On the Arab-Islamic Thought's Need for Authentic Modernity

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May God guide us towards the rigt path

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*B*y the nature of his making and existence, his self-awareness and sense of responsibility within the small and larger community, Man is perpetually striving to advance himself and renew his life, in the ways made possible by the times in which he lives and his capacities, and as dictated by the conditions of progress, provided these do not clash with his innate nature and its prerequisites, and most importantly with his faith in the Creator. He evolves within a framework that preserves the individual's freedom and dignity, and those of his close or extended community.

In order to achieve this, Man needs a contemporary model of thought and tireless efforts to grasp what this thought imposes at all levels and on all fronts, whether political, economic, social or cultural, and what the latter interface involves in the way of thought, literature and art and the creativity necessitated by all these levels.

For Man to live his times and interact positively with them, i.e. in ways that fulfill his aspirations to progress and prosperity, he must rely on what was right in his past and blow dust off what is obsolete and defective. This not only enables him to recognize what he aspires to, but also to open up to the world and what is new in it, the changes unfolding within this world and what he can contribute to enrich it.

However, 'new' is not meant to refer to the technological innovations and inventions abounding around the world, often easy to consume and within everyday reach of the general public. Instead, it relates to the cultural element and the stances it requires vis-à-vis identity components, particularly in reference to history, customs, traditions and everything that constitutes or is related to heritage.

This calls for a reflection of this self and its components and what governs it in the way of conscience and mindset, keeping in mind the extent of its readiness to cleanse itself from the negatives and impurities that have accumulated in that heritage, and freeing itself from the constraints that weigh down on the custodian of this heritage in his relation to the superior 'Other' who prevails through the pattern of his culture and behavior. This Other goes further to

project the universality of this pattern and leads many thinkers to fully preoccupy themselves with his model and dedicate effort to understanding and solving its problems in order to keep pace with it. It would have been more worthwhile for them to expend these efforts and attention on researching their own heritage issues which they relegate to others –who are often enemies- at the risk of their causing confusion, distortion, provocation and sensationalism, and perhaps engage in intimidation and threats.

From this angle we tackle Western modernity and the attitudes adopted towards it and what followed it, and to the possibility of finding a model of modernity that could serve as an alternative that would free Arab Islamic thought from the dilemma and turmoil it experiences, particularly after its failure to resolve the problem of authenticity and modernity in discussions that have been ongoing for a very long time.

When we look at the notion of Western modernity – though other terms may be used to refer to it such as modernism - we will find that it was associated with modernization which pursued enlightenment and intellectual revival within the context of what was appropriate at the time of its emergence, and as it freed itself from the backwardness of Middle Ages, from the

power of the Church, the tyranny of feudalism and all other manifestations of regression that marked these centuries.

This movement may have seen its first light at the beginning of the 16th century with the emergence of Protestantism and the revolutions that erupted in parallel, whether philosophical, industrial or political, along with the early manifestations of Western Renaissance. During this period, many names emerged such as Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), Martin Luther (1483-1546), Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Galileo (1564-1642), René Descartes (1596-1650),

Isaac Newton (1642-1727), Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), and others. Soon after this, other movements gained in importance such as existentialism and Marxism. In fact, they may have emerged long before that with the invention of printing by Johannes Gutenberg (1397-1468). Certain historians even claim that they date back to the mid-19th century in France and the time of poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) with romanticism which soon spread to many cultural and civilizational fields, though the term itself was only used at the beginning of the 20th century in relation to some literary and artistic forms.

While this modernity may have appeared to suit the European environment, it also coincided with the rise

of the capitalist tide, the first colonial forays, and the decline that Arabs and Muslims came to experience, from the fall of Andalusia to the annihilation of the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the concept of modernity, which calls for probing and critical questions, it remains a movement, a theory, a trend or an approach based on a philosophical vision that rebels against the past with its history, religious sanctities, doctrinal and moral values and cultural achievements, as well as every constant that was inherited. It is also a revolution against the present with its politics, economy and culture while calling for releasing thought and freeing expression to revisit the common conception of Man and nature and strive to control them and rationalize all of this.

All this criticism has made modernity - even among Westerners – the subject of divergent positions between proponents and opponents. Suffice it to mention that modernity was closely followed on the heels by the post-modernist movement which constituted an improvement of this concept though it was more of a negation and rejection of modernity. In fact, post-modernism carried a fair share of criticism directed against modernity and the crises and wars it caused. It was an attempt to rectify certain viewpoints

or supplement what it perceived as incomplete, giving a greater importance to criticism. It went beyond modernity's stance vis-à-vis religion and called for its outright abolition, urging for the exclusion of the absolute truth and considering it non-existent, and touting relativism in everything.

Thus, post-modernism seems to have refuted all the theories put forth by modernity, warning against anything that may lead to anarchy, i.e. chaos and nihilism. Yet, it supported the West's call for rapprochement and for openness onto others, although this call only led to further hostility and conflict.

When we consider modernity from an Arab-Islamic perspective, and in all objectivity, we find that it erred when it narrowed its vision of the world by perceiving it through the eyes of the European context and the culture and civilization it produced, ignoring or negating what other environments experienced and continue to experience, particularly the cultural and civilizational progress attained by Arabs and Muslims and which constituted one of the most important foundations of the West's modern renaissance.

It further perceived progress and refinement from a material angle, supported in this by some philosophical

ideas that had little concern for the human being in terms of his existence, needs and aspirations, and from a totalitarian vision that steers clear of the individualism that had dominated it. It thus dismantled his relations and stripped them of their closeness, propelling Man into a trajectory that run counter to his needs in the present and future, in an attempt to rally the colonized peoples around the intellectual and behavioral model inherited from the colonizer.

Add to this the secularization character it adopted at the expense of spiritual values, calling for abandoning religion as a mere illusion, and even a scourge associated with the primitive phase. It also focused on challenging language and sanctities, starting with the Qur'an and the noble *hadith* and the associated Prophet's sunnah, and challenging the Islamic legislation and provisions, and the methods, terms and standards it adopted as its tools.

This in turn led to adverse results that were behind the Islamic religious awakening that began in the mid-20th century and was believed to bring about salvation from the scourges that had befallen the Ummah and signal the end of the era of Western modernity, not only for Islam, but for other divine religions as well. This was expressed by movements, activities, writings and

others as witnessed, in the past and present, on the ground of most religious societies, especially Muslim ones.

For reasons that cannot be addressed in the present study, this situation gave birth to the phenomena of extremism, violence and terrorism. This in turn led to the deadly wars ravaging Arab Muslim peoples and other vulnerable peoples and endured at the same time, consciously or unconsciously, by major developed countries as they gloat in the destruction of others.

Yet, and despite all these failings and the criticism that the Westerners have leveled at themselves under this modernity, when we reflect on the reality of Arab Islamic thought and the stance it has taken vis-à-vis this modernity, it is possible to observe a host of trends that can be delineated in the following:

First: Embracing it wholeheartedly with all its advantages and inconveniences, with insistence on negating sanctities and the past, and calling for abandoning this past and rejecting the civilization and culture they brought.

Second: Totally and fully rejecting it because it separated science from religion, breaking away from

identity and its components and choices, especially the constants and components that enrich this identity.

Third: Faith in modernity with consideration of the possibility of amending it by removing some of the negatives and trying to rationalize it with philosophical and moral ideas, in the hope of conferring a humanist imprint on it.

Fourth: Replacing it with a modernity based on authenticity in its different components but with a profound conscience, a progressive mind and rational approaches, which is what we aim for in this paper.

It is worth of note that certain Arab and Muslim thinkers who viewed Western modernism in awe and admiration and were influenced by its dynamism, were helped along by the emergence of the translation movement, some missionary trends and Masonic institutions. In this regard, they look forward to espousing and adopting this modernity, oblivious to the drawbacks that Arab and Islamic thought cannot accept, particularly with regard to religion, values, heritage and history. The most important aspect drawing them together relates perhaps to literature in general and poetry in particular. The first stirrings of this emerged in the mid-20th century with some

writers, poets and intellectuals in Iraq and the Levant and among the Arab diaspora. However, they often dealt with modernity from the angle that considers it a consumer commodity that they did not study well, nor did they delve deep in its substance to fully realize its advantages and disadvantages. The prevalence of such influence, especially among younger generations has been – along with profound political, economic and social factors- among the reasons why Arab and Muslim societies lost their own capabilities and distinct characteristics and are prone to quick frustration and disintegration.

Further confirming the above, and before addressing aspects of modernity as advocated in this paper, we need to point out that refusal to walk the walk of Western modernity stems from the diverse circumstances surrounding its inception in the West, and the status of the Arab and Islamic world and the reality of its societies. Notwithstanding its imbalances, this reality reflects these societies' values, components and constants as inherent to their religion, language, heritage and traditions, as well as their attachment and pride in their freedom, dignity, political, economic, cultural and social rights, their legitimate aspirations to progress, advancement and prosperity, as well as their

desire to fulfill their mission and play the part devolved to them in today's world.

Moreover, and whilst positive in its enlightenment and creativity aspects, western modernism, in other aspects and when practiced by some of its advocates, is no more than tampering with the mind, with knowledge and freedom of thought, and stripping people of their humanity, driving them not only to alienation, but also to destruction and annihilation. This led the Arab and Islamic world to suffer from its destructive woes, and its subversive effects may affect those who boast power should they persist in their arrogance and tyranny.

However, the path to a true modernity may be littered with obstacles. These may include:

First: We failed to study properly and deeply enough our heritage in its roots and frames of reference to gain a sense of its essence and purge it of the unfortunately many weaknesses affecting it, so that we can recognize these truths, whether at the level of thought or of method.

Second: We are still unable to deal with religion – Islam in this case- in a way that enables us to keep pace with our times through an innovative jurisprudence and

a novel discourse with fresh content and original ways of delivering it.

Third: Despite our principled stance on Western modernity, we did not delve properly into its epistemic and rational dimensions in order to expose its deviations and criticism it was subjected to. We limited ourselves to capturing its material manifestations and some of its most salient characteristics. We even went as far as to regard it as a primarily European product without taking into consideration what competes with it such as other models of modernity, especially the American and Asian ones which have undoubtedly surpassed what Europe presented and can be put to contribution in reaching the model of modernity we aspire to.

The Arab-Islamic thought we seek to modernize today seems to need a review more than ever before. This review would begin with a bold self-criticism, proper knowledge and without any sense of inferiority, until the causes behind the decline are exposed. This review must extend to the different aspects of knowledge and meet the prerequisites of scientific research, keeping in mind the tremendous expansion achieved in modern sciences thanks to their approaches and developments in every field. This entails that we do not confine ourselves within the inherited and prevailing legacy

and also dictates re-reading and adding to it to better match this age, and before that to purge this legacy from the impurities that have clung to it from the eras of weakness and decline.

Such a review of the different areas of Arab-Islamic thought should begin with an enhanced awareness of the need for *ijtihad* on the genuine issues that arise from today's reality with its multiple and diverse challenges, leaving behind the puerile and fabricated problems that only consecrate backwardness and cause frustrations.

This calls for a new discourse - as already pointed out – to be developed by qualified theologians, in cooperation and coordination with other scholars, thinkers and researchers from different disciplines, figures who are tuned to the pulse of their societies and their needs. Armed with deep knowledge and courage, this discourse would be able to convince all components of society. Yet, this is only possible through what is inclusive and shared by Arabs and Muslims and therefore far removed from any form of sectarian, doctrinal or ethnic strife that divide, scatter, tear apart and spread hostility and hatred, leading to conflict and clashes.

We must perhaps start by stressing that religion, which is a key target in Western modernity, represents,

with its concepts, teachings, laws, values, practices, visions and perceptions, the safety valve for both individual and society. In preserving attachment to a religious identity, a person acquires a sense of personal and public existence, his place in the universe and the mission he carries in this universe. Religion is thus the safeguarding vessel of conscience and a source of psychological and intellectual serenity. It achieves a balance between the self and the universe and the mysteries, secrets and abstractions that the universe conceals and that science cannot fathom unless it is armed with faith. It is no secret that the need for faith has become urgent in these times where knowledge and its developments have reached peaks that almost represent a threat to man's humanity. Faith helps Man to confront the materialistic dimension and the crises of life and their resulting suffering. These crises worsen -as is the case today- when religion is confronted by those who negate or fight it or stir trouble around it, causing confusion and anxiety among people, including in the hearts of the believers of different faiths. This can easily affect the way relations should be between the followers of these religions, based on a mutual recognition that is founded on tolerance, respect and ability to engage in dialogue and accept differences.

Contrary to what the advocates of modernity in the West and beyond believe as they accuse religion of being behind the decline of those who embrace it, the key factor in this regression is not religion, heritage or culture. It is instead and primarily inherent to the political and economic imbalances that arose as a result of the failure of regimes that are often despotic to enforce democracy, social justice and human rights as per the Western model, having tried to imitate this without understanding the essence of its goals, and even without a desire or willingness to understand it, let alone apply it.

Religion is what brings Man in touch with his Creator who controls him and who created the universe. He loves this Creator and obeys Him by performing his duties and committing to their accomplishment out of obedience to His commands and avoidance of His injunctions. This places in a lofty relationship with his Creator, which relationship elevates him and continually teaches him how to deal with God, with himself and with people in a waythat may not be perfect, but is based on values that alert him to the need to steer clear of corruptions and draw closer towards what is sacred. This helps Man achieve the lofty and elevated status he aspires to, soon feeling that the rites of worship he performs bring him

closer to the unseen world which is sacred.And as he draws nearer to this world, he is able to visualize it and unravel some of its inexplicable mysteries and secrets, such as death.

There is no doubt that religion gives its follower a sense of freedom that has no limits other than submission to Allah. Man neither dominates nor controls. Instead, he tolerates, coexists and shows compassion and mercy for the weaker. Thus, the holistic human dimension is fulfilled, a dimension that can only be achieved through religion and not through any philosophy or rational model.

This discussion of religion leads us to the matter of values considered in the Islamic perspective as intrinsic to religion. The individual's behavior evolves in line with rules where his social existence is governed by established morals that carry special significance for individuals and societies. There is no doubt that in this fact lies the dissonance that Muslims feel in their actions today, a dissonance between those rules and the unfortunately predominant practices that are imposed on generations and can aptly be described as immoral or contrary to the Sharia and the traditions flowing from it.

Islam needs to be viewed not only as just another religion, i.e. as comprising laws and values, but also as

a history, a civilization and a culture. Such consideration requires constant renewal through *ijtihad* in Sharia and other fields to enable this religion to meet the requirements of this age, i.e. the needs of modern day Muslims, their relations with each other or their interaction with others.

In terms of heritage, another target of Western modernity, it must be safeguarded and preserved as well as adopted as the Ummah'scollective memory, its frame of reference, the guardian of its identity and legacy, and the sum of the genius it has produced throughout the ages, highlighting the essence of this Ummah's civilization and culture. Heritage is the fruit of the distinction and excellence of past generations. There is no difference between what is stored in libraries and art and archeology museums and what stands before us in the way of architectural manifestations, and what lives and takes body in our lives in practice such as customs, traditions and folklore creations, as well as the impurities that need to be purged and that have accumulated, far from any boastfulness and hollow pride but to draw benefit from it in our present experience.

The same can be said about history and its importance. What the Islamic state or states experienced throughout the different ages, before Muslims began to decline

and suffer eras of colonization, was no coincidence. Similarly, the cultural and civilizational prosperity that history recorded under these states was no accident, and served, by the admission of objective Western historians, as a foundation for the West's renaissance. Yes, those states' regimes were far from exemplary and suffered in most cases from political, economic and social disparities and problems, the most dramatic of which was perhaps their inability to preserve the unity and cohesion of the Ummah, persevere with and encourage ijtihad in law and fiqh and empower scholars with freedoms that would undoubtedly have helped achieve this.

However, a consideration of history requires first of all the assessment of its impact on societies' progress or regression and the factors accounting for this. This consideration should be based on a critical approach that would lead to the modernization of this history, i.e. helping it become capable of being one of the elements of the desired modernity. As we reflect on history, we must recall our presence in the Mediterranean region which witnessed many distinguished and prosperous civilizations – European, Arab and Muslim. This dictates that we all be mindful that our shared history is not distorted or its legacy falsified.

The authentic modernity we strive for –as the adjective 'authentic' intimates- is and must be based on this authenticity, that is, on the elements of Islamic identity and its Arab and Amazigh tributaries and all other trends that have contributed to and enriched it with their religious, moral and cultural frames of reference. But also and most importantly –as said earlier- in order to purge it of all the impurities that have accumulated over centuries, and then capitalize on what is good and examine its suitability for what appears to be positive in Western modernity, especially with regard to its novel rational approaches and what could be beneficial to use in our research. We should not forget though what the Arab and Islamic thought achieved in science and reason back in the Middle Ages when the West was slumbering in the stupor of ignorance and regression.

Without elaborating further on these aspects, it is enough to mention the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet's Hadith in their praise of learning and reason and their encouragement of their pursuit. This was advocated from the first century Hijriby Muslim theologians who reflected, in all knowledge and freedom, on the matter of divine entity, its attributes and relation to events. Such scholars include Ibn Khalid al-Jahani (died 805 AH), Ghailan Ibn Muslim al-Dimashqi (died 1055AH),

and al-Hasan al-Basri (died 110 AH) from the Qadariyya who believed in human free will, as opposed to Jabriya scholars such as al-Ja'd Ibn Dirham (died 117AH) and al-Jahm Ibn Safwan (died 127AH) from among those who restricted this freedom.

In addition to these, the Mu'tazilites analyzed the principles of freedom and divine justice and reflected on the attributes of Allah, stopping at speech which they considered as a subsequent attribute, and by association denying that the Qur'an, the word of God, was uncreated. Some of them were influenced by Greek philosophy, such as Abu Hudhayl al-'Allaf (died 226 AH) and Ibrahim Ibn Sayyar al-Naddham (died 231AH). In opposition, the Achaarites came up with a middle way that helped them reach a rationalized formulation of faith that was further developed by Abu al-Hassan al-Ashari (died 324AH). Among them were Abu Bakr al-Baqlani (died 403AH) and Abd al-Malik al-Juwaini, who was also known as the Imam of the Haramain (died 438AH).

Within these rational scholarly movements emerged a philosophical school spearheaded by Abu Yusuf Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi (died 260AH) who meticulously summarized, translated and explained a number of Greek philosophy books in a way that blended them with

the teachings of Islam. Another name that stands out in this regard was Abou Nasr al-Farabi (died 339AH) who took particular interest in the writings of Aristotle, Plato and in Platonism, poring over the dilemma of divinity and the relationship of Allah (SWT) with the universe, as he directed his philosophy towards a certain goal, namely happiness to which he dedicated his book *The Virtuous City*.

This philosophical trend was further strengthened by eminent scholars from Andalusia and Morocco such as Abu al-Walid Mohammed Ibn Rushd (Averroes), (grandson, died 595AH) who achieved distinction in many sciences, especially philosophy where he endeavored to explain the works of Aristotle and correct their translations. He takes credit for bringing Europe closer to what came to be known as «Rushdism». In such liberal scholarly field, some of the scholars were wise in that they warned against dabbling in delicate and esoteric issues that could be confusing to lay Muslims. If time allowed it, we would mention more examples of the innovations produced by Arabs and Muslims in the Orient, Andalusia and the Maghreb in engineering, mathematics, geography, medicine, sociology and other inventions related to architecture and even music and other arts. This is an indication of the level of genius

and creativity reached by this scientific and intellectual movement and its significant impact on the West's Renaissance. Suffice it to mention names such as al-Sharif al-Idrisi al-Sabti (died 560AH) in geography, Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (died 808AH) in sociology, and before them Ibn Sina (died 428 AH) in medicine to which Ibn Rushd had already dedicated his book al-Kuliyat (Generalities in Medicine).

But as we aspire to an authentic modernity, attention to this heritage does not mean that we must confine modernity within the past and close it in on itself. Instead, we wish it to be open to all forms of enlightened modernity through appropriate knowledge patterns, including Western modernity. We would like to carry a universal vision that pays attention to the human being in all his dimensions. With its authenticity and its emergence in the folds of Arab Islamic thought, this modernity becomes suitable for another thought, out of belief in the multiplicity and diversity of the manifestations of human thought, as well as of its acceptance of difference and the necessity of two-way interactions. This is what western modernity, which emerged within societies at a particular time and place, failed to take into consideration in order to be suitable for other societies, even failing to suit its own societies

of origin and thus opening the door to other trends, as mentioned earlier.

Yet, and despite all the optimism we feel towards the emergence of a true modernity, one should remain alert to the difficulties that will be encountered by intellectuals who share this optimism. Some of these difficulties lie in the perception some of them have of history and heritage, those who believe that the adoption of this past and of heritage may run counter to any modernity. Others concede the possibility of integrating religion within certain limits, provided sacred texts are dealt with using rational approaches that strip them of their sanctity, making it possible to adapt, in their view, to Western or any other form of modernity, and hence achieving the universality sought by the West from this modernity.

In fact, universality is not limited to what the other has, the more superior 'Other' who wants to fully impose his model or forcibly control what others have until they adapt to his own model, if we were to judge from the stance adopted towards religious texts. Instead, it presupposes inclusion of what exists in other modernity models with their identities and particularities, some of which may be shared already and some may differ but all ultimately enrich this

universality, especially in the areas of values and culture and their belief-related content. This has escaped the two parties, i.e. the developed party and the follower or the one who wishes to follow even at the expense of some of his identity's components. Both parties believe that universality is immutable and does not evolve or renew while everything, including religion, is subject to modernization as long as its fundamental components are preserved.

To make a success of the true modernity called for in this paper, it is most important for the Arabs and Muslims, peoples and regimes, to believe in the possibility of this modernity's fulfillment and the absolute need for it, and to muster the will power needed for this. This dictates that the thinkers who are convinced of this necessity tackle modernity through study, analysis and critique so that this vision of modernity can be completed from all angles, concretized then applied. However, they must not satisfy themselves with approving it as a mere formality, or at the worst rejecting it or taking it lightly, or even considering it as a dream that will never materialize.

We would like to add that it is not possible for the desired modernity to bear its fruits at the current stage and in the future unless we commit ourselves to a future

vision that takes into account all the prerequisites of this objective, starting with the mentoring of present and future generations and their integration in this dynamic. This calls for a comprehensive review of educational curricula, approaches and methodologies in order to instill new knowledge and educational values in young generations through teachers and professors from different schooling levels, provided these are well trained and qualified to keep pace with this modernity and enrich it with more credible scientific studies, notably at university and research center levels.

However, we all need to be convinced of the necessity to modernize our personal and general affairs, since modernization itself is a constantly evolving phenomenon in any society and should not cease no matter what the obstacles that may divert its course or stand in the way of redressing intellectual conditions and revisiting real and inherited manifestations.

This is not an easy obstacle to overcome. It requires strong willpower to accept the principle of renewal, change and the need to keep pace with the times without fear of self-critique and without being in awe of modern developments to the point of simply surrendering to them and accepting them as they are. We need to add to them instead while acquiring the keys to innovation and

the ability to find linkages between them and a heritage that cannot be renounced to, especially in matters of beliefs and the values that spring from this heritage and that are in symbiosis with the nature in which Allah created mankind and all other beings.

We do not have the luxury to hesitate, falter or retreat, nor are we allowed. We are instead under an obligation if we wish to overcome the crises weighing heavy on us and endured by our Arab and Islamic world of which the foundations and the cornerstones are beginning to crumble[2].

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2 Some of the reference works in this paper were written by the author (consult titles in the author's website, published in Arabic, French and English).