

Symbolic Globalisation and the Muslim Challenge

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One of the most striking features of the intellectual scene nowadays is the abundance of publications about Islam and a number of related issues. This seems to defy even some of the most entrenched patterns. It is not consistent with the model of intellectual fashions, whereby certain themes or terms “occupy the scene” for some time or attract attention, as the latest or most up-to-date trends, then fade away or look as *passé*, dated forms or views. Persistence throughout time and throughout cycles of interest for various issues and concerns is certainly very remarkable. But this is not the only salient feature.

In addition to it one can point also to the dissemination of interest for Islam throughout genres of writing and discourses and across languages and cultures. One can find publications on the subject in almost all forms of communication, analysis and predication, from ideological pamphlets to journalistic editorials, from documentaries, narratives until specialised scholarship. This happens also across diverse languages and cultural contexts: writings, styles or approaches that used to be local or particular to an intellectual tradition have crossed boundaries, through translation and original production. Considering this heavy presence through time and space, may we conclude that Islam has become one of the main loci of symbolic globalisation?

We can be tempted to consider this trend as being merely the consequence of structural changes in contemporary societies. The spread of higher education, the multiplication of institutions dedicated to learning, the expansion of publishing and of different media based communication, led to an exponential growth in production capacities and to a wider market for “literary” or media goods. Islam and related issues happen to be ready and available to different approaches, and thus to offer much to be “processed” by the growing communities of journalists, activists, scholars, analysts and all sorts of professionals for whom writing is a principal activity. It would therefore be more than mere fashion simply for formal and contingent causes: an “industry”, a large scale industry, was born and needed “raw

material” to process. Islam lends itself easily to the processing capacities of contemporary “symbolic” workers, since it offers a vast array of facets and data, with a combination of exotic appeal and close, intimate, presence and hosts of problems which need to be handled.

Another possible explanation for this phenomenon would be that Islam presents, in diverse forms and under different conditions, some of the most serious challenges to modern consciousness. The fact that Islam as a religion has led to the emergence of a distinctive identity, frequently put in contrast to cultural, geographic identities (Europe and Islam, Europe, China, Islam etc.) gave it the role of an “alter ego”, the “eminent Other” one could say, in a context where identities are linked to specific forms of belonging (cultural, geographical) rather than to beliefs or religious traditions. Muslims seem to be the one large group which derives its perception of its identity from its creed and religious traditions. We could elaborate in this direction and bring to light facts such as the large number of individuals and communities whose life is shaped, informed in a way or another by traditions linked to Islam, the fact that these traditions are proving to be the most resistant to changes called for by modern and rapidly evolving conditions, and, possibly, the fact that conceptions assigned to Islam are often presented, or assumed to be working alternatives to the views which emerge and prevail in modern societies. Islam, in a word, is seen to provide the main, and probably the only clearly identified, “rival” to many institutions, conceptions, forms, traditions and attitudes considered to be on-going, given, of the time and the place, modern etc. These offer serious challenges by the vehemence and sometimes the violence through which they are proclaimed and enacted, by many Muslims across various countries, languages and historical contexts. They thus seem to be the only, or at least the main, complex of living traditions, seemingly resistant to historical evolutions and claiming resistance in the name of unified symbols.

In any case, either for one reason or another, or the combination of both, the huge capacities engendered by modern institutions and qualitative perceptions of a distant and close relative to modernity, Islam has *de facto* been assigned the role of the “eminent Other”, deserving layers and layers of discursive approaches and leading to one of the greatest accumulations of intellectual productions in our time.

I. Orientalists and Polemicists

As one would expect in conditions such as these, a literature of secondary level flourished. Attempts aiming at mapping, interpreting

and scrutinising the literature on the subject were numerous. Within the scholarly works, we can immediately identify two different approaches, one mainly descriptive (or purportedly so) and the other critical (and/or polemical). The first has been dominant within European and North American academic circles. It gave birth to a number of attempts to propose typologies of discourses and attitudes displayed by Muslim authors. The other has prevailed to a greater degree within intellectual circles in Muslim countries or close to their main concerns. It led less to surveys and would-be catalogues than to critical appraisals of works by “Western” authors and their claims to scientific accuracy. Thus we have on the one hand histories, anthologies and monographs offering different kinds of “catalogues” or classifications of schools, trends and various types of attitudes. On the other hand we have critical, and often overtly polemical, essays on “orientalism” and its many perceived shortcomings.

There is, of course, a need to put order in the great profusion to which we are exposed. There is also the need for assessment, critical appreciation of what is on offer. However, those two kinds of approaches seem to go to extremes in their respective endeavours. They do, in one way or another “overstate the case” of their contrasting perspectives. The first leads to create “labels” which convey static views on evolving facts and impose on living debates strict “distributions of roles”. The labels which are created and, in more or less subtle ways, forced upon a great diversity of views and attitudes, lead to the occultation of nuance and difference, and to freezing or immobilising dynamic processes of thought. The other has given birth to some of the most violent polemics, leading to confuse scholarly views (which, as such, were certainly liable to criticism) with malign, hostile plots.

One may wonder whether, out of these ways, it would be possible to grasp dynamic processes without any kind of reduction, implicit and allegedly objective assessment, as are the anthologies, histories and reviews, or clear and explicit schematisation, as offered by accusations, reductions as happens in polemical exchanges?

II. Typologies and Polarisations

In order to follow the on-going debates, it may be worthwhile to begin by a different kind of typology, one which would help identify the relevant sources we need to follow the debate. This alternative attempt may begin by identifying some formal criteria rather than focus on contents, doctrines and attitudes.

The question is therefore the following: how to open a debate that overcomes “terms of reference” built on reification? The latest two decades witnessed the flourishing of a particular kind of approach: classification of discourses in categories such as conservative, liberal and fundamentalist. Beyond the variations in forms and content which are adopted by different authors, one can be surprised by the kind of uniformity or convergence this displays. Fundamentalism has thus become a familiar category in prevailing discourses, although authors have significant differences in the way they conceptualise it, sometimes even in the essential features they assign to it. The category nevertheless drives attitudes and views and shapes policies and conceptions.

One can be interested by the fact that these categories are derived from modern polarisations displayed among political movements and actors. Fundamentalism has more or less replaced the category of “progressism”, referring to the attitude of those who endeavour to change the prevailing order through the mobilisation of models or archetypes built on visions of the past or the future. While the two first categories, conservative and liberal, confine themselves within the limits of the accepted political game, the third one, progressist or fundamentalist, aims at changing the rules of the game.

One may wonder whether such a “mapping” of discourses along the lines defined by modern political processes conveys an accurate idea of the issues, aims, interrogations which drive the on-going debates. What it does tell us is that politics provides the lens through which intellectual discourses are examined, that the political pervades all aspects of life and that the language of politics expresses the main concerns of all human societies, communities, groups and individuals. But does the political lens convey an accurate idea of all that drives attitudes, aspirations? This does not mean that we should dig beneath these categories, nor seek some hidden motives or dynamics that erupt in the form of political movements or theories, but rather to widen our perspectives in order to replace these categories and the understanding they convey in context. This may be achieved by looking in two directions: a chronological (or vertical) one and a trans-disciplinary (or horizontal) one.

The present conditions, where discourses and attitudes about Islam are classified, organised and expressed – understood through predominantly political categories, are in fact new. Their emergence can be traced to an evolution which has begun a few decades ago, and which led progressively to the crystallisation of a small number of polarisations, limited in number but powerful in effect.

We need not go back to the Crusades and other pre-modern confrontations which led to the idea of two separate and conflicting identities. Neither do we need to go back to the beginnings of the scholarly interest of each human group for the other. The idea that there are two clearly marked identities is a given since the early 20th century and seems to be widely accepted from the outset in modern times. Modern times and the technological turn they brought about have offered the means for new contacts, and thus for new “discovery” of the “Other” from both sides. The first systematic attempts at the construction of a renewed image of the “Other” emerged in the 19th century. With Ernest Renan and Rifaa Tahtawi for example, we have projects which offer a comprehensive re-ordering of impressions, some new and some old, whereby each tries to “understand” the other by expressing/describing through one’s own categories. Asymmetry, a new feature of the relationship between the two, is already there. While Renan makes sweeping judgements on Islam, the religion and civilisations linked to it, from the point of view of a triumphant, positivistic modernity, Rifaa Tahtawi “finds” that the conceptions that drive European views and attitudes are no more than formulations of principles which already exist in Muslim intellectual traditions. The gap between the two contexts is acknowledged from both sides, but interpreted by each of the partners by drawing from one’s own conceptual framework. Europe had already proven its military, technological, political superiority and the attempts from both sides were dedicated to “conceptualise” the new situation.

A subsequent development may be identified in the following decades when, the new societies having come closer in their contacts, other kinds of inquiry – and thus of attempts at conceptualisation – became possible. Now the digging into history was possible and seemed to be the most relevant or most appropriate approach in attempting to understand the present. Opening “dusty dossiers”, going back to the formative periods of Muslim communities in a new spirit, became, in a way, the dominant mood. Reading history through concepts drawn from modern intellectual inquiry methods became a dominant trend early in the 20th century. Among the numerous “echoes” of this approach we can invoke the examples of Hamilton Gibb and Ali Aberraziq. The apparent contrast between the two is of great significance. While both converge on the attempt to re-conceptualise the understanding of Muslim traditions from the perspectives of modern disciplines, one of them could extend his enquiries to a wide range of cultural forms of expression while the other faced the earliest extreme forms of rejection, which proved to be a

durable trend in Muslim contexts. Gibb heralded a prosperous tradition of learning, which, although faced by strong criticism for “orientalism”, proved its ability of continuous adjustment and refinement of its processes. Abderraziq was the first in a long line of thinkers who had to face, in their own environment, misunderstanding, hostility, rejection and sometimes fierce repression.

This did not prevent further developments to happen. The following, more or less easily identifiable “phase”, is one where large attempts at synthesis were deployed. The emerging idea seems to have been that comprehensive, global reconstructions of the Muslim past had to be built, that the recent advances in the knowledge and understanding of Muslim traditions allowed or required new compilations or new *summae* of knowledge. Two names may be mentioned as examples here. Although separated by a few years, they display a comparable intellectual mood: Marshal Hodgson and Mohamed Abed Jabri. Both belong to a “moment” which thinks it possible and useful to build “grand narratives” and aim to finding ultimate reasons using fundamental keys, thus reaching new conceptualisation of the past.

As scholarship feels to have reached firm foundations, and becomes confident about the understanding it has built of Muslim traditions, their founding views and further development process, a new kind of enterprise becomes possible. This seems to take the form of inquiries in the meaning of religious conceptions and their potential for the orientation of modern minds. Again, two names come to the mind immediately of researchers, both learned theologians, who attempt to build on modern scholarship in order to redefine the essential meanings of Muslim traditions. Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Fazlur-Rahman belonged, if one can say, to a generation which could and did envisage the possibility of a modern Muslim theology, modern in both senses of being of the time where both were living and working, and of being built on the conclusions and views reached by modern scholarship. The first one, being a non-Muslim (although with a deep religious sense, which transcends religious boundaries), conceived this in terms of questions that the Muslim mind has to confront in order to face challenges of its own heritage and present conditions. The second has offered one of the boldest attempts at rebuilding (or saving) orthodoxy in the face of contemporary advances of scholarship and rationalistic, agnostic approaches to the Islamic faith.

The next phase, the one we live in nowadays, remains within the lines derived from the previous ones and is firmly anchored in the approaches and mindset organised by modern scholarship (learned traditions). It

is less driven by theological aspirations than by aims at understanding in more refined ways the processes through which Muslims build their distinctive world views and the systems, social and political, which shaped their collective life and individual consequences. Mohamed Arkoun and Reinhard Schulze concentrate on the history of Muslims in the 20th century and on the trends which, beyond the day-to-day events, are making the facts and the perceptions within Muslim contexts. Both are strongly critical of the categories which are adopted as means and vehicles for understanding contemporary evolutions. Both offer examples of alternatives to the media-disseminated, politically-driven views on the history of the present.

III. Epistemologies and Aporias

This shows us that the processes by which the histories of peoples in different areas of the world were collated around allegedly fixed identities, Muslim and Western, leading to a polarisation that has become extremely influential in shaping behaviours and views, were not the only ones at work on the intellectual scene. Other approaches which emerged within learned circles have developed strikingly similar patterns in terms of epistemological assumptions and methodological ways. They have opened horizons of understanding much beyond those inspired by political categories.

This convergence can probably be seen at deeper levels, if one examines the concerns expressed and the arguments deployed by different schools and various thinkers across borders of language, culture and scholarly traditions. The question raised in the most influential works can be shown to focus on some of the most important issues for human thought in the last decades. Although it is difficult to articulate these issues in the form of a list of discrete topics as a set of clearly separated questions, we can recognise in the apparently continuous series of intertwined themes a few major loci of concern. The one which comes first to the mind is related to the modalities of presence and content of tradition within modern contexts. Muslim societies, which engaged later than others (mostly European and North American) in building modern states and political systems regulated by bureaucratic rationality and positive law, had to negotiate the presence of traditions, some local and some build on the religious heritage, which until very close times provided meaning to the prevailing worldviews and means for the regulation of social life. In Muslim contexts, the conflict between “tradition” and “modernity”

encompassed wide areas and affected numerous facts of life. At one extreme, it took the form of an insoluble contradiction between a socialised corpus of laws, considered to be of divine origin, called '*shari'a*', and modern processes of norm building. The call for the implementation of *shari'a*, the divine law, has become the favourite slogan of fundamentalists. The issue of *shari'a*, its potential for adaptation to modern conditions and the most entrenched aspirations and ethical norms which are now adopted by all humans, is one where the issue of tradition is posed in acute terms. It has become, in a way, a kind of *aporia* for contemporary thinkers. Although scholarship has shown that it is mainly a construct by early generations of Muslims which has been sacralised in specific historical contexts, the way to face it, or rather face those who proclaim its divine origin and unlimited validity, remains one of the greatest obstacles to modernization in Muslim societies and probably the more contentious issue in on-going debates. Tradition is also a contentious issue in a wider sense. Social customs, which solidified in diverse local contexts and acquired resistance to questioning and to change to an extent that is nearly comparable to that of *shari'a*, offer another example of conflict between heritage from the past and requirements, expectations of contemporary generations.

Finally, tradition, taken in the widest sense, encompasses linguistic and cultural heritage, which most modern states attempted to revive and strengthen as a foundation for the new political "national" identity. This one particular use of tradition, the codification of languages, and cultural codes inherited from previous generations in specific areas may be considered as the main factor in the formation of attitudes, perception, including patterns of behaviour and forms of articulated expectations within new generations in Muslim contexts, mainly during the second half of the 20th century. This process, which is sometimes called "re-traditionalisation", has led to some of the most challenging issues related to the presence of tradition in modern contexts, where Muslims offer extreme conditions of conflict, tension, social engineering to the scrutiny of the scholarly and the practical-minded (mainly political) concerned. A close web of issues is generated by the fact that tradition does not come in uniform, clearly identified and generally accepted forms. Traditions are multiple and display numerous facets and diverse, often conflicting interpretations. Within the newly formed national ensembles, it often was the case that many communities, with different linguistic, religious, sectarian, local traditions were brought together. The case of Iraq for example, is not an exception. Lines of divisions of linguistics (Arabs and Kurds),

religions (Muslims, Christians, Jews) or sectarian (Sunni-Shi'i) kind cut across the human group brought within the control of one modern state. This was not a new condition for the concerned communities, for diversity has for a long time, been a given in the whole areas where Muslims are a majority. However, the rules and patterns which had been designed to manage this diversity in pre-modern times could no more be implemented. The very attitude towards plurality of communities and traditions could no more be held. This brought to the fore the issue of coexistence of various groups with different traditions, together with the web of concerns brought about by the emergence of the individual as a new aspiration in contexts where community prevailed over each and every one of its members.

Issues of gender or family relationships brought other important challenges, bringing into question inherited patterns of behaviour and systems under construction within the new national boundaries. Finally, divergent interpretations surfaced in contexts where traditional authorities were no more able to impose monolithic views. Conflicts of interpretation, although not new in Muslim environments, were in a way born again and were strongly amplified and deeply affected by new conditions, including the polarisation between the "Self" and the "Other" and socio-economic evolutions within Muslim societies. This has raised issues of plurality, of difference to new heights. It became a new challenge to these societies to devise new ways of facing new and old lines of fragmentation, fraction and division. Here again Muslim conditions offered extreme cases, where the intensity of confrontations, the weight of inherited patterns and the stresses generated by new conditions combined to convey special gravity, even a dramatic character to issues of universal human concern.

IV. Prevailing Worldviews and Social Change

One understands that in such conditions the issues related to the elaboration of the novel "social contract" pervade the whole debate within and about Muslim societies. This means that the very foundations of the social and political order are the centre of the ongoing confrontations, including the ethical and formal norms which are to offer the framework for these foundations and the rules which should help in the resolution of the confrontation around them. Although, as was pointed out by some contemporary thinkers, democracy and human rights have been incorporated within ideals adopted in Muslim contexts and even adopted as an "implicit religion" in these societies, issues about the political order,

the systems and regulations which govern the public and the interactions within society are an ongoing concern and weigh heavily on the consciousness of groups, associations and individuals. They lay in the background, one may say, of the debates about religion and its role in the political systems and processes, of the attitudes towards the self, its definition and referential and the other including perceptions and patterns of behaviour. This extends to issues of public policy, including modes of distribution of power, the management of economic activities and wealth generation, and educational programmes. These latter are particularly influential in determining the terms, conditions and ways through which public debates are conducted. The policies adopted in most countries with a Muslim majority have severely restricted the access of young generations to world cultural resources, especially those which are linked in one way or another to the “Western” heritage. Historians of the 20th century Muslim world may reach the understanding that educational policies have strongly influenced the mindsets of young generations, including the perceptions and behavioural models, which prevail among them. This has strongly contributed to the construction of a deeply entrenched polarisation in the minds of wide circles within these environments.

Needless to say that issues linked to secularism, freedom of expression and association, gender equality and the reputation of political power are directly affected. They are approached in ways which altogether make all avenues of change seem to be open and the debate about them obscured by heavy prejudices and confusions. Muslim societies are thus in fact a kind of laboratory where attempts at redesigning basic patterns for social and political order are ongoing, but where the process through which fundamental choices are made are in fact hampered by enormous obstacles linked to the intellectual equipment of major actors, the freedoms (margin of manoeuvre) available to social movements and individuals, and growing economic and cultural inequalities.

Therefore, it seems that the questions which need to be addressed in order to transform in positive ways the conditions and outcome of our debates include the following:

Is it possible to invert, or subvert, the views which are built on local or identity markers? Is it possible to reach out to the themes, nodes, aporias which are, really, challenging the mind of contemporary thinkers of all religions and cultures? Instead of thinking in terms of specific examples, however illustrative they may be, is it not time to think in terms of issues, beyond the diversity of their various “incarnations” and despite the fact

that human societies are not in similar situations in terms of economic and political evolution, religious and cultural living symbols and the like? Would this not be a positive reaction to the wave of market and media driven globalisation?

