The birth of modernity in north-west Europe is generally dated to the middle of the eighteenth century, although sometimes it is considered to have begun in the seventeenth century with the publication of Rene Descartes’s Discourse on the Method in 1637. However, the advent of modernity was not as abrupt as the above may indicate. Rather, it was the outcome of a long process beginning as early as the Renaissance. Nevertheless, intellectual movements of the late seventeenth and early to mid eighteenth centuries known as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason were the main wellspring of modernity.

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Can Islam and Modernity be Reconciled?

SHIREEN T. HUNTER*

ABSTRACT
Is Islam particularly inimical to modernity, and the two are never to be reconciled? Many westerners and Muslims alike would argue that this is the case. Yet the more pertinent question: is religion in general and modernity incompatible and irreconcilable? There is a basic tension between all religions which rely on revelation as the primary source of knowledge and on God as the source of law and ethics, and modernity which privileges reason as the main source of knowledge and posits the source of law and ethics in human beings. An objective and unbiased reading of Islam shows that it is no more inimical to modernity than any other religion. Rather some of its aspects, including its emphasis on the importance of reason, its injunction that there is no compulsion in faith, and its frequent reference to people and their rights makes a reconciliation between Islam and modernity possible.

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litical and ethical values emanating from it and the socio-political and economic systems build upon them.

Today, with the advantage of perspective, students of this phenomenon can see far more organic connections among disparate developments that led to the birth of the modern. However, those whose acts in various intellectual, religious, cultural and economic spheres led to the birth of the modern did not do so with a clear intention of ushering into a new age. The conscious efforts to embrace the modern and to modernize belong to those societies that were not involved in the early intellectual and socio-economic processes which culminated in the birth of the modern.

This time lag between the birth of the modern in north-western Europe in the mid eighteenth century, and its spread to other parts of the European continent, the new world in the Americas, and much later to the non-European world, accounts for vast differences in various countries's and cultures's experience of the modern and the way they have tried to embed it in their own cultural environment.

For example, in Europe, although the Protestant movement in Germany under the inspiration of Martin Luther is considered as being a main factor behind the birth of the modern, the German experience with aspects of modernity began later than that of England and Holland, and in some respects, to that of France. In fact, Germany, in terms of economic and industrial modernization, had to achieve in fifty years what Britain had achieved in 200 years. This lapse in the timing of modernization and hence the speed in which it had to be achieved has considerable socio-economic consequences, most of which are disruptive. This time difference in the modernizing experience of southern European countries has been more pronounced and their consequences more disruptive. One important characteristic of the late modernizing countries has been the lack of the democratic and participatory dimensions of modernity until quite late. For instance, countries like Spain, Portugal, and Greece were dictatorships well into the 1970s. Some south–eastern European countries even today cannot be considered fully modern.²

The encounter and experiences of Russia and non-European countries, including Japan which for a long time was seen as perfect and successful blending of traditional values and virtues and modernity, have been even more complex. Even today, countries like China and Russia cannot be considered fully modern because democratic and participatory politics and an emphasis on the natural rights of the individuals are essential components of modernity.
Moreover, in countries that were the birthplace of the modern, notably England, the process occurred gradually, with the physical and intellectual aspects of modernity evolving in an organic fashion. Consequently, the process of modernization was not excessively disruptive and negative reactions to its disruptive dimensions were muted. By contrast, in late modernizing countries where modernization was an imitative process and carried in a more compressed time frame, the process has been more disruptive and negative reactions to it stronger, and this has led to socio-political movements based on the idea of return to traditional ways of life. The Muslim countries's experience with modernization confirms the importance of the time factor in the process of modernization.

Additionally, the process of modernization has not touched all parts of different societies equally. On the contrary, in most societies the modern and the non-modern coexist even today. For instance, even in the most modern societies pockets of non-modern exist in the form of those people who, in regard to such important questions as the origins of life and the cosmos, rely on revelation rather than on reason. By contrast, those in otherwise religious societies, including Muslim societies, who subscribe to rationalism, constitute modern pockets in otherwise non-modern societies.

Furthermore, some societies may have become modern in the sense of adopting a rational system of thought and a secular way of life, but are still not completely modern because of a lack of participatory politics and respect for human rights. In short, even today in the most modern societies, modernity as put by Jurgen Habermas remains an “unfinished project”.

**Foundational Principles of Modernity and their Relation to Religion**

The three most important characteristic that distinguish modernity are: First, the emphasis on reason and rational thought as the means to knowledge rather than revelation; second, a greater emphasis on the here and now, or in other words, this world rather than the hereafter. This is why, as noted above, the birth of the modern is dated to the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment and the ensuing scientific and industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In Europe, the birth of the modern was accompanied by a gradual, but steady, erosion of the role of religion in social and political life. This was quite natural because the rationalist thinkers were to varying degrees reacting to the abuses of the
At least since Weber, Western thinkers have argued that Islam is particularly inimical to rational thinking, secularism and democracy, and hence to modernity. Established churches. In some countries, such as France after the 1789 revolution, this rupture was brutal and extreme, and the French modernity was sharply defined as being against religion. By contrast, in other countries, like Britain and in northern Europe, it was less brutal and more gradual, and not militantly anti-religious. Meanwhile, in southern European countries, religion remained important until the mid twentieth century. This process of the reduction of religion’s sociopolitical role is generally referred to as “Secularization”, which is considered a major distinguishing characteristic of modern societies. According to Max Weber, societies become modern as they become “disenchantment,” or when rational thought replaces religion as the guiding principle of social life.

Weber also argued that some religions are more compatible with aspects of modernity, such as emphasis on this world and the pursuit of material goals, than others. According to him, Protestantism is more compatible with modernity than Catholicism because of the latter’s abhorrence of materialism and its emphasis on the non-material aspects of life.4 His views on Islam and other Asian countries are even harsher. These religions, according to him, are incompatible with modernity, and not merely in its material dimensions because for them “in contrast to ascetic Protestantism, the world remained a great enchanted garden…No path led from the magical religiosity of the non-intellectual classes of Asia to a rational, methodical control of life.”

The history of the spread of modernization, if not modernity in its entirety, has shown that a culturalist explanation of this phenomenon is not valid. If Weber’s and other culturalists’s thesis were correct, southern European countries should have remained be underdeveloped, undemocratic and led purely by religion until today. The same applies to many Asian countries, notably Japan. Nevertheless, history has also shown that certain cultures and religions have been more resistant to certain aspects of modernity than others.6

The third principle of modernity is its emphasis on the people as the source of political legitimacy rather than on a divine or divinely ordained source such as the church or the king. Similarly, modernity posits the source of individual rights in nature rather than God. Furthermore, modern society is a rights-based society whereas a religious society is essentially based on duties and rights are an outcome of duties. For example, the right to life is an outcome of the injunction that thou
shall not kill, or the right to property results from the injunction though shall not steal etc.

Viewed in this context, modernity is not compatible with any religion, because religion is a system based on revelation, and a religious society is a God-centered society within which religion is the foundation of law and ethics, whereas modern society is based on reason and a modern society is a human-centered society.

**Islam’s Exceptionality: Myth or Reality?**

As noted earlier, at least since Weber, Western thinkers have argued that Islam is particularly inimical to rational thinking, secularism and democracy, and hence to modernity. For their part, Muslims, too, have been preoccupied with this question since their encounter with modernity. Muslim views on this subject have been divided for a long time. Some have viewed modernity as incompatible with Islam either because of their view that modernity is synonymous with Godlessness, or because they consider Islam being irrational and anti-secular.

The fact, however, is that Islam as argued by the nineteenth century Muslim reformist thinker Jamal Ed Din Assadabadi, known as al Afghani in his correspondence with the French philosopher Renan, is no more anti-reason than other religions. On March 29, 1883, Ernest Renan delivered a speech at the Sorbonne on Islam and science, in which he eulogized Hellenism as the source of science and progress in Europe and attacked Islam as an engine of “despotism, terror and persecution” and responsible for the destruction of the Sassanid and Byzantine civilizations. In response, al Afghani wrote a letter to Renan where he argued that all religions were antagonistic to reason, not just Islam. Al Afghani wrote:

Every time that religion has the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary takes place when it is philosophy which rules as a sovereign mistress. So long as humanity exists, the struggle between dogma and free will, between religion and philosophy, a bitter struggle from which fear, free thought will not emerge victorious, because reason does not please the masses, and its teachings are understood by a few choice spirits, and also because science, however, beautiful it is, cannot completely satisfy humanity which is athirst with an ideal which it likes to place in obscure and distant regions which philosophers and men of science can neither glimpse nor explore.\

Historical evidence tends to confirm this view. For example, Galileo was condemned for his theories about the earth. Although there is nothing in the Christian bible that clearly states that the earth is flat, or that the sun orbits the earth, in the seventeenth century the Church saw his views as disruptive and against
If modernity is not viewed as being inherently anti-religion and is willing to allow religion a place in the social sphere, then reconciliation between the two, including between Islam and modernity, is possible. The authority of the Church, and therefore it punished Galileo. In the Islamic world, especially during Islam’s golden age, philosophers, although considered somewhat suspect by theologians and men of religion, were not punished for their views. This confirms al Afghani’s contention that Islam is not particularly anti-reason.

Al Afghani in his reply to Renan was prescient in another respect, namely that cold reason and hence modernity, if it is defined as anti-religion, is not enough to satisfy human needs. The resilience of religion and its comeback even in modern and secular societies is testimony to this fact. In this regard, it is important to note that, even in Europe, that although traditional religions may have lost their influence, the thirst for spirituality has not disappeared and new religions, including a variety of Eastern religions, have come to fill the place left by the traditional religions. In other words, there has been a process of what Peter Berger has called “Desecularization”.

In short, there is no scriptural or historical evidence to show that Islam is especially antagonistic to reason. Rather as Henry Louis Gates has noted, the “perennial Kulturkampf between faith and secularism” has existed within all religions until today.

The Muslims’s practice may have been anti-reason, and Muslim religious authorities may have tended to posit reason as antagonistic to religion, but Islam itself has nothing that makes it peculiarly anti-reason. As Iqbal Lohori has said in a famous poem, the fault is not with Islam but with Muslims.

**Islam and Rationalism**

As explained above, not only is Islam not exceptionally antagonistic to reason and rational thinking, it could be argued that it actually favors reason, but of course not as a substitute to revelation. Several aspects of Islam tend to support this contention:

First, Islam puts special emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, and considers it a duty of all Muslim men and women to seek knowledge. Since the acquisition of knowledge requires the use of one’s rational abilities, by enjoining Muslims to seek knowledge, Islam was actually encouraging rational thinking.
Second, reason (Aql) and reasoning is an important part of interpreting Islam’s foundational sources in response to new conditions and questions. Of course, not all schools of Islamic law and jurisprudence emphasize the use of reason to an equal degree. Historically, the Mutazila were the most rationalist of Islamic juridical and theological schools. Although, for a variety of political and other reasons they lost the battle to more literalist schools in Islam, their influence still remains to date and has made a comeback among reformist Muslim thinkers.

Third, the historical evidence also points to the fact that Islam, especially in its golden age, fostered rational thinking and scientific endeavor. However, in the Islamic tradition, it is believed that both faith and reason are necessary for human happiness. Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad Al Ghazali was of this belief. Moreover, many Muslim philosophers, notably Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Tufayl have maintained that what is revealed cannot be abhorrent to reason.

Therefore, the causes of why Muslims lost their rationalist spirit by the fourteenth century, or as al Afghani has said, passed it on to others must be sought elsewhere rather than in Islam’s own essence.

Islam and Secularism: Is Islam Different from Other Religions?

A hallmark of modernity, as noted earlier, is the de-sacrelization of socio-economic and political life, and the erosion and eventual disappearance of religion from public life and as the principal indicator and guide to what is morally correct—in other words, secularization. However, there are different forms of secularization, some of which are actively hostile to religion, whereas others are neutral toward it and only insist on the separation of the domains of the sacred and the profane and the non-interference of religion and religious authorities in the political affairs of society. It is this separation of politics and religion, the sacred and the profane, which is said make secularism incompatible with Islam, because as both Western analysts and many Muslims themselves claim, in Islam there is no division between the sacred and the profane, between the public and private, and hence between religion and politics. Bernard Lewis's saying that “in Islam there was no Caesar, there was only God” sums up this view of Islam. But to what extent is this assertion correct?

Clearly, much more than Christianity, Islam is a communal religion and has rules and regulations for many aspects of life, although Islam allows for a significant portion of socio-economic relations to be conducted according to the customs of each society. In this aspect, Islam is not much different from other communal religions, such as Judaism. In fact, in Orthodox Judaism, meaning pre-reform Ju-
daism, with its elaborate legal and social systems and prophet-kings, such as David and Solomon, the fusion of the temporal and spiritual and the sacred and the profane is greater than in Islam because as Professor Norman L. Zucker has noted, “Orthodox Judaism provides for total regulation of society. All temporal acts have spiritual relevance and must, accordingly, conform to strict religious code of law that is subject to rabbinic interpretation.” Even in Christianity, which supposedly separates the domains of God and Caesar, historically religion exercised considerable influence on socio-political life for a long time.

By contrast, in Islam, where supposedly there is no Caesar and only God, religion and the religious establishment was dominated by political power. This is still the case in nearly all Muslim countries. Indeed, if secularism is defined merely as the separation of religion and politics, despite the widespread belief among both Muslims and non-Muslims, Islam is not incompatible with secularism. To begin with, there is no official clergy in Islam with an authority that is superior to that of any Muslim knowledgeable in matters of religion and law. In other words, there is no official church in Islam. This may be the reason why Ernest Gellner opined that Islam is the most secular religion compared to all the rest.

Moreover, there is no reference in the Holy Qur’an or the Prophet’s Sunna to any specific form of government that Muslims should have. All the references are to the character of any government, which must be just, non-oppressive, compassionate and should take care of the vulnerable elements of society such as widows and orphans. In contemporary time, this injunction will apply to the elderly, handicapped, poor and other disadvantage segments of society.

Perhaps of greater importance is the fact that Islam believes in the freedom of conscience with its injunction that there is no compulsion in faith. Muslims have a duty to enjoin their fellow Muslims to be good and to warn them against evil, but contrary to the claims of literalist Muslims and the Takfiris, Islam does not believe in the forceful imposition of faith. All this makes Islam compatible with a non-militant secularism which is not particularly anti-religion. The reason many Muslims today are weary of the term secularism is because in their mind the term has become synonymous with the atheism they abhor.

Islam, Democracy and Human Rights

Belief in the idea that human beings have certain rights simply by virtue of being human, that the people are the source of political legitimacy and that sovereignty belongs to the people, and that a participatory form of government is necessary constitute the fundamental elements of modernity. It is precisely for this rea-
son that some political systems, such as that of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and various right-wing fascist regimes in Europe and elsewhere, are not considered modern, although they all achieved considerable material modernization. In fact, the disregard shown by these types of systems for the more emancipatory aspects of modernity, coupled with the abuse of science for destructive and en-slaving goals, led to the criticism of modernity in the West by various philosophical schools, notably the post-modernist school, a criticism that has been seized upon by many Muslim intellectuals since the 1950s to justify their rejection of modernity. Today, however, values of respect for basic human rights and participatory politics are accepted by nearly all people, although significant difference of opinion exists regarding what constitutes basic human rights.

The following question, therefore, arises: Is Islam compatible with these fundamentals of modernity? Again, notwithstanding statements to the contrary by some Western and Muslim thinkers and intellectuals, Islam is no less democratic than other religions. As a general rule, there is a basic tension between any socio-political system derived from religion which is God-centered and democracy which is human centered. In God-centered systems the source of legitimacy, law and ethics is God, whereas in a human-centered system people are the source of legitimacy, sovereignty and law. In this sense, there is a non-democratic aspect to all religions, including Islam.

However, there is nothing in Islam that makes it any more undemocratic than other religions. On the contrary, there are certain notions in Islam that have some resemblance to aspects of contemporary democratic systems. The most well known are the concepts of Shura (consultation), Bay‘a, (pledge of allegiance) and Ijma (consensus of the society). Clearly, these do not amount to a full-fledged democratic system as understood today. But the question to ask is where there any system anywhere in the world at the time of Islam’s arrival could be said to correspond to what is now understood as being a democratic system of government. Even the much mythologized and idealized Athenian democracy was of an extremely limited nature because only rich males who had enough leisure participated in the running of the Polis.

If this was the case, then why should Islam be compared in its democratic potential or lack thereof with the early twenty-first century standards? The fact
There are no elements in Islam which make it particularly antagonistic to modernity. Rather aspects of Islam are more compatible with foundational principles of modernity than some other religions.

The same issues are involved in regard to Islam and human rights. In Islam, as in other religions, all rights are bestowed by God, and the notion of natural rights is alien to Islam as is to other religions. However, Islam recognizes that people have a significant number of rights, including the right to life, property, procreation and reason, known as *Huquq al Ibad*. The problems in this respect, too, arise when the position of human rights in Islam is compared with the twenty-first century notions prevalent in the West. Moreover, it is often forgotten that Western views of what constitutes basic human rights have greatly evolved even compared to only fifty years ago, and that regarding certain rights there is no consensus within the population of Western countries even today.

**Conclusions**

There are inevitable and persisting tensions between religion in general and modernity, because the former is a God-centered system of thought and ethics and the latter is human centered. Religion and modernity are also incompatible if the secularism essential to the latter is defined as being anti-religion.

In this sense, Islam as a divinely revealed religion is incompatible with modernity, and the reconciliation between the two should not be expected. However, if modernity is not viewed as being inherently anti-religion and is willing to allow religion a place in the social sphere, then reconciliation between the two, including between Islam and modernity, is possible. This is so because, as discussed earlier, there are no elements in Islam which make it particularly antagonistic to modernity. Rather aspects of Islam are more compatible with foundational principles of modernity than some other religions.

In particular, the Islamic injunction that there is no compulsion in faith can be interpreted in ways that makes possible an Islamic social and legal system compatible with notions of democracy and human rights. However, for this process of reconciliation between Islam and modernity to take place, it is important that Islam’s essence be separated from the historical accretions, and various ethnically...
and tribally based traditions and practices which have little to do with it. In other words, as the Iranian reformist thinker Hojat ul Islam Mohsen Kadivar has argued, “Spiritual Islam” should be separated from “Historical Islam”. Similarly, the rationalist traditions of Islam should be revived, and foundational Islamic sources be reread in light of new conditions and requirements, and in light of basic Islamic concepts of justice and mercy as the Prophet of Islam and the fourth Caliph Ali Ibn Abi Taleb have enjoined. Many Islamic jurists, notably the Andalusian jurist Abu Ishaq Al Shatibi, have recommended a similar path. For example, Al Shatibi has argued that when implementing the Shari’a what is important is to keep in mind its ultimate objectives (Maqasid al Shari’â) which is the establishment justice and compassion.

However, if Muslims fail to adopt this path, and fall in the trap of literalist Islam or use Islam for power and self-interest and ignore its noble aspirations, not only will they make reconciliation between Islam and modernity impossible, in the long run they will undermine the very faith itself and will lead next generations away form the faith.

Endnotes
10. The Mutazila used reason in interpretation of Islamic sources, and interpreted some passages including those related to God’s attributes allegorically. Some of them believed that the Quran was created rather than having existed all the time. (Qadim). For this opinion they were accused of blasphemy. Others thought that they were unduly influenced by Greek philosophy.


20. Cases in point are the highly divisive issues of abortion and gay rights, notably the question of same sex marriage.


22. Iran is a case in point where the instrumentalization of Islam for purposes of seizing and maintaining power has led to a weakening of peoples's Islamic beliefs.