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MODERNIZATION, SOCIAL CHANGE AND RELIGION: A CASE STUDY OF THE ISLAMIC UMMAH

Abstract:

In this paper I explore the impact of modernization and social change on the Islamic *ummah* (community of believers) and how they are shaping the emerging struggle between 'hybridity' and 'authenticity' among Muslims and Islamic movements. The paper will explore the challenges of this struggle and its sociological implications for the 'de-centering' of the Muslim world into multiple autonomous regions. The future of Muslim *ummah* may gain strength not as a unified and unitary community, but as a differentiated community consisting of ummahs representing different Islamic regions, each regional *ummah* possessing and embodying a unique character moulded by the history and temperament of its people. The paper concludes with observations on the future religious, intellectual, economic and political trajectories of Muslim countries.

Islamic Ummah: A Brief Historical Overview

The concept of *ummah* has inspired the imagination of Muslims, especially Muslim intellectuals, from the very early days of Islamic beginning. The term *ummah* appears over sixty times in the *Quran*, where it has multiple and diverse meanings ranging from followers of a prophet, or of a divine plan of salvation, to a religious group, a small group within a larger community of believers, misguided people and an order of being. However, from its numerous and, sometimes, vague meanings in the early days of Islam, it came to symbolize and embody the very notion of an Islamic community, gradually acquiring socio-legal and religious connotations. Sociologically, *ummah* became a transformative concept in the sense that it played a significant role changing, first, the Arab tribes into an Arab community and, later, as Islam began to expand to non Arab lands, different groups of Muslims into a community of believers.

Ummah as a community of believers entailed a consciousness of belonging to a community whose membership was open equally and without any qualification or restriction, except that of the faith, to all believers. In this sense it embodied the universalism of Islam. It became a means of establishing a religious and cultural identity that was independent of the Muslim state. This means of constructing a

religious and cultural identity made the spiritual development and sense of cohesion independent of the transitory territorial states.

The life of the new *ummah* was marked by a pervasive new moral tone, derived from the individual relationship to God and not by old primordial loyalties and maintained by the expectations prevalent in the group as a whole and given form in their corporate life. Over time, *ummah* became a state of mind, a form of social consciousness, or an imagined community which united the faithful in order to lead a virtuous life and to safeguard and even to expand the boundaries of the autonomous *ummah*.

Ummah became a framework for maintaining the religious unity and accommodating the cultural diversity of the believers. This generated a strong sense of unity, which permeated the Muslim world and was instrumental in submerging, or overriding, the significant ethnic and cultural differences on the level of the ideal. It thus became a critical basis for expansion that allowed for a certain disregard of the realities of life. Psychologically speaking, the term *ummah* provided for an existence on two levels, an existence in a tension that, never completely to be relieved is still an important element in the inner unrest besetting significant parts of the Muslim world.

In the modern Muslim world the notion of *ummah* is an integral part of religious, political and ideological discourses on Islam. Its foundation is constructed on the basis of the *Qur'anic* revelations and on the collective memories of the political grandeur of Islamic history. In the Muslim imagination, the *ummah* lives under a divine law whose protector is the *ummah* itself. The temporal political authority is neither a source nor a guarantee of the law. Its legitimacy is recognized so long as it guarantees the preservation and expansion of religion. While this type of volitional orientation is very much in tune with the contemporary globalization trends, it is also an inherent source of political instability and unrest in the modern Muslim world. This is reflected in the ideologies of several major modern Muslim social and political movements, like the Jamaat-i-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood.

For organizations like the Mohmmadiyah, Jamaat-i-Islami and Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim *ummah* is a transnational geographical entity with its heart lying in the modern Arabic Middle East. According to their ideologues, the dignity and political authority of the *ummah* have been severely undermined by the last five centuries of Western political and military domination. The Western attempts at keeping the *ummah* ineffective forever are now being resisted by the new signs of Islamic revival.

This illustrates the fact that, for many Islamic activists, the notion of *ummah* is an important and integral part of the contemporary Muslim consciousness that originated in *Qur'anic* revelations, but has evolved in meaning and usage in conjunction with developments in the Islamic world. *Ummah* manifests itself at the ideological, cognitive, behavioral and ethical levels. For Muslims, and especially Muslim activists and intellectuals, it is a sociological reality. It is a unique principle of social identity in Islam which acts as a basis of collective consciousness and community organization. There is a consensus among Muslim scholars that the

ummah refers to a spiritual, non-territorial community distinguished by the shared beliefs of its members.

However, the Islamic world is not immune from the ideology of nationalism. In Muslim countries nationalism has often incorporated the concept of the *ummah*. While most of the Muslim countries, like their counterparts elsewhere, have been strongly influenced by nationalism, the Islamic revivalist movements invariably make the existence of Muslim *ummah* an important part of their political platform. These movements argue that loyalty to the Islamic *ummah* overrides any other ethnic, linguistic and geographical loyalties.

The political reality, however, is that while most Muslims regard the idea of *ummah* as an important source of their collective identity, nationalism and nationalist movements are also an important part and parcel of most Muslim countries. As such, Muslims tend to have dual or multiple social identities comprised of national, or ethnic, and Islamic identities. In a sociological sense, the concept of *ummah* refers to an ideal state—an all-encompassing unity of the Muslims that is often invoked but never completely realised.

Sociology of the *Ummah*

As a sociological phenomenon, the *ummah* can be viewed as a collective identity. Collective identity is grounded in the socialization process in human societies. Individuals develop it by first identifying with the values, goals and purposes of their society and by internalizing them. This process, besides constructing the individual identity, also constructs the collective identity. Rituals and ritualized behaviors of the society further reinforce it and give the members a sense of similarity, especially against the 'Others' whose collective identities are different.

The key role in the construction of collective identity is played by symbolic systems of shared religion, language and culture, which act as boundary defining mechanisms of the collective identity. The boundaries can be crossed, or changed through incorporation, or shedding of symbolic domains such as those that are entailed in religious conversion or excommunication. Collective identity is constructed through major 'codes' of primordality, civility and transcendence or sacredness. These codes are ideal types as real coding invariably combines different elements of these ideal types. The construction of collective identity is not purely a symbolic affair unrelated to the division of labour, to the control of resources and to social differentiation. Collective identity and social solidarity entail consequences for the allocation of resources and for structuring entitlements to members of the collectivity as against the outsider.

From this perspective *ummah* would constitute a collective identity of Muslims in the sense that it refers to Muslim's identification with the sacred domain of Islam and its incorporation in their individual consciousness. The implication of viewing *ummah* as a frame for collective identity of Muslims is that, since it is a result of social construction in which social structure and social processes play critical roles, as these framing

devices change, they also produce changes in the nature of collective identity. In other words, since Muslims, besides partaking in common faith, also live their lives in the contexts of their respective societies, as these societies change under the impact of modernization and globalization that also will impact on Muslim collective identity.

The *Ummah* Consciousness

If *ummah* is a form of collective identity or an imagined community can we detect its presence in contemporary Muslim consciousness? I attempted to investigate this question in my study of Muslim religiosity in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Iran and Turkey. This study was conducted between 1997 and 2003 and involved the questioning of over 6300 Muslim respondents about their religiosity.

The evidence shows very high to high *ummah* consciousness in Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Egypt, Iran and Turkey and low in Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstan case is unique among the countries included in the study. It was the only country that was part of the Soviet empire until its disintegration in 1991, which led to its independence. During the Soviet rule religion was more or less banished from public life. Consequently Kazak Muslim identity became grounded in ethnicity and history rather than religiosity. In all other countries Islam was a powerful and ubiquitous part of public and private life and played a pivotal role in the development of religious identity and ummah consciousness as reflected in the data.

Table 1: Ummah Consciousness and Modernity in Muslim Countries

| Country | Ummah Consciousness ¹ | Modernity ² (Human Development Index) |
|------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Indonesia | 92 | 0.682 |
| Malaysia | 90 | 0.790 |
| Pakistan | 91 | 0.499 |
| Egypt | 94 | 0.648 |
| Iran | 76 | 0.719 |
| Turkey | 71 | 0.734 |
| Kazakhstan | 22 | 0.765 |

1. Ummah Consciousness Index was derived from unpublished survey data from the named countries. It is an average of respondents “agreeing” with the following beliefs: 1. No doubt about the existence of Allah. 2. Firm belief in the Quranic miracles. 3. Faith in the month of Ramadan. 4. Belief in life after death. 5. Belief that persons who deny the existence of Allah are dangerous. These surveys were conducted by me between 1997 and 2003. The sample sizes for the various countries were: Indonesia 1472; Pakistan 1272; Malaysia 802; Egypt 788; Iran 614; Turkey 527; and Kazakhstan 1000. The samples were not random. The findings apply to surveyed samples.

2. Modernity refers to the Human Development Index value for the selected countries, see UNDP (2002)

This consciousness shapes the image of the 'self' and also that of the 'other'. It allows Muslims to identify with the other Muslims who are subjected to oppression, violence and injustices by the 'other'. This is the reason why the conflict in Palestine and the pro- Israeli policies of the West, especially of the United States, have created a feeling of intense anti-Americanism in Muslim countries. For the same reasons conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan have provoked anti-Western feelings and attitudes. One can argue that *ummah* consciousness also underpins the so called Jihadist movements which are actively involved in violent resistance in a number of Muslim countries in Southeast, South and Central Asia and the Middle East. Their activities in the Iraq, Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere are the most commonly reported stories in the media.

Does this mean that *ummah* consciousness also acts a catalyst for Islamic unity at the international and even at the national level? The answer is *no*. The clearest evidence of this is the fragmentation of the Islamic world into 49 Muslim majority countries many of which are hostile to each other as well as the ethnic and sectarian violence which is endemic in many Muslim countries. Other indicators of this are the lack of or poor mass support for Islamic political parties in almost all Muslim countries and conflict between radical Islamist movements such as Al Qaeda, Jammah Islamiyah and the existing political structures.

Muslim countries differ in their level of modernity. I would like to argue that the level of modernity would have a significant impact on the institutional development, differentiation and institutional specialization that may lead to a decline in public influence of religious institutions in society while at the same time leading to a greater emphasis on personal religiosity. Such developments would obviously have consequences for the development of religious and political pluralism or at least their greater acceptance as a social and political norm. My argument is that in Muslim countries, political culture, as elsewhere, will evolve in response to national aspirations and not in response to the *ummah's* aspirations. If this argument has any validity then the future of Islamic *ummah* would not be a unitary social reality but a differentiated one. And one consequence of that may be the 'decentring' of the Islamic *ummah*. Let me explore this proposition in some details

Modernization and the *Ummah*

Modern technology has resulted in rapid communication over unlimited space. This technology is now in existence nearly all over the world. The potential for worldwide rapid communication has been translated into actual practice. We now live in a globalizing social reality in which previous effective barriers to communication no longer exist. The world is fast becoming a global village and 'a single place'. Therefore, in order to understand the major features of social life and emerging religious and political trends in contemporary Muslim societies, we need to

go beyond local and national factors and situate the analysis in the global context. In the pre-globalized world, 'knowing' of all Islamized people was seriously constrained or even rendered impossible by the limitations of technology. At best, only a small number of people were able to travel to other cultures and societies. The legendary travels of Ibn Batutta and Vasco de Gama are now a reality experienced by thousands of business and recreational travellers every year.

In the pre-modern and globalized world *ummah* consciousness was largely determined by the observance of the practice of the 'five pillars' of Islam (oath of belief, payment of zakat, performance of hajj, daily prayers and fasting) and certain other key beliefs. The existence of these beliefs and practices was seen by many believers everywhere as evidence that the entire culture of the Muslim societies was Islamized, that is, had come to resemble the Arabian culture where Islam had originated. This transformation of all Islamized people was considered to be an integral part of Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) social and religious mission. It was naively assumed by many Islamic intellectuals in the Middle East that such cultural trajectory was the common destiny of all Islamized people. The difficulties of communication and contact with people in far off regions fed this belief. But the reality was that Islamized cultures invariably added the Islamic layers on top of the various other cultural layers. The work of Clifford Geertz (1968) on Islam in Java and Morocco provides an excellent illustration of this. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the study of the customary laws of Muslim countries, which still continue to play a significant role in social and cultural affairs of Muslim communities.

It can be argued that modernization is prompting a reformulation of the common Muslim belief that Islam is not only a religion but also a complete way of life, which, in Islamic discourse is known as the 'one religion one culture' paradigm. Instantaneous and worldwide communication links are now allowing Muslims and non-Muslims to experience the reality of different Islamic cultures. Such experiences reveal not only what is common among Muslims but also what is different. For example, gender relations and dress codes for Muslim women are structured in different ways in Muslim countries like Malaysia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kazakhstan.

While the first consequence makes us conscious of the social and cultural diversity of the Muslim *ummah*, the second consequence produces a reaction of rejection of this cultural and social hybridity and a desire to replace it with the authentic 'Islamic way'. The struggle between 'hybridity' and 'authenticity' perhaps constitutes the most important challenge of globalization for the Muslim *ummah* and is one of the underlying causes of the emergence of Islamic fundamentalist movements. Islamic fundamentalism refers to a strategy by which Islamic 'purists' attempt to reassert their construction of religious identity and social order as the exclusive basis for a re-created political and social order. They feel this identity is at risk and is being eroded by cultural and religious hybridity. They try to fortify their interpretation of religious ways of being through selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practices from a 'sacred' past.

Religious fundamentalism thus is a problem produced by the encounter between modernization and Muslim *ummah* in all its diversity and cultural hybridity. Its strength varies according to the intensity of attitudes towards diversity and cultural hybridity. For example, in the context of Indonesia, Islamic scholar Azyumardi Azra has observed that Islamic radicalism in Indonesia is predicated on the perception that indigenous Indonesian Islam is syncretic and hybrid, and needs to be purified and transformed into 'authentic' Islam through the application of the radicals' interpretations of the sacred texts. According to Azra, this 'literalist' interpretation is the root of the radical Islamic fundamentalism in Indonesia (Azra 2002). This observation is applicable not only in the case of Indonesia but also in the context of other Islamic countries as well.

In the modern globalized world diversity and cultural crossovers will become a matter of routine. Instead of eliminating hybridity, this may in fact transform different Islamic countries and regions into autonomous cultural systems thus posing a challenge to the conventional categorical oppositions of 'us' and 'them', 'Muslim' and 'other'. This type of development would have far reaching implications for the Muslim *ummah*. Islamic countries in different parts of the world could be transformed into unique religious and cultural systems, each claiming acceptance and recognition as authentic traditions of Islam. This transformation may lead to the 'de-centering' of the Muslim world from its supposed cultural and religious center in the Arabic Middle East to a multi-centered world. Five such centers of the Islamic world can be readily identified, namely, Arabic Middle Eastern Islam, African Islam, Central Asian Islam, Southeast Asian Islam and Islam of the Muslim minorities in the West. The demographic characteristics such as size, diversity and age structure of the populations in the Muslim countries will further accentuate the movement towards de-centering. Over time, these traditions may find strength and consolidate with the support of their followers.

Drawing from the insights of Professor Alatas's work one can argue that modernization, while corroding and challenging the inherited or constructed cultural identities, also encourages the creation and revitalization of particular identities as a way of competing for power and influence in the global system (Alatas 1970). This will be aided by a unique affinity of religion for particularistic identities. And because religion in a globalizing, modernizing world is marginalized, it uses new opportunities and ways to gain public influence and legitimacy. My argument here is that, far from losing public influence, religion may gain public influence under conditions of globalization. This influence, nevertheless, will be mediated by a sub-global religious tradition that can adapt and encourage the applied role of religion with greater success than the inherited global tradition can.

In the light of the above, the future Islamic *ummah* will gain strength not as a unified and unitary community but as a differentiated community consisting of *ummahs* representing different Islamic regions. This de-centering of the Muslim *ummah* may also be beneficial for the intellectual revitalization in the Muslim world

The Real Challenge to *Ummah*

The looming challenge for the Muslim world is not religious, but intellectual. At present, Islamic *ummah* is in the doldrums not because of the weakness of commitment to the faith but because of its intellectual stagnation brought about by political, social and cultural conditions generated by colonialism, neo-colonialism and economic underdevelopment, poor governance some of which can be attributed to the real or imagined influence of increasing devotional religiosity of the masses. This stagnation is most dramatically manifested in the scientific and technological backwardness of the Muslim world.

In the 2008 ranking of the world's top 200 universities by the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) 2008, 49 Muslim majority countries did not list a single university. Likewise the research contribution of Muslim countries is negligible and there are few writings or translations from other languages.

Several factors account for these intellectual conditions. One of these being the meagre resources allocated by Muslim countries to research and development. However, this is not only a cause, this itself is an effect of the legacy of the colonial history which was experienced by most Muslim countries for an extended period in the past two centuries, during which they endured some of the worst excesses of racial and economic exploitation that stalled their development which has been brilliantly detailed by Professor Alatas in his book *The Myth of Lazy Native*. But the causes of their present predicament can also be attributed to the prevailing cultural and political practices and poor governance.

Muslim countries are increasingly coming under intense pressure from religious fundamentalist movements to impose epistemologies compatible with their versions of Islamic doctrines that are generally hostile to critical rational thought. This is stifling the development of conditions conducive to the development and growth of vibrant institutions of higher learning.

In my recent studies of contemporary Islamic consciousness in a number of Middle Eastern Muslim countries, I was struck by an all-pervasive sense of humiliation arising from the inability of the Arab countries to match the military and technological superiority of Israel. This sense was further reinforced by the economic power and absolute technological superiority of the West vis-à-vis Muslim countries. This sense of humiliation is a major underlying cause of Islamic militancy and terrorism.

A robust civil society is a prerequisite for the development of a society based not on the tyranny of strongly held convictions and beliefs but on a social order based on doubt and compromise. Science and technology prosper only under conditions which privilege the rule of reason and nature. The intellectual stagnation of Muslim countries threatens to imprison a significant proportion of humanity into permanent servitude. There is a great urgency to create and nurture conditions promoting academic excellence and to develop strategies to arrest the decline of the institutions

of higher learning to ensure an honourable survival of future generations of Muslims. This is probably the greatest and growing challenge facing the governments of the Muslim countries today.

The real challenge for the differentiated Muslim *ummah* will be to find political, social and cultural ways to fuse a high degree of piety and a high degree of intellectual activity for scientific advancement. The Algerian – French anthropologist Muhammad Arkoun has proposed three categories of thought. He labels these categories as ‘thinkable’, ‘unthinkable’ and ‘unthought’ (Arkoun 1994). The cultural conditioning emanating from the dogmatic religiosity and traditionalistic self-image appear to encourage the majority of Muslim masses and intellectuals to think only in terms of the ‘thinkable’ and the ‘unthinkable’ and discourage cognitive processes leading to the ‘unthought’.

The conditions which prevent the realm of the ‘unthought’ from flourishing and which now prevail in most Muslim countries constitute perhaps the most significant barriers to the development of science and technology. Muslims, like non-Muslims, will be called upon to address and solve modern problems not only related to the development of science and technology but also other problems like equality of citizenship for women and children, the management of human sexuality, environmental degradation, the rule of law, political and cultural freedoms. A proper understanding and resolution of these and other problems would require a common understanding based on rational scientific knowledge.

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