single way of natural science; (b) the rise of religious and non-religious existentialism.

According to the existentialist approach, religious faith is not the product of logical or rational thinking or scientific experimentation, but an inner and compelling response to the mystery of 'Being'. It is the most vital form of subjectivity and the deepest and highest form of existential response to the mystery of existence as such. But the subjectivity of religious truth is not like the subjectivity of a taste for coffee cold, or for coffee hot. It is subjective in the sense in which deep personal love or commitment to moral values is qualitatively different from an objective judgment, 'this table is three feet high'.

A tolerant person need not be apathetic to persuading others to accept his own views or values, since tolerance is not the same as apathy. However, the concern of a tolerant person for the welfare of others is tempered by humility instead of a hidden desire to dominate others and impose one's own ideas or values, as the absolute truth. Tolerance is not the fear of giving offence, just as it is not the fear of commitment to a particular viewpoint. Tolerance does not conflict at all with spontaneous self-expression and active communication or dialogue, provided mutual goodwill and respect be present. Dialogue helps to promote greater harmony even though it may also bring existing differences into sharper focus. A tolerant person, therefore, need not remain a silent spectator in the face of conflicting truth-claims.

A tolerant person need not appease those who disagree with him. Tolerance is an intrinsic value like love of truth or devotion to duty, while appeasement is a strategy for buying agreement or peace on an ad hoc basis.

A tolerant person may be extremely firm and unbending in doing one's duty or in resisting evil. Tolerance may result in self-sacrifice of a martyr, while appeasement seeks the easy way out. The birth of tolerance, however, does not signify the death of genuine faith in one's own cherished tradition. Tolerance merely signifies the willing acceptance of the view that beliefs or convictions, other than one's own, may also inspire goodness and beauty in the depths of the human soul. This approach is quite different from merely tolerating dissenting views which are deemed to be essentially evil or, at least, devoid of any real value. In other words, tolerance, at its best, is not passivity at the follies of others, beyond our power of correction, but rather profound humility in the face of the inscrutable mystery of reality, and of genuine respect for different perspectives and views.

Apostasy became a major issue after the death of the Prophet when some Arab chieftains who had earlier accepted the Prophet's call to Islam decided to repudiate Islam or the authority of the successor to the Prophet. It seems that two logically distinct issues, namely, repudiation of the Islamic creed proclaimed by the Prophet, and repudiation of the political authority or supremacy of the successor to the Prophet got intertwined in the historical developments after the passing away of Prophet Muhammad. In other words, the ideas of 'religious defection' and of rebellion got mixed in the Islamic response to behavior of the 'false prophets' after the passing away of Prophet Muhammad. As we all know, all societies or states mete out the death penalty to anybody who challenges the power of the supreme authority at any point of time. The earliest Islamic establishment did the same without making any distinction (valid and essential for the modern mind) between political loyalty and religious faith, or between the matters of inner autonomous faith and the matter of loyalty to the sovereign. Perhaps, at that critical juncture the successors to the Prophet had no time and patience to go into the distinction between the freedom of conscience and loyalty or obedience to the ruler.