Chapter 13
Islam and Modernity: Considering Shafi’i’s Perspective on How Islamic Thought Dealt with the Question of Renewal

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ABSTRACT
The problem of Islam and modernity has been an important point of discussion in the Arab and Islamic world for decades, though this discussion has taken various forms, such as being called the conflict between the past and the present, or tradition and progress. This discussion has hidden within it clear contradictions when seeking compromise between the Abrahamic religions and present times throughout history. This conflict first appeared in the geographic area known as the Islamic world and looked much like the Age of Enlightenment in Europe in the eighteenth century. However, the true meaning of the conflict revolved around the capacity of Islam as a religion to be compatible with modernity and its philosophy, precepts, politics, and historical facts. This means that Islam was obliged to come into agreement with modernity, which became like the soul and language of the present.

INTRODUCTION
The question of modernity for Arabic society became an obsession, occupying it for centuries. Even though this question has had different definitions, such as considering modernity to be an historical era, or a group of principles which Westerners believed in during the Age of Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, this does not negate the fact that modernity was a major topic of discussion in a number of fields. We cannot deny that modernity was also a reason to create a compromise between Islam and tradition. Creating this compromise occupied a large portion of Arabic culture and busied a large number of researchers and thinkers. These questions, which were the starting point of this dichotomy, were not limited to merely defining modernity, but also included theories of compatibility. The dichotomy hid inside itself a question about the ability of Islam and tradition to agree with modernity, including its

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principles and views, which were created by Western society. Therefore many Arabs insisted on viewing tradition through the lens of modernity. Many Islamic researchers became convinced that modernity was the soul of the present and questioned whether or not tradition had the ability to agree with the principles of modernity centred on reason, enlightened thought, and secularism or political modernity, which included democracy, human rights, etc.

The problem of Islam and modernity was dealt with by many as a search for commonality, while others searched for points of contention in order to show that, if modernization was to be achieved, Islam would have to be left behind. We can describe this as the Arabic reaction to modernity but, in general, the questions that Arabic society asked regarding the problem of its relationship with modernity were not exclusively Arabic. In fact, all non-Western societies asked the same questions. If modernity and its entire human heritage couldn’t answer these questions, it would fade into history. But its human heritage and historical experience made non-Western societies ask questions of their own traditions to assess to what extent they could participate in and contribute to modernity. So, modernity shocked all societies outside its historical undertaking and affected them through its scientific and technological achievements. But this shock not only affected non-Western societies, it also affected Western societies themselves by forcing them to find answers to the questions that non-Western societies asked of modernity. Postmodernism is a result of non-Western societies’ reaction to modernity. Postmodernism’s pioneers acknowledge this fact.

Western society now lives in a moment of civilizational review (postmodernism constantly reminds it of this fact). This civilizational review is necessary to allow us to say that the project of modernity, which the West created during a period of its history, creates two reactions: the first in non-Western societies, the second inside Western society itself. This period was the real test of the truth of modernity’s principles and the understanding of its effects.

Although the official door of Islamic reformation has closed in the Sunni world, this has not stopped the development of some reform movements over the centuries. Instead, we find many fatwas and religious scholars which support Islamic reformation and explain that the closing of this door was to prevent the chaos of fatwas and make it possible for only scholars to make them. Regardless, the closure of this door did not prevent the development of religious criticism among Sunnis.

THE QUESTION AS SEEN FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF MUSLIM SOCIETIES

Grasping a period’s essence, like creating an expression that describes it, can be complex and difficult to achieve. Though the term modernity is often used to describe the rapid development of technology and information, some have used it in an attempt give expression to the period, or speak on its behalf, in a way that indicates the emergence of new kinds of concepts that have both global and universal features. They are part of the period’s essence. Is there any civilization that refuses to be in harmony with this period and its essence? Is there any culture that tries to be far away from the propounded conceptual and epistemic changes that leave their effects on the whole world and influence all civilizations?

The world and the time period have become one thing; just as the world gets smaller in spite of its vastness, as Paul Vereliear propagated in his discourse about the end of geography, so the period moves faster and becomes more united at the same time. If history was previously equivalent to histories and dates that differ according to areas and regions, nowadays it is history that all societies participate in making, in spite of the fact that their shares differ – some have increased their portion, while the shares
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