

Islam, Postmodernity and Freedom

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What is post-modernism? Does it have a universal definition? (1)

A question asking for any definition that is universal implies the existence of an essential quality that transcends local context. This would according to the postmodern dogma constitute an unforgivable sin. The primary moral agenda behind postmodern attempts to destabilize the foundations of modern knowledge and modern ethics is to challenge essential theorizing claiming universal applicability. The postmodern thinker seeks to privilege the now and the here – the local over the global.

Postmodernist discourses come in various forms. They include and are not limited to postcolonial narratives, literary theory and its criticism, poststructuralist analysis, postmodern feminism, deconstruction, genealogies, archaeologies of history and often simple cultural relativist arguments that reject rationality and rationalism. Because of their diversity it is difficult to describe what postmodern discourses really are. But it is easy to infer what they are not. They are not grand narratives which claim justification on the basis of some transcendent ethic or infallible reason and boast of validity across time and space. Postmodern narratives take pride in their cultural and historically specific character.

Postmodernism, I believe, may not have a universally applicable definition, Lyotard's famous claim "postmodernism is an expression of incredulity at grand narratives" notwithstanding; but it is most certainly is a universal phenomenon. I think that postmodernism as a reaction and even a rejection of the constitutive elements of post-enlightenment modernity, it is a widespread collection of phenomena. In a postindustrial society, like that of Western Europe, postmodernism manifests as a rejection of modern institutions such as marriage, traditional family structure, gender roles and even nationalism. In the Muslim World postmodernism manifests in the form of religious resurgence which rejects modernist institutions such as secularism and nationalism and instead advocates a different moral/political ethic and a different political unit (Ummah).

(2) How did post modernism evolve from modernist views?

This is a very complex question and begs a long and historical narrative. Nevertheless in the interest of brevity let's assume that there is indeed a human impulse for freedom. It is this impulse for freedom which discovered that modernity had become a tradition. In a curious way being a modern society, under the benevolent protection of a nation state, worshipping reason

and science, meant living in a traditional society. Postmodernism in that sense is the exasperated, and to some extent, an irrational response to the stifling quality of modern institutions.

The culture of centrist liberalism with its politically correct discourse that dominates advanced societies is in many ways emaciating the human spirit rather than emancipating it.

Postmodernism is a violent reaction to this form of modern political culture. Let me make a bold claim here. The most spectacular postmodern manifestation is the contemporary explosion of terrorism. Notice how terrorism is seen as an enemy by the most powerful of all modern institutions – the nation state. Terrorism defies all the ethics anchored around the principle of sovereignty. Today terrorists and nation states are locked in a global struggle. Notice how terrorists see themselves as freedom fighters and states fighting terrorists claim that they are protecting freedom. This is about freedom. Postmodernism is about rediscovering freedom.

The postmodern challenge to modernity manifests itself in two separate but equally devastating, forms. One is cultural and the other is philosophical (epistemological). On the cultural front, postmodern manifestations in the form of new social movements whether in art forms, politics or lifestyles, are joyously disrupting the neat order of things that reason had established in the heyday of modernity. On the epistemological front, postmodern incursions are subverting not only the foundations of truth, but also the possibility of ever establishing any truth claims.

If the cultural assault of postmodernism is devastating, than its epistemological assault cannot be described as anything but as "writing the epitaph of modernity". While modernity decentered God and in its place crowned reason as the sovereign authority that alone determined the legitimacy of truth claims, postmodernity has chosen to dethrone not only reason but the very notion of authority and the very idea of Truth with a capital T.

How then in the postmodern vision will the project of civilization survive or progress? The answer is more than startling. All projects are illegitimate because they undermine competing projects and because it is power, not any intrinsic worth, that determines which project becomes the civilizational project. Progress is a myth. Without God, without reason, without a worldview, how do we live? The postmodern answer is let life itself find the way. So just live, "just do it" and life will lead you to life.

The prophets of postmodernity and their cohort have little to offer. Foucault says power is god. Derrida says dance to the sound as human civilization is deconstructed -- god by god and idea by idea. Rorty says let life be guided by success, it does not matter if there is no intrinsic good

in life or success.

Because modernity in an attempt to institutionalize freedom (oxymoron?) has created and proliferated regimes of discipline, the human spirit is rebelling in the form of postmodern moments of insanity.

(3) Is the phenomenon of globalization a product of post modern thinking?

There is no such phenomenon as globalization. We however are experiencing a phenomenon that can be described more accurately as glocalization (hence my website <http://www.glocaleye.org>). Structural processes and discourses of identity and difference are tearing the modern era apart. We live in a strange world. We are at the peak of scientific achievements; the genome project has been completed, we are on the verge of cloning human beings, simulations and artificial intelligence are paying dividends and yet the Talibans and Hindutvavadis in the East and Jerry Springers and Jerry Falwells in the West enjoy supporters in millions.

Glocalization therefore is a crucial site where the forces of modernity and Postmodernity are waging an unlimited war. If the modernists win the nation state, and along with it reason and science will reassert sovereignty over the human subject. If the terrorists, the cultural crazies, the environmental junkies, the religious fanatics win, then contingency and not reason, locality and not globality, anarchy and not sovereignty will prevail.

(4) Do you see any possibility for the co-existence of religious/fundamentalist thinking and post modernist philosophy?

Yes I do. In fact I believe that the contemporary resurgence of religion is a postmodern phenomenon. Both postmodern philosophy and Religious theology reject the modernist claim in the infallibility of reason.

For over three hundred years, Islam has faced the challenge of European enlightenment and modernity. While compared to other religions, Islam has performed formidably and by far. While the significance of nearly all religions has receded to the private domain or even into vestigial customs and occasional rituals, Islam has experienced a major resurgence in the twentieth century. The scars of modernity, however, are easy to see on the face on the Muslim World. Secularism and Nationalism, two of modernity's worst diseases, are now well entrenched in many parts of the Muslim World. Ideologies emerging from the conditions of modernity such as Marxism and liberalism continue to compete with Islam in trying to shape Muslim societies. Even Muslim intellectuals who are seeking authenticity are compelled to succumb to modernist discourses, thereby furthering the agenda of modernity at the expense of Islam.

Islam and modernity, one must remember are not necessarily antithetical. Indeed one could argue that the genesis of enlightenment and modernity can be found in thriving medieval Islamic civilization. However modernity has taken many wrong turns in the last century by corrupting its own foundational principles. The value of freedom, understood by Kant as freedom to do good is now understood as freedom to do anything. Reason has been displaced by instrumental reason. Knowledge has become the servant of power. Wisdom has been replaced by public opinion. Even as Muslims enjoy the fruits of modernity, Islam continues to struggle against the dark side of modernity.

As a contemporary Islamic philosopher, living in the dusk of modernity and in the heart of the West, deeply nostalgic for a divinely ordained order of things which is consistent with reason and justice, full of compassion and mercy, I am fascinated by the systematic deconstruction of modernity by the very forces it engendered and unleashed upon itself. The normative structure of boundless freedom and a culture of irreverence that modernity has deliberately fostered to subvert God has now turned upon its creator.

Skepticism based on the assumed infallibility and universal sovereignty of reason was the constitutive character of modernity. It was designed to eliminate faith and re-channel Man's inherent compulsion to submit and worship. New Gods and new traditions were invented, new prophets were proclaimed and new heavens were imagined. But religion has not only survived the five hundred year assault on God and his messages, but has returned with an increased fervor that baffles the postmodern being.

The postmodern being, whose heart without faith is empty and mind without reason is immature, can destroy the fragile foundations of modernity, ridicule the memories of tradition but can neither comprehend and nor deal with the postmodern resurgence of faith.

Those waging a losing battle for Modernity against Postmodernity reject the resurgence of faith as a return to backward premodernity. Their shortsightedness precludes them from imagining the resurgence of faith not as a return but as a leap forward.

For those who were always with God and comfortable with reason, in the tradition of Al Ghazali, Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Rushd, the resurgence of religion is merely the continuation of the divine way. Islam never succumbed either to modernity nor is losing out to postmodernity. Islam's decline was geopolitical and economic, never epistemological. The entire musical chairs of authority, God, Reason, Conventions, Text, and Nothing, is Western and limited to those societies who have succumbed to the forces of modernism completely.

Islam was from the beginning comfortable with reason. Recognizing its immense potential and necessity but also remaining acutely cognizant of its limitation. The Al Ghazali-Ibn Rushd

debate on the nature of causality is an excellent chronicle of Islam's position on reason. Islam simultaneously recognized the absoluteness of Truth as well as the relativity of truth claims. For nearly 1300 years Muslims have believed in one Shariah but recognized more than four different, competing and even contradictory articulations of this Shariah (madhahib). Islam has survived the experiment called modernity and will survive the bonfire (postmodernity) that is threatening to burn down the lab along with the experiment. There is sufficient play within Islam in terms of epistemological pluralism, whether it is recognition of the validity of different legal opinions based on different contexts or time or based on different discursive epistemes such as burhan-- illumination, jadal--dialectics, and khatabah--rhetoric, that will .allow Islam to negotiate postmodernity's epistemological rampage