

Islam and the Postmodernist Deconstruction of Metanarratives: Epistemological and Sociological Implications

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ABSTRACT---- *The position and role of reason in the Quran play a vital role in understanding Islam's relationship with both modernity and postmodernism. This is because, in many accounts, modernity involves the diffusion of rationalism in all spheres of life and the main concern of postmodernism is oriented towards the deconstruction of the assumptions and promises of instrumental reason.*

It can be argued that the Quran does not accord reason, in the conventional, modernist, sense a foundational or sovereign status. This has serious consequences for Islam's epistemological relationship with postmodernism as well as the postmodern condition as it is manifested in the sociopolitical field.

Of major concern in this regard is whether or not Islam constitutes a metanarrative in the postmodernist sense and how this impacts upon its relationship with both modernity and postmodernism

Does Islam constitute a metanarrative in the postmodernist sense? If so, what are the epistemological and sociopolitical implications of this relationship between Islam and postmodernism?

Postmodernism may be viewed as an intellectual position which casts doubt on systems of thought which claim to justify their views about reality, knowledge and society through appeal to allegedly objective and universal criteria like modern science and universal reason. Francois Lyotard, the first scholar to introduce postmodernism to philosophy, calls the above position towards the justification of knowledge claims “incredulity towards metanarratives”.

Metanarratives are “interpretive frameworks or ways of understanding the world that are claimed to have truth or validity that crosses all spatial and temporal boundaries, true for all people, at all times and in all places”¹

The notion of the metanarrative is centered on the distinction between knowledge production and justification in traditional and modern societies. Knowledge legitimization in tribal and pre-modern societies inheres in their traditions and foundations myths. It is by virtue of relating their traditions and handing down their customs that they are legitimized. They do not have to appeal to a criterion which is outside their traditions, like reason or science, in order to legitimize themselves. What is at stake here is not the nature of truth-claims or their scope but the manner of their justification. If they are justified according to universal criteria which is outside cultures and perspectives and have universal applicability they are then considered as metanarrative. And this is exactly the case in modern societies which claim to justify their views about knowledge and society through appeal to allegedly objective and universal criteria like universal reason or modern science.

But the problem with this method of justification according to Lyotard is that it too has to ultimately rely on narratives, on ways of legitimation which inhere in the system. This is because scientific knowledge “cannot know and make known that it is the true knowledge without resorting to the other, narrative, kind of knowledge, which from its point of view is no knowledge at all. Without such recourse it would be in the position of presupposing its own validity and would be stooping to what it condemns”² It is the consensus of the experts which ultimately constitutes the proof which scientists rely on. Hence they are similar to narratives.

¹J. Hermida, “The Resurgence of Religion in the Advent of Postmodernity”, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 11(4) (2008) p. 98

Reason also is not a reliable criterion for legitimizing truth-claims, according to the intellectual currents which constitute postmodernism. This view is mainly based on three factors. Firstly, reason is partly fed by the subconscious and this factor impacts negatively upon its objectivity. Secondly, it is parochial in the sense that it is related “to a specific society and culture whose life heavily relies upon a historically- defined, if not determined, cognitive structure, meaning and value system”³. Thirdly reason is thought to be implicated in the Knowledge/power paradigm where the powers that be set the parameters for what is considered as knowledge and marginalize forms of knowledge which do not fit their scheme and label these other forms as mythical, superstitious, traditional, and not fit for modern societies. The implications of this systemization of knowledge find their counterpart in the sociopolitical field in the form of marginalization of others like natives, blacks, minorities, Muslims e.t.c.

In order for Islam to qualify as a metanarrative it has to fulfill two basic criteria. First, it has to make some claims about what constitutes reality and knowledge and offer a prescription for the “good life”. Secondly, and more importantly, it has to justify these claims through appeal to allegedly universal and objective criteria like modern science or universal reason. The first criterion fits well the Muslim religion as it does other monotheistic religions and systems of faith in general. In the words of Brendan Nelson “is not religious belief- the religious worldview, understood as a set of metaphysical, doctrinal and moral claims about reality- as clear a case as one can get of a metanarrative”⁴. The second criterion, that of justifying these claims on universal and objective grounds, however, is much more complex to establish. It requires investigating the position and role of reason in the Quran and whether the latter accords reason a foundational status and makes it the final arbiter with regard to the claims it makes about reality.

When the Quran invites people to believe in what it considers to be the truth it does not do so on the basis of blind faith. Rather, it exhorts them to think, ponder and employ the logico-cognitive processes of rational argumentation, proof and systematic thought. Although this aspect, which corresponds with reason in the conventional sense, constitutes the necessary first step for the attainment of truth it, nonetheless, forms according to the Quran, part of an integral process whereby the mind interacts with the heart and innate nature (fitra), taking revelation as a guide, in order to attain certitude.

This is because the notion of the intellect in the Quran (*'aql*) is more comprehensive than the western conception about reason. Moreover, the nature of the metaphysical claims the Quran makes about existence, the creator and the afterlife cannot be totally ascertained, or rebutted, through exclusive appeal to instrumental reason.

The Quran acts as a framework within which reason operates and it also opens up for the latter avenues for reflection upon metaphysical realities which - although it cannot verify on its own-through interaction with the heart and innate nature create a kind of conviction which subsumes the whole being of the believer not just his mental faculty. This type of conviction is not purely theoretical. Involving as it does a belief in the hereafter, divine reward and punishment, upholding justice and shunning oppression, it elicits from the believer a moral response. This process is explained by Karim Douglas Crow, a contemporary expositor of the status and role of the intellect in Islam in the following terms: “Islam’s notion of “intelligence” or “reason” embraces the faith-induced dimension of knowledge yielding conviction and moral volition in the operation of human intelligence, being intimately joined with its cognitive or perceiving-knowing dimension. This “practical” ethico-religious dimension of reason has a close connection with ethical endeavor and moral volition, namely the faculty of conation”⁵

It is also at this deep level that the intellection in Islam entails socio-political commitment.

Also the Quran alerts the human to the ailments which affect reason and act as an epistemological barrier between it and the truth. These are namely: “imitation”, “haughtiness”, “following of passion”, “being unmindful” and “following Satan”. It is the severance of the link between reason and the other components which constitute the intellect which render reason prone to the above-mentioned ailments. It is also interesting to note that there are some parallels between these impediments to the proper functioning of reason, according to the Quran, and the postmodernist conception about this issue.

2. F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN. University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p. 29.

3. Mehmet Aydin, “An Islamic Evaluation of the Modern Concept of Rationality”, in *Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Historical and Contemporary Context*, ed. Sharifah Shifa Al-Attas (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) 1996) p. 78

4. B. Sweetman, “Lyotard, Postmodernism and Religion”, *Philosophia Christi*, 7/1 (2005) p. 143

5. K. D. Crow, “Islam and Reason”. *Al-Shajarah* [ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur], 18/1 (1993) p.14

The Quran also mentions the faculty of listening and that of intellection interchangeable with regard to the process of knowledge: (And they said: Had we listened or used our intellect, we would not have been the companions of (hell) fire) (Quran 67:10). What is meant by the above is not merely hearing the message but the conscientious interaction with what one hears and registering the outcome at the level of the heart and conscience, otherwise this faculty, among others, becomes useless.

(They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning)(Quran 7:179)

What is interesting about this verse is that the heart is designated as the ultimate locus for understanding. It too may be affected by epistemological barriers to do with passion and being unmindful whereby it loses its cognitive function. (It is not the eyes that are blind but the hearts) (Quran22:46).

In the same way as the improper use of the faculties charged with the task of seeking knowledge, because of the interjection of whims, imitation and haughtiness, lead to the inability of ascertaining the truth, this aspect also makes them disposed towards unjustly acts and the spreading of oppression and corruption:

(Do you enjoin right conduct on the people and forget (to practice it) yourselves, and yet you study the Scripture? Will you not use your intellect?) (Quran 2:44). In another place the Quran lists some of the main sins and unjustly acts that a person may commit and links this with the improper use of the of the intellect:

(Say, "Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited to you. [He commands] that you not associate anything with Him, and to parents, good treatment, and do not kill your children out of poverty; We will provide for you and them. And do not approach immoralities - what is apparent of them and what is concealed. And do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden [to be killed] except by [legal] right. This has He instructed you that you may use your intellect.") (Quran 6:151).

What transpires from the above is that reason, in the conventional, modernist, sense is not considered foundational in the Quran. It cannot stand on its own as a solid base for knowledge. It needs to be complemented by other sources which make the process of ascertaining the truth a wholesome endeavor involving the senses as well as mental and spiritual faculties. It is interaction between these very sources which also ward off against instrumental reason's disposition towards oppression and hegemony if it were not to be checked by moral and spiritual sources and principles which make adherence to justice and communal engagement incumbent. This leads to the conclusion that Islam should not be considered a metanarrative in the postmodernist sense.

Does this position towards reason make Islam an epistemological ally of postmodernism? Although Islam shares an affinity with postmodernism's critique of the epistemological pretensions of instrumental reason and its hegemonic ramifications it, nonetheless, shares with modernity a belief in the existence of an objective reality which the mind can comprehend. True it believes that reason alone is not capable of understanding this reality but it is against the perspectivist and relativist outlook which is advocated by postmodernism⁶. It is as if the latter champions the right of systems of faith and non-western worldviews in general, to challenge the exclusivist and universalist claims of instrumental reason only to claim in the end that they too are products of particular societies and cultures and are thus just as equally prone to deconstruction. However, with regard to Islam, this applies only to the first condition which is necessary for constituting a metanarrative, that of having a prescription for what should be considered as valid knowledge and proper principles for organizing social life. As regards the second and more crucial condition, that of justifying these claims on the basis of universal reason, Islam should not be considered a metanarrative.

Postmodernism's philosophical debunking of modernity's intellectual premises has important socio-political consequences, chief among which is what is termed "de-centering the West". It is thought that once modern, western, thought's claims to universality is deconstructed western culture no longer remains the yardstick by which to measure other cultures in terms of whether they are developed, civilized, progressive, representative, or not.

These sociopolitical ramifications are termed under *postmodernity* and it is this condition's relationship with Islam which has attracted the attention of a very limited number of Muslim scholars: namely Akbar Ahmed, Bobby Sayyid and ZiauddinSardar.

⁶The relativist methodology of postmodernism sometimes evinces its nihilistic consequences very openly. Perhaps this is most illustrated by a lecture which Jacques Derrida gave in Sydney in the early nineties of the last century when, during the lecture, he said that he will take a particular theory and deconstruct it, which he did in a masterful way, proving that it is baseless. For this he received a round of applauds. Immediately after that he said "now I will deconstruct my deconstruction of it". See Jacques Derrida, "Deconstructing Vision: Lecture by Jacques Derrida at Sydney Town Hall". 12 August 1999. <http://www.abc.net.au/specials/derrida/>. Accessed 3. 9. 2014.

Sayyid is concerned with the opportunities which postmodernity represents for Islam in as far as it heralds the waning, or folding back, of the western political project, and the resulting emergence of Islamism. The latter, Sayyid defines, as an intellectual and political movement which attempts to make Islam the master signifier in the political field. For Sayyid the emergence of Islamism, sometimes termed as Islamic fundamentalism, or Islamic radicalism, can only be understood in the shadow of postmodernism's deconstruction of the intellectual and political project of modernity.⁷ This thesis is problematic on several counts chief among which is that although postmodernism's deconstruction of the intellectual premises of the western political project unveils the darker sides of modernity in terms of colonialism, marginalization and oppression of others, and its implication in the knowledge/power praxis, it does not provide a blueprint for an alternative order⁸ with the result that modernity's hegemonic political project goes on unchecked. Thus it is telling that the postmodern age saw the exasperation of the belligerent nature of the western political system as embodied in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the proliferation of such supremacist theories as The New World Order, The End of History and The Clash of Civilizations.

Secondly, ascribing the rise of Islamism to conditions related to the waning of the western political project denies the former an autonomous ontology which begs the central question: Had it not been for postmodernism would Islamism have arisen? And the answer is clearly that Islamism has arisen as a result of the threat of the hegemonic and imperialist western modernist political project and was early manifested in such movements as the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in the beginning of the twentieth century and Ayatollah Khomeini's anti-Shah movement in the beginning of the sixties of the last century. Peter Mandaville was alert to this aspect when reviewing the thesis of Sayyid:

"Is there not a sense, though, in which this reading of Islamism is itself too Eurocentric in the sense of reflecting European concepts or values, but because you seem to want to understand the emergence of Islamism exclusively by reference to changes in the West. On this reading, your argument seems "infrastructural" in that it focuses on how something called "the West" is shifting in relation to other "non-Western" units; that is, it concentrates primarily on changing configurations of hegemony"⁹

A scholar with a different focus, Akbar Ahmed, sees in postmodernity's celebration of difference and advocacy of a pluralist atmosphere, which engenders tolerance and acceptance of others, a good opportunity for Muslim communities living in the West.

Ahmad's perspective is based on a rather partial and superficial reading of postmodernism. In his view since postmodernism questions the intellectual basis of modernity it can be regarded as an ally of Islam. This is like taking the argument half way. True that postmodernism's questioning of modernity's monopolistic claim to what constitutes objective knowledge and good society gives an opening for other worldviews and other cultures, but the other half is that these worldviews and cultures are considered just as wrong and parochial. And since there is no advocacy by postmodernism of an alternative social order the culture which is wealthier, stronger and more globalized, turns out to be the winner.

Ahmad's main concern, however, is with postmodernity, the social aspect of postmodernism, its manifestation as lived experience. In this respect he lists eight features which he thinks are representative of the postmodernist spirit. The most important of these is that the postmodern condition is characterized by an increased role for the media; skepticism towards traditional orthodoxies whether of the religious or secularist type; a pre-supposition of democracy and an eclectic spirit.¹⁰

The above features are supposed to lead to tolerance and acceptance of difference and fostering a truly pluralist society, particularly in the West, in the societies which saw the birth of postmodernism.

⁷ B. S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*. (Zed Books, 1997), pp. 113-124.

⁸ It would be interesting to see whether Foucault's initial enthusiasm for the Islamic revolution in relation was related to this issue, in that he saw in the "political spirituality" which it manifested a system exterior to western culture which may be able to transcend modernity. For Foucault's writing about the Iranian Revolution see Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson's *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*.

⁹ P. G. Mandaville, "Bobby S. Sayyid's *A Fundamental Fear: A dialogical review*". *Global Society* 13/2 (2008), p. 212

¹⁰ A. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 10-28

Perhaps nothing illustrates the inadequacy of Ahmad's thesis than the alarming rise of Islamophobia in the West, particularly in Europe.

At another level, globalization and consumerism, which are associated with postmodernity, pose distinct problems for religious worldviews, Islam's included. From one side they make possible the emergence of a global Islam through development and proliferation of the means of communication. From the other they involve particular risks which emerge from the availability of myriad lifestyles, tastes and choices with regard to occupation, residence, consumption and associations, which are tantamount to threatening the uniformity and wholeness pre-supposed in religious adherence. This level is more threatening to religious conviction than the theoretical deconstruction of the principles of faith.

A more perceptive writer, ZiauddinSardar, sees postmodernism as an advanced stage of the domination of western culture. The West, according to Sardar, seeks to maintain its of domination of the rest of the world. But this situation can no longer be maintained through presenting its view of reality and truth as the objective and valid criteria because of the onset of postmodernism. However postmodernism works in favor of the western project through undermining all categories of reality and truth¹¹. The West dominates other cultural systems through appropriating ideas and cultural forms from other cultures divorcing them from their histories and belief systems. The net result of this process, according to Sardar, is a diffusion of the values of liberalism¹² worldwide. This last aspect seems somewhat problematic in an otherwise sound theorization of the relationship between postmodernism and the rest of the world, the Muslim world included, on the part of Sardar, the reason being is that liberalism itself is supposedly a metanarrative which postmodernism seeks to deconstruct. It would seem more appropriate to suggest that what remains at the end of this process of appropriation of ideas and cultural forms and divorcing them from their histories and belief systems is a kind of nihilism which is represented in the promotion of individualism, the celebration of the body and the proliferation of consumerism. This same nihilism fuels the engine of western culture and contributes towards its globalization.

Postmodernism promotes cultural hybridity within the matrix of western political and economic foundationism¹³. It does not challenge the capitalist system nor does it provide a blueprint for an alternative order. In this global cultural marketplace the Western products have the lion's share: films, music, novels, fashion, lifestyles,e.t.c.

Postmodernism poses a societal threat to sections of Muslim societies, especially the youth, because of the proliferation of western cultural forms through globalization. It is the allure of material wealth, individualism, consumerism and sexual freedom threaten to draw sections of Muslim youth and educated elite away from the Muslim religion and not the philosophical deconstruction of the principles of faith. The reason is Islam is resistant to secularism, a thesis advanced by the late sociologist Ernest Gellner, more about which will be discussed later.

A more subtle and insidious way in which postmodernism influences Muslim culture is through the emergence of what has become known as Post-Islamism. This is a term advocated by AsefBayat and elaborated in the political field by Olivier Roy and it involves transcending Islamism in the political, cultural and social domains. Roy sees it as the embodiment of the failure of political Islam as Islamist groups turn their gaze more towards the sociocultural at the expense of the political. The reason being, according to Roy, is that Islamic ideology has proved to be unable to constitute a base for a new society or offer a viable alternative to liberal democracy¹⁴.

AsefBayat also sees the emergence of Post-Islamism as a result of the waning of the Islamist project as Islamists come to acknowledge the inadequacy and contradiction of their strategies and programs. Post-Islamism, according to Bayat, is less rigid, more inclusive and open to experimentation. It represents "an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty. It is an attempt to turn underlying principles of Islamism on its head by emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality in place of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture and the future instead of the past."¹⁵ Notwithstanding, Bayat asserts that this tendency is neither anti-Islamic nor secular.¹⁶

¹¹ Z. Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1997),p. 40

¹²Ibid., 67.

¹³ For further exploration of this theme see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 131-135

¹⁴ SeeOlivier Roy "There Will be no Islamic Revolution", *Journal of Democracy*, January 2013, Vol. 24, No.1, pp. 14-18

¹⁵A.Bayat Ed. *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8

¹⁶ A. Bayat, "The Coming of a Pot-Islamist Society",*Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 9/4 (1996), pp.43-52

Islam's resistance to secularism is a thesis which was advanced by the late sociologist Ernest Gellner when he studied Islam's relationship to modernity.

In the conventional secularization theory –sometimes called “modernization theory” – this happens because of a number of reasons chief among which is that as people become urbanized religion loses its social base, and as science progresses and becomes able to answer more and more questions about the natural world religion loses its interpretive prerogative and, finally, as a result of the process of differentiation which happens with the spread of modernization. In Islam, if anything, the opposite has happened. Religious adherence and observance has increased phenomenally with the acceleration of modernization.

Islam has a distinct relationship to modernity, unlike other monotheistic religions, and also distinct from how other, non-western, cultures relate to this phenomenon. According to Gellner, Islam is more in agreement with modernity than the other two monotheistic religions, Christianity and Judaism, because of its universalism, its emphasis on reason and its dedication to following the law, or the *Sharia*, but, adds Gellner, Islam has proven to be the most resistant to secularism out of the three religions.¹⁷

Why Muslim societies were able to modernize without succumbing to secularism, according to Gellner, was because, when faced with modernity, the Muslim world did not have to look for a foreign paradigm, alien to its traditions, in order to come to terms with this epochal phenomenon. This paradigm which Muslim societies adopted was embodied in High Islam. Borrowing the methodology of the 14th century Muslim sociologist Ibn Khaldun, Gellner argues that there are two religious traditions, or two “religious styles” in Muslim society, one was Low or Folk Islam, the other High Islam. The latter tradition reflects the natural taste and values of urban middle classes. These values include “order, rule, observance, sobriety, and learning. They contain an aversion to hysteria and emotional excess and the excessive use of audio-visual aids of religion”¹⁸. Gellner adds, “this High Islam stresses the severely monotheistic and nomocratic nature of Islam, it is mindful of the prohibition of claims to mediation between God and man”¹⁹. On the other hand, Low or Folk Islam is centered around cults and saints, is more concerned with magic ecstasy rather than learning and rule-observance. This form of the faith is most associated with saints and Sufi brotherhoods. Thus the adoption by Muslim societies of the tradition of High Islam on the eve of the Muslim world's encounter with modernity enabled them to come to terms with it without having to relinquish their religious principles or succumb to secularism. High Islam, according to Gellner, was akin to Protestantism which was the spiritual and intellectual precursor of modernity.

Regardless of the plausibility of the explanation as to why Islam did not have to succumb to secularism as it came to terms with modernity, the thesis itself, that Islam is resistant to secularism holds.

The way this resistance to secularism manifests itself with regard to Islam's relationship with postmodernism is that Islam is not subject to postmodernism's deconstruction of metanarratives.

It remains to be said that, in the opposite direction, Islam, more particularly Islamism, can be thought to have a postmodern impact on western culture in that the perceived threat from Islamism causes the ideological borders among the traditional sociopolitical forces in western societies, Left/Right, Conservative/Progressive, to become fluid. This is illustrated by the migration of significant segments of the Left, traditionally tolerant and inclusive, to the neoconservative camp, especially after such events as the Rushdi Affair, the 9/11 attacks and the constant fear-mongering about the growing numbers of Muslims in Europe. From the other direction elements of the religious Right, traditionally suspicious

¹⁷ E.Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (Routledge London and New York, 1992), pp. 5-7

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 11

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 11

of Muslim minorities, now find themselves in de-facto alignment with Muslim fundamentalist religious groups in the West when it comes to voting and taking a political stand with regard to issues related to protection of families and issues of an ethical nature. This fluidity is a major feature of postmodernism.

CONCLUSION

Reason is not foundational or autonomous in the Muslim worldview. It has an important role to play in the knowledge process but cannot operate in a proper manner without the guiding force of revelation. The criterion to which Islam appeals for the justification of its claims about reality and knowledge is the intellect which consists of reason in the conventional sense in addition to human nature and the heart with all these faculties operating within the prism of revelation. This issue precludes Islam from being subject to postmodernism's deconstruction of metanarratives. In fact it precludes Islam from being considered as a metanarrative. But this does not mean that postmodernism can be an ally of Islam either in the epistemological or sociopolitical sphere. In fact Islam is closer to modernity because of its belief in the presence of an objective reality and the capacity of reason to play an essential role in understanding it. Where it differs from modernity is in the fact that reason is not considered the sole source of knowledge or of values. Islam is deeply opposed to relativism of knowledge and of values which postmodernism advocates and Muslim societies face threats from the proliferation of tastes and lifestyles associated with consumerism and globalization, which threaten religious identity and adherence. While postmodernism questions the claims of modernity's intellectual system to universality and unveils the oppressing aspects of its political project the modernist project goes on unchecked and the rest of the world bears the brunt of the alienating and nihilistic ramifications which are exacerbated through globalization.