

Redirection of the Sacred: The intricacies of Islamic meaning

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Abstract

In the simulacra generating age of postmodernity, the hyper-reality of contemporary society and an "anarchic" sociality warrants an investigation into rampant consumerism, the decline of rationalist fundamentalism as the ideology of modernity and the plethora of resurgent-cum-resistant movements. With this scenario, the article attempts to ascertain the value of postmodernism to Islamic scholarship in resolving the dialectic of metanarratives and relativism. Muslim scholars must be vigilant of postmodernism as a western construct and redefine its experience through Islamic phenomenology by exploring the complexities of heterogeneity and principles of humanity as opposed to a radical postmodernism that negates humanity as a meta-narrative and the celebration of egocentricity. Islam's "occidentalism" is not a mental projection of moral superiority against the "Other" but a progressive discourse aiming to discover a universally tolerant projection and manifestation of Islam's ummatic body and a representation of its tradition in a new age of possibilities.

Postmodernism and Islam

It may seem unusual that while the treatise of contemporary Islam is ingrained in its unresolved struggle with modernity, a postmodern discourse has recently been projected upon its constituents. The definition and elements of postmodernism remain a heckling point among "rational fundamentalists"¹ and even pose an elusive subject among its adept "converts": how to construct a meaning without falling into an "unpostmodern" grand narrative.² Far from suggesting the ambivalence of its technical application, postmodernism is seen as a relational pair with modernism, thus propelling and implicating each other within a parallel period.

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It was some time during the 1980's that postmodernist developments in sociology, literature and the arts most visibly began to create an intellectual movement in counterdistinction to the modern. Its characteristics were the juxtaposition of the high and the low, the serious and the frivolous, the historical and the contemporary; the deliberate breaking down of traditional ideas and thought patterns; the notion of "magical realism"; a cynicism regarding religion and a conscious abandonment to the consumerist society of our times. All these have helped to challenge the traditional method of looking at Islamic studies.³

Ahmed and Donnan (1993) postulate that 'the aims of postmodernism are to seek the rich variety of local styles and practices and grasp the development of cultural "hybridity" while Gellner describes postmodernism's lack of concrete direction as "metatwaddle". My approach to the postmodern area is cautious with its novelty to Islam, impressed but dazed by the insistence of postmodern pedantics on social theory with the likes of Maffesoli⁴, Mellor and Shilling⁵ and enlightened by the clarity of its scope in the works of Turner⁶, Gellner⁷, Bauman⁸, and Ahmed⁹. There is virtually no operational and moral distinction between "organic" postmodern case studies of Islam and the state e.g. Iran, Tunisia and Malaysia¹⁰ or "mechanical" modern case studies of Muslim states (e.g. Donahue and Esposito 1982; Mutalib and Hashmi 1994). I will take the stance that postmodernism and relativism should essentially be a "return of the sacred" for a banal rationalism that is too caught up with its mechanised procedures, i.e. the transition to a postmodern refinement of rationalism which would give it a definitive direction. Postmodernism and relativism thus should be seen in the Islamic social context as an ample opportunity for Islamic "fundamentalists" to negotiate a theoretical settlement with "liberal" Islam in propagating a fundamentalist rationalist modus operandi of Islamic phenomenology. This will perhaps dispell the lingering effects of Orientalism and anti-Orientalism which have permeated the study of Muslim society and embedded suspicion and doubt among fellow Muslim scholars and the populace concerning the virtues and motives of a problematic modern Islamic scholarship.

The survey of Muslim responses to modernity should take into account the relatively short period Muslim nations have had in adopting and assimilating modern institutions, which happen to be the very tools of colonial rule and imperialism. As far as theory goes, Islamic social idealism as projected by religious fundamentalists

or modernists resists the rampant profanity of sacred institutions brought through the "evils" of secularism. Islamic modernists continuously reiterate its convergence with modernity as an amicable and reflexive experience, while fundamentalists assume a similar position while emphasizing a "puritan and scripturalist world religion that is not necessarily doomed to erosion by modern conditions. It may on the contrary be favored by them"¹¹ The cause of Islamic resurgence is the same in the utopian sense regardless of postmodern expositions on the varying embodiments of collective religious significance and meaning in different Muslim communities. What postmodernism aptly scrutinizes is the transformation of meaning from High Islam to Low Islam in the transmission between established modern social structures (mechanical, e.g. institutions, contractual groups and individual functions) and organic postmodern sociality (complex, e.g. masses, personal roles and affectual tribes)¹². The refining quality of postmodernism in the social sciences is of great value provided that it defines and maintains a consistent moral direction. Would this be a relative or unpostmodern supposition? This writer aims to tame relentless postmodern conjectures within the postmodern structure of Islamic social institutions and sociality. The argument is that Islamic social principles have never ceased to be the pivot of temporal sacredness despite its institutional degeneration into the profanity of modern secularism. This may sound like a paradox, but Islamic phenomenology as evident within the cause of religious fundamentalism, which is to be blamed for Islamic creative stagnation, is also the axis from which a large degree of liberal Islamic interpretation carefully threads itself. In any interpretation of High Islam, there is an unconscious embodiment of Islamic fundamentals. Compare this with Bryan S. Tumer's account of Protestantism¹³:

It has often been argued that Protestantism was its own grave-digger; the rational ethos of radical Protestantism has the unintended consequences of reducing the scope of sacred persons, places and events in the everyday life of the believer. One result of this inherent potentiality for secularization is that "the immense network of intercession that unites the Catholic in this world with the saints and, indeed, with all departed souls, disappears as well".

The newly acquired postmodern conscience for Muslim scholars on Islam now demands not only resolving the institutional impedance of Islam but more importantly, problems pertaining to its sociality. It has added a new complexity to the approach of Muslim sociality, far from being a monolithic entity. Postmodern tribalism is not a totally alien concept in Islam. The disenchantment with pervasive Low Islam and the

experience of modernity has brought back the *Jahilliyyah* (ignorance) age and *Assabiyyah* (narrow group interests/ tribal), the very elements pristine Islam had sought to eradicate in the time of Prophet Muhammad. The issue of unity has always been central to Islam in the modern world and there is innate confidence that while there have only been failures, Islam possesses the right tools.

The formative period of Islam can serve as an inspiration, as Muslims look to their early history and the sources of Islam. For once again the Islamic community faces the challenge of a creative interpretation (*Ijtihad*) and reapplication of Islamic values to meet the needs of changing Muslim societies.¹⁴

Postmodernism highlights the intricacies of the Islamic grand narrative and its relation with the social body. It is this relation that will be explored, an effort which will involve a postmodern locating of the essence of Islam.¹⁵

The Rupture of the Sacred and Illusion of Religion

How does a religious civilization like Islam cope in an age which self-consciously puts aside the past and exults in diversity? Faith versus skepticism, tradition versus iconoclasm, purity versus eclecticism-it is difficult to relate Islamic postmodernism to western postmodernism in any coherent or direct manner, or even to establish a causal relationship between the two. Muslims may utilize some of the conceptual tools (e.g. Baudrillard) for analysis, however, there must be a fundamental distinction in the categories of analysis utilized. Muslims appreciate postmodernism but also recognize its threat to the Islamic worldview. Islamic and western postmodernism are coetaneous but also experiencing it from their own respective histories with different causes, features and understanding of the age.¹⁶

From this excerpt, it would seem that the very notion of Islamic postmodernism is a paradox, bearing in mind the grand narrative Islam engenders through its fundamentals and the systemic rupture postmodernism insists upon. Ziauddin Sardar obliquely objects to this notion as well as Akbar S. Ahmed's eager embrace of this phenomenon as a positive development, calling it a "most recent panic-ridden offspring" of secularism which is similar to Ernest Gellner's ridicule of the project: "The relativist endorses the absolutism of others, and so his relativism

entails an absolutism (fundamentalism) which also contradicts it. Let us leave him with that problem: there is no way out of it."¹⁷ There is no matrix for postmodernism nor will there ever be if there are no set principles. Religious and rational fundamentalism will subsist with a heightened sensitivity through postmodernism by a more refined, in-depth, articulate and complete method of analysis on moral absolutism, sociality and the social. For the moderate liberal Muslim, propelled by a sure set of religious principles and a secure sense of righteous modern rationalism, there is no difference between religious and rational fundamentalism. Both are essentially the same, call it fundamentalist rationalism if you must. There is no theoretical dialectic of the mechanical and the organic or of banal associations and sensual solidarities in Islam, but rather a rupture of the sacred brought about by modern secularism, which Islamic fundamentalism gave response to. To what extent this can be compared with western experience is another matter, but what is obvious is the role of religious "fundamentalism" (not groups in this context but an ideological axis, therefore religious modernists or liberals are also considered) in consciously dissociating profanity induced by modernity from Islamic phenomenology. Which is why the unoperational totality of Islam (modern institutions and contracts) seems to the modern world to have suspended (or deem inapplicable, outdated and impractical) itself from "true" social participation and application.

It is this fracture in the relationship between mechanical organizations and the masses which has permeated negative, regressive and decadent neotribalism in Muslim socialities. But at the same time, this has prevented dramatic theological shifts or alterations concerning its principles; i.e. any institutional failures and deviation of the masses from the fundamentals are by default considered not Islamic, thus alleviating symbiotic involvement with such phenomena. In order to understand this, I will later indulge in the relationship between the Islamic sense of the sacred and volatile bodies. While the high realm of Islamic scholarship grapples with postmodernism's motive and utility, low Islam is steeped in its relative embodiments. Heterogeneity is a reality of Muslim societies and it has always been so. A historical survey of Islamic societies and their upheavals will mostly reveal socialities which are far removed from the corporeal utopia. I will give examples of the "unchanging masses" in this segment. In truth, the disintegration of the Muslim *ummah* (society) with regards to temporal institutions and sociality is not unexpected, even

foretold.¹⁸ However, one looks through the lens of Islamic phenomenology and certain problematic (unresolved) issues, e.g. concerning leadership and government, there is only decline. Islamic phenomenology enjoins unrelenting effort because of its achievement of the sacred in the temporal world, i.e. the *Madinah State* (where social and organic structures reflected the sacred), which disqualifies fatalism but sets a monumental standard in the dimension of piety and experience of the sacred. The disenchantment with modern structures in plain conventional religious wisdom imply a lack of balance of such experiences with the sacred. The Islamic experience with postmodernity and a detailed reassessment of its historical embodiment should entail a proper redirection of Islamic resurgence related to the general understanding of the principles of humanity. Not a postmodernism, which negates humanity as a metanarrative.

The sacred revolution of pre-Islamic Arabia with the dissemination of Islam is perceived in its phenomenology as a total correctional effort and success of sacralizing sociality and societal institutions. Islam is *Ad-Din* or the way of life and also religion among many other things. Islam did not come with the advent of Prophet Muhammad, but was perfected as the experience of the holy. The claim in the Qur'an that every people was sent a messenger disregards traditional relativism in the strictest sense of a grand narrative on humanity.¹⁹ There are far too many verses in the Qur'an which compel the reconciliation of social organization and its organic constituents within the operational matrix of the sacred. Both dimensions must essentially be in constant symmetry with the other. Lacking a fundamentalist pivot, it is quite understandable that the likes of Sardar and Gellner look upon postmodernism as the resting place for the transference of religious energy to the rational concerns of this world.²⁰ It merely describes the profane-sacred dialectic of secularism in a progressive form, but can never hope to resolve it nor does it, seriously have the intention. Islam does not necessitate that its grand narrative be accepted by those who reject its claim, thus maintaining a principled relativist approach. Relativism is nothing new in Islam or any other faiths for that matter, it is merely a synonym for compromise. This has caused the relegation of false belief systems as argued by Durkheim:

All are true in their own fashion; all answer though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence. Religious beliefs must be distorted representations of an empirical reality which is capable of correct analysis by an empirical science, this time sociology.²¹

Apart from Islam, it is commonplace in the spirit of mutual tolerance and respect in a "civilized" plural society to claim that all religious paths lead to the same "truth" or "goodness". Its quite as if in dealing with religion, postmodernism has unloaded its burden back onto the non-reductionist reflections of religious phenomena, unable to rationally construct a sufficient rational religiosity. And if rationalist fundamentalism will only admit to an indefinite but committed loyalty to a set of procedural rules²², it would only seem rational that rationality has exhausted itself in the containment of "religioustricity", regardless of any religious definition. The basic anxieties of death, meaning and purpose in life permeate the masses, unaccounted for in the nontranscendental institutions that regulate human activity, and projected through consumerism which includes religion as a selective commodity and its dispersion among affectual tribes. Muslim societies are just as entrenched in this structure. But in as far as western societies can be assumed to trudge themselves along the path of this advanced secular dysfunction and generate their own relative reconciliation (is not postmodernism a resolution of the modern experience?) with the sacred, so must Muslims. However, the fundamentalist response of Muslims is a total miscue of Islamic fundamentals.

Islamic fundamentalist response: people concerned about the pace of change and what this will do to the next generation, people genuinely worried that their culture and traditions which have held for a thousand years will now be changed and even be in danger of being wiped out.²³

This is merely an example of Low Islamic fundamentalism in the modern scenario, a response which degrades Islam as a cultural religion. The disintegration of the sacred whole disrupts the flow of transcendental meaning. While it may still be contained in the sociality of the 'brotherhood' and reproduced as the "true" tradition, the rupture is structurally parallel with any postmodern scenario. This normative function of religion (e.g. as Durkheim would define) in the modern world thus becomes the greatest illusion to the relationship with the sacred (if it is considered to relate sufficient meaning of the sacred) in Islamic phenomenology. This writer thus believes that Gellner is hugely mistaken in proposing that the gap between High and Low Islam has been narrowed considerably with the advent of modernity.²⁴ This is because modernity and its responses also

breed other versions of Low Islam. Misconception and ignorance are progressive entities as well. If one analyses the ethnic-religious dialectic of the modern state, the same kind of diluted Islamic understanding is filtered through the hierarchy of established and intellectual sacred authority down to the masses; i.e. that ethnic society does actually appear to be the object of worship. Societal institutions that govern and regulate Muslim relations are devoid of transcendental meaning.²⁵ While the ritualistic aspects that embody the Muslim masses are relatively unscathed and are fairly easily regulated to maintain the meaning of Islamic brotherhood, this organic structure does not find its institutional catharsis which essentially supports the total regulation of the sacred. What Muslims have in practice is a short change of *Ad-Din*, effectively functioning as a “Durkheimian cum Weberian” definition of institutional religion²⁶ as far as the significance of sociality is concerned. The sense of the sacred fails to bind itself with temporal institutions. This directly affects the organic structure of the Muslim masses, which in turn dissolve into religious and non religious neo-tribes.

Islam and Society

Traditional Islam implies both the sacred as revealed to man through revelation and the unfolding and development of the sacred message in the history of the particular humanity for which it was destined in a manner that implies both horizontal continuity with the Origin and a vertical nexus which relates each movement of the life of the tradition in question to the meta-historical Transcendent Reality i.e. *Ad-Din*.²⁷

In defending the tradition, Seyyed Hossein Nasr distinguishes both fundamentalists and modernists from authentic tradition. He argues that fundamentalism is quasi-traditional and also counter-traditional but displays certain characteristics outwardly similar to the traditional and a modernist acceptance of science and technology. He argues against adapting the term “ideology” to Islam, that it has no authentic traditional base and that ‘it is only when the traditional order succumbs to the modern world that the understanding of religion comes to the fore, with momentous consequences for religion itself, not to speak of the society which is ruled in the name of religious ideology rather than according to the dicta of the Shari’ah, as the traditional understood.²⁸ Nasr considers that the contemporary polarity of Muslim societies and their method to achieve the Islamic end are antithetical to the principles of traditional Islam. He also

insists that apart from these glitches, traditional Islam still reverberates among the vast majority of Muslims with a transcultural dynamism that will endure to the end of history. Nasr is merely describing the pivot from which these modern polarities harness themselves to resolve the relation of tradition to the "meta-historical Transcendent Reality" he has mentioned. His defense of the tradition is detached from the fact that this present polarity is the very dynamism which suggests the transcendent reality which the tradition embodies. It does not reflect upon the fact that the very tradition that enfolds and defines Islamic sociality is the very entity which protracts Muslim society from its transcendent meaning and lulls the masses into a false sense of the sacred. Muslim heterogeneity in the post-modern sense suggests that in response to modernity, the authentic-traditionalists²⁹ begin to polarize once an operational function of Islam's transcendent reality is proposed because of this "sacred" fracture. This is postmodernism's challenge to the "preserved" meta-narrative of traditional Islam. If anything transcendentally meaningful is to be salvaged, traditional Islam itself must be made to expand beyond a parochial religious function.

Why is it that a society must seek the complement necessary to its order in the realms of the imaginary? Why does one meet each time, at the heart of this illusion, and through all expressions, something which is irreducible to the functional?³⁰

Like Castoriadis, Bryan S. Turner (1991) also questions that religion, be it a civil religion or an amalgamation with nationalism, can serve as a social cement of modern society.³¹ He points out that religion cannot solve the problem of social stratification because of the possibility that these beliefs are themselves ideologies, that societies are not necessarily primarily bound by common beliefs and ritual practices but by social contracts, and that in the process of secularization, religion functions as a regulating apparatus. Any future discourses of Islam must necessarily be intellectually negotiated with the theoretical proclamations of contemporary thought in order to highlight the inadequacies and dangers of the modern interpretation of Islam and to open up new areas of inquiry. Muhammad Arkoun, like Nasr, emphasizes traditional Islam in defining the relationship between Islam and society³², but provides a much needed redirection. Arkoun points out the enduring primacy of public interest (*maslaha*) based upon the postulation that society and its past are a product of the *Din* taught by God and not the reverse. Arkoun cites *Ibn Khaldun*

(considered to be Islam's pioneering sociologist) as the scholar who had used this principle in explaining the institutional link with sociality and how culture interacts with the religious aspect. Arkoun criticizes the Islamological (which include orientalist) proponents of the study of Islam and society, that while they were highly influenced by historicism and philology (especially from 1950-60), they had tendencies to over-define the religious factor and transposed concepts without dismantling them (e.g. *Ummah*), thus perpetuating an ideal unrelated to space and time. Some let societies explain themselves and the social forces involved without discussing essential elements (e.g. the predominance of orthodoxy, the dogma related to the confusion of temporal and spiritual Islam). Arkoun implies that Islamology is at an impasse, where results tend to be repetitive in the treatment and re-treatment of the same subjects without a clear direction in resolving the problems of Islam in modern Muslim societies. Unlike Nasr, Arkoun's view of traditional Islam is less defensive, even flexible and in fact, more helpful to the current predicament of Muslim societies. The separation of Qur'anic interpretation into exclusive fields (e.g. historical, linguistic, legal etc.), while obviously having its specialized purposes, also tends to not converge in transcending the meaning beyond their scope, thus limiting and disjointing the symbolic values addressed.³³ Arkoun suggests a total and wide-angled approach to the Qur'anic expression of its contents, a passion to recreate the socio-cultural order in modern Muslim societies yet open-ended enough to consider time and spatial intricacies. A form of eclecticism is the only direction that can be taken or, in retrospect, should have been taken to promulgate the comprehensive notion of the sacred among Muslim societies. Islam will be its own matrix in deciphering the fluidity of postmodernity. At risk of causing the postmodernist to cringe at this suggestion, I must add that unlike Gellner, I do not perceive an absolutism which merely contradicts the relativist. In as far as Islamic absolutism is concerned, it acknowledges postmodernity as a fact of humanity but simply upholds its moral position which is based on an elastic transcendent reality.

This establishes a more flowing form of traditional Islam which must simultaneously retrace, be vigilant and inculcate an erudition in the study of Islam while avoiding the pitfalls of "imperialistic" proclivity associated with such master narratives. This is no stranger to the history of Islam, whose reduction to an ideological function has made it an effective political utility while negating its social scientific perception. It reproduces

social hierarchy which does not resolve its contradiction of High and Low Islam despite the institutionalization of a self-proclaimed "traditional" Islam and the research and prominence of religious scholars. This ideological function has also impeded and de-legitimized rationalizing projects in relation to traditional Islam. It has led to the unresolved polarity of *Sunni* and *Shi'ite* Islam and the much discussed "closure of the gates of *Ijtihad* (critical analysis)". This representative work of the glory of traditional Islam neglects the 'other' or Low Islam and is unable to control it while the advent of the modern age breached Islam's unexplored and unfulfilled progressive meaning of the sacred. This heritage speaks a lot about the actual significance of Muslim scholarship in neglecting its social implications, despite the improvements and increasing relevance of contemporary Muslim scholarship, i.e. the subservience of intellectuals into the censorship of authority while gradually leaving gaps of "properly" unscrutinized periods of socio-cultural change in the distant past as well as the modern epoch. There has always been disparity between the realm of modern Muslim scholarship and the socio-political reality of its institutions and people. Unless this chasm is bridged, the transcendent reality is itself questionable and the scholarship becomes pointless. Arkoun emphasizes the necessity to subject the "area of Islamic thought to be expanded by the rigorous opposition of categories, definitions, traditional themes, to the positive facts of history, sociology, psychology, linguistics and so on, and that there is a philosophical duty to reflect again on Manichaeic conflicts which continue to destroy the world (e.g. sacred/profane, pure/impure, faithful/unfaithful), that are used in a demythified, desacralized, despiritualized, deprived context of theological coherence created by divinely inspired thinking."³⁴

Postmodern society's return of the sacred can never really include the experience of Islamic resurgence. Islam perceives secularism in its institutional relation and disconnection with the masses, not the more recent western experience of secularism as a meta-narrative and arguments of society's reversal from it.³⁵ In as far as their arguments go in describing the sacred in examples of sociality, Islam does not see or share it as the core issue of the secularism debate, because it did not experience a disenchantment. If this is the case with Islam, it was thus never secularized. But in as far as banal associations are reflected upon the function of social institutions, and their incapacity to fulfill the experience of the sacred can be defined as secularism, it constitutes a central problem to the

secularization experience of Muslims as well. Islam can easily be said to be frustrated in its own response to the modern project, which at times corresponds with western descriptions of postmodernity. Globalization has meant that the world of Islam is more acutely aware of shifts in western academic perspectives and their direct impact on the study of Islam. In bringing about practical solutions to the metaphysical anxieties of humanity in a systematic fashion, Islam will continue to navigate its masses in the postmodern age while becoming aware of its own heterogeneity and more adept at assessing its own tradition in the socio-political and historical milieu.

Redirecting Society: Transculturalism and Islam

The fusion of Islam and modernity in postmodern scholarship requires a genuine but careful deconstruction of these “separate” forces, taking into account their historical emergence and evolution. The hermeneutics of Islam is effectively subject to modern discourse, institutions and social realities which re-essentializes modernity in the equation, despite the rationality embodied in both forces. The fact is that Islam is playing the “catch-up” game or, to be more pessimistic, “following the leader”. While “apologists” struggle to re-essentialize Islam without “sanctified” institutional support in reality, only the theoretical premise remains unscathed, or has it? It is not about reductionist perspectives but the reality of Muslims reducing Islam. A non-reductionist and deconstructive methodology is needed to sift the inter-cross of Islam and modernity at the basis of any given phenomenon (e.g. Islamic politics or political Islam), which entails a “genealogical” approach to both forces. Armando Salvatore sees this as a necessary approach which establishes a “line of descent” of such discourses and traces a trajectory which can be expressed “in terms that are not imitative of the western experience” which has wedged itself in the modern Muslim psyche, i.e. the colonial impact.³⁶ Salvatore approaches the Islamic tradition through a deconstruction of the Turath (cultural heritage), which is necessarily indigenous (i.e. Arab), in “analyzing Islam as the plural hermeneutics of a complex civilization and the flexible medium of a collective identity centered on one Qur’anic keyword (Islam)” (intro: 13-25), where an expansion of its principles is then subjected to its various social and cultural realities. The point of convergence and historical form of Islam and modernity’s dialectic and its dynamics are then, supposedly, better explained and reconstructed. An

example was made out of the historical and semantic interplay between Islam and its various constructs (e.g. *Din*, *Dawla* [state], *Shar'iah*, *fiqh* [jurisprudence], *nizam al-hulan* [system of government], *kalam* [theology], etc.) from its inception and progression of meaning. For instance: how hermeneutic contention was constricted to the perception of the textualized logos of the Qur'an and affected the interpretation and adaptation of *fiqh* and the utopia of *al-siyasa al-shar'iah* in an insulated and restrictive culture, thus possibly hindering the emergence of a modern intellectual distinction. Salvatore disagrees with Gellner's perception of the dynamics of Muslim societies and sees "modernity intervening in the process of Muslim societies from without, and thereby re-launching the reformist option." He describes a deconstruction of the Islam-modernity dialectic and discontinuities and secularization of sacred meaning:

An important stage in this process was the scholarly systematization of the couple of words into which the multi-layered meaning of *Din* split *iman* and *islarn*. The deepening of the process of reification, which consists of distancing oneself from a living practice, objectifying it as a target of analysis or an instrument for social action, and finally depriving it of its original impetus, has occurred especially through the latter word...³⁷

It reflects an alienation which persists in the post-colonial age and a dislocation from mechanisms of society which includes the function of intellectuals. *Islam din wa-dawla* represents a reconstruction of society, be it appropriated by Islamists or moderate liberal Muslims, and thereby differs with the liberal-pluralist context of civil society. Any form of reconciliation ultimately leads to a negation of the other but the examination of transcultural dynamics between the West and Islam should at least provide an amiable ground for postmodern scholarship. The enigma lies within the real de-essentializing setting of religious nationalism, which subjects religious resurgence to a "radical secularization of content."³⁸ Islamic phenomenology requires its re-essentialization in the exchange, but in order to maintain its purity, ironically it must remain detached despite the inability of modernism and postmodernism to resolve the fundamental question of being. In order to make lithe this enduring rigidity, conclusions must be made of transcultural dynamics and the mechanisms and sociality which impede the redirection of the sacred in Muslim societies. The important thing to heed in this exchange is how the western experience and conceptualization of religion, especially through

sociology, has sought to evaluate an undifferentiated Islam. This evaluation made its breakthrough via a national-Islamic discourse, perhaps exemplified by the ideologization of Islam in the framework of the modern state (i.e. Salvatore has given the example of Ali Abd. Raziq, whose controversial ideas did not include that which attributed the source of *Shar'iah* to God, but Islam), which decidedly takes Islam as an active reference defined by ethnicity. This is where radical secularization of context becomes oblique, as Islam retains its transnational (e.g. brotherhood) and intra-Islamic projection as a religion in the organic sense, but without binding institutions.

Modern transcultural dynamics brought about the problem of essentialism in rational methodology. While Muslim reformers take up the western institutionalized form of social study and development and emphasize the centrality of Islam, western sociology has already decided on Islam's comparative function in the construction of Protestantism as the proper and exclusive source of modern rationality (this can be referred to Max Weber's sociology of religion). Edward Said and Michel Foucault have pointed out this impasse of western rationality in different ways, i.e. the utility and exploitation of a marginalized Other; and the stagnation of western subjectivity and a profane modernity. These practices did not integrate Muslim societies with modernity, while the course of modern Muslim intellectuals, in their efforts to present Islamic civilization as a dynamic, autonomous and rational entity, only contributed towards a mere reification of Islam's juxtaposition with modern development, since modern social mechanisms operated independently without sacred legitimization. This essentialized view which considers all institutions as derivative of Islam, is at odds with its own incapacity to transcend these structures in modern transition, thereby producing reactionary fundamentalists or secular essentialized liberals at either extreme of the continuum. The centrality of power and politics in the advancing modern discourse of Islam reflects the gradual operationalization of its abstract and problematic elements. However, postmodern transcultural analysis, in ascertaining the modern-ideological intensity or degree of Islamic totalitarianism in the plurality of Muslim states, will only intensify the problems of an independent Islamic framework, since it has yet to redefine its actual relation with modernity and the transmission of the sacred. This means that the nexus of such specific studies is still secular in the sense that it is central to the social structures while rendering insignificant the reifying discourse of

“utopian” Islam. A much more refined and neutral approach is needed to negotiate an autonomous but solutionist trend which presupposes the human capacity to reproduce God's will and the self-constitution of the ulama “as guardians of the sacred heritage which immobilizes the function of individuals in projecting the sacred upon social organizations”.³⁹ The form of Islamic government is also seen recently as an exclusively societal issue, where the impetus is on serving Islam and not using it, which evidently occurred with its ideologization in the modern state.⁴⁰ This signified the convergence of *Islah* (reform) and *Ijtihad* in the institutional discourse of modernity and has settled into a solutionist-based ethos and neutralist-oriented rationality in its effort to reconcile with modern reality, at least intellectually.

This framework is a viable attempt at reactualizing rational elements of the Islamic *turath* (cultural heritage) by handling transcultural dynamics and modernity in a positive and beneficial manner while addressing a more realistic hermeneutic relationship between text and modern subject. Hasan Hanafi proposes nothing less than a reverse Orientalist project, that is *Istighrab* (Occidentalism) as an attempt to domesticate western civilization to the Islamic world. i.e. transcultural exchange which essentializes Islam and explains western history's fundamentals as being inherited from Islam. It represents the inevitable course and quandary of modern social interpretation, regardless of “the postmodern logic which strives toward freely reconstructing one's own place within modernity among a much wider range of options that previously allowed.”⁴¹ The fact remains that the interpretive process by virtue of socialization, is illiberal even in a presumed liberal society. In the case of Islam, the nature of this discourse leads to social institutions that can be superficially described as Islamic, given the legitimizing role of religion in the modern state and intrinsically secular political organizations. It is a paradox that while Muslim scholars gear up towards a refined Islamic essentialized mode of transcultural discourse, it has yet been able to produce established modern academic institutions. The equation is still the opposite, i.e. brain drain to the west and for historical imbalance in terms of “power-knowledge” within the transcultural space, since valid knowledge about Islam could be legitimized only by a varying degrees of association with the western academic establishment.⁴² In light of these inhibitions, Arkoun necessitates the distinction of modern social scenarios from representing authentic tradition, saying that authority is a “mundane” matter.

All these developments indicate that a dislocation of the Islamic essence has occurred. There is hesitance in bridging the gap between modernity and the Islamic tradition, allowing secularism by failing to locate the sacred in mundane matters, which is perhaps aggravated by transcultural dynamics and a general deficiency of its own Islam essentialization methodology. The redirection of Muslim society and a transcendent sacred experience is thus still confined to the reification of its absolutist and unrealized principles in the modern world.

Conclusion

We are not moral thanks to society (we are only ethical or law-abiding thanks to it); we live in society, we are society, thanks to being moral. At the heart of sociality is the loneliness of the moral person. Before society, its law-makers and its philosophers come down to spelling out its ethical principles, there are beings who have been moral without the constraint of codified goodness.⁴³

It is transparent in this paper that my orientation is very much in the mold of Arkoun's Occidentalism. To rephrase and domesticate Bauman's postmodern view of moral universality (as quoted above): We are society, thanks to aspiring to be moral. I cannot deny my heart of sociality (essentialization of Islam) though it is the loneliness of the moral Muslim (due to its tension with modern institutions). Before society, its law-makers and its philosophers come down with the aim to spell out its ethical principles, there are beings who strive to be moral without the guidance and freedom of codified goodness (revelation). It is representative of my immediate rationalizing process in evaluating statements. Islam, thus, also seeks to domesticate and alter what it constitutes as incompatible elements of postmodern "globalization": the vision of a global spread of information, technology and economic interdependency does not include the ecumenization of political, cultural and moral authorities (factors supposed to "globalize" are seen as *non-rational*, rather than *inter-* or *supra-national*). If anything, the new historiosophy renders the prospects of moral universality achieved by the spread of the "civilizing process" distant and dim.⁴⁴ In its theoretical efforts to impart sacred and moral practice, the Islamic transcultural discourse of solutionist based ethos and neutralist rationality should augur well for reception of the wisdom and refinement in temporal matters that a post-

modern perspective offers. Islam perceives that moral issues can be resolved, but the moral life of humanity cannot be guaranteed by the calculating and legislative efforts of reason (rephrasing Bauman). If sacred moral responsibility is innate within sociality (as in religion), it naturally endeavors to manifest itself despite this never being sufficient (an institutional religion). Islam has never experienced a disenchantment with institutional religion as the West has had, but it has yet to reconcile with modernity, whereas the West has abandoned itself to secularism. The constant frustration of Islam in negotiating its role in the modern state as more than an ideology impedes the formation of mechanical structures which support and convey the sacred moral meaning to a conscious Muslim sociality. It is a sociality conditioned by Islam as a form of religion which demands such a structure that complements the human nature's need of a sacred system of life. The direction of the sacred in Islam has always been clear, but the institutional and cultural intricacies that surround, mislead, corrupt and obstruct its society from this path also boil over to a grotesque extremism that claims and is often projected by the media as being "Islamic". Locating the essence and redirecting the sacred in Islam in its dealings with externalities requires a moderation in temperament but firmness in response, and "Postmodernism, with its emphasis on globalization and plurality, equality and tolerance, will perhaps encourage such friendships."⁴⁵ Despite the constant failure of Muslims in projecting Islam upon modernity, they have been careful enough to distance its manifestation from a true representation of the Islamic tradition.

Notes

1. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
2. Akhbar S. Ahmed & Hastings Donnan, (cited from Fardon, 1992, p. 25) *Islam, Globalization & Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 11.
3. Akhbar S. Ahmed & Hastings Donnan, *Islam in the age of Postmodernity* in Ahmed & Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization & Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1994.
4. M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribe: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, Sage Publications, London, 1996.
5. P. Mellor & C. Shilling, *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity*, Sage Publications, London, 1997.
6. B. S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1991.
7. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
8. Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Polity, Cambridge, 1993; *Postmodernity and its discontents*, Polity, Cambridge, 1997.

9. Akhbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Preddicament and Promise*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
10. Akhbar S. Ahmed & Hastings Donnan, *Islam in the age of Postmodernity* in Ahmed & Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization & Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1994.
11. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
12. M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribe: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, Sage Publications, London, 1996.
13. B. S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1991.
14. J. J. Donohue and J. L. Esposito, *Islam in Transition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1982.
15. Akhbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Preddicament and Promise*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
16. Ibid. pp. 6-7.
17. T. Gerholm, "Two Muslim Intellectuals in the Postmodern West" in Ahmed and Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization & Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 209-210.
18. There is a famous *hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad) that the Muslim *ummah* will break into 73 factions of which only one is on the right path. But then again the Qur'anic injunction is toward unity and an emphasis on unrelenting effort, for the burden of each person is that which he is able to bear and a community is supposed to be justly balanced and guided by the perfected *al-Din* (way of life). Certain Qur'anic verses also highlight the fact that in spite of an absolute truth, humanity will also be divided into different religions, nations and tribes e.g. Qur'an: 49:13 and 42: 7-8.
19. Qur'an: 10:47.
20. T. Gerholm, "Two Muslim Intellectuals in the Postmodern West" in Ahmed and Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization & Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 209-210.
21. B. S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1991.
22. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
23. Akhbar Ahmed & Hastings Donnan, *Islam in the age of Postmodernity* in Ahmed & Donnan (eds.), *Islam, Globalization & Postmodernity*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 13.
24. Ernest Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.
25. See my assessed essay of "Islam in the modern world" module: *Malaysian Islam: an impasse of modern Muslim politics*.
26. B. S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1991.
27. Hossein S. Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World*, Kegan Paul Int. Pub., London, New York, 1987, p. 13.
28. Ibid., pp. 18-21.

29. I refer to the digression of authentic tradition in its inability to reconcile with the modern environment. Its a progressive experience which involves the socialization process that fails to incorporate the complex and organic features of humanity with its mechanical structures.
30. M. Arkoun, "Religion and Society:The Example of Islam" in Dan Cohn and Sharbok (eds.), *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*, McMillan, London, 1991, p. 134.
31. B. S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1991.
32. M. Arkoun, "Religion and Society:The Example of Islam" in Dan Cohn and Sharbok (eds.), *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*, McMillan, London, 1991, pp. 134-177.
33. Arkoun convincingly demonstrated this through a semiotic analysis of Surah Yusof in the Qur'an in the same article, where the story is not enjoyed as literature but as a telling of socio-cultural changes of the past reintroduced by Muhammad in his Arab society, 1991.
34. M. Arkoun, "Religion and Society:The Example of Islam" in Dan Cohn and Sharbok (eds.), *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*, McMillan, London, 1991, p. 175.
35. M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribe: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, Sage Publications, London, 1996; Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Polity, Cambridge,1993; *Postmodernity and its discontents*, Polity, Cambridge, 1997; P. Mellor & C. Shilling, *Re-forming the Body: Religion, Community and Modernity*, Sage Publications, London, 1997.
36. Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, Ithaca Press, Lebanon, 1997.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
38. B. S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, Sage Publications, London, 1991.
39. Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, Ithaca Press, Lebanon, 1997.
40. Hashim Kamali, "The Islamic State & its Constitution" in Norani Ahmad's (ed) *Shari'a Law and the Modern Nation State: a Malaysian Symposium*, Sisters in Islam Pub., Kuala Lumpur, 1991.
41. Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, Ithaca Press, Lebanon, 1997, p. 170.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Z. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Polity, Cambridge,1993, p. 61.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
45. Akhbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam:Preddicament and Promise*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, p. 191.