When Words Collide:
Islam and Modernity – Alternative Paradigms, Contrasting Authentic Ideals

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Abstract

The conflict between Islam and the West is rooted in contrasting worldviews that are informed by alternative moral underpinnings and differing existential implications. Furthermore, engagement between the Islamic and western paradigms is defined by imbalanced power relations in which the subaltern Islamic paradigm is pressured into conformance by the dominant western modernist paradigm. Using the issue of freedom of expression as an entry point, this article examines the contrasting cultural conduits that define each community by outlining the main tropes of their worldviews. It therefore attempts to suggest an alternative engagement between Islam and the West, one that emphasizes convergence over conflict.

Introduction

The simmering controversy around the cartoons of the Prophet published a few years ago in the Danish press undoubtedly deepened the chasm between Muslims and the West.[1] While it is somewhat unfashionable (in our postmodern age) to frame debates in such stark, polarized terms, the almost surgical division of society into "western" and "Muslim" camps that became apparent as the controversy worsened cannot simply be ignored. Westerners, whether sympathetic to Muslim sentiments or untroubled by the prospect of causing offense, generally defended the cartoons by asserting that the free-

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dom of expression is an inalienable right. Angered Muslims argued that the cartoons were a severe affront to Islam and a violation of the boundaries of faith.

Strangely enough, both positions reveal a dogmatic closure around preconceived notions that, lamentably, remain poorly articulated. Such closure does little to explain tensions; if anything, it only leads to the expedient management of conflict. As such, dissipated tensions are sure to rise again, given the right provocation. The comments made on 12 September 2006 by Pope Benedict XVI during his lecture on "Faith, Reason, and the University,"[2] considered by some to be anti-Islamic, and the ensuing outpouring of anger by Muslims around the world is clear evidence of this. The cartoon controversy was reignited in February 2008 when Danish police arrested suspects for supposedly planning to assassinate one of the cartoonists. In response, the *Jyllands-Posten* reprinted one of the cartoons, triggering another round of support and condemnation to which even Osama bin Laden contributed.

In this article, I want to argue that the increasingly persistent conflict between Islam and the West is not only rooted in contrasting worldviews that are informed by alternative moral underpinnings, and thus with consequently differing existential implications, but also in the imbalanced power relations that define engagement between the two paradigms. In this regard, the western modernist paradigm maintains the hegemonic posture, acting as a universalizing discourse that constantly pressures the subaltern Islamic paradigm to conform to western norms and dictates. Such coercive power relations need to be examined, together with the contrasting cultural conduits that define each community, if we are to make sense of the barriers that separate us.

In what follows, I explore the metanarratives informing the modernist and Islamic paradigms, by which I mean the cultural and philosophical underpinnings that have shaped their opposing worldviews. The purpose of such an exercise is to adequately explain the provenance of our current attitudes and biases, which is a prerequisite for ultimately transcending them. The most logical point of departure is to explore how the western modernist worldview came to be so pervasive.

The Modernist Social Imaginary

Ironically, modernity's paradigmatic moment finds its best expression in the words of Protagoras (c.490-20 BCE), the ancient Greek philosopher who, in

an instant of narcissistic eloquence, declared that "Man is the measure of all things."[3] It is, however, only from the eighteenth century onward that modernity emerges in history as "an unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularisation, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending dissolution)."[4] So while the key elements of this paradigm (e.g., individualism, progress, rational order, and secularity) all have historical antecedents, they only gelled together as a comprehensive worldview sometime in the eighteenth century, which thus became the juncture at which modernity emerged as a dominant paradigm. While modernity may be a relatively recent phenomenon in terms of historical scope, its impact has been far-reaching, virtually effacing alternative ways of looking at the world.

The modernist vision gained ascendancy throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only by virtue of its philosophy, but moreso by the dominance of its institutions, as epitomized during the colonial era when the Third World was rendered prostrate before the absolute power of the colonial state. The modernist worldview only took a reflexive turn late in the twentieth century when modernity, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman, was able to go beyond its false consciousness and come to understand what it was doing, thereby acknowledging that its goal of imposing a rational order founded on absolute truth could not be achieved.[5] This reflexive turn came to be known as postmodernity, which Bauman views as a nothing more than a further unfolding of modernity.

Nonetheless, the onset of postmodernity opened up a space for alternative perspectives once again. Emphasizing the provinciality of western modernity as well as its hegemonic nature, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor argues that modernity is not a single phenomenon, even if it represents a horizon beyond which we have much difficulty seeing. For him, it is far more apt to speak of "multiple modernities," the plural reflecting the fact that other non-western cultures have modernized in their own way and cannot properly be understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was designed originally with only the western case in mind.[6] Taylor elaborates further, arguing that from this view western modernity is inseparable from a certain kind of social imaginary and that the differences among alternative paradigms need to be understood in terms of the divergent social imaginaries involved.

Simply put, a given social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather, it is an expression of how ordinary people imagine their social surroundings, one

that is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Most importantly, the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy possible.[7] As Taylor explains, it often happens that what starts off as theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society.

Our practices, as such, are not necessarily a rational response to events emanating from a process of careful reflection; rather, to a large extent they are an expression of the unique cultural baggage acquired while proceeding through life's journey. This baggage not only influences how we perceive reality, but also goes a long way toward explaining our biases and value judgments. In this regard, Abdelwahab Elmessiri posits that since our grasp of reality is mediated by our cultural context, it makes sense to speak of a conceptual paradigm or a conceptual map that is a product of this context.

An individual's conceptual map influences his/her perceptions – generally at a subconscious level – and is informed by such factors as language, custom, predominant beliefs, experience, and a host of other psycho-social elements. Acknowledging the presence of this conceptual map helps explain why the same phenomenon is quite often perceived very differently from one person to another or from one culture to the next.[8] This has a direct bearing upon the vehement differences of opinion that have polarized Muslims and their western counterparts on the issue of freedom of expression, for example.

It therefore makes sense to probe the formation of the western modern social imaginary in some detail in order to reveal its implicit biases, and thereafter explore the Islamic paradigm as a point of contrast. As will be seen below, modernity produced within the western mindset a conceptual map of distinctive contours, with the notion of secularity emerging as centrally important.

The Roots of the Modernist Paradigm[9]

The roots of modernity as a philosophical discourse can be traced back to eighteenth-century Europe, to an age that became popularly known as "the Enlightenment." Prior to this, Europe was gripped in the clutches of an intense struggle between science and religion. After the Middle Ages, the scientific discoveries of great figures like Kepler, Copernicus, Gilbert, and Galileo provided a basis on which to challenge traditional religious worldviews concerning the nature of the universe. The price paid for doing so was

very high. Galileo, for example, faced persecution for positing scientific theories that ran contrary to Catholic dogma.[10] However, the changing tides ensured that the church's tyrannical rule did not last much longer.

The Enlightenment marked a decisive epistemological break with the thought paradigm of the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church's hegemony over the existing institutions of knowledge and its power to determine the very nature of knowledge were vigorously challenged, as was the central role of religious ideas in politics. This period of time thus emerged as a "critique of the social systems and philosophical traditions which characterised the Middle Ages."[11] Within the broader spectrum of world history, these changes were as significant as the classical Greco-Roman outlook (which flourished up to the fourth century) and the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The Christian worldview replaced the Greco-Roman outlook and dominated Europe until the seventeenth century.[12]

With the onset of the eighteenth century, the modern ideas and arguments that came to the fore shifted the focus of the looking glass. Philosophers now began to openly scrutinize the church's worldview. The Enlightenment also became known as the Age of Reason because its philosophy emphasized instrumental reason and scientific rationality over the church's speculative theology. Rationalism and empiricism, now core elements of epistemology, displaced speculative and theological metaphysics.[13] This major shift forms the very core of philosophical modernity and is still invoked today.

Thus the Enlightenment removed religion as the principle and base of identity and replaced it with reason. Human worth was now measured in terms of humanistic ethics and utility rather than creed and piety.[14] In return for the compromise on faith, the Enlightenment was able to rekindle the imagination and instill confidence in the ability of the subjective self. Given that the scientific advances made during the last four centuries have surpassed the collective efforts of all the epochs preceding it, it is quite easy to understand why modernity was embraced so quickly and has been the dominant force for so long.

Modernity and Secularity

But as John Esposito eloquently pronounces, "the world at the dawn of the twenty-first century challenges the 'wisdom' and expectations of the prophets of modernity."[15] Current skepticism toward modernization and development theory challenges the longstanding claim that the development of

modern states and societies requires westernization and secularization.[16] Although westernization has indeed developed and advanced the bureaucratic mechanisms of modern society, it has not been nearly as successful at eradicating humanity's predicaments. In this regard, Parvez Manzoor contends that the expression "crisis of modernity" needs to be understood in terms of modernity's inability to redeem its promise of delivering a model of perfect historical order. Explaining further, he emphasizes that modern societies are neither capable of dealing with the inner challenges of governance and economy, which are primary determinants of the human condition in terms of the modernist vision, nor are modern polities invulnerable to any threats by external enemies. Rather, according to him, upholders of the modernist vision are perplexed by the realization that their global city is not a city of humanity.[17]

Ali Bulac, a Turkish Islamist scholar, lends his support to this criticism by focusing on the plight of the environment as well as of the individual. He exclaims that although modernism had promised paradise on Earth, it has instead turned the entire planet into a living hell. He goes even further, adding that along with polluting the environment modernism has also succeeded in polluting the soul.[18] While many have equated the western discourse of modernity with secularism, not much attention has been focused on the above description of modernity as a dual-pollutant encompassing more than just a philosophy that advocates the separation of church and state.

Elmessiri, one of the few Islamic scholars who has seriously interrogated the notion of secularism at a metacritical level, contends that the identity of western modernity is more in keeping with what he refers to as *comprehensive secularism*. The separation of religion and state is a phenomenon that does not imply a comprehensive worldview, and he thus refers to it as *partial secularism*. He argues that such an outlook confines itself to the realm of politics and perhaps economics, but maintains a complete silence on absolute or permanent values, be they moral, religious, or otherwise. It also does not address itself to ultimate things like the origin of humanity, human destiny, or the purpose of life.

In contrast, he points out that comprehensive secularism is a completely different outlook, one that does not merely seek to separate the church from the state and some other elements of public life; rather, it seeks the separation of all values – religious, moral, or human – not only from the state but also from public and private life and from the world at large.[19] For him, it is in this comprehensive regard that western modernity and secularism are almost synonymous. In referring to one, the other is also tacitly

implied. As such, Elmessiri defines western modernity as the adoption of value-free science as the basis of humanity's world outlook and as a source of values and norms. This outlook reorients the individual to follow value-free laws while remaining blind to moral consequences, instead of modifying the world to fit human needs and aspirations.[20] History itself stands as a witness against, and testifies to, the disastrous consequences of such a worldview. But in order to manifest this more clearly, there has to be a move toward a more holistic reading of history and, more specifically, a more holistic reading of the history of secularism itself.

Elmessiri argues that in the West the paradigmatic sequence of immanentization (i.e., the shift from a transcendental worldview to a materialistic one), and therefore secularization, modernization, and naturalization, began in the Middle Ages when some economic enclaves "freed" themselves from Christian values or such concepts as "fair price." He goes on to explain that since then only strictly economic criteria were to be applied to economic activity, and success and failure were to be stripped of any moral or human considerations. He thus asserts that the economic sphere was immanentized, becoming value-free and referring only to itself, as its criteria and standards were immanent in it. This development established a pattern that repeated itself in all other spheres of human activity.[21]

Another significant example of the pattern alluded to by Elmessiri is that of the political sphere. He draws our attention to the birth of the theory of the modern state during the Renaissance. The state, in this instance, became value-free and justified itself by *raison d'état* (i.e., its own existence) rather than seeking legitimacy on a religious or moral basis. As a result, the realm of politics freed itself from any values external to it and was judged by the criteria immanent in it. In a similar vein, all spheres of human life, including science, were freed from religious and moral values and considerations, thereby becoming self-sufficient, self-regulating, self-transforming, and self-explanatory.[22]

Elmessiri bemoans the fact that the emergent secular worldview was never clearly articulated because western social scientists monitored the history of secularism in a piecemeal and diachronic fashion: first humanism and/or the Reformation, the Enlightenment, rationalism, and utilitarianism; then the Counter-Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Darwinism; then positivism, existentialism, phenomenology; and finally the end of history and postmodernism.[23] This piecemeal approach concealed many of the common and more appalling aspects of the western modernist worldview. Elmessiri argues that this resulted in some of the most shameful ideologies of the recent

past (e.g., racism, imperialism, and Nazism) being seen as mere aberrations and having a history of their own, as distinct from the history of secularism and modernity. When this particular worldview is approached holistically, however, it becomes apparent that these so-called aberrations are in fact part and parcel of the western civilizational model.

His central contention is that by grasping this overall unity and articulating it into a comprehensive paradigm, thereby developing a uniform and complex paradigm of secularism, we can unmask the relationship between the Enlightenment and deconstruction; between modernization, modernism, and postmodernism; between Nietzcheanism and Hitler, pragmatism and Eichmann; between rationalism, imperialism, and the Holocaust.[24] From the vantage point of this novel paradigm, it becomes far easier to expose the moral and sociopolitical consequences of the modernist vision.

Elmessiri points out that in light of the above it is not plausible to regard oppressive ideologies of the past and the present – like Nazism and Zionism – as exceptional cases, because modernist discourse reflects a general pattern of extermination that began in the West from the time of the Renaissance in countries like the United States and Canada, right up to the present in Vietnam, Chechnya, Bosnia, and elsewhere.[25]

On the basis of this analysis, his contention of a direct link between western civilization and genocide is quite compelling.[26] He supports this position on several grounds. First, he points out that western civilization is a technological civilization that elevates progress at any price, even to the detriment of humanity. The resultant hardship and suffering, both physical and spiritual, are not of much significance in a culture that supports the principle of the survival of the fittest and ignores such traditional values as being charitable to the weak and assisting those in need. By this logic, the Nazis were able to legitimate the extermination of the Jews because they were viewed as non-productive or useless. This was admittedly an extreme solution, but Elmessiri argues that other western countries like the United States and Poland bear a certain degree of culpability because they refused to give asylum to this "useless" ethnic grouping.

A second trend that justifies drawing parallels between genocide and western culture is that the Nazis' "final solution" shares many similarities with "solutions" adopted by other western imperialist countries. The genocide of the United States' indigenous inhabitants is an appropriate example. Elmessiri points out that Nazism and imperialism share the common belief of the superiority of the Aryan race.

Finally, he states that a central trait of western civilization – and a phe-
nomenon common to both Zionism and Nazism – is the rationality of its pro-
cedures and methods and the irrationality of its objectives and goals. Max
Weber has also mentioned this characteristic. For Elmessiri, the best exam-
ples of the antinomy between objective and method are the Nazi death
camps and the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland.[27] In
both these cases, horrendous atrocities are afflicted upon a target population
with the utmost precision and planning.

According to him, the moral implications of comprehensive secularism
are indeed grave. The secular state derived from such a vision, he argues, is
not subject to any religious or ethical absolutes, and its sovereignty and
power become the only absolutes.[28] It must be noted that this critique is con-
ditioned by Elmessiri's position as an outsider looking in and that he brings
to his analysis his own personal cultural baggage. As an Islamic thinker, he
places an added emphasis upon the loss of fixed moral underpinnings as a
result of the loss of transcendental moorings. As such, it is equally important
to explore an insider's perspective on secularity as well. Taylor's work is
once again helpful in this regard.

Taylor asserts that modern social forms are characterized by the absence
of an action transcendent grounding. In other words, they exist exclusively
in secular time.[29] In clear contrast to the premodern worldview, the modern
social imaginary no longer sees the greater translocal entities as grounded in
something "other," something "higher," than common action in secular time.
Society is now imagined horizontally, unrelated to what Taylor refers to as
"high points," where the ordinary sequence of events touches higher time.
The consequence of such "radical horizontality" is that it does not recognize
any privileged persons or agencies, such as monarchs or priests, who stand
and mediate at such points.[30]

As Taylor remarks, unlike the premodern order in which earlier hierar-
chical societies tended to personalize relations of power and subordination,
the principle of a modern horizontal society is very different: "Each of us is
equidistant from the centre; we are immediate as a whole. This describes
what we could call a direct-access society. We have moved from a hierarchi-
cal order of personalised links to an impersonal egalitarian one; from a ver-
tical world of mediated access to horizontal, direct-access societies."[31]

As is clearly implied from the above, the modern social imaginary has
contributed to religion's displacement from the public sphere. While it may
not have completely removed God from the public space, it has certainly
removed one mode in which God was present, as part of the story of soci-

ety's action-transcendent grounding in higher time.[32] Taylor posits that we need to examine and understand what this alternative form of God's presence amounts to and how many contemporary societies have set it aside. Plainly put, the modern social imaginary is the end of a certain kind of presence of religion or the divine in public space. More poignantly, it is the end of society as structured by its dependence on God or the beyond.

Drawing on the insights of French philosopher Marcel Gauchet, Taylor explains that although this development does not represent the end of personal religion or of religion in public life, it is definitely a decisive stage in the development of our modern predicament, *in which belief and unbelief can coexist as alternatives*.[33] For Taylor, the difference between the premodern and modern conceptions of religion amounts to the following:

> In the earlier phase, God or some kind of higher reality is an ontic necessity; that is, people cannot conceive a metatopical agency having authority that is not grounded somehow in higher time, be it through the action of God or the Great Chain or some founding *in illo tempore*. What emerges from the change is an understanding of social and political life entirely in secular time. Foundings are now seen to be common actions in profane time, ontically on the same footing with all other such actions, even though they may be given a specially authoritative status in our national narrative or our legal system.
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> This freeing of politics from its ontic dependence on religion is sometimes what people mean by the secularity of public space.[34]

The substance of what Taylor has argued tries to drive home the point that modernity is secular, not in the frequent and rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, one compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time.[35]

It is worth reiterating that Taylor has been describing the modern western social imaginary. The Islamic paradigm, in stark contrast, still holds very firmly to the notion of transcendence. Consciousness of the absence of a transcendental grounding in the modern western social imaginary is extremely significant to any attempt to understand the differences between the modernist and the Islamic paradigms. We must now devote some attention to elaborating upon the latter. In what follows, the Islamic paradigm is explored by presenting it in counterpoint to modernity and postmodernity; its essential features will also be analyzed.

The Islamic Paradigm[36]

Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' contends that the resurgence of religion in both industrial and peasant societies is one of the most significant features of transcending the challenges of modernity and postmodernity.[37] One may even argue that it is a resurgence borne out of the exasperation of treading on shaky ground. While postmodernism is to be fully acknowledged for creating the space that made such a resurgence possible, it has failed dismally – as a philosophy – to provide a firm foundation for an alternative worldview. As a result, people have increasingly begun turning back to religion.

Islamism, or the influence of an Islamic worldview in the sociopolitical sphere, is a specific example of this resurgence. Islamism is viewed as a product of the frustration with the promises of western modernization and, more specifically, represents a critique of modernism that displays remarkable similarities with postmodernism,[38] such as the rejection of the modernist paradigm's determinism, rationalism, and positivism.[39] There are, however, fundamental differences between the two that ultimately make them incompatible. Bulac explains that Islam is ultimately a "total doctrine" that rejects the universalism and relativism of postmodernism.[40]

Despite the fundamental differences, it is quite enlightening to explore the fascination that postmodernism holds for Islamists. Mustafa Armagan, another Islamist thinker, is helpful in this regard. He explains that

> […] postmodernism is attractive to Islamists because: (1) it shows the failures and limitations of modernism; (2) given the exhaustion of modernism, the postmodernist search for alternatives opens up an opportunity for Islam; (3) in their rejection of the secular uniformity of modernism, postmodernists freely borrow from tradition and religion which Islamists advocate; (4) the postmodernist emphasis on diversity and (5) the announcement of the death of "meta-narratives" strengthens the hand of Islam in its struggle against modern "isms" such as socialism, positivism or Darwinism.[41]

Returning to the critique of postmodernism, he argues that postmodernist "playfulness" results in the rejection of a unitary point of reference for truth and thereby endorses the acceptance of multiple perspectives as equally valid. As a result, he holds that this constitutes a second wave of secularization. Explaining further, he argues that in the first phase of secularization, undertaken by modernism, the self reconceptualized the outside world (society, state, nature, art, religion, etc.) by using reason.

> In the current phase of secularization, the self has begun to reflect on the outside world which the self created through reflection in the first place. Modernists, although secularized, still retained the traditional notion of a distinction between form and essence. For the postmodernists, however, form is everything – style constitutes content and rhetoric makes up reality.[42]

He therefore regards postmodernism as a commercial paganism that turns religions into playthings and therefore cannot, as such, be an ally of Islam.

The impact of modernity and postmodernity upon human subjectivity and moral agency cannot be construed as altogether positive. Modernity is best characterized as the subjective self's rejection of all external authority in the quest for complete emancipation and freedom. But this quest came to be tainted by the fading of moral horizons, because the turn inward was also a turn away from any transcendental ethical arbiter, thereby locating the source of all morals within the subjective self. This has ultimately had a very negative impact upon society, for it has allowed the complicity between modern scientific knowledge production and the thirst for power.

Although postmodernity came to the fore as a result of extreme disenchantment with modernity, it remains a discourse that is even less empowering to the human subject than that of modernity, due to its inherent cynicism and nihilism. So while the western scientific paradigm is still very effective at producing valuable knowledge, it poses more of a threat to modern society than any long-term benefit it may provide because it has no effective moral compass to guide it. While the modern subject is still very keen on asking "how," he/she is no longer concerned with asking "why" or "what for," which are essential expressions of moral agency. Even in our contemporary context, the Islamic subject has not made a similarly radical turn inward and still holds on to a religious essence informed by a worldview that invokes transcendence.

Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi captures the essence of the Islamic paradigm rather poignantly. He argues that the essence of religious experience in Islam

> is the realization that life is not in vain; that it must serve a purpose the nature of which cannot be identical with the natural flow of appetite to satisfaction to new appetite and new satisfaction. For the Muslim, reality consists of two utterly disparate orders, the natural and the transcendent; and it is to the latter that he looks for the values by which to govern the flow of the former. Having identified the transcendent realm as God, he rules out any guidance of action that does not proceed therefrom. His rig-

orous *tawhid* (or unization of divinity) is, in the final analysis, a refusal to subject human life to any guidance other than the ethical.[43]

To use Taylor's term, it is apparent that a central difference between the modernist and Islamic paradigms is that the latter still strongly invokes "higher time." More precisely, Islam's central tenet is the belief in revelation, as embodied in the Qur'an.[44]

The onset of Islam is best characterized as a moment of irruption brought about by the event of the Qur'an. Its impact upon history bears testimony to an influence that not only gave rise to a community of the faithful, but defined an extremely deep and meaningful mode of existence as well. This nascent community, nurtured by the Qur'an's profound influence, grew into an empire that dominated world history for a significant period, spawning a civilization that until today sustains and inspires people to embrace Islam as a response to ultimate concerns. The Qur'an of the first generation, therefore, acted as foundational text that is, in a sense, synonymous with a grand or master narrative that informs all levels of existence, both sacred and profane.

It is in this penetrating sense that Fazlur Rahman refers to the revelations inspired to Muhammad as "the voice from the depths of life, speaking distinctly, unmistakably and imperiously."[45] The Qur'an's assertive power, however, is not simply attributable to the belief concerning its divine origins. As Rahman explains, God's existence, as far as the Qur'an is concerned, is strictly functional because it is not a treatise about God or His nature.[46] Its central concern is humanity, as it is either directly addressed to human beings or is a discourse on human existence.[47] This very important attribute conveys upon the Qur'an a universal significance, because it is expressly addressed to all who are willing to listen.

From this perspective, a Muslim is simply one who submits to its teachings and affirms its authority. The Qur'anic philosophy resonated strongly within the very beings of the first-generation Muslims in this manner and thereby gave impetus to their spiritual and social existence.[48] In this formative period, the event of the Qur'an became the focal point of intellectual activity even among those who were not reconciled to its message. Any opposing inclination was invariably drawn into dialogue with the voice of revelation, and the Qur'an thus maintained a central position in the mind of the community.[49]

The Qur'an thus occupied the most privileged of positions in the believers' hearts and minds and could deservedly be accorded the status of a foun-

dational text, seeing that it served to inform and inspire all aspects of life. Al-Nashshar elaborates on its centrality in the formative period, arguing that the beginnings of Islamic thought may be traced back to the deep reflection effected by the Qur'an. As such,

> Islamic existence in its entirety is nothing but an elaboration of the Qur'an. Pondering over the practical stipulations of the Qur'an gave rise to jurisprudence; reflecting over it as a writ on metaphysics led to the development of dialectic theology; contemplating over it as a book [concerned with] the hereafter gave rise to mysticism, spirituality and ethics; deliberating over it as a book of laws gave rise to the science of governance; regarding its language as divine inspired the linguistic sciences, and so forth. The development of all the Islamic sciences should be approached from this perspective. They sprung forth and developed from the Qur'anic purview and confronted the sciences of other cultures from this very same purview, either affirming them or rejecting them.[50]

In light of the above, it should now be obvious that the place of religion in the modern western social imaginary is far removed from that of religion in the Islamic social imaginary. Whereas the modernist paradigm's radical horizontality is able to view religious values as being on an equal footing with all other alternatives, the Islamic paradigm consciously sees itself as a nodal link to "higher time" and by its very nature accords primacy to ethical precepts that emanate from the Qur'an.

From the above discussion, it should now be manifestly clear that the modernist and Islamic paradigms represent visibly contrasting authentic ideals. The modernist ideal of authenticity is rooted in self-reflexivity, where all values and judgments pass through the prism of individual affirmation or rejection; in this regard, even religion is no exception. In stark contrast, the authentic Islamic ideal is best conceived of in terms of an external or transcendental locus of authority to which the believer strives to submit. The only common ground between the two contrasting authentic ideals is that both find expression within the sphere of human existence. How, then, are we able to break the impasses that constantly arise as a consequence of our differences?

Transcending the Modernist Social Imaginary

Even though this inquiry has consciously emphasized the conflicting aspects of western and Islamic cultures, it by no means affirms Samuel Huntington's now infamous thesis of an inevitable "clash of civilizations"

between the West and the Islamic world.[51] Huntington offers but one of many ways of imagining cross-cultural interaction, and by his own admission his book is not a work of social science but rather one that offers a paradigm for viewing global politics in a way that will benefit policymakers.[52] He therefore does not strive to describe social realities, but rather to create them. By presenting an extremely biased and ideologically loaded reading of the encounter between Islam and the West,[53] he conjures up the Islamic nemesis needed to justify the United States' ambition to maintain its current global hegemony. His primary objective is to ensure that western civilization emerges victorious in any encounter with challenger civilizations:

> The changing balance of power among civilizations makes it more and more difficult for the West to achieve its goals with respect to weapons proliferation, human rights, immigration, and other issues. To minimize its losses in this situation requires the West to wield skillfully its economic resources as carrots and sticks in dealing with other societies, to bolster its unity and coordinate its policies so as to make it more difficult for other societies to play one Western country off against another, and to promote and exploit differences among non-Western nations. The West's ability to pursue these strategies will be shaped by the nature and intensity of its conflicts with the challenger civilizations, on the one hand, and the extent to which it can identify and develop common interests with the swing civilizations on the other.[54]

By exploiting preconceived notions and entrenched biases, scholars like Huntington strive to perpetuate the reigning modernist social imaginary. Therefore, the necessary point of departure from the hostile engagement that currently defines the relationship between Islam and the West is to begin viewing our differences as a starting point for convergence, not conflict. This will be the focus of our attention in the conclusion below.

Conclusion

In my exploration of the western intellectual tradition I have relied heavily upon the work of Charles Taylor. His critical reading of modernity is extremely significant to marginalized traditions, like the Islamic, which bear the burden of the dominant western paradigm. But while his discourse may represent an important countervailing strand, it is nevertheless still firmly rooted within the western paradigm and so is part of a continuous dialogue between the West and its own past.

Roxanne Euben astutely notes that alternative paradigms, like the Islamic, have to engage in at least two dialogues: a conversation across time with its own rich intellectual heritage, and a conversation across culture with the dominant West.[55] Many Muslim scholars are acutely aware of the burden of the western paradigm. Elmessiri, for example, refers to it as an "imperialist epistemological vision."[56]

Euben convincingly argues that such attempts to highlight the epistemological dimension of western power by illustrating how western ways of seeing, knowing, and understanding have been universalized, demonstrates how it sets the terms of debate for Islamic (and other) thinkers, even those who seek to reject or redefine the western paradigm.[57] As this insight has a direct bearing upon the freedom of expression debate, it must be stated categorically that the western paradigm dictates the terms of the debate as well as the language of the discourse. This alone is a major stumbling block for any attempt to make sense of the debate. So while considerable energy has already been expended on exploring the provenance of these two paradigms, it is worth reiterating once again the slanted power relations that favor the modernist paradigm.

From this perspective, the "freedom" in *freedom of expression* is not about earning the right to state one's case in an unimpeded manner, hoping that one's ideas will gain ascendancy by virtue of their innate rational appeal. Nor is it worth investing much hope in the liberal postmodern climate of our age that so generously bestows freedoms of all shapes and sizes upon the subaltern subject. As Bauman confesses, the total amount of freedom in society cannot be measured. We may therefore conclude that freedom cannot, as such, be equally apportioned. For him, freedom is a social relation, because

> [t]he more freedom I have the less freedom somebody else has. Freedom means ability to act on your will, and if you are able to have it your way, that means somebody else must compromise and surrender. [...]. [C]onsidering freedom in society, the better you can implement your own wishes, the worst someone else may be able to implement theirs.[58]

The only escape from such incredulity, therefore, is to initiate the process of reimagining the horizons of our collective existence. At the outset of this inquiry I opined that our view of the world is largely a consequence of the cultural baggage we have accumulated over a long period of time. Equally significant is that our social imaginaries are rooted in our ideas, which emanate from the minds of influential thinkers who are able to hold sway over large strata and, finally, over whole societies.[59]

As has been implicitly suggested throughout this paper, one way in which mutual understanding can be forged is to trace the provenance of our exclusive worldviews in the hope that this will help us overcome the differences that separate us, because, as Taylor so poignantly declares: "With the realization that [our] differences matter comes the humbling insight that there is a lot we don't understand, that we lack even the common language to describe [our] differences."[60] It is ultimately the search for this common language that gives us cause for hope, even if it is only the beginning of a process of engagement that carries no guarantee of a brighter future.

Endnotes

1. For an elaborate account of the controversy, see the Wikipedia entry "Muhammad Cartoon Controversy": http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyllands-Posten_Muhammad_cartoons_controversy.
2. For the full English translation of the speech see: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.
3. A. C. Grayling, *What is Good? The Search for the Best Way to Live* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolsan, 2003), 13.
4. C. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.
5. Peter Beliharz, ed., *The Bauman Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 20.
6. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 1.
7. Ibid., 23-24.
8. A. Elmessiri, *Al-`Alam min Manzur Gharbi* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 2001), 15.
9. This section is a synopsis of aspects of a more elaborate discussion on the impact of modernity and postmodernity upon contemporary Islamic thought. In this regard, see A. Farouk-Alli, "The Second Coming of the Theocratic Age? Islamic Discourse after Modernity and Postmodernity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi' (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 285-301.
10. N. Romm and M. Sarakinsky, "Introduction to Sociology," in *Social Theory*, ed. N. Romm and M. Sarakinsky (Johannesburg: Lexicon Publishers, 1994), 4.
11. Ibid.
12. H. Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 5.
13. Romm and Sarakinsky, "Introduction," 4-5.
14. I. R. al-Faruqi, "Meta-Religion: Towards a Critical World Theology," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 3 no. 1 (September 1986): 17.
15. J. L. Esposito, "Islam and Secularism in the Twenty-First Century," in *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, ed. J. L. Esposito and A. Tamimi (London: C. Hurst & Co., Ltd., 2000), 1.

16. Ibid.
17. S. Parvez Manzoor, "Islam and the Crisis of Modernity," www.algonet.se/~ pmanzoor/, in: Parvez Manzoor's Homepage: Reconciling Transcendence with Existence, 21/10/2000.
18. Bulac's views are cited in H. Gulap, "Islamism and Postmodernism," *Contention* 4, no. 2 (winter 1995): 67.
19. A. Elmessiri, "The Dance of the Pen, the Play of the Sign: A Study in the Relationship between Modernity, Immanence, and Deconstruction," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 14, no. 1 (spring 1997): 2.
20. Ibid., 3.
21. A. Elmessiri, "Secularism, Immanance, and Deconstruction," in *Islam and Secularism*, 74.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 55.
24. Ibid.
25. A. Elmessiri, *Al-Sahyuniyah wa al-Naziyah wa Nihayah al-Tarikh – Ru'yah Hadariyah Jadidah* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1997), 11.
26. Ibid., 13-14.
27. For a detailed account of the Palestinians' systematic expulsion from their homeland, see I. Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), esp. chapters 4 and 5.
28. Elmessiri, *Al-`Alam*, 308.
29. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 155.
30. Ibid., 157.
31. Ibid., 158.
32. Ibid., 186.
33. Ibid., 187. Emphasis added.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., p. 194.
36. For a more detailed exposition of the Islamic paradigm see Farouk-Alli, "The Second Coming," 285-301.
37. I. Abu-Rabi', "Beyond the Postmodern Mind," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (1990): 255.
38. Gulap, "Islamism and Postmodernism," 59.
39. H. Gulap, "Globalizing Postmodernism: Islamist and Western Social Theory," *Economy and Society* 26, no. 3 (August 1997): 429.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 430.
43. I. R. al-Faruqi, *Islam and Other Faiths*, ed. Ataullah Siddiqui (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1998), 17.
44. For a detailed account of the Qur'an's position in contemporary Islamic thought, see A. Farouk-Alli, "Contemporary Islamic Thought and the Re-

Emergence of the Qur'an as Foundational Text" (unpublished M.Soc.Sci thesis, University of Cape Town), especially chapter 3. The discussion above draws significantly on this study.

45. F. Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 30.

46. F. Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989): 1.

47. F. M. Isma'il, *Al-Qur'an wa al-Nazar al-`Aqli* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993), 25.

48. A. S. al-Nashshar, *Nash'ah al-Fikr al-Falsafi fi al-Islam*, 7th ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, 1977), 32-33.

49. Ibid., 34.

50. Ibid., 227.

51. S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2003).

52. Ibid., 13.

53. Ibid., 209-18 and 254-65. It comes as no surprise that Huntington approvingly quotes veteran Orientalist Bernard Lewis and Zionist lobbyist Daniel Pipes in his account of the relationship between Islam and the West. For two compelling alternatives to Huntington's thesis, see R. W. Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2006) and A. Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

54. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations,* 206.

55. R. L. Euben, "A Counternarrative of Shared Ambivalence: Some Muslim and Western Perspectives on Science and Reason," *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 1 (2003): 50-77.

56. A. Elmessiri, "The Imperialist Epistemological Vision," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 11, no. 3 (1994): 416-29.

57. R. L. Euben, "Contingent Borders, Syncretic Perspectives: Globalization, Political Theory, and Islamizing Knowledge," *International Studies Review* 4, no. 1 (2002): 213-48.

58. Beliharz, *The Bauman Reader*, 25.

59. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 2.

60. Ibid., 196.