

The West and Islam: Clash Points and Dialogues
Features of the New Islamic Discourse: Some Introductory Remarks
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[Preface]

Some people tend to view Islam as if it were a monolithic or one-dimensional entity. Islam is undoubtedly the faith of transcendental monotheism, the belief in Allah, (the one and only God), who transcends both man and nature. But monotheism does not lead to monism; on the contrary, it leads to plurality and diversity. For from a strictly Islamic point of view, except for God, everything else exists in variety. Therefore, there is not one single Islamic discourse, but rather a variety of discourses that manifest the various endeavors (*ijtihad*) of the Muslims, within a specific time and place, to understand the world around them and to interpret the Quran.

[Classification of Islamic Discourses]

One may classify the Islamic discourse prevalent at the present time in the following manner:

First

1. A populist salvationist “messianic” discourse. This is the discourse of the overwhelming majority of the Muslim masses that have instinctively realized that the processes of modernization, secularization, and globalization do the *umma* (Muslim community) no good and bring no real reform. These masses have observed that these processes are in essence nothing but processes of Westernization, that rob the *umma* of its religious and cultural heritage, giving it nothing in return, and that have only led to further colonial hegemony and class polarization within society. Adhering and clinging to Islam, which they know well, the masses encapsulate themselves within their Islamic heritage, cry for help, and hope for salvation from Allah. But they are incapable of contributing new ideas or organizing political movements. Such a discourse frequently expresses itself in the form of spontaneous and, at times, violent acts of protest against all forms of radical Westernization and colonial invasion. But more often it expresses itself in the form of philanthropy, either at the individual level (giving money to the poor), or at the community level (building mosques, hospitals and schools or providing meals to the public, especially in Ramadan, etc.). The populist discourse is mainly the discourse of the poor and the marginal, but it is also the discourse of those wealthy members of society who appreciate their religious and cultural heritage, and who recognize that its loss would mean a loss of everything.

Second

2. The political discourse. This is the discourse of some middle class professionals, academicians, students, and traders, who perceive the need for an Islamic action that can protect this *umma*. These people, having realized that political action is the means of achieving their objective, have set up or joined political organizations that do not resort to violence, and out of which youth and educational organizations may branch. Some of the bearers of this political discourse harbored, at one time, the illusion that taking over the central state would be the long sought panacea, and some of them did develop para-military organizations and try to infiltrate the armed forces and seize power by force. However, as of 1965, as will be shown later, there has been a general inclination toward working through existing legitimate political channels. Most of the bearers of this political discourse, at the present time, tend to restrict their activity to the political and/or educational sphere.

Third

3. The intellectual discourse. This is the discourse that deals primarily with theoretical and intellectual issues.

This classification does not mean that the three discourses exist in total isolation, each one separate from the other. In fact, the populist and political discourses, more often than not, merge into one another, and the same can

be said about the political and intellectual discourses. Notwithstanding the common ground shared by the three kinds of discourse, we deem it useful, from the analytical point of view, to assume their independence from one another.

A Chronological Diachronic Classification

In addition to this synchronic system of classification, a chronological, diachronic classification might prove more relevant, from the standpoint of this paper.

1. The old Islamic discourse. This emerged as a direct and immediate reaction to the colonial invasion of the Muslim world, and prevailed until the mid-1960s.

2. The new Islamic discourse. After an initial indefinite, marginalized period, this discourse began to assume a more definite form in the mid-1960s, and started to move gradually toward the center.

Both discourses endeavored to provide an Islamic answer to the questions raised by modernization and colonization. Nevertheless there are radical points of divergence between them that stem from two interrelated points:

1. Their respective attitudes vis-à-vis Western modernity.
2. The varying levels of comprehensiveness of outlook that each discourse has developed.

This paper focuses primarily on the old and the new intellectual Islamic discourses, and to a much lesser degree, on the political discourse. It tries to identify some of the salient characteristics of the new discourse. Any intellectual or political movement must pause from time to time to look critically at itself and to assess its performance so as to be able to abstract some of its own nascent traits and crystallize them into a relatively coherent system, then map its future course.

It is worth noting that the first generation of Muslim reformists came in contact with the modern Western cultural formation in a historical era that is considerably different, in many aspects, from the present one. It could be argued that the comprehensive secular paradigm, the fundamental paradigm underlying the modern Western cultural formation, has always occupied a central position in the conscience of the modern Western man and has always molded his view of the universe. It could also be said that the imperialist aspects of Western modernity manifested themselves only too clearly from the very beginning. All of these facts notwithstanding, modern Western civilization viewed itself as a humanistic, man-centered civilization, and for some time maintained, at the level of vision if not also at the level of practice, a sense of balance and faith in absolute moral and human values. At the structural level, Western societies long maintained a high level of social coherence and solidarity. Family values, far from being an empty social slogan remembered during election days, were a concrete social reality.

But things changed. It might be useful, in this context, to conceive of secularism not as a fixed paradigm, but rather as a dynamic paradigmatic sequence that unfolds progressively in time and space. One can say that by the end of the nineteenth century, many of the links that make up this sequence had not yet materialized. Man's private life and many aspects of his public life were still beyond the reach of the processes of secularization. In other words, Western man was a secularist only in some aspects of his public life, but in his private life as well as in many aspects of his public

life, he was committed to moral and human values, and, more often than not, to Christian religious values and code of ethics. When the first generation of Islamic reformists, the bearers of the old Islamic discourse, encountered this modern cultural formation, they did not interact with a comprehensive secular civilization but rather with a partially secular one. Whereas partial secularism recognizes the validity and importance of values on the moral level, and of the idea of totality on the epistemological level, comprehensive secularism denies them as well as the very idea of transcendence. Many of the negative aspects of Western modernity, which later became more or less a recurrent pattern and central phenomena, were isolated events and marginal incidents that could be easily overlooked. Furthermore, the Western critique of modernity and the Enlightenment had not yet been crystallized, in spite of the fact that the voices of protest were becoming stronger. Western romantic literature, for instance, is in essence a protest against the negative aspects of Western modernity. The writings of some conservative Western thinkers, such as Edmund Burke, include references to many topics that were later developed by the Western critical discourse on modernity. Nevertheless, the shortcomings of modern Western civilization, whether at the level of theory or at the level of practice, were not yet obvious to those who observed or studied it.

As for the bearers of the new Islamic discourse, the situation is quite different. Most had their intellectual formative years in the 1950s and had their first encounter with modern Western civilization in the 1960s. This was the time when Western modernity had already entered the stage of crisis, and when many Western thinkers had begun to realize the dimension of this crisis and impasse. (See *Introduction to the Deconstruction of the Secular Discourse*, 4 vols., Cairo, December 1997). The bearers of the new Islamic discourse realized, from the very beginning, the darker aspects of Western modernity. It had embroiled the entire world in two Western wars, called “world wars” because the whole world was dragged into the arena of conflict. In the time of “peace,” the world was caught in a frenzied arms race. The centralized nation-state, growing stronger and more authoritarian, expanded and reached the most private aspects of man’s life, and, through its sophisticated security and educational *apparati*, tried to “guide” its citizens! The media, another by-product of Western modernity, extensively invaded the private lives of citizens, accelerating the process of standardization and escalating the consumerist fever. In the meantime, the pleasure sector became so powerful as to control people’s dreams, selling them erotic utopias and outright pornography. The family as a social institution could not sustain the pressures and therefore divorce rates rocketed, reaching levels rarely witnessed before. The crisis of meaning, the epistemological crisis, anomie, alienation, and reification became more pronounced. While the liberal capitalist project ceased to be the smashing success story it used to be, the socialist experiment collapsed and lost any vestige of credibility. Anti-humanist intellectual trends such as Fascism, Nazism, Zionism, and Structuralism emerged and reached a climax in post-modernist thought. By the mid-1960s, the critical Western discourse on modernity had crystallized and the works of the Frankfurt School thinkers

had become widely available and popular. Many studies, critical of the age of the Enlightenment, were published. Writing about the standardization that resulted from Western modernity and about its one-dimensional man, Herbert Marcuse sought to demonstrate the existence of a structural defect that lies at the very heart of modern Western civilization in its totality, a defect that goes beyond the traditional division of this civilization into a socialist and a capitalist camp. Many revisionist historians, rewriting the history of modern Western civilization, tried to underscore the enormity of the crimes committed against the peoples of Asia and Africa and the colonial pillage of their lands. Many studies, radically critical of development theories, appeared during the same period. The New Left movement made a significant contribution in this regard. Thus, whether on the practical or theoretical level, it was not difficult for the bearers of the new Islamic discourse, those who studied Western modernity in the middle of the twentieth century, to recognize many of its shortcomings and to see it in its totality. It was no longer possible for them to experience a naive infatuation of the type experienced by the intellectuals of the first generation. The Western modernity they knew, experienced, and studied was, in many aspects, different from the Western modernity known, experienced, and studied by the generation of the pioneers.

It should be pointed out that neither the new nor the old generation of Muslim intellectuals constructed their respective intellectual systems exclusively on the basis of the Islamic worldview. Their interaction with Western modernity was, as could be expected, an important formative factor. After all, this was a civilization that acquired centrality by virtue of its economic and military accomplishments, put forward its own view of the world as if it were the view of all human beings at all times and in all places, conceived of its knowledge as a precise science applicable to all communities, and set the challenge that everyone else had to respond to. Responses varied with the type of challenge and its intensity. The early reformists found many positive aspects in Western modernity. One may even go so far as to suggest that they were entranced by it. This is evident from Shaykh Muhammad Abduh's oft-quoted remark that "whereas in the West he found Muslims without Islam, in the East he found Islam without Muslims." He wanted to say that in the West he found people who manifested in their very conduct the ideals of Islam even though they were not Muslims, whereas in the Muslim world, he found people who believed in Islam, but their conduct belied their belief. Consequently, the issue for many of the bearers of the old Islamic discourse was basically how to reconcile Islam with Western modernity, and even how to make Islam catch up with it, and live up to its standards and values. This was the core of Muhammad Abduh's project, which predominated until the mid-1960s.

Had Shaykh Muhammad Abduh's experience with Western modernity been different, he would have hesitated long before making this remark and before proposing his project. The following incident may explain this point further. In 1830, Shaykh Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, whose infatuation with Western civilization is well-known, was in Paris. In that same year, French cannons were pounding unsuspecting Algerian towns and villages, reducing them to

rubble. Shaykh al-Tahtawi could see only the bright lights in Paris and could hear only the urbane and sophisticated rhythms of Western modernity. On the other hand, the Algerian shaykhs, who were subject to a brutal colonial attack using the most sophisticated technology available at the time, could see only the raging flames of fire and could hear only the racket of bombs. One of these shaykhs was once told that the French troops had actually come to Algeria to spread Western civilization and modernity. His response was as cryptic as it was significant: “But why have they brought all this gunpowder?” Like this Algerian shaykh, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse smelled the reek of gunpowder, saw the flames of fire, heard the racket of cannons, and watched the hooves of colonial horses tread over everything. Then they saw gunpowder become omnipresent, transformed into a variety of weapons of destruction and extermination: bombs, missiles, biological and nuclear weapons, etc. Huge budgets were allocated for the production or purchase of these weapons, first by western, then eastern, southern and northern governments. In fact, the mass-destruction weapons industry has grown into the most important industry of our enlightened rational times, and homo sapiens, for the first time in his long history, allocates more funds for the production of weapons of destruction than for the production of food.

The old Islamic discourse was neither unique nor isolated in its advocacy of Western modernity; it was, in a sense, part of the general outlook that prevailed in the Third World since the beginning of this century. Efforts were directed at catching up with the West and competing with it on its own terms. Liberals called for the adoption of the modern Western outlook in its totality, “both its sweet and bitter aspects.” The Marxists rebelled slightly and suggested that the peoples of the Third World could enter the promised land of Western modernity through the gates of Marxism and social justice. The Islamists, in their turn, imagined it would be possible to adopt the Western modern outlook or rather adapt Islam to it. It is interesting to note that all the trends and movements, religious or secular, irrespective of their ideological inclinations and social or ethnic backgrounds, turned the West into a silent and ultimate point of reference.

As a result of this attitude to Western modernity, the Islamic worldview retreated, its dimensions shrunk, and it lost its comprehensiveness. Instead of providing an Islamic frame of reference for Muslims in the modern age, the issue became how to “Islamize” certain aspects of Western modernity. The Islamization process would, in most cases, take the form of “omitting” those aspects of Western modernity deemed *haram* (prohibited) by Islamic law, without any addition or innovation, underscoring those aspects of Western modernity deemed *halal* (permissible) by Islamic law, and searching for those aspects within the Islamic worldview analogous to some aspects found within Western modernity. This inevitably meant the eventual atrophy of those aspects of the Islamic worldview that have nothing analogous to them within the modern Western worldview. But ironically, those aspects constitute the very essence and source of the specificity of the Islamic worldview.

The bearers of the new Islamic discourse do not have the same fascination with Western modernity. Actually, a radical critique of Western modernity is one of their main points of departure. They too are neither unique nor isolated in their critique, for they do not differ from many of the thinkers and political movements in the Third World at the present time who try to evolve new forms of modernity, nor from many important thinkers in the West who are critical of Western modernity. Marxism was a form of critique of modernity, out of which sprung the Frankfurt School which further deepened the critique. Romantic literature, as indicated earlier, was also a protest against Western modernity. The protest of modernist literature, however, is even more profound and radical; it tries to represent the reified world of modernity, where the chain of causality is either completely broken or becomes so rigid that man becomes completely determined. The theater of the absurd is part of this Western protest against the dead-end Western modernity has landed mankind in. More recently, religious fundamentalism emerged as a populist extension of this intellectual trend. All of these trends, in one way or another, show an increasing, if implicit, realization that Western modernity strips man of his specificity and subverts his human essence.

The new Islamic discourse is only part of a wider global trend. The perceived crisis of Western modernity has taken different forms in different parts of the world. In the Muslim world, the perception has taken an Islamic form. Nevertheless, the critique of the new Islamic discourse of modernity is characteristically different from the other critiques. For one thing, it recognizes and emphasizes the inextricable ties between Western modernity and Western imperialism. Imperialism was, after all, our first encounter with modernity, and Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine is the last. Furthermore, unlike the Western critique of modernity, which is nihilistic and pessimistic, the Islamic critique is optimistic by virtue of the fact that it proposes a project for reform.

Difference Between Two Fundamental Points

It could be said that even though there are many points of agreement and disagreement between the old and the new discourses, the attitude to Western modernity and the level of comprehensiveness of the Islamic paradigm, as indicated earlier, are the basic points of difference that could serve as a basis for classification. The main distinguishing features of each discourse spring from these two fundamental points and can be outlined as follows:

1. The bearers of the new Islamic discourse are neither apologetic nor self-defensive. They are not interested in expending much energy on the attempt to “improve” the image of Islam or to “justify” themselves, even though they are interested in sending “a message” to the world.

2. The bearers of the new discourse neither reject nor accept the West uncritically. Ironically, total rejection, just like total acceptance, presupposes the West as a silent point of reference. What the bearers of the new Islamic discourse reject, in effect, are both the presumed centrality and universalism of the West, as well as its imperialism, which is closely linked to its claim of centrality. They reject the practices of spoilage, pillage, and repression that were perpetrated by Western colonialism in the past and that at present take new forms that are no less brutal than the previous ones. They also reject what they consider the negative aspects of Western modernity and fully realize its crisis.

But despite their awareness of the crisis of Western modernity, and their realization that there is no point in repeating the mistakes of others or proceeding along the same path that led to an impasse, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse do not resemble the Algerian shaykh who smelled the reek of gunpowder and saw nothing else in Western modernity. Indeed, they have read Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, Becket’s and Camus’ absurd plays, and Derrida’s nihilist writings; and they know that the West constructed its material infrastructure through the process of pillage (which led to “imperialist” not “capitalist accumulation” as claimed). However, they also know Western theories of architecture, how to use the computer, various management theories, and the broad horizons opened up by Western modernity. They know the advantages of this modernity just as they know its destructiveness. They also know that Western modernity has raised certain questions that cannot go unanswered. They know that the Muslim mind is not a blank sheet, and that the Islamic starting point cannot be a hypothetical zero point. Hence the necessity, and even the inevitability, of engaging and interacting with Western modernity, and assimilating its achievements without adopting its value system. In short, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse do not see any justification for accepting Western modernity in its entirety. Instead, they stand on their Islamic ground and view Western modernity, opening up to it, simultaneously criticizing and interacting with it. This is what can be referred to as “the interactive critical response,” which is the very opposite of the “positive” unqualified acceptance or the “negative” unqualified rejection of Western modernity—two extreme points between which the old discourse oscillated.

The old Islamic discourse is an eclectic, cumulative discourse that imported constituent elements of Western modernity, without realizing their relation to the Western worldview, and at the same time adopted other constituent elements of the Islamic religio-cultural formation, without realizing their relation to the Islamic worldview. Having isolated these Islamic and modern Western constituent elements, the bearers of the old discourse tried to “add” the one to the other, creating a concoction rather than a totality.

The bearers of the new discourse, on the other hand, are not content with importing ready-made Western answers to the questions posed by Western modernity. They have developed a radical, exploratory, generative discourse that neither attempts to reconcile Islam with Western modernity, nor preoccupies itself with searching for the points of contrast (or similarity) between the two. Rather, it sets forth to explore the main traits of Western modernity, presenting a radical, yet balanced critique. In the meantime, the bearers of the new discourse go back to the Islamic worldview, with all its values and its religious, ethical, and civilizational specificities. They explore it and try to abstract an epistemological paradigm from it, through which they can generate answers to the problems raised by Western modernity. One can place the modern attempts aimed at reviving *fiqh* (jurisprudence) from within, in the context of this generative approach. Rather than impose Western analytical categories on the Islamic worldview, the bearers of the new discourse try to discover its fundamental categories. One can safely argue that the new Islamic discourse, issuing forth from an Islamic framework, opens the door of *ijtihad* regarding both the modern Western worldview and the Islamic religious and cultural heritage.

Given this radical generative approach, the new Islamic discourse is by necessity comprehensive. While at the grass roots-level the bearers of the new Islamic discourse raise the slogan “Islam is the solution,” at the philosophical level they raise a more complex one, “Islam is a worldview.” Theirs is a discourse that stems from a comprehensive worldview from which different ethical, political, economic, and aesthetic systems are generated. It is an Islamic discourse that deals with architecture, love, marriage, economics, city planning, the philosophy of law and history, modes of analysis and thinking, etc. It deals with the quotidian, the direct, and the political, as well as with the total and ultimate. Actually, the new Islamic discourse claims that it is addressed not to Muslims only, but to “all humanity.” In other words, it claims that its project for reform is an answer to the crisis caused by Western modernity. In this respect, its claim is similar to the claim made by the Islamic discourse that prevailed during the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him.

By virtue of their open-ended critical interactive approach to Western modernity, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse are able to benefit in a creative way from this modernity without being engulfed by it. Issues such as class conflict, the necessity of an equitable distribution of resources, gender issues, and the influence of the environment on shaping man’s personality had been debated by Muslims before. However, the sensitivity and intense awareness of the new discourse vis-à-vis these issues have been

enhanced, thanks to the interaction with Western modernity. The bearers of the new discourse do not object to benefiting from this modernity in discovering the mechanisms of the solutions for these problems nor the solutions themselves, as long as such solutions do not contradict the Islamic paradigm.

Opening up to the modern Western worldview and critically interacting with it have alerted the bearers of the new discourse to aspects that would otherwise have been difficult for them to realize. Issues raised by Western modernity such as international relations, globalization, the menace posed by the media and the central state to the human individual, the increasing amount of leisure time available to ordinary people, and the processes of standardization and leveling, were never raised by humanity in the past, and expectedly were not raised by the old Islamic discourse.

The bearers of the new Islamic discourse discovered that opening up to Western modernity and studying it in a critical and interactive manner may serve to sharpen the awareness of Muslims who would then come to know the nature of the crisis of Western modernity and its magnitude. Consequently, this may increase the Muslims' knowledge of and confidence in, themselves, and may even help them discover the creative and generative potentials within the Islamic worldview. The bearers of the new Islamic discourse, having realized the wide gap separating science, technology, and democratic procedures from human values, try to address themselves to this issue. For instance, in the case of science and technology, they try to benefit from the technological and scientific achievements of Western modernity, without adopting its worldview and without accepting its claims of scientific neutrality and value-freedom. An attempt is made to incorporate these achievements within an Islamic value system (see below). The same applies to democracy. The attempt to distinguish between democracy and *shura* (consultation) is an attempt to incorporate democratic procedures within the Islamic value system, so that value-free democratic procedures do not become the frame of reference, and do not arrogate for themselves the status of an ultimate value.

The bearers of the new Islamic discourse realize that the human sciences are neither precise, nor universal or neutral, that they contain several human biases, and that they are fundamentally different from the natural sciences. However, the human sciences do not lose their value because of this lack of precision and neutrality. On the contrary, their ability to deal with human phenomena is thereby enhanced. The difference between the natural sciences and the humanities emanates from the fact that the basic subject of the humanities, that is man, cannot be reduced in his entirety to the natural-material system. Human reality is radically different from material reality, in spite of the existence of man in the natural-material world. Thus, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse attempt to establish human sciences that do not exclude the human element and that are, consequently, different in their basic premises, principles, ambitions, and criteria from the natural sciences. The main characteristic of the human sciences is that they are not, and cannot, be value-free, and that they have to be incorporated within a value system, which is the Islamic value system in

the case of the Muslims. This, indeed, is the basic premise of the Islamization of knowledge project, or the project for generating Islamic knowledge.

The bearers of the new discourse are quite aware of what is referred to as “the new science” that comprises concepts such as indeterminacy and that does not move within the framework of the concepts of hard causality within which nineteenth century science moved. The bearers of the new Islamic discourse realize that the terms in the Western lexicon are not simple, for they are an integral part of a complex cultural lexicon that determines their purport and meaning. For instance the word *‘aql* (mind–reason) within the Islamic context has a specific and definite Islamic meaning. Having been so impressed by modern Western civilization, and having failed to master the subtleties of its cultural idiom, the former generation imagined that the word “reason” in the modern Western philosophical lexicon was synonymous with the word *‘aql* in the Islamic lexicon. Hence the deep admiration for, and even fascination with, Western rationality and the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the bearers of the new discourse have knowledge of the complexity of the category of the mind in the Western lexicon and the contradictions inherent therein. They are also familiar with the Western critique of reason, that is divided into “instrumental reason,” “critical reason,” “functional reason,” “imperialist reason,” “abstract reason,” etc. The critique also talks of “the negation of reason,” “destruction of reason,” “deconstruction of reason,” and “decentering reason.” Thus, it is no longer tenable to suppose that the word *‘aql*, as it exists in the Islamic lexicon, is synonymous with the word “reason,” as it exists in the modern Western lexicon. With the emergence of absurd, irrational tendencies in the West, the matter has become even clearer and more crystallized.

The bearers of the new Islamic discourse realize the cultural dimension of most human phenomena, religion included. The bearers of the old discourse stopped at the distinction between what is *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (forbidden). The car and the hamburger are undoubtedly *halal*, and so is canned meat, as long as it does not contain pork. However, the pioneers did not grasp the cultural dimension of the commodity and its roots in a comprehensive worldview. (It should also be added that a full realization, on the part of many Western intellectuals, of the nature of the commodity as a cultural artifact was still quite rudimentary and nascent). Consider the car for instance: when a driver turns the ignition key, more often than not, he thinks he is handling a simple machine that transports him from one place to another, which of course is a fallacy. Driving a car is an act rooted in a whole worldview that manifests itself in a specific lifestyle; it necessitates prospecting for oil then drilling innumerable wells. Huge oil tankers cross the oceans to deliver huge quantities of oil to hungry gas-guzzlers and over-heated houses. That of course results in the pollution of the atmosphere, the land, and the sea. Troops are deployed to guarantee the flow of cheap energy and to protect the “national security” of the consumers. Speed gradually becomes the sole criterion for judging human conduct and city planning. Towns are planned in such a way as to facilitate

the movement of speeding cars; and consequently, old, traditional districts and buildings are demolished. The same can be said of the hamburger and the take-away food. The cultural dimension of these commodities, which seems perfectly innocuous, absolutely *halal*, and entirely unblemished from the purely religious point of view, is an organic part of a worldview that conflicts with the Islamic worldview and Islamic certainties.

The realization on the part of the bearers of the new Islamic discourse of the importance of the cultural dimension of all phenomena is manifest in their acceptance of the nationalist idea, and their refusal to take a confrontational attitude in relation to it. They accept cultural plurality within the framework of Islamic values, and realize the importance of forging an alliance with the nationalist elements in a common confrontation with the forces of hegemony and globalization that try to eradicate autonomy, specificity, and the very idea of absolute values and transcendence.

The bearers of the new Islamic discourse are perfectly aware of the problem of the environment and the ecological crisis. Concepts such as “infinite progress” (which are central in Western modernity) are deemed by them as hostile to the very idea of boundaries and therefore to the idea of man and nature, and, eventually, to the idea of God. Such concepts are atheistic, not only in the religious, but also in the epistemological human sense. Thus, the bearers of the new discourse persistently search for new theories of development and new concepts of progress. They argue that Islamic theories of development should be radically different from the generalist Western theories promoted by “international” organizations, for such theories have largely proven to fail, and have led to an environmental crisis and the impoverishment of the masses. This is linked to the continuous criticism by the bearers of the new discourse of consumerism (the invitation to accelerate consumption, the revolution of rising expectations, etc.) and their realization of its danger to the environment, natural resources and man’s psychological and nervous systems.

The new Islamic discourse is aware of the basic philosophical question in the modern world, that is, the question of epistemological relativism that leads to nihilism. It replaces it with what may be termed “Islamic relativism,” which asserts that there is only one absolute, the Almighty. But His absoluteness implies the relativism of everything else. However, by virtue of the presence of the absolute God outside relative time, He becomes the center of the universe, bestowing on it purpose and meaning. This means that while the world is itself relative, it does not fall into relativism, nor does it become meaningless. Islamic relativism is a “relative relativism,” not an absolute one. Thus, there is a simultaneous awareness of the irreducibility of truth to matter and of the relativity and impermanence of some of its aspects. In other words, there is an awareness of a certain interrelatedness between the absolute and the relative that does not necessarily result in a nihilistic negation of the absolute. Any human discourse, the discourse of the Muslims included, is primarily and ultimately a set of endeavors, assiduously exerted by human beings, living within time and place, to comprehend the world of man and nature, and for each to interpret his

sacred text. But human hermeneutics, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse would argue, is different from the sacred text.

All this leads to a belief in the idea of *tadafu'* (gentle conflict–interplay) and *tadawul* (succession or alteration), and to a recognition of the dynamism of the world. *Tadafu'* does not necessarily mean conflict, even if it occasionally takes that form. *Tadawul* implies that permanence is one of God's traits and that everything else changes. It also implies that the world is not exclusively ours. On the concrete human level, this means accepting to co-exist with "the other" and to search for a common ground. Hence, the emergence of the modern *fiqh* of minorities, whether pertaining to non-Muslim minorities in Islamic societies or Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies. This *fiqh* stems from the Islamic concepts of justice and equality.

The bearers of the new Islamic discourse are aware of the danger of post-modernism, which manifests itself in an onslaught on all human and sacred texts. The Quran, for instance, is seen as a historical text, that can be interpreted in its entirety with reference to certain temporal circumstances and events. I believe that Justice Tariq Al-Bishri has made a major contribution in this field. Through his work, he has attempted to assert the stability of the sacred text. He has explained that the disagreement among religious jurists, in most cases, does not stem from their interpretation of the text, but rather from their disagreement regarding the nature of the human incident for which they were asked to issue a *fatwa* (legal judgment). This is a very important matter, because post-modernism involves an attack on anything stable or normative and involves a denial of any ultimate foundation.

I believe that the bearers of the new Islamic discourse are making a concerted effort to discover new middle analytical categories that distinguish the Islamic discourse from the discourse of Western modernity, characterized as it is by a feverish oscillation between two conflicting poles. The discourse of Western modernity demands either absolute certainty or absolute doubt; either a reason fully dominating the world, or a reason completely dominated by it (reduced to fluctuating matter and perpetual experimentation); and, finally, either a full presence (to use post-modernist idiom) or full absence. It is a discourse that shifts from rigid materialistic rationality to an equally rigid materialistic irrationality. The new Islamic discourse, on the other hand, tries to create a human space that goes beyond the materialistic extremes of Western modernity. In human matters, evidence does not have to be decisive and comprehensive, covering all possibilities and filling all gaps, and the chain of causality does not have to be organically or strictly linked. It is sufficient to marshal adequate evidence, and cause and effect need not be linked in a rigidly scientific, materialistic manner. This is what can be called in Arabic *sababiyah fadfadah*.

The closest equivalent to the word *fadfadah* in English is the word "loose" or "wide," neither of which truly expresses the meaning of the Arabic word that connotes a level of tolerance and a loosening of rigid organic unity, permitting a degree of freedom without necessarily leading to incoherence and fragmentation. This causality, in my view, is the essence of

the Islamic worldview; it asserts that A does not uniformly and absolutely lead to B, but that it does so by the will of God. “God willing” expresses the distance that separates the creator from the created, a distance which is actually a human space where man can exercise his freedom and use his reason, becoming thereby a responsible trustworthy creature. It is an affirmation of what is called in Islamic jurisprudence *bayniyah*, from the preposition *bayn*, which means “between.”

Dr. Bashir Nafi' has made the important point that the Islamic discourse in traditional Islamic societies is *shari'a* (religious law). *Shari'a* is indeed the very basis of both the old and new Islamic discourses. However, the new discourse attempts to resolve the problem of what I call the “duality of idiom.” *Shari'a*, Muslims believe, is open and has been capable of generating answers to collective and ultimate questions that have faced both Muslim communities and Muslim individuals throughout history. But the idiom of the *shari'a*, due to the historical and cultural discontinuity caused by the colonial invasion, has become inaccessible to many people. The bearers of the new Islamic discourse are trying to decode this idiom, so that it would be possible to extract the wisdom inherent therein and apply it to modern realities. This is exactly what one Muslim scholar did when he described “enjoining good and forbidding evil” as the Islamic idiom for expressing the problem of power sharing. This does not mean that the Western and Islamic idioms are synonymous. All that this scholar tried to explain is that this modern issue, expressed in a modern idiom, is the same issue that was addressed by the Islamic tradition through its own idiom. Such an *ijtihad* would undoubtedly help in increasing the generative power of the traditional religious worldview and help Muslims to stand firmly on their own doctrinal ground.

Due to the isolation of *shari'a* from political and social realities, many Muslims have come to view it as if it were a set of disjointed verdicts and opinions. However, the process of generating new answers to new challenges requires an awareness of the interrelatedness and integrity of the components that make up the *shari'a*, as well as an awareness of the fact that it expresses a worldview. This is what the new discourse is trying to accomplish. Undoubtedly, the traditional discipline of *maqasid* (purposes) deals with this issue. It is through this discipline that it is possible to distinguish between the whole and the part; the final and the temporary; the essential and the contingent; the permanent and the impermanent; and the absolute and the relative. What is needed is to develop this traditional discipline so as to attain an Islamic epistemological paradigm emanating from the Quran (the Muslim's sacred text) and the *sunna* (the Prophet's traditions). Such a paradigm would be hierarchical, its crown is the testimony that there is no god but Allah; this is succeeded by the primary Islamic of justice and equality; and then by the various lateral precepts. The scope of *ijtihad* can then be expanded without much apprehension of going astray. After all, *ijtihad* would take place within the framework of the hierarchical epistemological paradigm extracted (through a continuous process of *ijtihad*) from the Quran and the *sunna*. That paradigm would be

the only norm on the basis of which judgments are made and new interpretations are formulated.

One of the main traits of the new Islamic discourse is that its bearers realize the complex dimensions of the question of power, its various intricate mechanisms, and the relationship between local reality and international relations. The bearers of the new discourse also realize the complexity of the modern state as well as its power and ability to dominate and interfere in man's private life. They know it has become an octopus that has its own quantifying logic, which goes well beyond the will of those who are supposed to be running it, be they Islamists, Marxists or liberals. The role of bureaucracy in decision making, and in manipulating the ruler according to its whims and purposes, is quite clear to them. They realize too that the state has a variety of "security" apparati (information, education, etc.) that maintain a tight grip over the masses through the pleasure industry, the bombardment of the public with information and songs, and the rewriting of history. Thus, taking over the state does not solve the problems of the Muslims, as some of the bearers of the old discourse used to imagine. The heart of the matter is the necessity of setting bounds on the state and trimming its nails to enable the *umma* to be restored to its role as vicegerent. Hence their interest in the notion of the *umma* and the increasing attention to civil society and to the role of the *awqaf* (religious endowment), and their growing interest in new theories of the state and administration.

The new Islamic discourse, by virtue of its universality and interest in the cultural dimension of human phenomena and on the basis of its awareness of itself as a comprehensive worldview, pays great attention to aesthetics. It is not content with a *halal/haram* categorization of things. In fact, the bearers of the new Islamic discourse endeavor to develop a comprehensive vision of Islamic arts based on the Islamic worldview. Hence the new theoretical formulations, and the many applications in the field of architecture and various arts. This aspect of the new Islamic discourse is an expression of its creative critical approach to Western modernity and its generative approach to tradition. Many Islamic artists in the modern age, studying either in the West or in the East, have been exposed only to Western artistic views and methodologies. Nevertheless, many of them seek to break away from the modern Western worldview. While directing their critique to it and benefiting from the knowledge they acquired thus far, they attempt to generate artistic criteria and norms from within the tradition that translate themselves into Islamic artworks and buildings that follow an Islamic style, yet respond to the needs of the modern age. It is notable that these artists study the Islamic heritage from new angles; they rediscover it and its theoretical bases, using the analytical tools they learned in the West. They have also started showing interest in classical Islamic writings in this field.

One of the important aspects of the new Islamic discourse is the way its bearers read history. There is a rejection of the idea of unilinear concepts that presume the existence of a single terminal point and a final *telos* toward which the entire history of mankind is moving. This makes viewing the histories of all men through a single viewpoint and judging them through

one and the same standard inevitable. But this single viewpoint and standard are not, in reality, universal (as claimed), it is actually the viewpoint and standard of modern Western man. I believe that Dr. Bashir Nafi' has given us a concrete example of this rejection of unilinear history by presenting a reading of Islamic history from within, without importing analytical categories from outside the system. The reading process here is at once explanatory, empathetic and critical. Dr. Bashir has read the documents that Western historians have not read, or probably have read but marginalized, for they deemed them unimportant. Thus, he has succeeded in offering a new view. This includes his emphasis on the role of Sufism and the Sufi *tariqa* (guild) which other historians, trained within the secularist tradition, usually unconsciously overlook or consciously disregard. They view Sufism as mere superstition, whereas Dr. Bashir Nafi' finds the study of Sufism and Sufi schools an essential prologue to understanding Islamic history. In some of his studies, Justice Tariq al-Bishri also explains the importance of studying the Sufi *tariqas* in order to comprehend the history of modern Egypt.

One can say that there are scores of the bearers and promoters of the new Islamic discourse including Malik Bennabi, Naquib al-Attas, Fahmi Huwaidi, Rachid Ghannouchi, Munir Shafiq, Adel Hussein, Tariq Al-Bishri, Dr. Abdelhalim Ibrahim Abdelhalim, Dr. Rasim Badran, Dr. Salim Al-'Awwa, Dr. Bashir Nafi', the *IIIT* group including Dr. Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, Dr. Taha Jabir Al-'Ulwani, Dr. Abdulhamid Abu Sulayman, Dr. Hisham Al-Talib and Dr. Jamal Al-Barzinji, who are the founders of the Institute. Of those associated with IIIT, one can also mention Dr. Muna Abulfadl, Dr. Dr. Sayf Yusuf, Dr. Nasr Arif, Dr. Usama Al-Qaffash, Ms. Hiba Ra'uf, Dr. Al-Bayumi Ghanim, Fuad Sa'id, Hisham Ja'far, Dr. Aly Gomaa and Dr. Lu'ay As-Safi. The bearers and promoters of this discourse also include: Dr. Jamal `Atiyah (and the contributors to Al-Muslim Al-Mu`asir), Azzam Tamimi, (and Liberty for the Muslim World group), and Al-Habib Al-Mukni (and Al-Insan group). There are, undoubtedly, scores of others inside and outside the Arab world who are contributing to the crystallization of the new discourse. It is also notable that many intellectuals among the Islamic minorities in the West have started to contribute quite creatively to this new Islamic discourse. One may count in this category Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ziauddin Sardar, Ali Mazrui, and Parviz Manzur. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list. Such a list would be compiled by a research institute that can assign the task to a group of researchers. Perhaps what is required now is to deepen our understanding and knowledge of the central premise of this discourse, and to initiate a process of epistemological condensation by listing the names and publications of those who bear or promote this discourse.

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