Religion and Modernity Reflections on a Modern Debate

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The relationship between the phenomena of modernity and religion has exercised scholars in many fields over recent decades. For example, one of the original exponents of the secularization paradigm in the late 1950s and 1960s, sociologist Peter Berger, had, by the end of the millennium, recanted his earlier position saying: 'The big mistake, which I shared with everyone who worked in this area … was to believe that modernity necessarily leads to a decline in religion.' Steve Bruce, sociologist and firm adherent of the secularization thesis, quotes this statement in an article in which he attempts to rescue Berger from the folly of his recantation.[1] While Bruce's view may now be regarded as 'unfashionable'[2] in sociology of religion circles, echoes of the 'modernity–religion' dichotomy are very much present in studies related to modernity, contemporary Islam, and fundamentalism.

Modernist or fundamentalist?

Elsewhere I have argued that a 'modern' conception of the state need not imply discontinuity with the past (as implied by the secularization thesis) when conceived within parameters of a religious tradition.[3] The 1925 case of the Egyptian 'alim Ali Abd al-Raziq illustrates the point. Abd al-Raziq argued in *Islam and the Roots of Authority* that neither the Qur'an nor the Prophetic tradition supported the view that the Prophet's role was both political and religious; it was, indeed, merely spiritual. Since there was no essentially Islamic form of government and the modern state was conceived of as secular, the spheres of the political and the religious needed to be kept separate in the modern, colonial-dominated states in which Muslims lived. Abd al-Raziq examined and rejected the views of the fourteenth-century philosopher-historian Ibn Khaldun who argued, according to his modern interpreter Muhsin Mahdi, that religion must be politicized – a notion clearly not alien to the Islamic tradition. In other words, Abd al-Raziq examined his own tradition seriously, debated with it, and found it wanting for modern times with regard to the nature of the political. Although his views were vigorously denounced at the time and led to his dismissal from al-Azhar, his argument was the product of a historically evolving, differentiated Islamic tradition. His contemporary opponents, drawing upon the same data of the tradition, claimed that Islamic societies all shared essential elements, which marked their history and moulded the paradigm of their social and political development in the modern world.

It is curious that this latter position is labelled by Western scholars as 'fundamentalist', while that of Abd al-Raziq is called 'modernist'; or that the 'fundamentalist' position is held to be ideological, while Abd al-Raziq's is not when both views are about the disposition and institutional framework of political power. The main point here is that tradition can be employed in various ways, irrespective of differing visions of the past and demands for the present, none of which logically implies a radical break with that past. Expressed in terms of one of the many debates on modernity and tradition (religion), 'detraditionalization', the example of Abd al-Raziq and his rivals would be best described, not in a manner that makes the characteristics of past and present mutually exclusive (and hence discontinuous), but rather as coexisting inasmuch as 'detraditionalizing processes do not occur in isolation from other processes, namely those to do with tradition maintenance and the construction – or reconstruction – of traditional forms of life'.[4] The arguments of Abd al-Raziq and his rivals might then be described as examples of 'modernity-as-tradition' and 'tradition-in-modernity' respectively.

Legal and theological uses

A second, illuminating case is that of the concept of jihad. The distinction between the legal and theological uses of the term is well known. Writing in a theological context, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) called 'true jihad' the struggle against one's inner desires. Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) laid out the jurists' approach to jihad, expounding impartially the contested positions over various points related to the theme of the 'lesser jihad', or fighting 'in the way of God'. For example, one controversy arose over the imam's choices in dealing with captives of war: he could pardon, enslave, kill, or release them either by way of ransom or as a 'protected person' (*dhimmi*) in which case a head tax was imposed; some scholars taught that captives may never be slain, based upon the consensus of the Prophet's companions. Ibn Rushd noted that technical differences of opinion emerged among scholars owing to the apparent contradiction between certain Qur'anic verses, the inconsistent practice of the Prophet, the contradiction between the manifest interpretation of the Qur'an and the Prophet's deeds, or to a general and particular rule in the texts being at variance.

The later jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) concurs both with the view that captives taken in fighting unbelievers may not be killed, and with the discretion allowed the imam as to their appropriate disposition; he adds, however, that some jurists were of the opinion that the options of releasing captives or ransoming them had been abrogated. In his discussion on jihad, Ibn Taymiyya, in contrast to that of Ibn Rushd,

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does not deal with the technicalities of the various viewpoints embedded in the material sources of the law.[5] His priorities lay elsewhere. Perhaps as much moralist as jurist, idealist yet pragmatist, Ibn Taymiyya has been described as one of the most notable scholars of a fourteenth- to fifteenth-century 'revisionist' trend within the developing discourses of the Islamic legal tradition, especially in his views on the closely related themes of violence resulting from fighting against rebels and bandits or from blind obedience to the ruler. He was a revisionist inasmuch as he attempted to deconstruct the traditional discourses on the law of rebellion and to focus upon what he took to be its 'unprincipled and lawless tendencies'. In his view, the traditional law tended 'to simultaneously encourage rebellion and lend support to rulers against rebels regardless of the substantive claims of the rulers or the rebels.'[6] Given the highly unstable times in which he lived and his denunciation of all manner of *fitna*, he stressed 'the imperative of unity among Muslims' and 'the ideal of the state as the protector of order and stability, and guarantor of correct religion or orthodoxy.'[7] He argued further, however, that the individual Muslim should keep his own conscience pure and avoid obeying a ruler's sinful command in a patient, non-violent way. In any course of action, there are costs and benefits, and where they need to be weighed in the balance, that which yields the greater benefit or averts the greater cost should be adopted.[8] Although he discusses in passing both offensive and defensive forms of jihad, his chief preoccupation is with the need to confront recalcitrant Muslim groups (Kharajites and the like) who refuse to abide by certain obligations of the *shari'a* such as payment of *zakat*. Writing from different legal, regional perspectives and historical contexts, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Taymiyya were both engaged in and with a developing, authoritative juristic culture; for each, the past and present formed a continuous reality that nonetheless accommodated differences and changes in emphasis and direction.

Modern authoritarian voices

With the advent of modern times, understood broadly as the past 150 to 200 years where Muslim societies are concerned, a 'new sense of anxiety'[9] becomes apparent in writings on jihad. This reflects the ubiquitous presence of Europe; its physical presence in the form of colonial control of Muslim lands; and its accompanying institutions and ideas and the challenges they posed. To cite one example among many, in the short work by Mahmud Shaltut published in the 1940s before he become Shaykh al-Azhar (1958–1963), the author speaks of 'our days of weakness and decay'. The purpose of his essay was to rectify the popular European idea that Islam had been spread by the sword. Indeed, he notes, the Qur'an had provided instruments to secure peace and eliminate aggression long before the establishment of the modern League of Nations. Moreover, the sacred text provided general principles that could constitute a handbook for the ethical conduct of warfare ranking alongside similar modern works.[10] It is true that, with the exception of the principle of abrogation, he is less concerned (in the vein of Ibn Taymiyya) with the legal technicalities of controversies over various points of the law of jihad. He constructs his argument following an exegetical method, which consisted in 'collecting all the [Qur'anic] verses concerning a certain topic and analyzing them in their interrelation' and by working in light of the main stages of the Prophet's life and those of his first two successors.[11] Twice he cites from the work of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209). Shaltut is described as a 'modernist' and follower of Muhammad Abduh. Acknowledging a crucial feature of modernity, the nation-state, Shaltut argues that the relation between Muslim and other states is by nature a peaceful one, a proposition based firmly on the Qur'an. Where normally 'fundamentalists' (along with Orientalists) are charged with being essentialist in their depiction of the Islamic tradition, Shaltut's 'modernist' discussion of jihad is equally so; however, unlike the Orientalists who insisted on the utter difference between Islam and the West, here Shaltut attempts to show that the two essences are similar. Like his contemporary Abd al-Raziq, a trained religious scholar, Shaltut engages closely with the sacred text and tradition to produce his modernist, but nonetheless authoritative argument.

By way of contrast, we may note the lecture on jihad delivered in 1939 by the most influential 'fundamentalist' thinker of the last century, Abu'l Ala Maududi (d. 1979). A gifted, largely self-trained polemicist, Maududi was acutely aware of the challenges of modernity posed to Islam in British India. His response is equally modern. He declares at the beginning of his address that 'Islam is a revolutionary ideology and programme which seeks to alter the social order of the whole world and rebuild it in confor-

mity with its own tenets and ideals.'[12] 'Muslim' is the name of that International Revolutionary Party. The Qur'anic citations employed (with one exception) bear no relation to those used in the discussions on jihad of, say, Ibn Rushd or Ibn Taymiyya. Rather they focus on Maududi's abiding concern to replace the tyrannous and idolatrous rule of man over man with that of law of God for the benefit, ultimately, of all mankind. This would be achieved by jihad, 'fighting in the way of God', not from crude personal ambition for power or gain. In this instance, Maududi's views appear more radically novel and less engaged with tradition than Shaltut, and hence, more removed from the thought of his classical predecessors.[13] Maududi's position on jihad could then be labelled 'authoritarian' rather than 'authoritative' (Shaltut), taking him to be the creator of a new discourse rather than receiver of an existing one.[14]

To return to the beginning: the hard version of the secularization thesis postulates a universal and dramatic decline, or disappearance, of religion as society 'modernizes'. Even some participants in the debates on 'detraditionalization', mentioned above, adopt the hard view that characterizes the past and present as mutually exclusive. Efforts at tradition maintenance or reconstruction are, in my view, more crucial for an understanding of this process in contemporary Islamic societies. I have tried to show that a modernist (Abd al-Raziq) may engage closely with tradition to arrive at a modern view of the state in which the religious and political are separate spheres; and how a thinker like Maududi may, at one point, seem to abandon tradition altogether, although he clearly intended to support it elsewhere. Overall his thought may be described as 'tradition-in-modernity'.

What is seldom acknowledged is that the strident authoritarian voices of contemporary religious fundamentalists have confronted for decades the powerful forces of secular fundamentalism, which have striven to eliminate them. One consequence of this has been the muting through co-optation by secular fundamentalists of the religiously authoritative voices of modernists. We have yet to see whether in the future a just balance can be achieved between 'religion' and 'modernity'. The debate continues.

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Notes

1. Steve Bruce, 'The Curious Case of Unnecessary Recantation: Berger and Secularization', in L. Woodhead, ed., *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion* (London, 2001), p. 87.
2. Ibid., p. 4, observed by Woodhead.
3. David Waines, 'Ali Abd al-Raziq Revisited', *Awraq* 19 (1998): 79–96.
4. Paul Heelas, in Heelas, Lash, and Morris, eds., *Detraditionalization* (Oxford, 1996), p.7 .
5. For the translated texts, see Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 27–42, 43–54.
6. Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge, 2001), 278.
7. Ibid., p. 276.
8. Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 154; see also Abou el Fadl, op. cit., p. 274.
9. The phrase is Ahmad Dallal's from 'Appropriating the Past: Twentieth Century Reconstruction of Pre-Modern Islamic Thought', *Islamic Law and Society* 7/1 (2000): 334.
10. Peters, op. cit., pp. 89, 79, 71, 82 for references to the translated text.
11. Ibid., pp. 61, 94–9.
12. Abu'l Ala Maududi, *Jihad in Islam* (Lahore, 1978), p. 5.
13. Here I disagree with Peters, op. cit., p. 129.
14. On use of the terms 'authoritarian' and 'authoritative', see Khaled Abou el Fadl's excellent study *And God Knows the Soldiers* (New York, 2001).