

The challenge of Modernization in the Muslim World

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The word modernization has been used fairly loosely by academics and journalists. It is generally accepted that modernization or Westernization or in other words technological development, is an essential prerequisite for achieving prosperity or even acceptable living standards in the Third World to which most Muslim countries belong. The problem is to define modernization to see what it means exactly and to set realistic limits to the changes that this process envisages.

Europe or the western world became itself subject to 'Modernization' in the period following the Protestant Reformation and the geographical discoveries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is important to remember that the basic urge for innovation and for scientific thinking came as a result of the break with historic religion in Europe. The questioning of traditional Catholic beliefs and practices established the basis for scientific enquiry. The defiance of Papal authority which had held the Christian world in thrall for well over a thousand years let forth a great spirit of adventure which resulted in the discovery of the New World and extended the control of Europe over the non-European world of America, Asia, Africa and the Far East. Thus for the last five centuries or so Europe has dominated the world because of its scientific knowledge and technological know-how. Its effect on the other four continents has been profound. Europe has exercised direct political control over the world and has created the modern economy which makes it impossible for the world to exist without becoming a part of this 'modern economy' and use of 'modern technology' thus even though direct political control by Europe over the world has receded due

mainly to the western civilization's own conflicts. (it must be made clear that both capitalist and Socialist worlds are a part of the western civilization, the basic principles on which they are found being the same), the world is still bound by the necessities and the norms of the western world. Without a doubt the most serious problem facing the Muslim world today is the challenge posed by the necessity to adjust to the technological world and to the accompanying influence from that world that has such a profound implication for the Islamic Societies.

The curious fact is that the Islamic world and Western Christian world stood confronting each other right at the beginning of the modern age. The age of the Crusades and the resulting interaction between the Arab Muslims and mediaeval Europe served as one of basic reasons for the expansion of the mediaeval European mind and its questioning of the Church dogma. That encounter led Europe to the revolutions of Reformation and Renaissance and to Rationalism and the Scientific Revolution and then Europe came into a position where for the last two hundred years it implies for the Islamic world the kind of revolution for which the Islamic world was a major causative factor in the 13th and 14th centuries. In the words of Arnold Toynbee - "In that life and death struggle Islam, like Christendom before it triumphantly survived. The Central Asian invaders were converted, the Frankist invaders were expelled, and, in territorial terms, the only enduring result of the Crusades was the incorporation in the western world of the two outlying Islamic territories of Sicily and Andalusia. Of course the enduring economic and cultural results of the Crusader temporary political acquisitions from Islam were far more important. Economically and culturally, conquered Islam took her savage conquerors captive and introduced the arts of civilization into the rustic life of Latin Christendom."

The next encounter between the west and Islam though at first sight leaves the Muslims victorious as the Ottoman armies laid siege to Vienna, had long term implications which were to prove disastrous for the Islamic world. For though the Ottomans occupied most of south-east Europe they failed to take Vienna and occupy the heartland of Christian civilization in Germany or Italy. More-

over while the energies of the Muslim Empire were engaged for the next few centuries in border warfare with Christian kingdoms of East Europe, the rest of the western world was free to make itself the masters of seas and therefore potential masters of the world. They discovered and occupied America and entered the Muslim heritage in India, Indonesia and Africa, and having encircled Islam attached in its heartland of Arabia and the Ottoman Empire. Thus the present challenge of the west or of modernism to Islam began its serious onslaught more than two hundred years ago. It destroyed the traditional Islamic order of the Empire and Caliphate of the Ottomans seized control of the Arab world, Africa and India and is now throughout the Muslim world engaged in a direct struggle with the people. Western civilization in its present phase is aiming at nothing less than the incorporation of all mankind in a single great society, and the control of every thing in the earth, air and sea which mankind can turn to account by means of modern western technique. At the same time the west is engaged in consuming other surviving civilizations, the Hindu, the Far Eastern and the African societies. In this situation the west is armed in a very advantageous position. The west is superior in technique of arms, in the technique of economic life and has a very strong will and inner strength.

What does this challenge of westernization and modernism mean for an Asian Muslim society like ours. It means in short, the total transformation of the life style of our people. It means urbanization and mechanization on a vast scale. The rapidity of communications and the ubiquity of mass media is having an electrifying effect on traditional societies in the literal and figurative sense. Mediums as powerful as television and radio are a great and insidious force in the changing of the traditional life of our country and people. On television for instance, one may make long speeches on Islam but the immediate and dazzling effect is that of the Coca-Cola advertisement. Through its control of the techniques of economy the west can in reality control our way of life and our future development in a very real sense. We may long to give Islamic traditional education to the people and we may invest in beautiful *madressahs* in every village but every *Hari* knows that unless his

son acquires western techniques in an Engineering College he cannot be sure of earning a living. This is the basis of the challenge that faces us, the Muslim world and the other non-western civilization.

What is the nature of our response and what is it going to be in the future? Historically a society under such dire challenge has responded in two ways. Thus one way is that of resistance and resort to fundamentalism. The other is adoption of the techniques of the opponent and using them to save oneself from total subjugation. Both these responses have been made by the Muslim world in the last two hundred years.

The fundamentalist reaction was the first response to the onslaught of the west which came in the early period in form of armed invasion. Fundamentalist revivals occurred in Arabian Peninsula as *Wahabism*, in North Africa as the *Sanussi* movement and in Sudan as the *Mahdist* movement. In the Indo-Pak Subcontinent as the Mujahid movement of Syed Ahmed Brelvi was of a similar kind. But these reactions have proved temporary and doomed to failure—the fight between swords and machine guns has proved totally unequal. When the fundamentalists adopt guns and western arms they have already begun to compromise with the western civilization and that is the thin end of the wedge. The conclusion is obvious that preservation of a traditional life style intact and un-contaminated is impossible.

The other response of societies hard pressed by the west has been to adopt the technique of western societies in order to preserve themselves. The Ottoman Empire which had for centuries confronted the west when severely wounded, brought about a metamorphosis and as modern Turkey she has jettisoned many of her traditions and has made a deliberate effort to transform itself into a western nation. After its defeat at the hands of western powers Ataturk and his friends felt that by adopting the modes and manners of west they could discover the magic formula which would make Turkey a powerful modern nation. Less drastically attempt was made by Egypt to adopt the western technique and it may be said in the 19th and 20th centuries most Muslim countries have been following the policy of adaptation although not in a thought out or

systematic manner. The result has been that there is confusion in the development process of these countries. Education falls between two stools of Islamic tradition and modern methods and there is polarisation between the tradition bound rural areas and the swiftly westernizing and industrializing urban centres. In fact these countries which are subject to the stress and strain of the western challenge develop a kind of schizo-phrenic response with different pressure groups and schools of thought pulling in different directions. Moreover adaptation in this sense is merely imitative and not creative, so that even if it succeeds, it is simply apt to enlarge the quantity of machine made goods of the western society and not release any new creative energy in the people. Secondly this uninspiring success benefits only a small minority, but the nation as a whole would become the proletariat of the western exploiter nations. All that would be achieved therefore would be mere material survival and the nation would not be able to make any creative contribution to the further growth of civilization.

On the present showing therefore taking into consideration the inexorable forces of economy imposed on the rest of the world by the west the inevitable fate for the Muslim nations and other so-called developing countries appears to be "not to be fossilized nor to be assimilated but to be submerged by being enrolled in that vast, cosmopolitan, ubiquitous proletariat which is one of the most portentous by-products of the Westernization of the world." Is this then to be our fate? Can western civilization with its basic weakness of racism and immoderation destroy a superior moral force like Islam? This depends entirely on inner strength of the Muslim peoples. It seems to me that adoption of western technological civilization by Muslims has failed where it has not been instinctively selective, that is where the adopting people have seen it from outside. In other words where education, democratic institutions and other such elevated products of civilization such as clothes, manners etc. have been adopted without discrimination.

The essential thing is to be selective and to understand the west from the inside. To be familiar with its history, thought, mechanism and *raison d'être*. In this regard the Muslim peoples who are best able to fill these requirements are those who have had

the longest contacts with the west and these are obviously the people who have been subjected to western colonial rule for over hundred years. These ex-colonial Muslim peoples who include Algerians, Egyptians, the Indo-Pakistanis, Indonesians, Malaysians and others have had the opportunity to absorb not only the thought and the philosophy of the west but also to see its operational methods from the inside: the methods of administration, modern statecraft and the political solutions of the problems of an industrialized society. At the same time these Muslims still have within their grasp, although tenuously, Islamic morality and the Islamic values of life. If it is at all possible to combine the two and produce a superior civilization these are the people who could be pioneers in this field. We have historical examples of the interaction of Muslim and non-Muslim people producing some of civilization's most remarkable fruits. Such interaction in Sind introduced the world to Indian mathematics and philosophy and such interaction in Syria and Byzantium produced the Renaissance. If such a true meeting of the minds were to take place the world could see the rise of civilization which could be the synthesis of spiritual, material and moral values. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished indeed - but for this the Muslim peoples would have to shed the cant and hypocrisy that has hidden the true light of Islam to relive Islam in its essence, to have the courage to discard the trivial and to grasp the permanent values. If this could be done, western civilization could then be judged in the light of these values by the people instinctively and such a sifting would take place as would surely produce a new superior civilization.