

A NOTE ON INDIAN MODERNISM*

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Time is limited. We have two of our senior colleagues who would, in turn, enlighten us on the subject. Even more limited is my ability to elucidate the present theme especially because it has been taken up earlier by such an outstanding scholar as Dr. Seyyed Muhammad Naquib al-'Attas himself.⁹⁶ The matter is further complicated by the fact that we have a history of more than a century to narrate in order to form an idea of the unfolding of the secularization process in its Indian setting. This is an obvious impossibility given the short span of time at our disposal. I, therefore, propose to leave out all discussion about the concept of secularization itself since the present audience has, more or less, attended the earlier lectures and we can presume its familiarity with the meaning and different ramifications of the idea. Secondly, I would confine myself to the first phase of modernism in the Indian subcontinent, inaugurated by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his Ali Garh movement. Within these parameters I would focus my discussion on two important factors at work in the process that gave rise to modernism which, inevitably and unfailingly, produces secularism, westernization and/or rejectionist fundamentalism. In the light of the discussions carried out earlier on this forum and with reference to what Dr. 'Attas has had to say in the last two seminars⁹⁷

these two factors could be described as:

- 1) Error and confusion is knowledge.

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⁹⁶ For the views of Dr. 'Attas concerning secularism and its process of unfolding see Prof. Seyyed Muhammad Naquib al-'Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1993, p. 15. Also see p. 133-168 for his views on 'De-Westernization of Knowledge'

⁹⁷ Dr. 'Attas had taken up the theme in the preceeding sessions.

2) Loss of Adab and erosion of authority.

I refer precisely to that frame work which has been employed by Prof. 'Attas to study secularism firstly because it saves us from explaining the paradigm itself and secondly because I feel that these are the factors that were at the core of all the Indian modernist, secularist thinking.

But, before going to the subject matter itself, let us consider a point of importance. In the past Islam had encountered many civilizations with precepts that were alien to the Islamic ethos, e.g. Greek, Indian, Persian and the Byzantine. What accounted for the successful pattern of such encounters and assimilations was the confidence which was at base of the Islamic institutions of power as well as the intelle activity of the religious scholars. Which was, in turn, based on t knowledge or in other words, on an absence of confusion and error in knowledge. Moreover, these alien civilizations only posed intellectual or cultural challenges and not military or political ones vis-a-vis which Islam could have found itself consistently in a subordinate position. (The sole exception being the Mongol invasion where the conquerors were culturally inferior and Islam imposed its own culture on them.) The encounter with the West on he Indian soil, on the contrary, occurred in the wake of British colonization and was overshadowed by the superior military and political performance of the invading civilization. Moreover, this civilization was different from all the early ones in the respect that its world view was at complete antipodes to all the traditional civilizations, since it was based on secularism and various secularizing philosophies dominating the West ever since the middle ages. The main effect of this contact with the West on the collective Muslim psyche was to rather shake their confidence in their own civilization which they were compelled to view in a state of decadence. In the face of the new challenge and the realization of something wrong in their own civilization the Muslim response diverged into two different and more or less contradictory channels, namely the modernist and the traditionalist. Here, instead of naming the thinkers and mentioning their ideas, which would not be possible in a short time, I would try to summarize their respective positions vis-a-vis the Western challenge.

The traditionalists, with the aftermath of the war of independence in 1857, turned rather inwardly and concentrated on preserving as many facets

of the Islamic cultural, intellectual and religious heritage as possible to allow the continuous presence of faith and practice in the society. This, however, didn't preclude the possibility of shunting off ideas in the political as well as social and literary domains, which the traditionalists intermittently kept doing. This is a position of conscious inaction (i.e. action that is outward and political) which could be identified with the school of Deoband, Nadwa and other centers of learning among the traditionalist Muslims. Attacked by the modernists and the fundamentalists alike, and ignored by the western scholars, this position shows their superior sense of proportion which made them to attend to the first things first, that is, to rectify the error and confusion in knowledge which is a prerequisite to effective and legitimate action. They had realized that the path to development first passed through thought, which for so long as Muslims are Muslims and non-western, had to be genuinely Islamic.

No such realization of the importance of genuine Islamic thought and concomitant efforts at its preservation and furtherance is observable among the second channel of response that we termed as modernist. These modernists were either westernized thinkers groping for a veneer of Islam to legitimize their alien views (Amir 'Ali, Charag Ali) or Muslims in search of westernism, trying to justify their yearning for importing from without by constant references to Islam (Sir Sayyid, Hali, Shibli. To borrow prof. Pye's expression, "The universal practice is that of finding the present in their own history"⁹⁸ In other words their position vis-a-vis the western challenge was that these thinkers viewed their cultural heritage as based on the same principles which, they believed, did underlie the grandeur of the Western civilization. For development and to live up to its potentials the Islamic society would have to go back to those basic precepts, lost to the indigenous culture, but conveniently at display in the west.

Emphasis has shifted, in-stages, as far as the identification of these principles or precepts is concerned. Following statement from Sir Sayyid clearly gives us an idea.

⁹⁸ Lucian W. Pye, "Identity and Political Culture", in Leonard Binder et al, Crisis and Sequences in Political Development, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974) pp. 120.

If people do not shun blind adherence, if they do not seek that light which can be found in the Qur'an and the indisputable hadith, and do not adjust religion to the science of today, Islam will become extent in India.⁹⁹

Apart from the last part of the statement which is already suspect, there seemed to be nothing wrong with the advise. But keeping in view that Sir Sayyid and his cohorts themselves embarked upon this project this seems more of an announcement of the modernist agenda where all the three factors, enumerated in the beginning of our talk, could be discovered at work. I repeat:

Erosion of authority

Lack of Adab

Confusion/error in knowledge.

Let us see how:

To shun blind adherence and to seek light from Qur'an and hadith required qualifications. Was he qualified for that? All his authentic biographers do not support this point. His official biographer and close and faithful follower A.H. Hali says:¹⁰⁰

He studied no more than Gulistan and Bostan or couple of other books of the same type. Then he started Arabic and studied Sharh Mulla, Sharh Tahzib, Maybadhi, Mukhtasar al-Ma'am and Mutawwal; even these were not studied like the ordinary students but with extreme negligence and lack of concentration. In the same period he took a fancy for studying medicine..... After a few month he abandoned it as well. In 1846, he made a certain progress in this. regard.

⁹⁹ Fazlur Rahman, Islam, University of Chicago Press, 1966, p.216, cf. Vali Reza Nasr, "Religious Modernism and its Echo in the Political Development of the Islamic World", Hamdard Islamicus, Karachi, Vol. viii, No. 3. p. 20.

¹⁰⁰ A. H. Hali, Hayat-i-Javid, Hijra Int. Publishers, Lahore, 1984, Part I, p. 42, 52-3.

Same is the observation of Abu al-Hasan Nadwi.¹⁰¹

He had received a religious education of an intermediate level and his expertise in religious sciences and the Qur'an and Sunnah was not deep and broad.

An other biographer, Mahmud Ahmad Barakati, also gives a si view.¹⁰²

His father was a care free man so his education could not be looked' after properly. At the age of 17/18 he was married and his education was discontinued immediately afterwards.

Imagine of some body who new intermediate Persian and no English except his signatures.¹⁰³ was, in all his later career dabbling with Tafsir, Usul Tafsir. Fiqh, Kalam Theology, criticism of Hadith and reconciling religion with estern science. It was a clear case of erosion of authority and lack of adab ince it was nothing short of a conscious effort to render the religious authorities obsolescent, and hence to eliminate their position in the society, and a lack of recognition and acknowledgment of ones true and proper place in relation with them. Confusion and error in knowledge is even more evident when we analyze any of these fields in which he presented his ideas Here, again, we are faced with a bulk of literature that could be presented and analyzed to show that the modernists first accepted alien models of thought, foreign world views, and erroneous ideas and then interpreted or distorted Islamic precepts accordingly. By and large,. this is the point of view which was adopted by the traditional Ulama of India vis a vis Sir Sayyid's attempts at religious and educational modernism. This is, moreover, the approach which can place Indian modernism in its proper perspective and provide veritable keys to its understanding.

¹⁰¹ S. Abu al-Hasan 'Ali Nadwi, Muslim Mumalik main Islamiyyat awr Maghrabiyyat ki Kashmakash, Karachi, 1974, p. 94-95.

¹⁰² M.A. Barakati, Sirat-i-Faridiyyah Lahore, 1964, p. 16, cf. D,r. Zafar Hasan, Sir Seyyed awr Hali lea Tasawwur-i-Fitrat Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1990, p. 72.

¹⁰³ See Zafar Hasan, op. cit., p 81. Also see Hali, Hayat-i-Javid, op. cit., part II, p. 21.