

“Iranian Religious Intellectuals and the Modernization Debate”

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Abstract: *The success story of the west has encouraged nations of the world to take up the goals and the style of the west in development. The west has, on the other hand, imposed its values and cultures as the universally acceptable norms in the world, especially in the developing and the underdeveloped east without considering the pre-existing culture and traditions of the host countries. Despite all this, the West itself has come to the conclusion that science and development cannot be purely positive and leaving solely good consequences as it can ultimately cause alienation with the self and greed comes as a result of it. On the other hand the Easterners have found out that the imported technology and modernity is not neutral to their own culture, requiring a certain amount of perquisite norms to be accepted. This new look toward the west made theorists rediscover their thoughts on the matter and its essence for the eastern countries. Some thinkers realized that technology itself is not in essence bad or evil, but it is the practice which makes it so. It is believed by another group of thinkers that as modernity has been cultivated in a certain cultural atmosphere, it cannot be neutral to the cultures and traditions in other nations. This essay tries to define and understand these two ideas, the reasoning behind them and their consequences for development in the developing world. Finally,, the ideas of a number of religious thinkers on the matter will be discussed.*

Key Word: *Modernity, Religious Intellectuals, Technology, Selective Modernization.*

I. Introduction

The shift in the traditional Christian doctrine during the Renaissance in the 16th century under the shadow of rationality, and the end of the Church’s reign, were the significant factors which led to the end of the Middle Ages. This was the beginning of the revolution towards modernity in the following two centuries which created the foundation of modern Europe.

The beginning of modernity, however, is believed to have started in the West and caused the Enlightenment in Europe as a result of which the Industrial Revolution followed. In spite of its origins being in Europe, the wave of modernity is now the most overwhelming ideology in the world about which no country has the ability to compromise. Human wisdom, which is able to criticize itself, is the basis of modernity and as a consequence its other aspects such as science, technology and politics (Wilson & Hanns Reill, 2004). In effect modernity has been at the top of the cultural and socio-political agenda of the thinkers in the Islamic world since its rise in the 18th century. The spread of modernity has not been without controversies however. It has caused some clashes between a numbers of thinkers in the Islamic World. Some have attempted to draw a relationship between the modern world and Islam and some have labeled it as an anti- Islamic Western project. Some have tried to be selective and have chosen certain aspects of it in their political and social lives. Iran has been facing the wave of modernity for decades. Facing it, the Iranian people had two concerns; firstly, they have been interested in science and technology, secondly, being invaded culturally by Western modernity (Vahdat, 2002, p. 11). The negative view of the Western modernity was empowered with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. During this period all the aspects of modernity were rejected and a return to Islamic origins was offered instead. At the same time, a number of Iranian thinkers tried critically to detect the burdens on the way of modernity and offered their solutions to the crisis of identity which exists among the Iranian masses. They believe that to understand religion, people should use wisdom and to deal with the identity crisis we have to overcome religious ideology.

Another group of thinkers reject the notion of accepting Western modernism without modifications but at the same time believe in a coexistence of tradition and modernity. This group of thinkers believes that attaining civil society and wisdom is only possible by deeply understanding the West and utilizing the superior bases of modernity such as science, contemporary interpretation of religion and cultural interaction (Soroush, 1987, p. 244). Abdol Karim Soroush, Iranian thinker and philosopher is one of these thinkers.

It is useful to consider Iranian modern thinkers in either of the two categories: Western-minded and religious. The most prominent aspect of Western minded thinkers is their emphasis on separation of tradition and modernity. On the other hand, religious thinkers look forward to combining the two. The Western-minded thinkers believe that the most important burden on development in Islamic countries is in the Islamic culture itself. Therefore, they try to minimize the impact of religion on culture and society. The other group which is more religious put the emphasis on encountering the negative responses to modernity by the religious society. They also have the concern for maintaining the religious identity and at the same time pushing the society

toward development. The rise of such religious thinkers was also simultaneous with the Persian Constitutional Revolution. Sayyid Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi (b. 1838 - d. March 9, 1897), who was a political activist and Islamic ideologist, was also one of the first religious thinkers in this respect (Kazemi, 2004, p. 75).

Among the Islamic thinkers, there are two major groups in approaching the concept, one which support a selective modernization, meaning that they believe in selective the positive elements in a modernity which is a combination of good and bad aspects, and the opponents of modernity who are skeptical about the capacity of modernism to be divided into good and evil and they believe dividing it into these two categories will unavoidably make it less effective. Both groups have their own and sometimes conflicting reasons which should be considered equally. (Rahdar, 2008, p. 211) Abdoul Karim Soroush is one of the supporters of modernity. Allegedly, Murteza Mutahhari is one of such supporters of selective modernization. Seyed Hossein Nasr, and Mehdi Golshani on the other hand are two of the most outspoken critics of modernization, although Golshani supports a form of belief-centred science which does not conflict with religious views and principles. Ali Shari'ati is one of the opponents of modernization who believed that the negative outcomes of modernization are far greater than the positive gains of it in the developing world.

But what are the reasons offered by these thinkers in support of their respective positions?

II. Concept of Modernity

Modernity concept refers to the form of society which started in the Enlightenment in Europe and became consolidated with the French Revolution and the rise of German idealism. The word ‘modernity’ refers to the new civilization in Europe and North America which started in the 1800s and matured in the early 20th century. This civilization is by all accounts modern and unique. It is unique in the study of nature, machinery, and also the modern methods of industrial production which led to development of the humanity’s status in a way unseen in history. As it was the case with democracy, there are several descriptions of modernity. Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, believes that “Modernity is the way of living and socio-political institutions which appeared in the West starting in the 17th century until today, which spread gradually across the world” (Giddens, 1991, p. 4). In summary, modernity means living contemporarily. “Modernity can be called a very deep social reform which affects social, economical, political, bureaucratic, and religious principles” (Masini, 1998, pp. 81-82). In this description, modernity is limited to a time-based, periodical phenomenon, not a philosophical notion. That is why many thinkers believe that like any other periodical, or historical phenomenon, modernity had a birth and shall have a death, but of course this is not shared by many thinkers (Legenhausen, 1998, p. 50). Giddens believes it started in the 18th century, but many believe it started long before, in the 17th century. There is however one repeated theme: wisdom and rationality overcame religion and classical philosophy and discoveries and inventions paved the way to eradicate poverty. Discouragement toward invaluable religious ideas, Protestant reform and the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century hastened the process of modernity in Europe. Modernity however, remained a mixture of several modern ideas, which started to appear one after another. It also includes many aspects of contemporary art, philosophy, sociology, psychology, religion politics, literature, and morals.

Some of the most prominent effects of modernity in society and politics are:

- 1- **Scientism:** as a cause for positivism, it believes that the only way to understanding the world around us is to experiment and try. (T.Hunter, 2009, p. 81)
- 2- **Rationalism:** it only recognizes practical wisdom and rational thinking which only trusts the results of scientific research.
- 3- **Materialism:** the belief that recognizes existence and matter as the only concepts and the initial truth. The fact is that it is a direct result of the previous thinking, if the only way to understand the truth is experimentation, then there is nothing beyond what we can feel and taste. Therefore only materials exist because they can be ‘real’, or ‘existential’, if something cannot be experimented then it does not exist (Delanty, 1999, p. 163).
- 4- **Humanism:** modernity believes in a human-centered universe in which the only reason to exist is to serve humanity, and all things are there to serve humanity. The fact is that among traditionalist thinkers, this is the position of God, not humans to be served unlimitedly (Berman, 1994, p. 107).
- 5- **Individualism:** individualism is the belief in individuals and giving the priority to the individual units of society (humans) rather than society as a whole. This is to serve the freedom, rights and personal development and dignity of the individuals (Lan & Redissi, 2004, p. 16).

As mentioned earlier, there is a tendency among some thinkers that modernity has an end. They offer a replacement: Postmodernism. Many thinkers consider this as the natural complementary to the modern period.

In the following section, we present the arguments for and against modernization as presented by these thinkers:

III. Arguments in Support of Modernization

1) Scientific neutrality: the supporters believe that science has no affiliation or direction towards any virtue. Therefore, they do not have the capacity to be divided into good, evil, religious, secular, Islamic, non-Islamic and the like. They also believe that there is no such thing as Western or Eastern science, science is science. The idea behind science is legitimacy of an idea or its falsity, thereby having nothing to do with its ideological or religious interpretations. In other words, if two people discuss a chemical reaction, this discussion is only true and legitimate with the side which is empirically supported, regardless of their ideology. Some thinkers such as Abdolkarim Soroush, an Iranian thinker, reformer, Rumi scholar and a former professor at the University of Tehran, goes beyond this point and discusses that as this world is a human-Godly creation, there is not such boundary as between good and evil. Soroush, sees the concept of Islamic or any other form of religious science as paradoxical. In this view, science and religion and the realm of the two are completely separate and they have no influence on each other. His view and that of his followers is that it is impossible to expect religion to fulfill our scientific and intellectual needs as it is unthinkable to expect science to fulfill our religious needs.

Another thinker is Ayatollah Murteza Mutahhari. As Mutahhari believed, Religion is not in conflict with science. This idea shows itself particularly, in Islam, which has admired science and scientists for all its existence. Therefore, we need to understand this idea that being intellectual does not necessarily imply rejecting religion such as idea, rather, it arose as result of the historical and cultural experience of the West. Therefore, human beings need religion both in social and human contexts. In other words, man takes science to wherever he wants it to go, and use it whichever way he wishes, but a religion takes control of one's life and changes it to a great extent (Mutahhari, 2008, pp. 358,401).

2) Religion's emphasis on competition among humans: this is allowed to humans, as far as we make use of the human experiences. Not only does religion approves of human thinking and innovations, but it also supports it. It is in the soul of Islam to emphasize scientific, technological, economical and social reform exactly like the one which has happened in the West (Peyman, 2002, p. 19). In fact it is the people's behavior which has increased its distance from religion and has reached the point of conflict. On the other hand, we sometimes find that the findings of scientific research happen to support religious beliefs, which indicates an agreement between science and religion. As Ayatollah Mutahhari believed, there is no conflict between science and religion since science has its roots in the human soul (MirSalim, 2005, p. 102). Therefore in Mutahhari's view, both science and religion have appeared to give humans enough means to know. The difference is that science is a set of tools by which human takes over nature, i.e. has a vertical development. On the other hand, religion gives directions to human and describes the eternal life to us. So religion does not omit anything from the greatness of the universe, but adds to it by describing it to us. (Mutahhari, 1989, pp. 166,167)

(3) Interactions between civilizations are their key to survival: many modernist thinkers in the developing world believe that a harsh independence ideology adopted by a society decreases its ability to cooperate and interact with other societies. Societies and civilizations need each other and owe one another in their development which is not possible to achieve if no interaction is taking place. Ultimately, the cooperation and interaction will reach to a point of saturation in which we will all face a homogeneous global culture all over the world. Under such conditions, with the affiliation of all culture, everything will have a trace of globality and this will be the truth behind the cultures and the essence of them, and not only cooperate with one another, but this will essentially be their identity. For example, under such assumed circumstances, the Persian culture will only find its meaning under intense competition in which it proves itself through its strength, creativity, and assiduity. Talking about independence under such conditions will therefore be only for obscurantist ideologies and cultures. On the other hand, science and technology are an inevitable part of today's lives and identities and therefore have a global meaning to all. It is therefore absurd if a country closes its borders to other cultures, but still imports science and technology from others (Hajjarian, 2001, p. 243). Such thinkers basically believe that it is possible to move on a straight line to go from tradition to modernity in the developing world. Such thinkers approach the opponents of their ideology as equating Western civilization with corruption and in which a foreigner means an enemy. Rather than engage in positive cooperation with other cultures they have chosen a negative confrontation. The reality is that neither the Western civilization is totally corrupt nor our societies are all needless of change (MirSalim, 2005, p. 365). But we should accept that the supporters of modernization should not accuse their opponents of being closed-minded. This will in effect result in the death of thinking (MirSalim, 2005, p. 4).

(4) Modernization is seen as a means to social development: the supporters of this idea believe that we need to develop the society in such a way that it can handle the complicated issues of modern life which is only possible through modernization. Of course, these thinkers believe that in case of occurrence of conflict between religion and the process of modernization we inevitably have to take the side of religion.

IV. Arguments Against Modernization

(1) Partiality of science: the opponents of modernization believe that human sciences are all affiliated with certain norms and values. And they are in fact deeply sceptical of the idea that there is no interaction between

religion and science. They offer historical examples thereby to support their allegation. Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one of the thinkers who hold this view.

(2) Impossibility of achieving social development by the means of modernization: the opponents of modernization believe that although development is a necessity for all the developing countries, but this should start by reversing the effects of modernization and we should not even call this development a “modernizing” process. Their reason for this allegation is that the contextual meaning of development is a positive attitude which means moving toward a better future, but in fact, the history of the past decades in the West has shown that such developments in the West have not really brought the world to a better condition. In their view, Western civilization, as a secular and human-centered civilization, is therefore anti-development in the real sense. According to their thinking, development should be toward a more God-centered reality whereas the path of civilization shows that the reverse is true (Rahdar, 2008, p. 257). For example, Shariati viewed the process of “becoming modern” as one of the most ominous means by which the West entices the East to be modern (Shariati, 1979c, p. 19).

(3) Modernity is a holistic entity and it is impossible and to divide it into pieces. In the eyes of the opponents of modernity, modernity is an entity, in which many warps and woofs are sewed up together to make it a whole. Science, technology, politics, modern philosophy and the like are the building blocks of modernity having a fixed aim. These are all in the package with the same soul, meaning that modern science is secular as is its politics, and all these separate pieces support each other in this way. Thereby it is impossible to study such entities in singular units, because each of these units is only inspired by a whole, its significance depends on how effective their role is in the whole entity

(4) A view of religion as comprehensive and all-encompassing: in their view, religion has a maximal role in life, meaning that it covers all or at least many aspects of life as religion cannot just govern one aspect of human life. Even in the West many scientists believe in such a role of religion in our lives. The opponents of modernization believe that in the context of modernity, there is a minimal role for religion in human’s lives which is in contrast with the leadership role of religion. Through the eyes of the opponents of a maximal religion, religion is only good for the matter of eternal lives of humans, and thus useless for temporal living in the present world. In their view religion is a necessity, but a minimal necessity (Rahdar, 2008, p. 270) . For example Golshani believes that there is a rise of relativism in religious beliefs. As was mentioned before, the direct result of secularism is relativism in religious identity (Golshani, 1998, p. 38). Shariati wanted religion to be a prominent part of human lives and thus had a maximalist view of religion in the lives of people. On the other hand Soroush has a minimalist view of religion, that is, to have the minimal effect on everyday life.

(5) The synthesis of modern science with modernity: They believe that modernity as a whole is a nonreligious and even antireligious movement. The fruits of this tree have no religious shape. This shows that the modernity and the west in general have no good relationship with religion as the Western civilization is a humanistic civilization, separated from religion. It is a civilization whose gods are humans and its rules are only to satisfy humanity. The supporters of religion such as Golshani thus believe that the suitable place for religion in the modern world is in assuming a leadership role, and to have a controlling stake in the management of this world (Avini, 1997, p. 282). However, Golshani, believes that religious leadership has been mostly reduced to moral matters in the Islamic countries and that science has also been neglected in reality (Golshani, 1998, p. 35).

V. Conclusion

The religious thinkers have taken either of the following two major positions in viewing modernism:

- (a) The supporters of selective modernization,
- (b) The opponents of selective modernization.

The supporters of selective modernization are mostly concerned about the development and the survival of the developing countries and civilizations and the opponents have the local development schemes in mind. We can therefore, take the middle line and consider a middle point in this argument; meaning to define that instant development and survival is helpful and effective, but real, sustainable development requires patience. Therefore, the adherence of Islamic nations to the notions of modernity is just a result of the concern for survival, rather than development. In its true sense a move toward a real Islamic ruling and Islamic democracy is in fact the basis for an optimal path to development. Based on this reality, and considering that it is necessary to survive in this world, we have to accept modernization to the extent which is necessary, always considering taking the necessary part of it. On the other hand and based on the idea of selective modernization, we have to aim at reviving the real Islamic nation when working toward development. Thus, it neither is necessary to surrender nor to be too cautious to be stopped on the way, but the best way is to take risk not with the tools that are provided by the West, toward their aim, but by using local tools, toward a God-centered, Islamic aim.

Religious democracy is crucial to the government, as the axis of all social and personal activities involves the role of God and the authorities’ selection must reflect God’s will. Society’s vote must be in the context of Religious framework as, they cannot vote beyond this boundary, as the formation of the government is based on

people’s achievement on the welfare of world by the Religious democracy body. The aim of this study is to reflect the level of democracy in the ideas of the Iranian Muslim intellectuals. It certainly projects the influence of science and modernity as well as democracy fitting into the Islamic system of government. The goal of this dissertation is to examine and characterize the ideas of selected Iranian intellectuals, namely, Abdolkarim Soroush, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ali Shariati, Murteza Mutahhari, and Mehdi Golshani on Islam, modernity, science and politics, and its implication for Iran. The justification for the choice of these five scholars is based on their intellectual prominence and influence in dealing with the theme of Islam, modernity, science and politics in Iran.

This study drew an outline from some of the main themes discussed by Abdolkarim Soroush, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ali Shariati, Murteza Mutahhari and Mehdi Golshani in creating a vision of a new Islamic world view which would be achieved further through the process of Islamization of knowledge, using scientific arguments and Islamic teachings. It is part of an accumulated effort towards the rise of an Islamic world view which is hoped to conclude in the advancement of science and technology with regards to the Muslim’s world and a return to its past glory. Thus it is hoped that the results of this study would provide a platform for the issues involved in the Muslim’s pursuit of contemporary knowledge, from an Islamic perspective. Also it is hoped that through this study contribution will be channelled to the current debate on Islam, science and politics as well as the creation of an alternative Islamic world view that will be developed with regards to science, technology and a systematic government.

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