
Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Quest for an Islamic Episteme: Humanism as a Case Study

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ARTICLE DATA

Received: 02 January 2023

Accepted: 15 March 2023

Volume: 3

Issue: (1) Winter 2023

DOI: 10.54848/bjtll.v3i1.51

KEYWORDS

Islamic humanism, Muslim intellectuals, the sacred, the secular, western humanism, Abdelwahab Elmessiri.

ABSTRACT

Looking for an Islamic humanism in the Western sense of the word is utterly irrelevant to the spirit of Islam which poses man as a vicegerent of God, not as his structural opposite. The essence of all values in Islam issues from God and obedience to God frees man from superstitions and systems that limit his potential by endowing him as a moral agent with the freedom to choose between good and evil. Al-Faruqi & al-Faruqi (1986) show the epistemological biases of Western intellectual traditions which distinguish between two realms of knowing the world: the secular, rational mundane world and the fantastic, irrational religious world. This distinction is not problematic in Arabic Islamic religious tradition and is not the outcome of the separation of church and state.

1. Introduction

My argument is focused on the extent to which the sacred structures the lives of Muslims and how essential it is to Muslim identity. This gives rise to a different understanding of the human. That is the relationship between man and God. Islam as a religion is involved in the minute details of the life of a Muslim. God occupies a centrality that stabilises meaning and sustains man against self-destruction¹. The problematic of using the term ‘humanism’ lies in the fact that humanism is completely rooted in the Greek traditions of Western civilization and to use it –without taking its genesis into consideration- is to presuppose that all histories go along the same Western line of intellectual development. The term ‘humanism’ has limitations, mainly because it grew out of the Western tradition in opposition to the sacred which is apparent in the etymology of the word. According to Tony Davies (2000)

By later antiquity and the so-called ‘Middle Ages’, scholars and clerics had developed a distinction between *divinitas*, the fields of knowledge and activity deriving from scripture, and *humanitas*, those relating to the practical affairs of secular life (the study of languages and literatures is still sometimes referred to as ‘the humanities’); and since the latter drew much of their inspiration and their raw material from the writings of Roman and, increasingly, Greek antiquity, the (usually) Italian translators and teachers of those writings came to call themselves *umanisti*, ‘humanists’ (126).

The anti-clerical-cum anti-religious tendency of Western humanism is deep-seated:

Earlier humanists had been suspected of unorthodoxy, even of infidelity, and most, including clerics like Erasmus and Bruno, were anticlerical, though rarely anti-religious. Even Hobbes and Locke

¹ For a fuller treatment of the centrality of the divine and the spiritual in Islam read Yusuf Al-Qaradawi’s *Introduction to Islam*, Islamic INC., 1995.

observed the necessary protocols of piety, while scarcely bothering to conceal their lack of interest. It was the aufgeklärte of the eighteenth century, armed (wrote Condorcet) with ‘their battle-cry – reason, tolerance, humanity’, who uncoupled the rhetoric of Man from the apparatus of creation myth and eschatological anxiety that had encumbered it till then, and established the association between humanism and atheism which persists in the humanist associations and secular societies of the present day (*Humanism* 122).

Such a distinction did not exist in Islamic history. For this reason, looking for an Islamic humanism in the Western sense of the word is utterly irrelevant to the spirit of Islam which poses man as a vicegerent of God not as his structural opposite. The essence of all values in Islam issues from God and obedience to God frees man from superstitions and systems that limit his potential by endowing him as a moral agent with the freedom to choose between good and evil. Al-Faruqi & al-Faruqi (1986) show the epistemological biases of Western intellectual traditions which distinguish between two realms of knowing the world: the secular, rational mundane world and the fantastic, irrational religious world:

The secular-minded student, for instance has learned to shield himself from all religious calls whatever their source. In an atmosphere where religion is banished from the public life and relegated to the realm of secret personal relation with whatever one assumes to be ultimate reality, the secularist’s consciousness becomes compartmentalized into two separate chambers. In the one are to be found critical knowledge and truth, understanding of cultures, public loyalty to nation and state exercise of power, acquisition of property and consumption of materials of pleasure and life. In the other reside uncritical knowledge and dogmatic truth, loyalty that hardly ever transcends the individual, an escapist eschatological hope, and a phantasmagoric world of ethereal spirits! (*The Cultural Atlas of Islam* 45).

This attitude reveals the secular bias against religious truth: it is juxtaposed with scientific truth which is supposed to be of a superior category because it is certain and accurate whereas religious truth is supposed to be subjective and even superstitious. Akhtar (2008) agrees:

Indeed it is secular reason which is dogmatic and exclusivist. Ages of faith have nurtured great systems of reasoned conviction while, by contrast, the age of secular reason has, from its dawn, arrogantly rejected revelation without granting it a hearing. The most rigorously rationalistic systems of philosophy, such as medieval scholasticism and Thomism, matured in the bosom of faith. Absolute faith still allows an interface of faith and reason, an exchange between the two antagonists. But absolute reason is intolerant of the very possibility of revelation. It reasons in a circle: reason alone discovers truth and truth is that which reason discovers. (86)

This compartmentalization did not exist in the history of Muslims where no conflict was presumed to exist between revealed scriptural knowledge and ‘secular’ knowledge. They were thought to issue from one source and as such there was no conflict. Muslim writers who aimed to define an Islamic humanism had to contend with this dividing space. Professor Ismail Al-Faruqi further ascribes this division to the genesis of humanism:

Founded upon an exaggerated naturalism, Greek humanism deified man- as well as his vices. That is why the Greek was not offended by representing his gods cheating and plotting against one another, or committing adultery, theft, incest, aggression, jealousy and revenge and other acts of brutality. Being part of the stuff of which human life is made, such acts and passions were claimed to be as natural as the perfections and virtues. (*Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* 63)

As a reaction to this Greek humanism that deified man and elevated him to the level of divinity in all his imperfections, developed a Christian humanism that ‘went to the opposite extreme of debasing man through the “original sin and declared him a *massa peccata*.” [a fallen creature] (Al-Faruqi 63. In an essay entitled, “On Humanism”, a similar argument was made by sociologist Ali Shari’ati: “Thus in the mythic world-view of ancient Greece, it is natural and logical that humanism should develop in opposition to rule by, and worship of, the gods- the archetypes of nature- and that there should exist an opposition between humanism and theism.” This formative period of humanism has left an indelible mark of atheism on humanism. Western humanism has come as an assertion of the centrality of the human as against the divine. Ali Shari’ati defines the core values of humanism as:

The aggregate of these generally accepted assumptions maybe designated as ‘humanism,’ referring to the school that proclaims its essential goal to the liberation and perfection of man, whom it considers a primary being, and the principles of which are based on response to those basic needs that form the specificity of man. (*Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique* 17).

Shari’ati is critical of Western humanism in all its manifestations, Greek, existentialist, liberal and Marxist. He presents an Islamic critique of these intellectual and social systems. Humanism, he asserts, is dependent on a Greek mythological view of the world which depicted the human in competition with the gods which is a reflection of natural forces. He explains that, “The greatest, most astounding sophistry that the modern humanists, from Diderot and Voltaire to Feuerbach and Marx- have committed is this: they have equated the mythical world of ancient Greece, which remains within the material nature, with the spiritual and sacred world of the great ancient religions” (Shariati 19). Thus Islamic humanism differs in one important aspect, which is that, “although the interval stretching from man to God extends to infinity, that from God to man is altogether eliminated. Man is presented as the sole being within creation having the divine spirit, bearing the responsibility of the divine trust, and finding incumbent upon it the assumption of divine qualities.” (24). The core of the human in Islam is then derived from the divine purpose which has decreed that man becomes a free agent and consequently a responsible and moral being who is endowed with reason to effect the divine purpose through exercise of free moral action in the world. This is well-explained by Al-Faruqi:

Taklif, Islam affirms, is the basis of man's humanity, its meaning, and its content. Man's acceptance of this burden puts him on a higher level than the rest of creation, indeed, than the angels. For, only he is capable of accepting responsibility. It constitutes his cosmic significance. A world of difference separates this humanism of Islam from other humanisms. (*al-Tawhid* 62)

Mona Abul-Fadl (1990) introduces a comparison between two world views. She speaks of the presence of two “culture-modes”

The one is uni-dimensional; the other is multi-dimensional. The one is postulated on the autonomy of human reason; the other places this autonomy beyond human reason. Divine revelation is axial to the latter mode, and the circuit of human consciousness operates within its framework; unlike the case in the former, where divine revelation is incidental or marginal and is itself made to be contingent on human consciousness. In the one mode, that of the horizontal bearing, the phenomenal/visible world, the life-world and society, is a self-sufficient, self-subsistent entity which begins and ends with itself in the here-and-now. In the other mode, that of the vertical bearing, the life-world exists in time and points beyond itself: history is only a fraction of an extended temporal zone which spans the hereafter and relates it to the here-and-now. These are a few of the salient features which may stand out in a crude initial plotting of the epistemic chart with a general

distinction which can be made between the -secular and the tawhidi paradigms (pp 17-18)

The most recent engagement with humanism came from two other Arab Abdel-Wahab El-Messiri in his *Bias* as in most of his other books as well as Edward Said. Said and El-Messeri are strong advocates of Humanism each in his own terms. Both agree on the importance of humanism yet, El-Messiri calls for 'Islamic humanism' that stands at odds with Said's secular humanism. However, Said attempts to include the Islamic humanistic tradition in the Islamic world. Actually he suggests that humanism first appeared among students of Islam in medieval *madaris*. In his penultimate book, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2003) Said, drawing on the authority of Georg Makdisi, argues that:

Studies demonstrate amply and with enormous erudition that the practices of humanism, celebrated as originating in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy by authorities such as Jakob Burkhardt, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and nearly every academic historian after them, in fact began in the Muslim *madaris*, colleges, and universities of Sicily, Tunis, Baghdad, and Seville at least two hundred years earlier. (54).

Although Said pays a compliment to the Islamic origins of humanism, he sticks to the secular notion of humanism making no allowance for the possibility that we can believe in a transcendental being and study the physical world rationally that is have a religious humanism. A fair conclusion from that is where he and El-Messiri part company: Said insists that: secular criticism which is a mainstay of humanism against dogmatism is essentially secular and contrasts it with religious criticism (here introduce the argument of Talal Asad in *Is critique secular* where he gives an evaluation of the notion of Said's secular criticism)

The core of humanism is the secular notion that the historical world is made by men and women, and not by God, and that it can be understood rationally according to the principal formulated by Vico in *New Science* (11).

Yet further on, Said re-defines humanism as "critique that is directed at the state of affairs in, as well as out of, the university ... and gathers its force and relevance by its democratic, secular, and open character (22). Said views critique influenced by a long tradition that considers critique to be secular, and makes a distinction between secular criticism and religious criticism and as such secular humanism becomes the locus of this secular criticism and consequently rules out the possibility of humanism outside the secular context in the West. Said's humanism rules out God in so far as it is a tradition that stresses man's centrality in the universe and in the absence of any divinely inspired laws, the measure of everything. Thus critique of religion is assumed to be the basis of any criticism as Marx put it: "the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism." The critique of Talal Asad takes issue with Edward Said's notion of secular criticism and emphasises that:

... a constellation of Enlightenment conceits is part of what allows critique to comport so readily with secularism: from Mill to Marx, Diderot to Kant and Hume, we greet the Enlightenment *presumption* that the true, the objective, the real, the rational, and even the scientific emerges only with the shedding of religious authority or 'prejudice' (*Critique* 10).

El-Messiri who is a Marxist-cum-Islamist has not ruled the existence of a transcendental power that is outside history and yet is at its centre and endows the world with order and purpose:

This humanistic modernity has its roots in both the Islamic and Christian outlook (and in other religious traditions), for despite their difference regarding many theological points, there is a moral common ground, that subsumes all human beings, and that can serve a basis for a new social contract, by which we can administer our human societies in our modern times, in a civilized and just manner, and which can save us from ethical, and epistemological chaos we live in. (Abdel-Wahab Elmessiri

The Desantification of Man and Nature Pamphlet p. 29)

Yet he moves closer to what Edward Said intends when he emphasizes the distance between creators and created which leaves man a space to move in. Said's beginnings are secular and Messiri's are religious. This emphasis on humanism is a rear-guard battle against the postmodernist dehumanization and negation of the subject. This is very clear in Edward Said's criticism of Foucault and of his acknowledgement of human agency in shaping discourse. The same is clear in El-Messeri's criticism of the logic of capitalism which reduces man to one-dimension: that of the natural man which is easy to predict and satisfy apart from any transcendental claims, in this he is much influenced by the Frankfurt school of criticism especially Herbert Marcuse's critique of capitalism. Both were strong critics of the enlightenment which is associated with colonialism.

This particular manifestation of the sacred in the lives of Muslims comes into direct clash with the Western secular view of God. This means that Muslims living in the West encounter a group of biases that define their relationship with their Western context. This secularised space in all finality, presents a challenge to expressing Muslim identity. According to Shabbir Akhtar (2008), "We live under an epistemological apartheid: the genesis of an idea in the different faculties of reason, revelation or experience, privileges or debases it, without regard for its intrinsic merit or content." (330) This apartheid discriminates against forms of knowledge conceived in a religious form which makes faith-based religions excluded from discourses centered on man. According to Professor Tariq Ramadan (1999), faith lies at the heart of Muslim identity. For him faith "... is the purest expression of the essence of Muslim identity beyond space and time. It naturally takes concrete form in the *practice* of worship" (190). This brings us to the issue of representation of Islamic subjectivity which is affected by the monopoly of Western epistemological distinctions between sacred and profane.

Islam supplies a vocabulary that brings into use the obsolete moral language of Christianity and as such returns to religion some of its lost moral authority through reviving its moral vocabulary in an atmosphere of secularization of Western critical discourse where it is difficult to use religious vocabulary without being ironic as amply argued by Akhtar (2008)

It is difficult to express cynicism about religion or religion-derived morals in any Islamic language.

This differs from English where we face the opposite problem: we are unable to make claims such as 'He is a pious man' sound anything but mocking. The moral language of Christianity is now decrepit and abused; only a poet-saint could renew the religious employment of English in order to invigorate the cultural project of rescuing words such as 'sin' and 'virtue' for their original and intended senses. Even the word 'Christianity' has unction about it as do 'righteous', 'Jesus', and 'salvation'. Religious life languishes in the West while intellectual life flourishes and reaches new heights. By contrast, even the most secularized Muslim would not use 'Muhammad' as an expletive in casual conversation. It would be an embarrassing attempt at blasphemy. (109).

This historical opposition to religion marks the Western quest that sought to purify language of all metaphysics and banish religion from the realm of reason to the realm of fantasy. Saad Al-Baz'ee, a literary critic explains that: "Contemporary Western culture has long been characterized by the absence of the sacred; its chief criterion has therefore been the degree to which thinking has gotten rid of the effects of the metaphysical. (*Bias* 207)"

This tragic loneliness is a thematic in Western discourse that talks about God and man:

Western Humanism has failed because man is not the centre of creation, in the sense of being, creature and creator in one. The 'I am' is subordinate not pre-eminent, and honour on its own is not enough. There is no free-will in any important sense of the term, and human reason is powerful only on a narrow front within strict limits. (*Humanism: the Wreck of Western Culture* 228).

Man is lonely and has to do things on his own. He has to stand for himself. 'Mankind is self-sufficient' is essentially the Western humanistic view of things that even if we admit the existence of God, He is one who is withdrawn from the world and uninterested in his creatures: He is a blind watchmaker as Richard Dawkins has argued in his book *The Blind Watchmaker* (1996). Humanity does not depend on him anymore which is the core of secular humanism; man forgets God and takes over. Man becomes the centre of the universe in Western humanism. Man not only revolts against God but declares him dead, 'God is dead' was Nietzsche's cry. That ushers in the age of Prometheus.

The Greek myth of Prometheus is the founding ground work of Western humanism: he is the ultimate challenger of the gods. Secular humanism has elevated man to the level of a deity which is nothing but a reflection of Greek mythology. This atheistic humanism has no counterpart in the Islamic tradition even though Greek philosophy influenced a group of Muslim scholars of the time, yet seems not to have affected the Islamic vision of the sacred. In his book *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity*, Ramadan (2001) explains that, "The character of Prometheus, who had such an influence on the Judaeo-Christian tradition as on the representation formed in the West regarding the rapport between God and clerical authority, is absent from Islamic points of reference and traditions." (215) Furthermore, Ramadan asserts that, "... we can say that Muslim thought has never ventured out of the sacred space. It has rather developed and accomplished itself within the same. The cultural difference is evident." (217-218).

The promethean figure is absent from the fiction of Muslim women writers. There is no denial of God or challenging him as the ultimate source of freedom and values. There are transgressions of values but not the Originator of values. Heroines finally return to him for He is so close to them. Characters who forget God suffer from alienation and a heavy conscience.

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