

Reformers' Rationales and Conventional Views of Islam in Our Society

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Abstract

This article tries to find the causes of orthodoxy's stagnant thoughts and reformers' arguments for the decadence of Muslims of Sub-continent and their contentions for the remedy of the current situation prevailed in Muslims. The traditionalists assure that the return to the true Islam of the most primitive time would resolve all social problems. Whereas the fact is that literal repetition of a piece of history is not possible. Therefore, the reformers tried to draw attention to the unscientific and irrationality of the orthodoxy's attitude in the today's pragmatic world.

All humans innately possess the right to understand through organizing ideas. Moreover, it is vital to be organized to get successes and important opportunities in life. Unfortunately, today in the realm of ideas, we are disorganized and confused, in particular among the values of Islam and their precise executions happened in past.

The main reason for this situation and for the inability of Pakistan to define her Islamic goals in concrete terms has been the terribly confused ideological situation over the past thirty or more years.¹

The stagnation of ulemas' thoughts and the renaissance of western world, decline of Muslims in science and knowledge generally built confusions. Moreover, the conflicts between modernity and orthodoxy are also one of the crucial reasons which have resulted in creating uncertainty. Particularly the orthodoxy do not endeavored to have arguments concentrated on the sufficiency and soundness of Islam for modern time,

but on the description of what represent authentic Islam.

The so called fundamentalists and modernists have come up with radically different answers to some basic issues according to their respective environments, but neither has had a clear enough method of interpreting the Quran and the Sunna.²

Since in the medieval period Muslims were the super power of the world, therefore, they had a superior approach in every aspect of their thoughts. Like they are the superior nation of the world and their way of thinking is the most exceptional in the world. The orthodoxy even today has the same perspective. In their view the Muslim is born to rule. The ulema have, obviously persistent to insist the traditional world-view, and have strived to take advantage of the support they possess from the so called resurgences (all are explanations in the political perspective) to acquire changes they sought to make out against the modern approach, such as a return to several medieval interpretations of Sharia. So, Fazlur Rahman makes it obvious that the reactionary approach is not going to give solutions to the disintegrations facing Muslims.

But even where these movements have been successful, they have hardly solved the problem of deterioration facing the Muslim society, although their influence may be largely taken to have prepared the ground for such a solution. The reason for their failure is that they take "pristine Islam" i.e., the Quran and the Prophetic Sunnah, in too simple, narrow and static terms. In sum, they believe that if the Muslims were to "follow", i.e., repeat and reproduce exactly what their seventh-century forefathers did, they would recover their rightful position "with God", i.e., both in this world and the next. But the big question is: how can a piece of history be literally repeated?³

However, the primary cause for the resurgence comes out to be the feeling along with many common Muslims, as well as a number of the superiorly learned, that they were in threat of losing their individuality as Muslims, because of its decline by Western intellectual thoughts. This is

somehow a natural response as the preliminary reaction for that time but if it happens for a longer period as evident in our society, it results in the conservative approach and the arrogant psyche prevailed generally.

The Pakistani Islamic fundamentalism (like most other Islamic fundamentalist phenomena), however, substituted its essentially reactionary role for the positive Islamic reconstruction program and was able to enlist the support of middle and particularly lower middle urban classes. The most surprising thing is that while it itself was a defensive mechanism, it managed to put the Modernist on the defensive and confuse him. Take for example the opening clause of Pakistan Constitution(s) that talk about the 'sovereignty of God Almighty over the Universe.' This clause, which kept the Pakistan Constituent Assembly tied up for six or seven years, represents a sheer confounding of the fundamentalists between the Quranic assertion that "to God belongs the kingdom of the heaven and the earth," and the idea of political sovereignty discussed in modern political theory. Such confusions have pervaded and bedeviled all public fields of Pakistani life—⁴

Moreover, the orthodoxy believed that the social upheaval is originated by the influence of the West on their world, they were being treated relatively inferior than others; and many traditionalists were assuring that a go back to the true Islam of the most primitive time would resolve all social problems. They assure the common Muslims if they follow the straight path of Islam and submit their souls to God (follow the Ulama blindly) then the whole world will surrender to them. Islam was so exalted, a religion and the Muslims were the leaders of the world. Since generally laymen are much closer to these orthodox ulama from their Friday sermons. The effect of this attitude of ulama is the general response of blue-collar Muslims that they try to obtain shelter in traditional Islam and consider the impartial and moderate approach is deceptive. Asghar Ali Engineer scrutinizes the reasons behind the apparent failure of recognition of rational interpretations of Islam in Muslims.

It has great appeal for the modern elite as, more often than not, rational theology subserves the ends of this elite. However, this rational approach may not appeal to

the masses as they hardly feel any need for rational theology. In the present social structure which imposes severe constraints on the economic as well as intellectual progress of the masses and compels them to remain backward, a rational or book view of religion with its transcendental complex does not enthuse them. In this state of backwardness, what appeals to them is the folk religion with its attendant rituals. The religion, in this form, serves their psychological need to bear the hard conditions of life, miseries which would be difficult to bear without such a psychological prop.⁵

On the other hand, as the science has developed an unbiased methodology regarding analysis in every discipline of knowledge. It is important to get free ourselves from the rigid mind-set and fetters of Taqlid and come forward to analytical research of our history and tradition. That is why, in the attitude of progressive Muslims, taqlid has in general noticeably been the restraining feature, and the one chiefly liable for inactivity in Islam. Thus, the modern approach exposed the general uncertainty of Muslims for Islam. In fact human seeks spiritual fulfillment and love towards God, yet the conventional Islam does not bring Muslims close to God but to the glory of past and the words which have lost their meaning in today's world.

Despite the fact that at the time of Mutazila, Muslims had interacted with Greek thought and this enhanced the rational factor in Islamic theology. But this time since the interaction was in different aspect. The renaissance of western world and descend of Muslims not only in political domain but in their social and spiritual life as well. Thus the main intention of the scholars should be the same as Mutazila had, that is to have a more rationalistic description of Islamic traditional materials in modern understanding. However, after Mutazila, this rationalist thought that later transformed in Sufism⁶, was subsequently abandoned by the Orthodox Ulama of Islam, and became indeed the fundamental reason of the propagation of Islam in later future.

The rebellion of the Sufis and poets against the Sharia orthodoxy was no doubt basically generated by the fact that the orthodox systems of law and theology had become formal, rigid, and shorn of their source in the springs of inner life.⁷

The truth is for the basic need of rationalizing faith latest questions arises

in every era which must be answered in contemporary perception. Once rational comprehension is grasped then myths and traditional fetters are uprooted consequentially. Therefore, modern study does not consider myths and have a realistic attitude towards all kinds of knowledge. The reformers attempted to break down the orthodoxy's fort of stagnant viewpoint which did not crash in every respect yet it resulted in the modern intellectual attitude of denying the orthodox medieval Islamic ideology.

Consequently the inclination of orthodoxy to confinement has been resulted them in isolation. The modern educated man's ideology reflected the reformist thinking and in 20th century the fundamental reason of the fast conversion of people in Islam is not the orthodox's dogmas of belief. But the rationality of reformists' thought which provides the answers of questions in the light of the moral values of Quran and Sunnah. They believe in the diversity of religions, the modern need of time and a heterogeneous modern culture.

Historically, Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan was the first in Indian subcontinent, who tried to clear the thoughts of Ummah, who were living in the comfortable fantasy of leadership. They believed that Islam's main aim is to rule allover the world. Sir Sayyid was equally wanted and spent all his efforts for the educational and social uplifts of Muslims, however at the same time, he was bias not only for Muslim nationalism but also for the caste system prevailed in India. Once he argued against the equality in society and said,

It is very necessary that for the Viceroy's Council the members should be of high social position. I ask you ____
Would our aristocracy like that a man of low caste or insignificant origin, though he be a B.A. or M.A., and have the requisite ability, should be in a position of authority above them and have power in making the laws that affect their lives and property?⁸

This shows the Muslims' deficiency of humility and their superiority complex. That was indeed took them to deterioration and even then they were not acknowledging it at their intellectual level.

Albeit the way Islamic thought takes a turn through Sir Sayyid is significantly vital. He stands prominent with his rational principle of nature, that there could never be any difference between God's words and His creations. Thus, Islamic thought sways radically through the thoughts of Sayyed Ahmed Khan to a new mind-set.

An examination of the ideas developed by Indo-Pakistani Muslims in the past century and a quarter indicates that the modern Muslim mind in the sub-continent has used two closely allied modes of turning Islam into a more flexible thought system for better accommodating religion to modernity. The first of these modes can be described as the elimination of constraining ideas. Many an Indian Muslim intellectual, dissatisfied with the plight of Muslims, has rejected, or put limitations upon, those elements in traditional Islam which he considered responsible for the Muslim decline, and thereby gained a freedom to adopt the new perspectives. The second mode either reinterprets some basic beliefs in traditional Islam or substitutes a new for an old element. These reinterpretations and substitution have often been concerned with those ideas which we might describe as philosophical doctrines inherently capable of being rendered into doctrinal bases for assigning a large role to human reason in life than was formerly allowed."

The other luminous aspect of the reformers' thoughts is that they were ahead of their time and interpreted the Islamic ideology according to their contemporary and future needs. They did not only face the Western influences daringly but also have considerable impact upon Western philosophy. However, instead of confronting Western challenges, the orthodox Ulama have a uniform mind-set for every reformer from the colonial period till to date, that is regarding them as having heretical doctrines. On the contrary, their influences have certainly benefited in activating creative forces and the term "Ijtihad" (independent judgment) has assumed immense importance. The other influential feature of their thought is their stress on the ethical teachings of the Quran and Sunnah along with its guidance towards spirituality. Besides they all stressed to bring strong reforms in education.

Hence the thought which initiated by Sir Sayyid prevails in sub-continent and develops through Iqbal and becomes quite matured in Fazlur Rahman's inferences. For instance, Sir Sayyid was the one who tried successfully to refute an Orientalist Sir William Muir's accusations against the Prophet through their methodology, and then we have Iqbal

who strongly supports western neutral attitude. He was inclined to study religion through Western methodology or objectively, on the logical grounds. As a philosopher Iqbal wanted to initiate a philosophy through which Muslims will confront west and get out of decadence. Therefore, Iqbal truly believed that Islam can be divided in two parts; one is "ibadaat" which stands on the sacred compulsion (arkan-i- deen) – these related to the obvious spiritual needs of human, which do not need any modification; the other area is that of "nuamalaat" (communal dealings) which is subject to the law of change, and not directly related to spirituality but ultimately have a profound impact on the ascendancy of humanity. Therefore needs to review and redefine in the contemporary milieu.

In a letter to Nadwi on 7 April 1926 ... I do not intend to amend or abrogate ibadat, but rather I have tried to prove their eternity in my article on ijtihaad. However, some questions came to my mind about nu'amalat (legal subject matters other than ibadat). In this regard since the legality of ahadith (dealing with nu'amalat) comes into question...¹⁰

Iqbal believes that the worth of Hadith was a guide to the Islamic spirit and its desires. This thought comes in mature form in the thoughts of Fazlur Rahman who not only took Orientalists methodology and ignored completely the orthodox ulama's retaliation against the Orientalists' assumptions, but also initiated to work on their (Orientalists') findings of the deficiencies in Hadith literature.

Professor Schacht is the first scholar to have undertaken an extensive and systematic comparison of legal traditions in their historical sequence is unassailably scientific and sound in method and one only wishes that it were practised thoroughly in all fields of the Hadith.¹¹

His exceptionality is that he wanted to differentiate Islamic theology historically in 'normative Islam' and 'historical Islam' and indicated the need for an analytical study of the intellectual Islamic history. He believes in freedom of thought and like his predecessors, has strong arguments against Taqlid and the restrict manners of the class of ulama

generally have. Thus, he highlighted the needs to fulfill the task ahead for Muslims and tried to bridge the gap between traditional approaches of stickiness with the past and the modern interpretation of Islam, in the light of current knowledge of Science, History and Philosophy.

The Muslim aim of Islamizing the several fields of learning, this aim cannot be really fulfilled unless Muslims effectively perform the intellectual task of elaborating an Islamic metaphysics on the basis of the Quran. An overall world view of Islam has to be first, if provisionally, attempted if various specific fields of intellectual endeavor are to cohere as informed by Islam.¹²

These are 20th century's important attempts in the sub-continent to awaken the Ummah from the romanticism of leadership and the endeavors to attain harmony that could straighten out the demands of faith and modernity. As the orthodox ulema believes that the rise for the Muslims is to go backwards. This kind of approach has stuck us on stagnation. In fact the orthodox proclaims the ideal that is not pragmatic in today's world. Those factors cause the distances between idle and movement, a gap between traditionalist and modernist. These are the reasons, which lead the Ummah toward decadences and confusion.

Since the reformers tried to vindicate and defend religion from the western materialistic view and their rationalism is directed against inert traditional thinking and blind observance of the medieval interpretation of Islam. They all stressed that Islam was not static but a dynamic religion which in itself contained forces that would enable the Muslims to seek scientific and technical knowledge to put them on a level with the advancing nations of the world. Consequently, their efforts have gone a long way to liberate Islam from the numbing medieval authority furthermore their influences has been indeed profited in generating productive influences and the expression "Ijtihad" (independent judgment) has taken up vast significance.

When we look for the causes behind their apparent failure, the main reason for the unsuccessfulness of the infusion of modernity as a whole in Muslim society is that these scholars, who are called Modernist in Islam, do not proclaim modernity in every respect. Since,

Modernization has as its operative assumptions:
secularism, individualism, rationalism and materialism.¹³

It is obvious that the reformers do not support completely these aspects of modernity. Rather they tried to redefine these operative suppositions in Islamic framework. The truth is reformism furnish the rational consciousness of Muslims' circumstances and requests. Even if the reformist perception, in its essential principle, is divergent to absolute secularization and westernization, simultaneously it released the access to modernization, most of all in the scientific features of the development.

Cultural pluralism and giving full rights to all of its citizens with out the difference of religion, sect, race or colour are significantly evident in the Sunnah of the Prophet. As we find in the Constitution of Medina. Since their (reformers) focus is on the ethical teachings of Shariah they see the 'statecraft' through the moral values of Quran and Sunnah, indeed not in their literal terms.

The other major reason of their unsuccessfulness is that these all are individual attempts, not a collective and well thought-out systematic work. And most of all that they were fighting on two grounds at a time. The westerner's charges on Islam and the Islamic orthodoxy with their unawareness of time did their utmost effort to eradicate them. They are not liberals in every respect, in spite of that it is their brilliance that they remained in the mainstream of Islamic thought and seek to bring out a way between the secular modernist and traditional Muslims.

Subsequent to colonial period, the exchange of ideas with western world through modern means of communication and travel, forced them that they have had to become accustomed to the aspects of western values and tried to find out the pertinence of the tradition with the western thought. They highlighted the shortcomings in the traditional material, and work out for the improvement through impartially taking the oriental approach. However, these reformers strived to give Unumamah the support of intense rationalism. As Iqbal says:

Our only fear is that the dazzling exterior of European culture may arrest our movement and we may fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture.¹⁴

However, both the orthodox and the modernists consider that the circumstances of the Muslims require reform. But for the orthodox, reform means to go back to pristine Islam. In other words follow the

literal interpretations of Quran and the traditions. In contrast, the modernists believe that reform means to revive the meaning and the message of the traditional material in its spirit. That is the overall social-historical framework of the Quran and Sunnah. They think that Islam is an active spirit which is restraining because it has not attuned to varying facts. It has not sustained with the advancement of history and has been detained in its evolution and development. Dr. Fazhur Rahman clearly explains this;

I would like to tell those who have doubts about the liberal and progressive character of the principles of Islamic statecraft that they should not be misled by the writings and views of persons who have always looked at Islam through the opaque glasses of obscurantism and ignorance. Shake off your prejudices and preconceived notions, and you will see the light.¹⁵

The orthodoxy does not support the neutral study of Islam. If their descriptive Islam has deficiencies then surely it will come in conflict of modern attitude. But if Islam is sound and logical it will challenge any kind of scrutiny. So, our reformers endeavor to proclaim that Islam is sound and logical for every era, no need to forage in the past rather the need of hour is to march towards future and advancement with more confidence.

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6. On its speculative side which developed later, Sufism is a form of free thought and in alliance with Rationalism.
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