

# The Themes and Problems of Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Critical Review

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## 1

Within the scope of understanding the phenomenon of religious radicalism towards other nations and their cultures as well as religious groups, there are today three trends in the Arab world. In fact, the trends are three justifications for the deteriorating relations between the Islamic world and the world beyond.

The first trend, which is dominant among the Islamist intellectuals, ties the deteriorating relations, misunderstanding, and misbehavior to old and new colonialist repercussions, starting with the Crusades and ending with the history of the last two centuries. If the old Crusades were purely religious wars or were viewed as such, the modern crusades had mixed claims, ranging from the acquisition of raw materials and the control of markets, to missionary schools, orientalism, racial and nationalist tendencies, to scorning the other. Thus, this trend, which I call the justification trend, considers that all Muslim and Arab behaviors for over a century and a half to be no more than cultural, practical and theoretical reactions to this old and continuous aggression. And because the foreseeable results of this trend range from scholastic writings, provocative speeches, statements and fatawas, Qur'anic exegeses to draft constitutions and Islamic declarations of human rights. I

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will try here to summarize most of these in a few points:

- a) From the analytical perspective, this trend regards that the Western civilization as aggressive by nature because of the dominance of the materialistic aspects, including the Christian forms that have dominated the Middle Ages and that are still strongly effective until today. The moderates within this trend cite as example of the materialist aspects sectarian nationalist tendencies, and the mission of the Christian man, the white man's mission, and the primitiveness of all non-European religions, cultures and peoples. However, the radicals state that this domineering tendency aim at dominating, controlling or eliminating the others. This is the result of three trends: freemasonry, Marxism and Freudianism.
- b) From the historical perspective, the adherents of this view see that Muslims responded to this aggression in many forms for a century and a half, from the middle of the 19th century until today: there were anti-colonialist movements that appeared in the countries that were subjected to aggression and colonialism and in the countries of the Arab world. The other form of confrontation was the cultural struggle and argumentation against the colonialists and missionaries. The third form was represented in constructing an Islamic culture to maintain a solid identity and Puritanism that the Westerners have tried to dissolve or eliminate.
- c) From the contemporary and practical perspective, the comprehensive response of the nation to such challenges was the emergence of Islamic revival that has transcended mere behavior and dialectics to crystallize revivalist Islamic movements concerning culture, politics and society and that has built a comprehensive Islamic system that was not entirely achieved because of the obstacles that have been put in its path. However, cultural violence and obvious political violence of the Islamic revivalist movements in the last few decades are caused directly by the de-

veloped phenomenon of direct and indirect violence of the other.

The second trend regards that the deteriorating relations between the Arabs and Muslims on the one hand, and the world, on the other hand, are the outcome of two parties. The first party is made up, according to this trend, of nationalist and socialist elements that make the international order. It is an order whose Western centrality emerged during the Cold War. Conflict was not of a religious nature but over resources and dominance of the third world that includes the Arabs and Muslims between the Soviet Union and the Western camp. In that conflict the Soviet Union did not behave generally as a colonialist power except in its last phases. However, that conflict had a cultural dimension as represented by the liberal democratic culture and a progressive culture that focused on liberation from colonialism, which constituted a cultural crisis for the Arabs and Muslims with the two superpowers. The two superpowers did not recognize any particularity for other peoples and religions in the third world. In other world, both the liberals and the socialists considered themselves to have comprehensive and universal values while, at the same time, they considered the Muslims' refraining from embracing their values as proof of regressive nature of Islam and the backwardness of Muslims who have continuously upheld their belonging to the Middle Ages.

If the problems of the Arabs and Muslims with the bi-polar system are primarily of political and economic nature, according to this trend, it also has a cultural aspect manifesting in bias against the issues of the Muslim world. This problem became clearer after dominance of one superpower in the early eighties of the 20th century. Since then, there has been a lot of discussion by the neo-orientalists, strategists, and media people about the coming danger from the Islamic world.

The other source endangering the relationship is the lack of the freedom

to express the interests, ideas, and ambitions of people. The Islamic revival, according to this trend, lacks an enlightened thought that allows understanding Islam outside the historical experience and lacks as well a correct understanding of the universal historical experience of the nation. The Islamist problem is then, according to the progressive trend, is not the violence that is practiced by the few within and outside the Islamic world but in the objectives of violence and its political and cultural impacts on Arabs and Muslims.

The third trend concerned with the understanding of the development of Arab and Muslims with the world is embodied in a group of critical revisionists. This trend views that the Arab and Muslim problems with the world are political and economic problems. The problem however is that the Muslims has responded to these problems with cultural reactions. The political and economic paralysis, as is the case at time of crisis, forced the Arabs and Muslims to consider their problems with the world, such as the issue of Palestine and civil wars in many places and Muslim minorities in Asia, Africa, Europe and America, to be unique because they are based on the hatred of the West and non Muslim religions and cultures to Arabs and Muslims or more precisely Islamic religion. This impression or consciousness was encouraged by issues and events such as Salman Rushdie and theses of the end of history and the clash of civilizations and Muslims' problems in many countries. This atmosphere of crisis resulting surely from the employment of the instruments of cultural domination and superiority that justify control over the others as well as Arab and Islamic weakness do not mean that there is no cultural crisis or a crisis of Islamic thought. The proof of this is that religious and cultural justifications are given to problems as well as their understanding the world, not only among the Islamists but also among the nationalists and progressive.

When I wanted to speak in the first part of this article of the Arab viewpoints about nations, cultures and religious groups, I found myself speaking only of Arab and Muslim relations with the West. There is no reason for this other than that the Arab readings of non-Western religions and cultures were rare. The Arab intellectuals, especially the Islamists among them, have not been concerned with except with the tense relations with the West. Only little attention was given to Judaism because of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unfortunately, tens of books are originally academic courses or university dissertations that lack much knowledge to a point where books of scholars such as Ibn Hazm, 'Abd al-Jabbar or al-Shihristani have much more information. This applies as well to books written on Christianity, which are mostly dominated by old dialectical tendencies. Nonetheless, Judaism is treated much better historically and now than other religions. There are no serious researches in Arabic or translated into Arabic on Buddhism and Hinduism. During the crisis of the Buddhist idols in Afghanistan, Arab writers were not well informed about Buddhism or how and why the Buddhists build such temples, although Buddha was originally against idols, as was mentioned in the Western media. In the last decade, many books have been written and others have been translated on evangelical churches, and Mr. Muhammad al-Sammak put special efforts in this domain. However, I do not know of any contemporary Arab writing on the main Protestant Churches that can be referred to in order to understand the background of events and current developments that we cover in our media; perhaps the only exception is the good encyclopedia of 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Masiri where ideology is mixed with history.

However, the most central theme for the Arab intellectuals is the con-

flict or dialogue with Western civilization. I do not know of theoretical and translated studies in the second half of the last century about civilizations and the causes for their rise, development and collapse that are objective or expose beneficial knowledge and information with the following exception:

Brief academic exposition to be found in the books of philosophy of history and historical methods that are taught at universities on the theories of Schepingler and Toynbee. There are some bad brief translations of their theories and the books of Malik bin Nabiy on Afro-Asian and Islamic civilization (1950-1962) and a book by Constantine Zurayq published in 1964, a third by Hasan Mu'anas in 1977 and a bad translation of Fernand Bourdayil on civilizations that were published in the nineties. I know about sixteen books on the confrontation between the Islamic civilization and the Western one published before the nineties of the last century, which do not constitute scholarly studies on either the Islamic or the Western civilization. During the year of publishing Zurayq's book in 1964 until 1966 five books were published that centered on condemning Western civilization without any knowledge of this tremendous enemy that we have been confronting for over two centuries, or what is referred to as the modern time. When the article on the end of history by Fukuyama was published in 1992 and Huntington's article on the clash of civilizations in 1993, the Arabs busied themselves in responding. The end of history and Islam's aggressiveness were denied and Islam's authentic trend that encourages dialogue and interaction was stressed. I was optimistic at that time that this idea came from Arab Islamists and others who have been saying that the conflict between us and the West was a long term conflict. For I thought that regarding our civilization as a civilization of interaction and dialogue is a kind of a critical review of previous positions. However, since the mid 1990s and until today, this position has been overturned. Now the idea of interaction is briefly mentioned and super-

imposed on the Qur'anic sayings and the humanity of the rightly-guided caliphs, then a sharp turn is taken in condemning the other civilization as victimizer and ourselves as its victim. What helped in the dominance of this view is that progressive Arabs centered their attack on globalization in an ideological fashion that is similar to that of the Islamists. Globalization has been regarded as a continuation of Western domination, especially over the Arabs. However, it is ironic that the best five expositions of Islamic civilizations are orientalist. These include Adam Mitz on Islamic renaissance published in 1901, Kramer's book in the thirties on the spirit of Islamic civilization, and the *Civilization of Islam* published in the fifties by a group of orientalists and edited by Bernard Lewis, and Hodigson's *Venture of Islam* in 1972. In my opinion, the sixth book is that of Sayyid Amir Ali, which was published in the thirties of the twentieth century. A group of Egyptian researchers published in cooperation with the International Institute of Islamic Thought in Virginia a good multi-volume study on international relations in the history of Islam. However, it is on international relations and is not concerned with our civilization and its relations to other civilizations.

What I mean simply by this long exposition is that we do not have a worldview in contemporary Arab and Islamic thought: neither in a theoretical sense nor in a geopolitical sense. If this has constituted one of the problems with our relations with the world, it also indicates a serious shortage in knowledge, which is at the root of the explosive crisis. It includes our consciousness of the world and how we express it. It is this shortage that pushes us to fall into Huntington's trap by resorting to defending our civilization as being a civilization of dialogue. However, civilizations establish relations among each other during long periods, which include conflict, interaction, and borrowing at the same time. It is not active directly and immediately in cultural, economic and political behaviors, and therefore can-

not be used as a negative or positive justification for a particular behavior or experience such as the Japanese and Asia's experience in economic revival. Arab intellectuals and economists were interested in the Japanese economic revival since the sixties of the 19th century. However, the objective epistemological dimension is missing, and the Arab admiration for the Japanese experience is derived from the fact that the economic revival took place without giving up cultural and religious traditions, which means that that a revival is no more than an organizational and political decision. In any case, it is obvious that this situation has no relation to the aggression of the West, the clash of civilizations but with a worldview and the interests within.

Let's go back to the more relevant to theme: the nature of relations between nations, cultures and religious groups. We do not know much about Buddhists and Hindus, as mentioned earlier when I considered religion as one element or pillar of civilization. But our religious and cultural relations have been worsening since religious awareness has become active in politics and international relations. It is possible to say that that many Islamist researchers have written in the last few years about Islam's acceptance of cultural and political pluralism. But such a view becomes less serious because of few issues such as, first, the prospects of Muslim-Christian dialogue that started fifty years ago and, second, the behavioral and intellectual development of the Arabs and Muslims towards the Christians, and, third, the moderate Islamist views of the problems of Muslim minorities in the world and in the West in particular.

In the domain of Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue, there has not been any serious review of the relation with the Christian Arabs in the Arab world, which should have been subjected to renewal. When Arab Christianity became under tremendous missionary pressures from some branches of Western Christianity that exceeded the pressures on Muslims, the efforts



centered on confronting the missionary activity and orientalism without considering the possibility of solidarity and understanding on the national and Arab levels. By the way, the polemics between Christianity and Islam in the modern age had started in the Indian subcontinent in order to confront missionary schools but later with the school of al-Manar the Muslim-Christian polemics returned to the mechanism of old polemics. Since the Ottoman attempt to impose the Tanzimat in order to introduce the doctrine of citizenship instead of old Dhimmi system, many efforts for renewal have been made. But since the forties of the last century the Islamic revival renewed the dualities that resulted in the seventies in radicalism and the return to Middle Ages. The Egyptians have exerted many efforts to transcend this destructive movement through positing new positions and relied on the theme of national group instead of the religious group. Mentioning all of this does not mean that the Arab Islamists do not accept the doctrines of citizenship and religious freedom, but that the Islamists have not transcended the views of the renaissance intellectuals but destroyed or tried to destroy them. It is not the Islamists that are behind the reduction of the Arab Christians' role in culture, society, politics or in number. There are other reasons for that. But Islamic fundamentalism played a negative role in all of this, even if that was only renewing the old polemics and facilitating endangering other religions, their rituals, religious freedom and social movement.

However, Muslim-Christian dialogue has another story. We, both Arab Christians and Muslims, were invited to it by Western churches in the fifties. We were suspicious of the motives and the mechanism for the dialogue, but we are not anymore. However, the initiative is still controlled by churches such as World Council of Churches and the Council of Middle Eastern Churches and the Vatican. The only Muslim exception concerned with Muslim-Christian relations and dialogue is the Institute of Religious Studies in

Amman. While Western churches and universities have institutes, centers, and journals for relations with, knowledge of, and dialogue with Islam, we, Muslims, have nothing until now.

Let's get to the bottom of the matter that is both ironic and sad and that has an obvious indication for the deteriorating relations with the world and our alienation from the universalism of Islam and from the pluralism that we have written much about during the last two decades. In Africa and Asia, and since the sixties, the liberation movements and movements of independence of Muslim minorities in countries where the majorities are non-Muslim, the Muslim intellectuals have not been able to develop a rational and pragmatic discourse in this regard.

If we have indicated here the deteriorating relations between Muslim minorities and majorities in some countries, it is more indicative of the deteriorating relations with the other in their countries and the world is the non-Muslim minority situation in the countries where the majorities are Muslim.

However, what is more indicative of what I mean about the crisis situation of Islamic thought and deteriorating relations with the world is represented in the juristic view of Muslim communities in the West: Europe and the United States. Since the eighties the moderate Islamists established a new juristic branch, the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities, to legitimize the living of Muslims in non-Muslim countries. What is strange is that this jurisprudence focuses on justifying the presence of Muslims in the West and under non-Islamic law in terms of harsh necessity while disregarding the historical Muslim experience of co-existence with the world, especially with the non-Muslim world. It seems that this kind of thinking assumes that we are living at the end of the 17th century or the middle of the 19th century where the discussion revolved around the whether Muslims should fight or emigrate. This sounds as if the West has forced us to live on its land. The num-

ber of Muslims today is over a billion person and we deal with ourselves and the world as if we are a minority that wants to isolate and separate itself because it is afraid of extinction or its identity is threatened.

Contemporary transformations have shown that Islamic thought and behavior suffers from a devastating crisis. This does not mean that the other is right in his dealing with Muslims, their territories, and interests. Worldwide Islamic concern cannot be hastily condemned or denied or scorned. However, the religious and cultural consciousness in the Arab and Islamic domains does not help in confronting the real problems in the world as well as offering a view that is feasible to other nations, cultures, religions. We can persist in complaining about the world's attack on us. This will not solve the problem, and neither will the calls for authenticity, self-regeneration, cultural invasion, isolation or suicide. While I do not know exactly what is happening in non-Arab Islamic countries, I know that Arabs and Muslims, including revivalist intellectuals and particularly the fundamentalists, have become unintentionally part of the burden that befalls our homelands and Muslims. Regardless of whether we are right in our claims and complaints, we must get out of weakness and must be confronted with reform. But first and last we must enter the world and contribute to it, even if the dominant powers are reluctant.

The divisive vision of the world is a creation of Islamic revivalism in the thirties and forties of the last century. It aimed at preserving the purity of identity or to create that purity. Within the context of the Cold War, that purity became more deeply rooted.

Therefore, there must be a movement for religious reform from within Islamic and Arab cultural renaissance. This does not mean the return to the exact themes of Arab renaissance of the last 19th century but the spiritual platform that considered us as part of the world and the desire to contribute

to its progress and security and the making of its present and future. The framework was the objective of Islamic law that casts a responsibly moral bent on our human ambitions and interests. What I call for here is not easy to achieve because it requires epistemological and cultural conditions and environment that are not available. It is difficult for three reasons: right and wrong domination, bias against the Muslims, and the difficulty of bringing about political and economic changes in the Islamic and Arab world. Under the conditions of aggressiveness and tyranny, it is difficult to change and reform. That was the ordeal that the early reformers suffered from, but they mostly accepted that with responsibility and courage.

It is good in this context to mention the most important difficulty. The media of the other has in the last few months persistently called for reform of school curricula of religious institutions. Therefore, every attempt to review the religious curricula or the view of the national, international, and religious other has become suspect in being a defamation of Islam.

Here I recall the time when we were studying jurisprudence at the Azhar University in the sixties, we were reading old juristic text of the ordinances of non-Muslims and jihad. Our professor Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zahra considered such ordinances to be part of the forgone history as much as the ordinances on slaves. Thus, he encouraged us to compare the diverse historical views of jurists in order to show us the historical nature of such ordinances. The same applies to the division of the world into the abode of Islam and the abode of war. However, Islamic fundamentalism has had tremendous influence on the religious stagnation in the last few decades. Under the pretext of authenticity, the fundamentalists transform juristic traditions to a judgment that equals in its fixity the clear Qur'anic text. Such an issue becomes more dangerous when it applies to the fundamentals of religion.

In one way or another, I believe that all these matters depend on our worldview, that is, our relations, interests, and role. This requires a continuous epistemological work and a responsible critical tendency and taking into consideration the interests of the nation and its prospects. However, all of this difficult in an atmosphere of hopelessness, frustration, transcending realities, the tremendous difference between ambitions and realities, and inability to bring about change. The future lies in the ability of the elites to bring about renewal and their willingness to make a bright future.