Religion and Modernity

Although we find a wide range of historical reports in books on theology, philosophy, and sociology on the experience that the Western Christian world has gained from the phenomenon of modernity, our experience of what is called modernity has been decidedly different. The Western world has largely been oblivious to issues of Muslim societies even though our problems have never really found a fair platform within their media. However, if an atmosphere of a fair exchange of mutual experiences had been possible, a big stride would also have been possible towards the attainment of mutual empathy, understanding, and acceptance.

The Western Christian world witnessed and experienced the emergence and growth of the seeds of modernity right in its own home ground, whereas we first encountered this phenomenon when it had already borne fruit in the West and consequently picked and chose from its harvest. The Western world has been living with modernity for a few centuries now. Although the aim of this article is not to judge and evaluate this particular issue, it would however not be possible to study the relationship between modernity and religion without initially delving into this aspect of the heart of the Western Christian world, giving it a new dictate and thereby inviting it to participate in new order, consequently rendering only a tiny but ornamental niche for the purpose of worship and devotion, is the drama of modern history that Nietzsche was perhaps justified in calling the tragedy of history.

Whatever we choose to label this part of history, groups - affect a tiny fraction - in Muslim societies, we too have undeniably come to share of it in the past hundred years or so. Our encounter with modernity occurred at time when religion was viewed as defense against the oncoming onslaught of modernity.

Freud was of the opinion that the ancient pre-modern society was dealt three fatal blows with the onset of the modern age. The first blow was dealt by Galileo and Copernicus with their cosmic theories (derived mainly from the works of Islamic scientists); the second blow came from Lamarck and Darwin in the field of biology; and the third one was in the field of psychology that claimed that the intellect was drifting island in the ocean of the forces of the sub-conscious.

The intent here is not to advocate or to refute Freud's statement, nor does an evaluation fall directly into the context of the present discussion, but if at all, it could be said that the third blow was not inflicted upon the ancient society but rather on the body and the soul of modernity.

If we classify the history of modernity according to the Freudian criteria, it was around the time of the second blow on the European medieval society and the pre-modern world in general that the so-called elites in Muslim societies were introduced to the phenomenon of modernity that brought along a host of problems for us. Many terms and concepts that came to be translated into our languages did not really carry the meanings that they actually held in their languages of origin. To quote some examples, the term "progress" came to be translated as taraqqi while the term "liberty" came to be translated as hurriyyat. Although these translations were not altogether incorrect, the fresh implications of the terms like taraqqi and hurriyyat that were already in use in the language of our mysticism, ethics, and theosophy could not easily be discerned from their older perceptions.

Thus, if someone were to raise any questions in the realms of taraqqi or hurriyyat (progress or liberty), he would be accused of being against taraqqi and hurriyyat which were the pre-requisites for the independence of man. Also the term "modernity" came to be translated as tajaddud, which already held a specific meaning and implication in philosophy, mysticism, and theology. However, the implications held by this term in those fields are not adaptive to the concept of modernity and the sense in which this term was used in the other fields can even prove as barriers to the proper understanding of the nature of modernity.

One of the misunderstandings that arise from such loose translations is that many a historical truths are converted into mere words or intangible concepts. Let us remind ourselves that modernity is very much a historical reality that has more or less actively permeated the entire planet in varying degrees whereas the meaning of the term tajaddud as it exists in our dictionaries and our memories is rather neutral in implication and does not affect any change. Thus, if tajaddud is related to, as a mere concept, then it would be no problem for religion and modernity (tajaddud) to co-exist but if we were to refer to the historical meaning of modernity, it would be rather difficult to understand it within the context of religion.

No one can claim that religion and modernity have been indifferent and unbiased towards each other and neither can it be implied that all the advocates of modernity were opposed to religion. On the other hand, it is not as if all the religious authorities have been opposed to modernity or have struggled against it. However, modernity - according to its advocates - has changed man's relationship with his fellowmen, with the world, and in some cases with the origin of the world.

Whatever this relationship is, it is definitely not a religious one. At the same time there are many groups of people that look at things through the window of modernity, even though they continue to adhere to some sorts of religious beliefs and rituals. However, in the world of

modernity, religion is quite different from its original concept, or in other words, one could say that in modernity, religion has been interpreted differently. Despite the fact that the founders of modern society and modernity during the Renaissance period did hold religious beliefs and were concerned with religion and some of them even lost their lives for their lives for their religious beliefs; however, they chose to overlook religion at the time of actually designing the modern world.

But, religion is not a thing that can be overlooked, and thus, in order to preserve the necessary harmony in the modern society, religion had to be made to synthesize with modernity. Religious reforms and new interpretations of the Judeo-Christian Holy Scriptures were some of the attempts in the way of forging the required synthesis. Then it was the modernist philosopher Immanuel Kant's turn to introduce the concept of "religion within the limits of reason alone". It were these very changes and developments in Europe that resulted in the eventual expansion of modernity and those who attempted to re-interpret religion and to evaluate it with the new reasoning did not have any specific purpose in their minds and were not thinking in terms of resolving any civilization issues and were not even looking at paving the path for economic and social development. But the communities that adopted modernity from the West, on the whole, had three distinct types of approaches towards it. The first approach involved the products and the effects of modernity, which generally invited an attitude of skepticism and doubt. The second approach was an unconditional, open-arm acceptance of all the aspects of modernity and a complete surrender to this new phenomenon as well as to the invitation to an unquestioned imitation of the West which manifested in different forms. Of course, there soon appeared those who advocated the traditions and religions. Finally, the third approach which involved the study of the nature of modernity. However, our approach towards modernity is only one side of the whole issue; and the more important question would be concerning the effects that modernity has had on us. In reply to the efforts of those Muslims who had welcomed modern science, people like Ernest Renan - who had placed modernity against religion and religiosity - alleged that Islam was opposed to science and modernity.

Since the name of Ernest Renan has come up in this discussion, it would not be out of place here to bring to mind the debate between Renan and the great pan-Islamist reformer, Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi that took place in Paris. In one of his earlier speeches, Renan had claimed that Islam is opposed to science and modernity and Sayyid Jamal al-Din responded to this comment. However, their debate did not really end conclusively and in fact, even the point of dispute and disagreement was not actually clarified. Sayyid Jamal al-Din was defending a

religion that was not in any dispute with modernity while Ernest Renan who had no idea of the harmony between Islam and reason, this appeared as wishful thinking.

Renan believed that modernity would reach its zenith only when any and all kinds of sacred beliefs would come to be eliminated and in his opinion, only modern science would ultimately prove to be the answer to the needs of mankind. He claimed that science would not only be the answer to the needs of the world and mankind but that even the issues related to God or divinity would come to be answered only through science and reason. Therefore, Renan did not really find it necessary to place religion after science and reason.

As far as he was concerned, science was the only answer and when he was questioned by the French writer, Romain Rolland, as to why man's hopes, desires, and sentiments did not find any place in his book, The Future of Science, Renan answered with his customary pessimistic arrogance that man's attachments and hopes were of no significance and that what was of sole importance was the progress of science. Later, when Betrand Russell whose thoughts and ideas were generally close to those of Renan, used the term "the scientific hell", he too, probably held extreme ideas like those of Renan.

Renan was referring to the cultural-ethical results of the principles of intellectualism of Europe in the eighteenth century and beyond. In his opinion, if perfect scientific knowledge could be attained through modernity then man could take the place of God and could provide a systematized organization to the world.

Modernity has extracted its power from this belief and in the world of modernity, nothing is held as sacred or absolute and nothing should ever leave the precincts of research, science, technology, and art. It would not be right for us to try to understand the meaning of modernity by referring to the ideas of Ernest Renan because he had converted modernity into an ideology and speaks of it as though he is propagating its worship. This, however, does not mean that he was altogether opposed to the views of the other thinkers and authorities on this subject and held totally different views. Renan was an ardent admirer of reason and the power of modernity and was not the philosopher of modernity.

Kant is the philosopher of modernity. Even prior to the actualization of modernity, he had already described the qualities and nature of this phenomenon. This means that although, as a rule, a phenomenon can only be described once it is actualized and has taken shape, in a reply to the triple question of "who are we", "what should we do", and "what can we hope for", Kant had more or less described the essence of the modern man and the modern world. Hegel and Marx followed in his footsteps. Kant strengthened the foundation of subjectivity and presented a new theory according to which and through which it is man who grants everything its form

and that it would not be possible to say anything about such matters that fall out of the realms of man's power and perception and whatever had thus far been said in these areas are the outcomes of an error.

Besides this, he also wrote the book, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone (1793). It must however be mentioned that in his book, Kant has not rejected religion and has rather argued on how religion can be synthesized with modern reason. Renan believed that modernity has no boundaries and that everything is permissible in it.

According to him the ancient societies and religions believed in do's and don'ts, the lawful and the unlawful, sanctity and sacredness but the modern society is free from such restrictions. It was later on that Max Weber declared that the world has found a rational form and that nothing holds the power of enchantment anymore. Renan's problem was that he had not yet freed himself from the enchantment of modern science and unlike Kant he could not think of religion within the bounds of reason.

He was unaware that modernity is in itself a religion or at least intends to take on the appearance of a religion. However, modernity does not prohibit reference to the divine books and Law, provided that such a law is in conformity with the conditions of modernity and fits into its framework. Modernity considers the laws of nature as the valid laws. In the realm of modernity, any laws - divine or non - divine - should be made to conform to natural laws; but these laws do not govern man externally.

In modernity, nature does not hold the same meaning as was held by the Greeks. In fact, nature is translated into the "laws of nature', because nature is an objective issue. Hegel was of the opinion that it is in our quest for gaining dominance over nature that we get to rediscover ourselves. Marx, too, spoke in terms of the "humanization" of nature and the "naturalization" of the human. Both these views are rooted in the philosophy of Kant according to which , it is in understanding nature that man is able to rediscover himself well as the limits of science and the power of reason.

It is through this rediscovery that he reaches maturity and is freed from all kinds of external bondage; he does not any longer seek anything outside of himself; he does not abide by the laws formulated by others but instead undertakes to be the lawmaker himself, and follows the laws formulated by him. The modernity that Kant envisaged was not opposed to religiosity; rather, in his form of modernity, Christianity was manifestly stripped off its intrinsic sacredness and was in fact used as a piece of decoration in the secularized world.

Despite all that has been discussed thus far, we have not yet reached much clarity on questions like: "who is the modern man" "what is modernity", and "what is its relationship with

religion". If we were to ask people who have no background in philosophy, theology, or similar disciplines for their idea of modernity, they would most likely indicate towards the living conditions of the modern world as well as the customs and traditions of the Western world and would probably say:

"It is the Western man who is modern; and modernity is his way of living". In other words, in the common opinion of such people, modernity is equated to the externals that can be found in the modern world and, thus, they generally do not hesitate to accept it. Of course, there have been people who have not really welcomed the Western commodities. Yet what we see today in most developing countries seeking modernization in terms of their acceptance of such Western commodities that suit them and the rejection of the ones that are unsuitable to them, is nothing but a transformed version of the earlier stance.

In the earliest encounters between the traditional societies and the modern world, the leaders of these societies were very skeptical and dubious of anything Western, viewing it as a threat to religion, religious beliefs, and traditions. However, as modernity gradually spread and took people widely under its influence, introducing them to the modern commodities, not only was it no longer rejected but it was now even looked upon with admiration. There were yet some people who believed that modernity had both good and bad features, out of which the good ones should be accepted while the bad ones should be avoided.

This is undoubtedly a positive stance that cannot and should not be rejected. However, one could and should question the practical applicability of such a stance, and how and to what extent such a selection could really be possible. One may probably even encounter some of selecting between the good and the bad features, what other option would we then be left with? Would we not reach an apparent stalemate - either accept the whole package, consisting both good and bad features, or then abstain from partaking in any of it whatsoever? It appears as if there is no middle way between these two options. But this may not really be the case and we are not perhaps actually standing on a crossroad at all.

Or we could even argue that it has not been proved that the modern world and modernity are simply a package of technical-scientific objects. But if it is claimed that modernity is a single historical unit then our task becomes rather difficult because in that case, it would not be possible to split or segregate anything from a single history and single world; and moreover, any inter-relation and scientific-cultural interaction would become impossible or would at least prove to be extremely difficult. At the same time, we see through the course of the history of modernization that many things from the Western world have reached the various parts of the globe but it cannot yet be said that modernity as a whole has been realized

anywhere in the world. As we know, even an authority like Jurgen Habermas is of the opinion that all the possibilities of modernity have not yet been actualized.

This issue has sometimes more or less been an area of concern for the pioneers of modernity in some of the Islamic countries, including Iran. In one of his most outstanding papers that has been published under the title, "A Discourse on Education", Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi says: "it is now forty years since the Ottoman government has established modern schools but has yet to achieve its expected results." Sayyid Jamal al-Din was of the opinion that the adopters of the modern European system of the opinion had not taken into consideration the foundation of this system.

As a matter of fact, the mere appreciation and adoption of some of the aspects and things of the modern world and modernity does not necessarily mean that one has entered the world of modernity and even if one does manage to do so, the world of modernity does not become native to him and he does not experience solace and tranquility in it.

There are many people who are infatuated by some of the externals of the modern world without really having much in common with modernity itself and there are yet others who actually belong to the modern world or may be share some sort of a relationship with it but still do not approve of or appreciate all the externals of that world. It is very interesting to note here how a great and famous writer-poet of the older days had actually composed a poem eulogizing the railways and how a modern poet finds nothing but a "purple scream" in a train!

Thus, belonging to the world of modernity and simply being an admirer of the trappings of the modern world are two different things. When introduced to any society, with any historical background, the trappings of the modern world may always find some takers and admirers. But let us not forget here that we are not being taken to display of modernity from which we can pick, choose, and buy what we wish to.

In fact, no one is even seeking out our opinion on modernity. It must, however, be accepted without any hesitation that religious-minded people are very much in a position to pass a verdict on modernity. However, what should be particularly taken into consideration is that modernity is not compliant with every religion or with every form of religion. In fact, before permitting any entry into its world, modernity tends to first, before permitting any entry into its world, modernity tends to first mold the religion according to its own principles. It is thus not surprising that there are people who advocate that religion should comply with modernity. But is something like this really possible? It has been said that modernity is a city whose nights are lit up with neon lights and whose first great poet is Baudelaire.

It this happens to be the case, it would be rather difficult to modernize a city by manipulating

the views and beliefs of its people; and who anyway can command such a sway over the views and beliefs of the people? With his poem and "the street lights", thanks to which there is now no difference between the night and the day, Charles Baudelaire has laid the foundation of the modern city. However, there is a very distinct difference between the beliefs of the people of this city and those of the pre-modern world because wherever modernity steps foot, it changes and alters the beliefs, the customs, and the earlier traditions.

Again, if we were to believe that modernity can be said to have taken reality wherever certain apparent changes have occurred, we would be making a big mistake because anyone holding such a belief would firstly have misunderstood the order of things and would have, secondly, erroneously believed that in the course of the history of mankind anyone and everyone has the power to do anything he wishes to or can alter whatever he desires. As the famous Persian poet Hafız says:

Na har keh chehreh bar afrukht delbari danad
na har keh Ayeneh sazad sekandari danad
Whoever furbishes the face may not be a captivator of hearts.
Neither does any mirror-maker is the all-conquering Alexander.

Modernity is a specific kind of relationship between man, the world, and the origin of the world and this specific kind of relationship has manifested in modern science and technology by eclipsing the divine order and through the categorization of arts under the realm of aesthetics. Thus, modernity is not a matter of personal opinion or taste and being modern cannot be translated into some kind of psychological or ethical state of being. Although it is true that the modern man is the one who adapts to the call and changes of his times, however, the age and times of modernity cannot really be confined to a limited time period. Thus, what we can deduce from the above discussion is that being "modern" is equal to being up-to-date. A few years back, a banner adorned the Gallerie Lafayette in Paris that read: "Live by the latest fashion and express your own special taste in choosing your clothes and personal effects". According to this statement, in order to express one's personality one has to become like the others. But this paradox somehow needs to be eliminated. First of all, it should be kept in mind that people are not free to go by any and every fashion, and that these fashions are solely dictated by modernity and the modern world. Secondly, even "being you" and owning a personality holds a special connotation in the modern world. Thus, having a personality and being fashion conscious are both limited within the conditions of modernity. A visitor to the Gallerie Lafayette is free to buy and wear any outfit that he wishes. This freedom of his stretches even beyond the confines of the galleries. However, it would be

wishful thinking if he decided to leave the precincts of the city of modernity whose poet is Baudelaire and yet be considered a modern man. Modernity is not a personal opinion, view, or taste but when we translated it as tajaddud, we also attributed all the meanings that tajaddud held in our language to modernity as well. Although this translation cannot be considered as incorrect, as mentioned earlier, in the West the term "modernity" has been applied to such phenomena, one of whose pre-requisites is "progress", which has been translated by us as taraqqi.

Yet when modernity is translated as tajaddud, in all probability, it is assumed that the meaning of both these terms is same in all respects and that they can be used interchangeably. Modernity is a term that appeared in the nineteenth century whereas tajaddud is an old term that has been in use in our fields of philosophy, mysticism, and theology for centuries, and whenever we use the term tajaddud, all the meanings that the term carried in this term tends to take the place of our relationship with modernity.

Let us not forget that our problem is not restricted to the translation of the terms "modern" and "modernity" but we are faced with this same problem even in the translation of most of the terms related to the fields of philosophy and theology. Modernity is not only a term, the meaning of which can be understood by simply translating the word. Modernity is in fact a phenomenon that itself determines the meaning of certain concepts and it cannot be treated merely as one more concept among those that are already at our disposal. We could say that modernity is history; albeit one which was not related to all the peoples of the world initially but has now come to prove to be the history of the entire world.

There are many who believe that since man is known to have been capable of altering things to suit his own views, knowledge and actions, the same can also be possible in the case of modernity. They think it is possible to carry modernity along with them wherever they with whatever they want, or in short, to hold it under their own command. They are oblivious of the fact that this has only been possible so far as the material paraphernalia and the externals of modernity are concerned. Modernity has provided the conditions within which man's potential has been unfolded and if these conditions were to be withdrawn, his power, too, would be diminished.

Nietzsche had rightly predicted that man would lose his power in the final stages of modernity. Man has expressed himself to his full capacity in the world of modernity and now that the time of his power has come to an end, sitting in nostalgia will not prove to be very helpful. And perhaps, this indulgence in the past glory may even become a subject of ridicule in the future. It is high time that all those who have been fruitlessly dreaming about the utopia of modernity,

blaming the opponents - individuals as well as groups - of modernity for their failure realized their own inability.

Evidently, if a small minority is able to waylay their progress, it would only go on to prove their own disability because if someone weak were oblivious of his weakness, he would perhaps prove to be dangerous in word and action and would soon become an object of ridicule. But then can it ever be possible to turn aside from modernity or to even be indifferent towards it? Man is now not in a situation to be able to ignore modernity or to turn a blind eye toward it and even those who talk of post-modern conditions do not claim to have exited from the realm of modernity. The post-modern conditions are the continuity of modernity, the only difference being that the seeds of the downfall of modernity have manifested themselves in it. So it is possible to live in modernity without actually considering it an absolute value and the criteria for everything.

From what has been discussed thus far, it can be seen that modernity is pretty neutral towards religion and in it religiosity and agnosticism are both viewed equally. Modernity is a city whose founders, even if they were religious people like Thomas Moore who have given up their lives for their beliefs, have not been people who really held religion in very high esteem while some of them have even categorically opposed religion. Their opposition is normally attributed to their own individual or personal choices but what is important to note is that the rise of a modern world order with its agnostic thinking has taken place and the modern man today views life from an agnostic angle, in spite of the fact that some religious beliefs continue to linger on.

As a matter of fact, the understanding of the relationship between religion and modernity is not a difficult one and even if it sometimes appears to be difficult, it is mainly because there are some people who desire and claim to be able to create a marriage between modernity and religion, and to live with both of them simultaneously. And even if someone points out the difficulties in such a union, he is criticized from all sides. Some call him an enemy of science and tajaddud while others claim that he considers religiosity as impossibility.

And if one believes that it will continue to exist forever and ever, he should either turn away from religion or then should at least bring about a compromise between the two (both of which options would amount to the same thing). Such a person should realize that in his view, the world of modernity is no more one of the possible worlds, but that its existence is indispensable; and that in this indispensable world, people or at least some people can live and behave in any which manner they choose to; and no matter what their belief systems, they can influence the course and the management of general affairs. They say that there are people

who are scholars, engineers, and technocrats that have an effective share in the management of technological affairs who also hold their own set of religious beliefs; thus, it is possible for religiosity to survive safe and secure in the world of modernity.

The question that arises here is: What rules and regulations do these people follow? No one can claim that it is not possible to hold religious beliefs and to abide by one's religious obligations and practices in the modern society. However, it is one thing to hold religious beliefs and practices and it is another thing to view the world from a religious angle and follow the laws of religion in one's daily practical affairs. Modernity is certainly not in favour of allowing religion to have a say in the management of affairs. Or in other words, in the wisdom of modernity it is man's word and law that prevails, and anything beyond that is myth, invalid, and unsolicited.

This means that if there is a future for man, he is not destined or fated to stay on in this world; and this world is not eternal. No matter how difficult our task may appear, the horizons of possibility are open to man. If in the world of modernity, despite the fact that everything is constantly in a state of change and renewal, tomorrow does not hold much difference from today and everything repeats itself, yet one can hope in a day after tomorrow that will prove to be different from today and tomorrow.

Conclusion

Religion will prevail and is preserved in all times, including the age of modernity. Even though at the time when modernity appears to stands strong and powerful, religious people and religious thinkers can be found in all nooks and corners of the modern world.

Just as the modern world and its great happenings shook the foundation of the ancient world, the happenings of the future thinking will shake the foundations of modernity; tremors of which can already be experienced. Post-modernism is not an independent world and post-modern thinkers do not consider themselves as the thinkers of the future world and do not claim to be religious minded either, since they consider themselves as the spokespersons of the latter part of modernity - or the period in which the modern man does not anymore believe in the principles of modernity. The absence and concealment of religion in the modern world has perhaps been effective in the weakening of the principles of modernity and the emergence of post-modern thinking.

At the same time, there is no necessary relationship between religion and the post-modern thinking and we can clearly oppose religion and some others consider this opposition as the main symbol of modernity. Therefore, we see that religion has had a fundamental role in the destiny of all periods of history and society, including the modern world. Although this

discussion may appear to resemble theological and sociological arguments, the views presented in this article are of a philosophical nature and the aim has not been to discover how a union can be forged between modernity and religion or to create a compromise and peace among the two.

Anyone attempting such a task has invariably stepped into the realm of ideology. In a recent discussion with a couple of colleagues and friends on the relationship between religion and modernity, this writer questioned them on their views on the unfriendly attitude of modernity towards religion, to which one of them answered: "Modernity is neutral and indifferent towards religion." The other one replied: "Perhaps the answer would be as Prophet Jesus (A.S.) had supposedly said according to the Gospel, 'Love thy enemy as thy friend'."