

# Modernism in Islam

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Based on "Modernism in Islam" lecture series by Sh. Zarabozo

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## WHAT IS MODERNISM AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

We can relate, ideologically, the modernist movement spreading these days to one sect in the past. This sect is called the Muta'zila, which is dated back to the third Islamic century. Although those people accepted the Qur'an and Sunna they made ta'weel (their own interpretation of the Qur'an) and said 'aql (intelligence) takes precedence over naql (guidance of the Prophet). However, this school died out. The modernist movement did not evolve from them, but they are very similar to them. The modernist movement actually originated in Europe (middle-ages). At the time when the scientific method came about in Spain, it was seen that what the church was teaching was not true. This led to a slow revolt. The basic view of modernism (in all religions) is that: the religion should change according to the circumstances, and that it is not fixed. There is no such thing as absolute truth. The Jewish and Christian modernist response in Europe tried to explain how the religion was still relevant for the people. They made innovations to keep people interested in the religion (such as singing in church, introduced only in the 1900's). They tried to say the divine and the human is mixed in the Bible and that the parts that are true must be the ones that are not out of date. Also, the religion is improving over time and there is no absolute truth in the Bible. This is the time in history when many Muslims were looking to Europe. This led to three choices for those Muslims: accept the West; reject the West; or mix the two (reform Islam). Those who followed the third (the modernist) developed in, and focused on: Turkey - because it was under British influence; and Egypt - because Al-Azhar was the seat of Islamic knowledge. The people of this modernist movement judge Islam according to their 'aql. Some of their faults in regards to it are:

- 1) use it for things which it can't comprehend;
- 2) refer everything to it: accept what agrees with it, reject what does not;
- 3) judge the revelation by it. However, Ahl As-Sunna Wal Jamaa' believes that using the sound 'aql should lead one to the conclusion that the Qur'an and the Prophet are true and that their teachings should take precedence over pure 'aql.

## THE INFLUENCE OF MODERNISM IN AMERICA

Modernist are saying that the West and the world has changed, and that Islam must become "civilized". Modernism has spread the most in the U.S. because:

- 1) there are no scholars available to refute them, or they won't refute them because people don't want to criticize them;

2) it allows Muslims from overseas to become part of American society and they do not have to be recognized as Muslim. Also, new American Muslims will not have to change their old lifestyle;

3) much of the literature, scholars, and institutions in the U.S. reflect the modernist thinking.

In tafseer, Yusuf Ali is the most popular translator of the meaning of the Qur'an, even though he denies what the 'aql can't see (of the unseen). In seerah, one book is saying the Prophet is like anyone else. Another tries to say the sunna is not for the shariah and that sometimes we have to throw away the hadith because Allah did not correct the Prophet's mistakes when he made ijtihaad. In Fiqh, modernists say interest is permissible, menstruation women can pray, and Muslim women can marry kaafir men. They say the face of women was not covered until 150 years after the time of the Prophet, even though it existed in his time, and that women should always pray in the mosque, even though hadith only show women in the mosque at Isha and Fajr because they could not be recognized in the dark. They also say the hadith that a people with a woman ruler will not succeed is not true today and polygamy is forbidden except under certain conditions (which do not exist). Finally, it should be mentioned that this movement is organized and has resources such as magazines, television, conventions, and literature.

## **SOME OF THEIR VIEWS**

Modernists influence the thinking of people, and that person spreads their views on unknowingly. Their way of thinking is the most dangerous thing about them. None discuss aqeedah (belief) because it is not important to them ('aql judges naqal). They are also trying to remove the sunna and say that the system of the old muhadditheen is insufficient. Most say (as do critics of the Bible) that we need a "higher criticism" of hadith and the earlier conclusions (ijmaa) of scholars are not sufficient, yet they give no new way to judge hadith. However, we as Muslims understand that the Prophet was guided by Allah and that we may not be able to understand everything in the hadith with our 'aql. It is common for the modernists to question the role of the sunna in the shariah. One said all of the sunna is of this world and not deen, even in the Prophet's time, therefore it is all a matter of shoorah (consultation) and ijtihaad (therefore changeable). Another says we need to make ijtihaad for what is to be followed, and changes of time and place make sunna difficult to use. All of this is mentioned to weaken the view of the sunna. The Jews and Christians tried to differ the human from the divine. Modernists try to point out the differences between the Messenger as a human and as a Prophet. They also avoid following the sunna by dividing his life into parts (imam, judge, military leader, prophet, etc.), saying some are not divine teachings and not law. Some say everyone is free to make ijtihaad, and later restrictions on it were imposed by the people. Another said a ruling may change even if it is from the Qur'an and Sunna.

## **HOW DO MODERNISTS GO ASTRAY?**

The observer can easily point out the following points as the driving force for this trend:

1) Their premises and assumptions are wrong Modernists look to the West and try to reinterpret the "old religion" with modern science and modern times. They assume that:

a) the present situation is advanced or different (i.e. "this is not the Prophet's time!"). However, the idea of progress and that things are better now is Marxian and Hegelian. It is against the hadith, as the Prophet said each generation is getting worse. They must prove that there has been progression (no definition of it given). Islamically the advanced society is the one that comes closer to Allah, and understands and applies Islam better (such as the sahaaba). In fact, the current societies have the things of the old societies (such as homosexuality, etc.) as mentioned in the Qur'an;

b) religion is relative to time and place (i.e. "therefore we need to judge Islam in light of modern science"). Modernists are "people of science" and judge Islam according to modern science. They think that the West is based on science, but they fail to notice that not all science is based on fact. In reality, much of science is only hypothesis (not a fact). Also, every science has its own philosophy, which will lead to its own conclusions;

c) the way of thinking of a society is based on (is a product of) its environment. Modernists say most of religion is from the people and their environment and it can be judged by later times, and hadith are related to that time only. However, there is no proof for the modernist hypothesis that religious truth is relative. Allah says the Qur'an is Haq (truth). Modernists are saying (by inference) that if the Qur'an is not true now, then it was never true.

2) The methodology they use is wrong. The methodology of the modernists is the way they mislead people to the wrong conclusions. They claim to be scientific, but they are usually inconsistent or have no proof or foundation for their beliefs. Some of the means and principles they use include:

a) Sunna and Hadith. They claim the Qur'an is authentic and they only follow "authentic" hadith. This implies that they have a way to judge hadith (different from that of the traditional scholars), yet most give no new way to judge hadith, and are using their 'aql (intelligence) to determine this (like the female ruler hadith). Modernists especially dislike hadith which have specific meanings and prefer ones which only have general principles.

b) Use of weak hadith to help their points and arguments (while they are calling for the use of authentic hadith). For example, in the area of women in Islam (the two areas the modernists try to change the most are the sunna and women) they like to quote two stories from the time of Umar: 1) when Umar was giving a Khutbah he tried to restrict the amount of dowry, a woman opposed, and Umar corrected himself and thanked the woman, and 2) Umar appointed Umma Shifaa as a market-regulator (used by modernist to say women can work in the government). However, both of these stories are not authentic.

c) Use vague terms without defining them. Modernists use terms like democracy, freedom, and equality, but they do not define what they mean by them. The danger in using vague terms is that a knowledgeable person will pass over the word or concept, thinking they meant the Islamic or acceptable definition while in fact they did not, while others may believe what they are saying is true.

d) Do not present all of the relevant information that is available on the subject. That is,

from Qur'an, sunna, etc. They only present that which will support their views. This tactic is used to avoid unliked beliefs, so they just do not mention them.

e) Force their interpretation onto the text. This is what the Muta'zilla did, when they said 'aql takes precedence over what is from the Prophet. Many modernists say Islam is the "rational" religion. This is true if you mean everything is from Allah and there is no contradiction, but to say that we can study everything in Islam by judging it with only our intellect is unacceptable and there is also no proof for this. To avoid implementing what the Qur'an and sunna says, the modernists say we need to follow the "spirit" of Islam and not worry about the laws specifically. But it is clear from the Qur'an and Sunna that we are to take both. They will argue that the text of the Qur'an only says for women to dress modestly and they do not like to talk about the specific details of hijab and say we only need to follow the "spirit" of the law.

f) They tend to oppose scholars by saying they meant something else. They say that the door to ijtihaad is open, which is something accepted by the Ahl As-Sunna Wal Jamaa'. However, it is not open to everybody on any subject. Modernists claim that anyone would make ijtihaad until Imam Shaffie narrowed the qualifications (not true), and today anyone can do it. In one magazine, on the question of polygamy and divorce, some said that these two can be restricted by ijtihaad. They often misquote scholars and give their own meanings for what they said.

g) Often follow strange and rejected opinions. They try to revive some of the old opinions because they like it and say that this writer said it in the past. Modernists try to open the door to these opinions and choose what is the most suitable and easy to follow. However, we are supposed to look for the fiqh opinions that are the closest to the truth. They usually bring bad hadith such as "The differences in my Ummah is a mercy" or reject authentic hadith such as the one about the breakup of the Ummah into 73 sects.

h) Follow their desires. They often make rulings and fatawa without permissible daleel (evidence). One said music is permissible because he did not see something wrong with it, so it is halal. But he did not check what the Qur'an and the sunna say about this subject.

## **ISLAM AND MODERNISM**

Ahl As-Sunna Wal Jamaa' believes that there is only one true Islam. This is proven in Qur'an and Hadith. One hadith shows the straight line as leading to Allah, and branching paths leading off it with a devil at each one calling to it. Also, the umma will break into 73 sects, and the true way is the one who follows Muhammad and his companions. Modernists are differing from Ahl As-Sunna Wal-Jamaa' in:

1) everything in accordance with Qur'an and Sunna is Haq (truth) and what disagrees with it is false (some modernists disagree with this). Also, statements consistent with the Qur'an and Sunna are accepted;

2) Ijmaa (consensus) of the sahaaba (and early generations) is a hujja (proof) for all Muslims. Modernists say sahaaba are men and we are men, and even matters agreed on by them are

open to ijtihaad;

3) anything in the Qur'an and Sunna cannot be opposed by 'aql, rational thought, opinion, or qiysas. This is supported in the Qur'an and is not open to discussion or vote. One modernists said the cutting of the hand of the thief is a "Khomeni Islam" and is unethical;

4) there are constants in Islam related to belief, worship, etc. and these are good, sound, proper, and correct for all places and times. This view is accepted by the Ahl Sunna, but not by many of the modernists, saying that all truth is relative and there is no constants. However, these constant principles are basic aspects of the Ahl Sunna and are traced to the Qur'an and Sunna and Sahaaba. They are not questionable or changeable things. In many of these things, modernists say we need ijtihaad and tajdeed.

## **DANGERS**

1) Many are influenced by it and do not know it. Also, their views are unacceptable and should be refuted.

2) Many people do not recognize it as a movement of munkar or bida' and do not evaluate its writings and speeches, so they try to defend it. Many of their writings are from rationalization (which has no end or conclusion), and the effects of this are seen in the Christian church (that is, they now have no relationship to their religion, and it has no practical value or purpose).

3) This group is also playing into the hands of the kuffar. They are happy with is because their effort is to bring the Muslim women out of the home to change them. The last 200 years has been a colonialist and orientalist attack on the position of the woman in Islam (to destroy her and the society).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

1) The modernists movement as a whole (what it is based on) is from Bida' (innovation). They have their own principles and ways, which contradicts that of Ahl-Sunna. They say we want ijtihaad in the basic principles of the deen (religion) which are constant.

2) They are very willing to reject and contradict the ijmaa of the sahaaba on clear points (such as stoning of the adulterer and the apostate is to be killed) and hadith are dealt with as if they are not important (women ruler hadith is common).

3) One of the main points of modernism is to change the role of women. They say it is permissible to mix men and women and to not wear hijab. The modernists are impressed by the West and their conclusions always seem to agree with the views of the West.

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Most of the information used for this article is from a seven part cassette series which is available from: Dar Makkah: 2040 S. Oneida #2A. Denver, CO 80224. The speaker frequently pointed out that his purpose was to warn about the dangers and mistakes of this movement and not to

defame individual Muslims. Also, his information came from their writings, speeches, and discussions with these individuals, and not from what he heard from other people.

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