Multidimensional Challenges of Modernism and Post-Modernism towards Islamic Education in Malaysia

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Abstract

Modernism and post-modernism elements have been posing serious challenges to the Muslim world and its society since the eighteenth century. They tend to have disruptive and disorienting effects on various aspects of social life. Muslim countries have been afflicted with modernism and post-modernism which were fast-spread through colonialism. The challenges were complex and covered all facets of the Muslim life. However, these challenges took on a more definite shape in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Islamic modernists argued that Islam and modernity were compatible and asserted the need to reinterpret and reapply the principles and ideals of Islam to formulate new responses to the political, scientific, and cultural challenges of the West and of modern life. They are anxious to produce modernist Muslim intellectuals who would be able to face Western intellectuals and participate actively in the development of their countries and societies, by means of a selective synthesis of Islam and modernity. Meanwhile, the traditionalists have all along queried and opposed to the reformist moves. They reacted defiantly to conserve what they believed to be the true undivided truth. They envisaged that the (reformist) have put the ummah at jeopardy by distorting the sacred truth of Islam and through infusion of foreign hazardous elements into the minds of the ummah. In the Malay-Indonesian (*Jawi*) world, Islamic renewal and reformism, originated in criss-crossing networks of Islamic scholars were based in Egypt. They belong to a reformist tradition stretching back to the mid–19th century, initiated by Muslim intellectuals including Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) in India, Syed Jamaluddin Al–Afghani (1838-1897) across the Middle East and Central and South Asia, and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in Egypt. In the Malaysian historical context of modernism, Sayid Sheikh al-Hadi (1867-1934) and Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin (1869-1956) and many others are the proponents of Islamic modernism. They were greatly influenced by Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Sayid Shaikh al-Hadi's concept of Islamic education manifested by his criticism was mainly directed towards the *pondok*, the *madrasah* and the mystical orders. This paper tries to explore how Muslims in Malaysia over the past century together with the rest of the world acted defiantly to confront multi-dimensional challenges posed by modernity and post-modernity. The challenges posed to Islamic education in Malaysia during the period will be highlighted due to its vital importance.

Keywords: Modernism, Post-modernism, Modernity, Modernisation, Mordernised Islam, Islamic Education

Introduction

Modernism and post-modernism have been posing serious challenges to the Muslim world and its society since the eighteenth century. Subjects pertaining to this kind of modern thought often causes volcanic eruptions of emotions and passions and vituperations which hardly lead to an objective analysis of causes and a clear vision (Sayyed Hossein Nasr, 1983)

However, these challenges took on a more definite shape in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The challenges were complex and covered all facets of Muslim life. The transformation from pre-modern passivity to the dynamism of modernization followed by the disillusionment of post-modernism has a significant impact on our lives worldwide (Hourani, 1991).

Thus, this paper tries to explore and summarize how Muslims over the past century in Malaysia and across the globe acted defiantly to confront challenges posed by modernity and post-modernity. In addition, due to the multi-dimension and variety of topics surrounding the selected topic concerning Malaysia during that period of time, the challenges posed to Islamic education in the country will also be highlighted.

Definition And Characteristics Of Modernism, Modernity, Enlightenment Modernisation And Post-Modernism

Modernity is usually used in Western literature to denote certain cognitive, normative, and structural changes that emerged in modern history in contrast with what existed in classic and medieval world. On the other hand modernity is used to denote the type of society that arose in the West during the Enlightenment: A society that is highly differentiated from a structural-functional point of view, dominated by capitalist (market) economy, with a complex vision of labour, industrialization and urbanization, science and technology, political and ethical individualism, liberal utilitarianism and social contract theory, a certain set of ideas about the self, and a conception of human history that is implicitly theological and explicitly optimistic (Louay Safi, 1994). Generally, modernity means the rise of industry, cities, market capitalism, the bourgeois family, growing secularization, democratization and social legislation (Hollinger, 1994).

Modernism is a style stressing subjectivity or consciousness over objectivity. It is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon rather than a unified and coherent phenomenon. Historically it had different schools of thoughts moving in many directions such as philosophy and literature. (Farish A. Noor, 2003). Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Rene Discartes (1596-1650) are usually considered the philosophical founders of modernism. (Hollinger, 1994)

Modernisation refers to the process by which traditional societies were transformed into modern societies factors contributing to modernization included the reformation, the renaissance, the rise of the modern European state, the scientific revolution, and the rise of mass urban societies. Traditional European societies were largely rural, agricultural, authoritarian, religious, relatively small in population, relatively homogenous, and precapitalist or early capitalist. Modern societies are characterized by the growth of urban areas, various forms of capitalism, democracy,

science and technology, massive population growth and concentration, and cultural, political, and religious heterogeneity.(Hollinger, 1994)

The process of modernization involved tremendous upheavals, thus causing anxiety for many people. The old order was disappearing, and a new, modern world was emerging. How was it possible to understand, let alone access, such major changes? Was the modern world going to be better, worse, or just different than traditional society? How it could be possible to see what kind of world would result from all the changes? Was there cause for regrets for the disappearance of some parts of the old order? Were some parts of the new order worrisome , even dangerous? These are some of the pertinent questions that dominated the thoughts and writings of philosophers like Rousseau (1712-1778), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Hagel (1770-1831) (Hollinger, (1994).

Sokal and Alan and Jean Brictmont defined Postmodernist as an intellectual current characterized by the more or less explicit rejection of the rationalist tradition of the Enlightenment, by theoretical discourses disconnected from any empirical test, and by a cognitive and cultural relativism that regards science as nothing more than a "narration", a myth, or a social construction among many others. (Sokal etl, (1998).

The Enlightenment was a prominent intellectual movement that emerged in the late 18th century. This movement, which began in France, broached a set of doctrines stating that the source of all human misery is ignorance, especially superstition. Only knowledge, reason, and science can destroy ignorance and superstition and help improve the human condition. (Hollinger, 1994) The postmodernists seek to highlight the predicament, anxiety and uncertainty of a fragmented and diverse society at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of a new century.

Leotard (1924-1998), Foucault (1926-1984), Derrida (1930-2004) and Baudrillard (1929-2007) are the proponents of postmodernism. All take for granted the legitimacy of the need either to defend or to attack modernity. (Hollinger, 1994, p.35). Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) also, has interesting views on the nature of postmodern nihilism. In Simulacra and Simulation, he begins his discussion on the precession of simulacra by describing what he calls the "simulacra of divinity". Baudrillard discusses nihilism in terms of "transparency" or "irresolution of the system." By this he means that God is non-existent, that the simulacra that preceded today's nihilism was a reflection of the absence of any true God, at the same time as reflecting the omnipresence of the simulacra of God. (Laura Lee, n.d).

One the contemporary proponents of postmodernism, Leotard Jean-François (1924-1998) when he wrote *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir (The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge)* (1979), he proposes what he calls an extreme simplification of the "postmodern" as an 'incredulity towards meta-narratives'. These meta-narratives - sometimes 'grand narratives' - are grand, large-scale theories and philosophies of the world, such as the progress of history, the knowability of everything by science, and the possibility of absolute freedom. Lyotard argues that we have ceased to believe that narratives of this kind are adequate to represent and contain us all.

The transformation to modern society began approximately in the 17th century and took two centuries to reach is zenith. (Hollinger, 1994)

Islamic Modernism Vis A Vis Western Modernism And Post-Modernism

Islamic modernism has been the long awaited panacea to the ummah - an amicable solution to face multi-dimensional challenges of the ummah that has for decades been affected by western secularized thought of modernism and post-modernism.

According to Sayyed Hossein Nasr "Our definition of modern and modernism has nothing to do with what may be generally perceived nowadays as being new or 'up-to-date', instead, what is here defined as modern, is that which is cut off from the Divine, the Transcendant, or the 'Supernatural'**…** (Sayyed Hossein Nasr**,** 1994, p. 98). As Max Weber (1890-1920) pointed out in his introduction to *Sociology of World Religions*(1920), "No economic ethic has ever been determined solely by religion...The religious determination of life-conduct, however, is also one...only one, of the determinants of the economic ethic." (Weber, Max, 1958).

We further understand postmodernism as the recalcitrant child of modernism; modernism driven to its extremes, by its usurping or 'deconstructing' modernism itself and by its arrogant denial of tradition and anything absolute and permanent, which gives it the same bad smell as its parent concept, because it is overtly more rebellious and hateful of anything holy, divine, or absolute. (Omar K.N., 2015).

Skepticism based on the assumed infallibility and universal sovereignty of reason was the constitutive character of modernity. It was designed to eliminate faith and re-channel Man's inherent compulsion to submit and worship. New Gods and new traditions were invented, new prophets were proclaimed and new heavens were imagined. But religion has not only survived the five hundred year assault on God and his messages, but has returned with an increased fervor that baffles the postmodern being (Muqtedar Khan, 2002).

The postmodern being, whose heart without faith is empty and mind without reason is immature, can destroy the fragile foundations of modernity, ridicule the memories of tradition but can neither comprehend and nor deal with the postmodern resurgence of faith. The postmodernist envisage that there is no objective truth or reality.

There was a large shift of power due to the declining Ottoman Empire, which led to an essential subordination of Muslims because of Western technology and modernization. This subjugation by Christian empires led Muslims of the Middle East to question their own beliefs as well as their aspirations, making many wonder whether the success of Western occupation was due to the inferiority of their own Islamic ideals. Out of these self-criticisms came an assortment of responses, including adaptation of Western ideals, advocating for separation of religion and politics, complete rejection, and calls for armed struggle against Western powers. However, one of the major responses to western modernization and occupation of the Muslim world was *Islamic modernism.* (Esposito, 1998, pp. 126, 127).

Islamic modernism was both an attempt to provide an Islamic response to the challenges presented by European colonial expansion and an effort to reinvigorate and reform Islam from within as a way to counter the perceived weakness and decline of Muslim societies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam and modernity, retrieved from the internet on 17th., June, 2016).

Some scholars have listed the ideology and method of Muslim modernists in conducting modernization. *First*, Islamic modernists asserted the need to revive the Muslim community through a process of reinterpretation or reformulation of their Islamic heritage in light of contemporary world (Esposito, 1984:32; Saab, Hassan,(1963), *Second*, they endeavored to discover the spirit or objectives of the Qur'anic teachings rather than and reason, and asked whether reason had limits or whether it could sit in judgment on faith (Rahman, 1981:29); *fourth*, they created positive links between the thought of the Qur'an and modern thought at certain key points, resulting in the integration of modern institution with moral-social orientation of the Koran (Fazlur Rahman, 1981, p.27-29). Their purpose was to show the compatibility (and thus acceptability} of Islam with modern ideas and institutions, whether they be reason, science and technology or democracy, constitutionalism, and representative government (Esposito, 1984).

The ideology and method of Muslim modernists set above are explicit and are exampled in their thought about education, religion and politics in Islam.

Muslim reformers emphasized the "dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability" during the early development of Islam. This time period was distinguished by Islamic accomplishments in the sciences, law, and education. (Esposito, 1998).

Afghani advocated for an Islamic renaissance, which would unite the Muslim world while simultaneously confronting the cultural threat posed by adaptation of Western ideals. Afghani argued that "Islam was in harmony with the principles discovered by scientific reason, [it] was indeed the religion demanded by reason." (Adeed Dawisha, 2003, p.19). Afghani blamed the influence of Sufism, which had emphasized passivity, fatalism, and otherworldliness. He also faulted the *ulama*, or learned elite, for discouraging Muslims from obtaining scientific knowledge because they themselves lacked the expertise to respond to such modernity. For them Muslims could not accept the idea that man is the "measure of all things," which was an idea brought to the Middle East by forces of Western colonialism.

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani is considered one of the catalysts of Islamic modernization, with Muhammad Abduh seen as one of its great synthesizers. Afghani and Abduh did so by attempting to reach a medium between Islamic law and modernity. It was actually an attempt to reach a medium between adaptation and rejection. Their influence can be seen throughout the Arab world today. (Esposito, 1998, p.130).

Thus, he blamed their subjugation not on Islamic inferiority, but on the society's "intellectual backwardness" caused by the hundreds of years of neglect and suppression of the Islamic *ummah*, or community.

Challenges Of Modernism And Postmodernism To Islamic Education In Malaysia

The transformation from pre-modern passivity to the dynamism of modernization followed by the disillusionment of postmodernism has a significant impact on the Islamic education. In the context of the European rationalist epistemology that informed the colonial process, Islam and other religions were perceived as non-rationalist and even anti-rationalist entities. (*Shamsul A.B. & Azmi Aziz,* 2011, p.116).

The traditional Asian societies were in a state marked by "impoverishment, technological backwardness, disorganization, political instability, overpopulation and traditionalism". These features of a traditional society were common prior to the influence of modernity. These traditional legal and cultural systems adopted a dual pattern with a central legal order and a set of customary law juxtaposed on the structure of society. The desire to modernise and industrialise resulted in the diffusion of some of the characteristics of Western industrialism and technology into these societies. (Tie Fatt Hee, 2003, p.297).

Hence, the principal raison d'être behind modernization of Muslim education in most of the Islamic countries including Malaysia, was to overcome what they considered to be the intellectual and spiritual inertia of their traditionalism in the face of Western intellectual development. The response to those challenges in fact, may be considered as one of the characteristics of Islam as a religion that has always shown a living awareness of contemporary intellectual issues. (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1995, p.21).

William.R.Roff, "the eminent Malaysian historian at Columbia University" wrote that the Malay terms "*Kaum Muda*" and "*Kaum Tua*", each have a variety of meanings as used by the Malays and in Malaya. Roff does not use the term *Kaum Muda* in Malaya to mean the modernist. He associates the *Kaum Muda* with Islamic Reformation. (William R.Roff, 1962, p.162-163). He went on describing:

> *The Islamic reform movement, introduced into Malaya in the first year of this century became the agent which crystallised for the first time much of the conflict between the new social forces and those elements, both in Malay society itself and in its political and demographic environments,which resisted change.*

Malaysian (then Malayan) Scholars like Sayid Syekh al-Hadi , Sheikh Jalaluddin Tahir and many others are the proponents of Islamic modernism.

Sayid Syekh al-Hadi for instance was influenced not only by 'Abduh's Islamic modernism but also by Ahmad Khan's modernist views, especially those concerning political and educational modernism. There are similarities between al-Hadi's and Khan's political and educational teachings. Khan supported British rule in India, Al-Hadi did the same in Malaya. Al-Hadi's concept of the Anglo-Malay school was very similarity to Khan's concept of Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College. Their approach like Jamaluddin Al–Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) were influenced by the European Enlightenment, applied positivist and rationalist thought to reconcile Islamic *turath*. (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 1994, p.18).

With regard to the politico-religious conflict between the *Kaum Muda* and *the Kaum Tua*, R. Soenarno writes (Radin Soenarno, 1960, p.8)

> *Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi and the followers of his school of thought did not go unchallenged by the old, orthodox religionists in the country. The old religionists collectively known as Kaum Tua, condemned the young modernist group, the Kaum Muda 'as worse than idolaters and Christians'. On political issues the former were nationalist looking backward. They wanted a return to the old ways before the West was known and urged a revival of their obsolescent aristocracy. The latter looked*

ahead, advocated democratic rule and attempted to progress along the Western lines.

The greatest challenge in Islamic education is to provide and deliver an integrated process of imparting Islamic knowledge such that its recipients are equipped spiritually, intellectually and physically in order to execute their twin God-ordained roles, as His servants and vicegerents. *Pondoks*, whose leaderships were gradually taken over by the returning Middle Eastern graduates, responded to the new reformist wave by converting their *umumi* institutions into *madrasahs* adopting the *nizami* (structured) system, whereby students were demarcated according to proper classrooms based on age-groups, taught curricula which incorporated modern sciences alongside the traditional revealed sciences, and subjected to written examinations. Until the Second World War, the *pondok* institution was the quintessence of Islamic education in Malaysia. *Pondoks* were established in all Malay states except Johore and the Straits Settlements. The master or tok-guru had carte blanche over his particular *pondok*, but similarities could be detected. *Pondok* schools were funded by the surrounding community and imposed no fees, but many students developed self-sufficiency out of their vocational and agricultural activities.

Islamic Education were thought in schools of all the mediums: English, Malay, Chinese and Indian schools both at the primary and secondary level. At the same time, although knowledge which has been loosely labelled 'conventional' or 'western' by some, were not neglected. The approach is synergistic and diverse in nature. Establishments of Islamic University Colleges, Islamic Colleges, Islamic Primary and Secondary Schools (SAR, SMKA, SMAN, SABK), Quranic Schools (*Ma'had Tahfiz*) is a growing phenomena these days in the country. These academic institutions are under the patronage of the state governments, NGO's or private owned administrations. Much of the debate has centered upon on how to integrate and strengthen Islamic Studies within the university system and, since the 1980s, to implement the "Islamization of knowledge". With the founding of the International Islamic University of Malaysia in 1983 and the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization under Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas in 1987, social science method (Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad & Patrick Jory, 2011, pp.ix-x*).* In a more recent development, a specialised international university, namely the International Islamic University of Malaysia was established. The university employs a unique methodology in its education system, having Islam at the core of its foundation.

Conclusion

Islam being a natural religion is not opposed to modernism as far as it implies to be modern in the simple sense of the word. (Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, 1999, p.4).

Islam was from the beginning comfortable with reason. Recognising its immense potential and necessity but also remaining acutely cognizant of its limitation. The al-Ghazali-Ibn Rushd debate on the nature of causality is an excellent chronicle of Islam's position on reason. Islam simultaneously recognised the absoluteness of Truth as well as the relativity of truth claims. For nearly 1300 years Muslims have believed in one *Shariah* but recognised more than four different, competing and even contradictory articulations of this *Shariah* (*madhahib*).

Islamic Education in Malaysia and other Islamic countries has survived the experiment called modernity and will survive the bonfire (post-modernity) that is threatening to burn down the lab along with the experiment. There is sufficient play within Islam in terms of epistemological pluralism, whether it is recognition of the validity of different legal opinions based on different contexts or time or based on different discursive epistemes such as *burhan*- illumination, *jadal*-dialectics, and *khatabah*-rhetoric, that will allow Islam to negotiate postmodernity's epistemological rampage.

To live in this age of post-modernity means as above mentioned, to walk the path of pure religion, upright, seeking Allah Almighty's pleasure only. It does not mean be involved in hatred or seeking to reduce Allah's mercy (*rahmah*) towards other human beings.

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