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Muslims and Contemporary Postmodern Philosophical Issues

Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman

Problematic submission, philosophical. In fact, not well thought of con.

Introduction

While Muslims constitute a sizeable number in the population of the world today, Islam is misunderstood on many issues of great concerns like the rejection of jeans and similar tight fitting clothes in many Muslim societies is for example perceived by many people as an act of extremism that cannot be accepted in postmodern society (Ahmed, 1992:154-193). According to Balogun (2006: 4-10), the misconceptions about Islam, which are bound to ultimately worsen non-Muslim relationship with Muslims, still persist in this era of postmodernism. It is against this background that this paper examines some of the major philosophical themes in postmodern society. It also highlights their effects on religion, especially Christianity and Islam. It finally discusses how Muslims have responded and can still respond to these themes, while reflecting on the balanced views that are based on the values and principles that are deemed essential to Islam.

Definitions and meanings of terms

Postmodernism, as the name goes, transcends modernity. It is totally against modernity, yet this does not imply that it is in support of what modernity rejects such as religion and tradition. It is rather against modernity, tradition and religion. The birth of postmodern society was heralded by a powerful momentum that sought to supplant modern society with a new worldview. It was this new view of the world that created the postmodern society where modern values and modes of living gave way to a life of flux and relativity. Right from inception, postmodernism has been characterized by this relativism (Cahoone, 1996: 1-21).

The term modernity according to Harbermas is derived from the Latin word modernus which was used to distinguish between an officially Christian present and a Roman pagan past and thereafter the term has been used to signify the present in relation to the past of antiquity (Herbarmas, 1981: 22). At the same time, Cahoone (1996: 11) opines that it is derived from the Latin modo, which simply means "of today" or what is current, as distinguished from earlier times which has been used in various periods to

distinguish contemporary from traditional ways and in principle can refer to any sphere of life. Modernity is therefore in essence about a new worldview, civilization, epoch and way of life that is regarded as more superior, advance and refined than the ancient society, which it replaced. Unfortunately, the so-called refined, advance and modern society is already plagued with crises. The euphoria over the defeat of religion by modernity at the alter of reason and empiricism did not last long.

It was soon surpassed by a rebellion against the philosophical basis of modernity. This movement against modernity has been termed postmodernism. This term means different things to different people. The term postmodern has been used to distinguish the crises-plagued contemporary society from the modern society. It was used in 1917 by the German Philosopher, Rudolph Pannwitz to describe "nihilism" of the twentieth-century Western culture, a theme he took from Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Barry Smart, Toynbee was the first to capture this crisis of modernity under the term, 'postmodern.' Toynbee however contrasts the modern chapter of Western history with the postmodern era and identifies the modern era with 'bourgeois life' that was strong and powerful enough to dominate the remaining elements in the society. According to him, it was Western technological advances that precipitated a crisis in human affairs because the rate of change was beyond the adaptational capacity of one single life (Smart, 1990: 21-23).

It is however difficult to pinpoint what postmodern means because postmodernists are not united but rather they are divided in their views. For some, it implies the escape from the legacy of modern European theology, metaphysics, authoritarianism, colonialism, racism and domination. For others, it represents an intellectual movement of obscure, opposing but disgruntled intellectuals bent on destroying Western civilization (Cahoone, 1996: 1). Facing all this diversity, it becomes crystal clear that postmodernists are united over the view that modern or Western society is already plagued with some flaws. In other words, modernity describes the set of processes that brought an end to traditional lifestyles of medieval civilizations.

But sooner after, it was superseded by a form of rebellion against the utopian and unfulfilled dreams of modernity. This postmodern development later overshadowed the cultural and social arenas leading to many contradictory calls. For instance, it was taken up to mean the recognition of the failure of secular modernity and therefore the need for a return to religion. This call for religious values by postmodernists is a call for a form of quasi religion or

a religion that is subject to human interventions and control, an equivalent of constitutional monarchy in modern society to serve as a compromise between the supremacy of reason and the emotional need for religious sentiments. What is desired is not religion per se, but rather a form of constitutional religion. With the removal of religion from the sphere of serious cognition, what remains will be mere rituals and liturgies (Gellner, 1992: 91-92).

Religion, Islam and postmodern philosophical Issues

In postmodern societies, religion especially Christianity has not only been marginalized but also secularized. The religious ideology of the modern mind is based on practical thoughts that fall within the field of experimental sciences and reject any moral responsibility and all moral values. The temples of modern man's religion are the factories, laboratories, cinemas and discos etc. Consequently all religious and moral values are gone and postmodernism has invaded the entire human life including the private recesses of man. Thus secularism became total. The entertainment or pleasure industry now controls the people's life in his entirety including their dreams. The media is employed to sell people utopias in all forms especially with a sensate, capitalist and erotic culture (Elmessiri, 1997: 1-14).

Postmodernism basically seeks to destroy the idea of the sacred which is central to all religions. It finds unacceptable the idea of a unique and eternal message revealed by God which makes it unquestionable and absolutely valid. By rejecting that anything could be absolute and complete, it seeks to undermine the power of revealed sources. They become mere artificial constructions of man. Hence, the postmodern society can be perceived as being characterized by a war of attrition between religion in the true sense and postmodern society. This is aided by the theory of relativism which implies that nothing is real and tangible since it is only perceived in relation to other objects and ideas. In a world where truth and falsehood become relative then the world is nothing but a video game where human beings are merely enticed by the glitters of life. Life therefore becomes meaningless (Cahoone, 1996).

One central theme common to all members of the postmodern family is the rejection of Scientism or empiricism. This is the acceptance of only what is based on observation and experiment while giving dominant role to only rational, scientific and empirical approaches to knowledge. The postmodernists are not just concerned with facts but with the meaning and interpretation of facts. They argue that there is a need to study human society and why and how it developed over time. In doing so, they propound

structuralism or the focus of human sciences not merely on self and its historical development but more importantly on super structures of languages that make the individual what he is. To them, the study of abstract relations within systems or codes of cultural signs such as words is the key to understanding human existence. It implies that nothing in itself is authentic, fundamental and original against which human nature could be judged (Cahoone, 1996).

Feminism is another major theme in modern society. According to Boris (1992), the term feminism grew out of the desire of women for equal treatment with men in the specific area of workforce. Feminism can be traced back to 18th century Europe when many people became concerned with the illiteracy rates among women. Feminist struggle therefore centered mostly round the emancipation of women and the granting of gender equality at the initial stage but has assumed wider dimensions in recent years. One of the most striking features of this discourse is the feminist call for the liberation of women. Women who wanted financial independence, sexual emancipation and political empowerment used feminism to call for the liberation of women from all forms of oppressive cultures and practices (Boris, 1992).

One of such questions on which postmodernists seek reconciliation between Christianity and the rights of women is the notion of Patriarchy that is usually seen by feminists as an evolution in the Church history (Schussler-Fiorenza, 1983). Many postmodern feminists oppose the Biblical, scriptural and theological relegation of women in the Church; hence, feminist theologians view certain passages in the Bible as upholding a gender biased structure e.g. the Pauline taceat. The taceat (Corinthians 14: 34-35) reads thus:

The women should keep silent in the Churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is any thing they desire to know, let them ask their husband at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in the Church.

For centuries some Biblical scholars and theologians have maintained the above Pauline simple rule of action in the Church as well as outside it. They see the taceat as a divine mandate merely expressed by Paul. Paul was merely a vessel for transmitting a divine order and therefore the non observance of the rule is a violation of the divine order (Walther, 1969: 153-159). Still, another set of Biblical scholars see Paul as the personal author of

the taceat who through it seek to regulate, curtail and suppress the role of Christian women. That Paul believed in the taceat and defended it is not in doubt. The letters of Paul to the Corinthians show vividly that he believed in the subjugation of women. This runs through many verses such as: Col. 3: 8, 1 Corinthians 6: 19 and 11: 1-10.

However, postmodern feminist theologians have become very uncomfortable with the taceat and theological differences on it have assumed a serious dimension especially in Africa where many Churches have gone ahead not only to reject it totally but also ordain women priests. For Schussler-Fiorenza (1978: 153-166), the taceat should be understood within the socio-religious and political milieu of the Corinth at that time and therefore it is only valid for application in the Corinthian Church. Edet (1990: 94-100) however shows that most postmodern feminists reject the taceat out rightly and view the Pauline taceat as a direct attack on women by Paul based on personal prejudice and therefore should not be taken too seriously.

The above trend can also be perceived in Islam where there is emerging among reformist scholars what can be termed a neo-normative approach to the interpretation of Islamic laws especially in relation to Muslim women. These scholars unlike postmodernists argue that the primary source of the Islamic law is sacred and immutable yet the interpretation of this law is malleable. An example of this could be found in the normative perception of gender disparity. In Islamic law, the husband has always enjoyed a genetic superiority over the wife based on a Qur'anic injunction (4: 34). Semantically, the word *Qawwâmun* simply means taking care of, looking after and protecting. This meaning was put forward by no less a person than Ibn Kathir, a leading exegete of the Qur'an. Scholars like Aminah Wadûd (1999: 1-10) believe that instead of supporting patriarchy or any form of male superiority, the injunction could be thus understood to be asking men to fully take care of women by protecting them financially and physically. Aminah Wadûd using the theory of hermeneutics propounded by Fazl Rahman, argues in her thesis, the notion that the Qur'ân only teaches the importance of decency and modesty in the dressing of Muslim men and women, but does not command specific Islamic codes on the form and style of dressing. This, according to her, depends on space-temporal culture and context.

Wadûd argues that at the time for the proto-human soul, self or person (*nafs*) to be brought into existence, its mate (*zawj*) is already a part of the plan, 'From all (created) things are pairs' (Q 51:49). Therefore, the primordial pair is mentioned in the Qur'ân as *zawj* (denoting that they are a pair of the same

species) and not named as *Âdam* and *Hawâ'*. This means that *Hawâ'* was of the same nature as *Âdam*, that is she was created not from *Âdam* but from the divine soul (*rûh*), the same soul from which *Âdam* was created. Hence the two are perfect, complete and equal. None of them is less than, inferior or superior to the other as they were a part taken out of the other that was the whole. Where in the *Qur'ân* the event in the Garden is recounted, explains *Wadûd*, it shows that both partners were considered guilty. The female is never singled out and chastised for being a temptress (*Wadûd*, 1999:15-20).

Ultimately, the two sought forgiveness and it was granted both. They began life on earth untainted by a 'fall' from grace and with no trace of original sin. On the contrary, in Islam the story of creation of human beings on earth began with forgiveness and mercy as well as a most important promise or covenant taken to God. Furthermore, *Wadûd* explains the notion that *Allâh* is not gender-biased as Islam provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors. In short, *Wadûd* concludes that both men and women are appointed as the Vicegerents of God to carry out mutually supportive roles in the society. As a result, whatever differences existing between the male and female gender is not indicative of an inherent superiority or inferiority or else the mutual role of *Khilâfah* would be meaningless (*Wadûd*, 1999:18-35).

According to *Wadûd*, it is in order for a female to exercise and play the above egalitarian role of *Khilâfah* thus she went ahead to become the first woman to lead both men and women in the Friday Congregational prayers in the United States of America on Friday March 18th 2005, a significant religious role taken on by a woman and that came to create a division among scholars in the Muslim world. According to Barbara Shoetzau (March 19, 2005), a *New York* reporter, controversy erupted in New York on Friday March 18th and spread across the Muslim world as *Wadûd* led the mixed-gender service at a building on the grounds of the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine after the original venue was changed following threats. This event is *Wadûd's* pragmatic approach in clearly demonstrating her understanding of the egalitarian role of *Khilâfah* in Islam.

Another postmodern issue and with terrifying implications in the world of Islam is comprehensive secularism. The term, secular, is from the Latin *saeculum*, which contains a meaning with a marked dual connotation of time and location. In other words, it refers to this age or events in this world and

encompasses not only the political and social aspects of life but also permeates the cultural aspect. It entails the elimination of ethical and religious values. Secularization according to Al-Attas has its roots in the interpretation of Biblical faith; reveals how the Christian Church began a liberal, total and unmitigated surrender to the new trends of secularism and how a war of religion ensued between the orthodox and neo-modernist elements, leading to the secularization project in the 17th to 19th century European Enlightenment concomitant with the rise of reason and empiricism and scientific and technological advances in the West (Al-Attas, 1993:1- 29).

Following this development, the notion began that God was dead. It was soon followed by the dirge that Christianity was also dead. Christian theologians were later to align themselves with the forces of neo-modernist thought leading to a secularized Christianity. Hence, Christian theologians such as Karl Barth, Paul Van Buren and Harvey Cox called for a radical interpretation of the Bible. Both the Catholic and Protestant Churches soon welcomed this contemporary secular panorama of life. Even those Christians who opposed secular Christianity were themselves willing accomplices. Some Christian scholars even accepted secularization as part of the evolutionary process of human history. They became advocate of a relative, ever-shifting and ever-growing up version of Christianity (Al-Attas, 1993:8- 13).

In short, secularism penetrated the religious arena and provoked a reading of the Bible so much that Christians are converting Christianity to the world and not the world to Christianity. Though it was resisted by early Christianity, the secularizing forces eventually won the battle to divest the Church of its state power. Naturally, Christianity capitulated and became secularized after it had first been westernized under Roman influences. Herein lays the major distinction between Islam, a revealed religion and Christianity a westernized and secularized religion. On the above basis, Al-Attas submits that Islam has achieved the proper disenchantment of nature, the proper desacralization of politics and the proper deconsecration of values without any secularization. It does so because of its unique concept of the worldly life and the hereafter. The worldview of Islam does not accommodate a separation between the temporal and the spatial, yet it does not allow the distractions of the world to prevent man's development for the hereafter (Al-Attas, 1993:29-43).

Need for Islamization by Muslim scholars

Following the above impact of postmodernism, especially western secularism in the whole world and the desire to secularize the Muslim world, there is the need to Islamize the Muslim world and liberate the whole world from

the impact of comprehensive secularism in its entirety. This is because the Islamic worldview cannot be compared to any other worldview. There can never be an Islamic Christianity, socialism not to talk of secularism. There is therefore the need for Islamization of all the components of Western culture and civilization that have been influenced by postmodern thoughts like secularism. Muslims interest in the Islamization of knowledge goes back to the 19th century as encapsulated in the activities of the *nabdah* movement in the Arab, Indo- Pakistan, Persian and Turkish world.

For al-Attas, the question of Islamization could only be resolved by freeing man from all the chains that enslave him. To clarify the concept of Islamization, he defines it as the liberation of man first from all magical, mythological, animistic, cultural, secular and foreign control of his reasoning faculties. It also includes the Islamization of language because it is closely connected with thought and reason in projecting to man his worldview or vision of reality. The Islamization of language therefore brings about the Islamization of thought and reason. Here, al-Attas submits strongly that the crisis of knowledge is the real problem in modern society. Knowledge as conceived and disseminated by the West is the greatest challenge in the modern world. He gives a very powerful critique of the modern secular education which he believes is no longer relevant in the Muslim world. He argues that in order to disseminate knowledge in the Muslim world, there is the need to isolate all the key western concepts that have caused grave confusion. The acceptance of only what is based on observation and experiment and the rejection of religious and moral values is the bane of contemporary society. This has completely obliterated the concept of hierarchy of knowledge thereby undermining the role of spiritual and moral values while giving dominant role to only rational, scientific and empirical approaches to knowledge. The highest form of knowledge is *ma'rifah* and is given by God to man through spiritual savouring (*dhawq*) or unveiling of spiritual vision (*kashf*). The second is *'ilm* and is acquired through man's own efforts, experience and observation. In Islam, knowledge given by God through revelation is *fard 'ayni* or obligatory on all Muslims while knowledge of science acquired through experience, observation and research is *fard kifayah* or obligatory only on some Muslims. He advocates the *tawhidi* method that sees a unity in revelational and empirical, deductive and inductive, rational and spiritual knowledge (Al-Attas, 1993:79-95).

Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1996:555-561) submits strongly that the crisis of knowledge in contemporary society is a great challenge in the postmodern

world. He argues that it is only the rediscovery of the very heart and essence of traditional religious values that can save the modern man from the elegy of doom and loss in a world devoid of the sacred and therefore meaning. Nasr and other bearers of the new Islamic thought like him view traditional culture as a tree whose root is planted in the soil of divine revelation. The tree grows, taking his sap from its divine roots but also according to its level of exposure to external conditions of heat, cold, air and water etc. In sum, knowledge is greatly influenced by its aims and objectives, methodology, sources and the value-system that conceives it. It is never neutral but shaped by many factors. Since the present-day knowledge was conceived and developed outside the Islamic framework, the greatest challenge facing the *Ummah* is the crisis of knowledge. There can be no true Islamic revival without resolving the problem of Muslim education. Islamization of knowledge therefore goes beyond mere cosmetic or superficial changes to the current body of knowledge.

It would however appear that the greatest obstacle in the path of Islamization is the stifling of the views of scholars on Islamic texts and the closing of the door of *ijtihād*. In the words of Sayyid Sabiq (1995:9), the winner of the 1994 King Faizal Award for *Fiqh*:

With blind allegiance and tribal leaning to schools of law, the *Ummah* lost the Guidance of the Qur'an and *sunnah* and it was stated that the door of *ijtihād* was shut. Thus the *shari'ah* became the sayings of scholars and the sayings of the scholars became the *shari'ah*.

Conclusion

The idea of Islamization of knowledge has been suggested as a desideratum in the Muslim *Ummah* journey to free itself from the dominant postmodern Western civilization and its ideological and value-laden scientific and technological knowledge. To achieve this, there is need for a thorough understanding of Occidentalism as Muslim Occidentalists hardly exist. This is the case in the area of both Judaic and Christian studies where there are very few Muslim specialists despite the towering figures of our predecessors in this field. Such Muslim scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Biruni excelled in this field. Ibn Hazm actually wrote a monumental and ground-breaking work on comparative religion in which he did a brilliant critique of Judaism and Christianity (Aasi, 1999:33, 115).

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