

ISLAM, “A PROPHETIC, DISSENTING WITNESS WITHIN THE REALITY OF THE MODERN WORLD”: A RESPONSE TO BASIT KOSHUL

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Certainly, a conversation between western modernity and Islam²⁷⁹ is desperately needed and the role of Muslims in evincing a conversation that is fruitful and beneficial to all is crucial. Muslims have first hand experience of western modernity whereas the West is quite uninformed about Islam. What is prevalent in the West, particularly among Western intellectuals of Islam is a general tendency to explore Islam not from ‘within’, but from its own vantage point. Thus, the view that argues that the West tends to project Islam as its inverse image, as professed by Edward Said is quite compelling in its general thrust. What the West has portrayed as Islam is often a rather distorted image of it. As Kinberley Patton and Benjamin Ray observe, in the context of western modernity, “to compare is to abstract, and abstraction is construed as a political act aimed at domination and annihilation; cross-cultural comparison becomes intrinsically imperialistic, obliterating the cultural matrix from which it “lifts” the compared object.”²⁸⁰ In this case at

²⁷⁹ My understanding is that if we analyze Islam as a socio-cultural reality then consistency requires that the Enlightenment also be evaluated from a socio-cultural perspective. But if we treat Islam as a form and the Enlightenment as ‘essential’ then we will definitely run into unsolvable problems. It would particularly be misleading to consider the form of Islam from the perspective of modernity. We should also keep in mind that Muslims have been so much immersed in modernity— whether willingly or not— and they are often so ignorant of the Islamic tradition except as a modern socio-cultural phenomena that they are seldom aware of the challenge that the West poses for religious understanding in the metaphysical front. Finally, I believe that at an initial stage a socio-cultural analysis with all its complexities will not be very helpful in initiating a conversation. I will rather consider both Islam and the West at the ontological level. Yes we recognize a sickness at its symptoms but treatment is about identifying its underlying causes. Hence in order to address the cause of the sickness of modernity, we need to examine the ontological foundations behind its form.

²⁸⁰ K. C. Patton, B.C. Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in a Modern Age* (Berkeley: UCP, 2000), 2.

least, the so-called ‘universalism’ of the West would be more appropriately described as imperialistic Westernization of the world. The very notion of religious pluralism in Europe was the result of increased exposure to evidence from the ‘exotic’ and/or ‘primitive’ societies under colonial rule. Charles Long notes that the history of the study of religion, which finds its roots in the rationalism and naturalism of the European Enlightenment, is the dramatic story of the violent reality experienced by people and cultures that were colonized by Europeans.²⁸¹

This last point is significant. What went wrong with the enlightenment project? SR²⁸² practitioners are interested in answering such questions in order to identify the nature and origins of the problems of modernity, which they seek to address with aim of searching for remedies. The ideals of European Enlightenment, such as the dignity and freedom of human beings and their equality before the law, are truly ‘sacred’ principles but the problem is that they remained to a large extent only ‘ideals.’ At the socio-cultural level, the encounter of the West with the ‘other’ has often been one of oppression and despotic subjugation as the horrors of colonialism and two terrible World Wars attest. Where capitalism was not available for modernization, the state stepped in to realize it by totalitarian means. In “freeing” society from religion, the Machiavellian political philosophies of modernity legitimized absolute power. The two World Wars led to question the notion of science and technology as unmixed blessings, and the ecological crisis caused many to reconsider the Enlightenment’s concept of progress. Likewise, totalitarianism pointed to a dark side of modernity; something in modernity’s worldview - including its alleged concern for human life and well-being- was fundamentally flawed. For totalitarianism was a consequence of modernity itself. As Foucault has argued, without efficient technologies of surveillance, control, and extermination, despotism could not have developed into totalitarianism. I may have gone to extremes in highlighting the dark side of the ‘enlightenment’. However, this is dictated in part by the context and topic of our discussion: My aim behind this is to bring into relief the fact that the

²⁸¹ C.H.Long, *Significatio: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the interpretation of religion* (Aurora, Colo.: Davies Group, 1999), 3-4.

²⁸² SR stands for ‘Scriptural Reasoning.’

‘enlightenment’ is not a ‘given’ of universal value and certainly not a universal historical ‘fait accompli.’

Basit Koshul mentions three ideals at the heart of the Enlightenment, a) the irreducible dignity of the human being, b) equality of all human beings before the law and c) the value/worth of the material / profane worlds. How much has the West established human dignity? What is human dignity if the subject has no value except as an instrument, if he is no more than an object, a stranger to himself and to his environment? One could argue that religion dignifies human beings more than secular laws. Were not these laws human to the extent they borrowed from traditional religion? France, a major advocate of the Enlightenment, acclaimed “liberte, egalite et fraternite” while massacring hundred thousands people in its colonies. Marshall Berman states that the very self-identity of the modern individual has become acutely problematical. The modern individual does not know who he is, “he knows only how to live outside himself, in the judgment of others: indeed, it is only from the judgment of others that he gains consciousness of his judgment of his very existence.”²⁸³ Have not sociology and religious studies defined the self as a set of roles ‘performed’ in the stage of social life? What is then the meaning of equality of men without genuine selves²⁸⁴, and without purpose in life? According to Rousseau, philosophe of the Enlightenment, all individuals would “become equal, but only because they are nothing.”²⁸⁵ In addition, what is the value of the material world if it has no significance beyond itself?

²⁸³ Quoted in M. Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the emergence of Modern Society* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 141.

²⁸⁴ Modern institutions engineer their own settings of action, which act as a mechanism for the suppression of genuine identity. The more daily life is emptied of its traditional content and reconstituted in terms of modernity’s own dynamics, the more individuals are induced to negotiate lifestyle choices among the options enforced on them. Conditions of modernity intrude deeply into the very heart of self-identity and personal feelings. They impose on individuals how to think, feel and behave, what to wear and what to eat and many other things. Erich Fromm expresses this conditioning as follows, “The individual ceases to be himself, he adopts entirely the kind of personality offered to him by cultural patterns...this mechanism can be compared with the protective coloring some animals assume. They look so similar to their surroundings that they are hardly distinguishable from them.” E. Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1960), 160.

²⁸⁵ Quoted in Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 155.

For the pre-moderns, the world was not alien, it carried divine meaning; post-modernism however, predicts the end of hermeneutics.

In a fundamental sense, the crisis of modernity is a crisis of meaning: it rejects depth; it rejects signs because they refer to a transcendent realm and consequently it rejects the possibility of meaning. Nature is tamed and secularized so as to impede basic moral and existential concerns, which are considered as disturbing because the secular reason of the Enlightenment cannot answer them and because they may lead individuals to question the system itself. However, the desacralization of the world only serves to aggravate the situation. The organization of modern social conditions is such that they drown the individual into a routine of labor and consumption, which gives him the impression that his daily life is under control and is somehow predictable. In other words, the hope is that this routine will sustain a sense of ontological security. Yet, that very routine is often experienced as “empty” practices, which lack moral meaning. Personal meaninglessness and the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer dominate. This feeling of meaninglessness has haunted twentieth century intellectuals. Modernity "is caught up in an increasingly complete eradication of meaning." Logically, this would lead to the point when modernity itself loses meaning and abolishes itself so to speak: if everything is empty and worthless, then there is no sense in modernity either! This, in Nietzsche's words, is ‘nihilism.’

Given the crisis of meaninglessness, how can Islam engage modernity in a meaningful way? Can Islam assess critically modernity on the grounds of reason? From an SR perspective, the answer is not straightforward. Prof. Ochs says, “SSR appears to have arisen specifically in response to the great failing of Intelligence in the modern world. Our shared sense, in this Society, is that the dominant paradigms of reason both in the university and in our seminaries are deeply flawed.”²⁸⁶ I will argue that the secular reason of the Enlightenment is very far from being in harmony with the Qur’anic concept of reason; it constitutes more of an area of conflict than a commonality. We should keep in mind that an important result of the Enlightenment was the

²⁸⁶ P.Ochs, “SSR: The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning,” 1999 *Program for the NSSR*, April 1999, p.1. See <http://www.depts.drew.edu/ssr/nationalsr/NSSR1999RulesSR.htm#top>,

deification of reason at the expense of faith. Reason was elevated to the status of an absolute. This Promethean reason commanded skepticism toward religion (Christianity) primarily, but eventually, we could doubt everything except reason itself. In other words, reason became dogma. On what grounds did we accept reason accepted as ultimate arbiter, if not blind faith in reason itself? Anthony Giddens observes, "Modernity is not only unsettling because of the circularity of reason, but because the nature of that circularity is ultimately puzzling. How can we justify a commitment to reason in the name of reason?"

What can we say about Qur'anic reason? Koshul quotes the Qur'anic verse, "*Shame upon you and that which you worship besides God! Will you not, then, use your reason?*" (21:67) According to the logic of this verse, reason is that which confirms that the worship of idols is groundless. Koshul cites verse 45:5 also:

And in the succession of night and day, and in the means of subsistence which God sends down from the skies, giving life thereby to the earth after it had been lifeless, and in the change of the winds: (in all this) there are signs (ayat) for people who use their reason.

According to this verse, the use of reason concurs with perceiving the signs in the so-called natural phenomena. Put differently, to be inattentive to the signs is incompatible with the use of reason. Thus, it is clear that the Qur'anic notion of reason is quite different from the Enlightenment's reason. In fact, the dogma of the self-sufficient reason of the Enlightenment feeds on the dogma of 'meaning in itself.'²⁸⁷ Once it is claimed that the meaning of things is in themselves only; that they do not point to anything beyond themselves; i.e. that they have no signative meaning, then reason can supposedly 'discover' that meaning. It becomes ostensibly 'self-sufficient' i.e. it does not need a criterion outside itself to have access to the meaning of things precisely because it has decided from the onset that they have no other meaning (or at least no other meaning that is worth finding out) other than what it itself has invented. In other words, such a 'hermeneutical

²⁸⁷ As Gadamer acknowledges, "hermeneutics has to see through the dogmatism of a meaning-in-itself in just the same way as critical philosophy has seen through the dogma of experience."Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (London: Sheel and Ward. 1988), 430.

understanding’ moves inside a vicious circle. Within this paradigm, the individual does not understand things for what they are in reality but projects his own ‘understanding’ of them; as Gadamer says, “Understanding understands itself.”²⁸⁸ In other words, the interpreter makes up a “meaning.” Thus, within this context ‘meaning’ is so relative (a modern substitute for ‘arbitrary’) that ultimately it is not very different from ‘meaninglessness.’ Methodologically, they end up having equivalent status, that is the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’ appears as ‘a process whereby reason turned into its opposite.’ SR practitioners are inclined to see the disasters of modern Western society as the outcome of this ‘awful dialectic.’ “The purpose of SSR is, from the midst of modern thinking... to recover the practices of hearing God’s speech that both preceded and still provide the terms for modern thinking.”²⁸⁹

The Qur’an calls this reason, which equates meaning and meaninglessness *hawa*. The following verses highlights that the Qur’an is not unaware of this type of debate, and it underscores that the prophet was not encouraged to pursue it under confusing terms.

Say: "Produce, then, (another) revelation from God which would offer better guidance than either of these two (i.e. the Torah and the Qur'an) - and I shall follow it, if you speak the truth!" And since they cannot respond to your challenge, know that they are following only their hawa (their own likes and dislikes under the claim of following reason) and who could be more astray than he who follows his own likes and dislikes (hawa) without any guidance from God? (28:49-50)

The Qur’an mentions the deification of *hawa*, and contrasts it to the use of reason. Immediately after, it mentions the signs of the multitude favors of the Maker towards man and concludes by noting his ingratitude, thus relating the deification of *hawa* to an ontological state of ingratitude:

Have you ever considered the one who makes his hawa (his own desires) his deity? Could you then be held responsible for him? Or do you think that most of them listen and use their reason? Nay, they are but like cattle-nay, they are even less conscious of

²⁸⁸ H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 235.

²⁸⁹ Ochs, “SSR: The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning,” 2.

the right way! Are you not aware of your Sustainer –how He causes the shadow to lengthen (towards the night) when, Had He so wiled, He could indeed have made it stand still: but then, We have made the sun its guide; and then, We draw it in towards Ourselves with a gradual drawing in. And it is He who makes the night a garment for you, and (your) sleep a rest, and causes every (new) day to be a resurrection. And He it is who sends forth the winds as a glad tidings of His coming grace; and (thus too) We cause pure water to descend from the skies, so that We may bring dead land to life thereby, and give to drink thereof to many (beings) of Our creation, beasts as well as humans. And indeed, many times We have repeated this unto men so that they might take it to heart: but most men refuse to be aught but ingrate. (2543-50)

The problem is how one can have access to the meaning of the external world without recourse to any source other than reason when the world is both external and alien according to that very reason. How can this reason make sure that its interpretation of the world is in conformity with the reality of the world, and not merely a distortion of the world? The need for a criterion is indispensable in the face of the pervasiveness of doubt, a distinctive feature of so-called critical reason, which permeates so many aspects of modern daily life, at least as background phenomena.²⁹⁰ In absence of a universal criterion, all claims to understanding remain arbitrary for there would be no way to check whether interpretations of the world conform to the reality. Unless it starts with self-examination, the relentless search for a critical perspective in the modern world is bound to remain unsuccessful. The challenge that always confronts the claim of understanding without reference to a universal criterion of reality outside itself is that it has no means to apprehend or capture the meaning of things. It is bound to see things through its prejudices. Gadamer explains that things have no meaning independently of the interpreter's prejudices. Meaning comes into being only through the happening of understanding.²⁹¹ It follows that the modern subject is enclosed in his own paradigms. He is forever prisoner of his

²⁹⁰ As modern secular science and philosophy could not ground knowledge, they insist that all knowledge is uncertain; it is always open to revision and at some point, it may even be abandoned. However, according to what is it abandoned? It is not clear. "Knowledge" depends on the "methodological principle" of doubt! This issue is existentially disturbing to both the philosopher and the layman.

²⁹¹ H.G.Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical consciousness" in *Interpretative social Science: A Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow and W.M.Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 159.

prejudices. He has no means to see the world except within his own 'horizon.' In Gadamer's view, "the horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us,"²⁹² and that is supposedly evidence for the openness of the horizon. In fact, it is just the opposite: if my horizon moves with me, it means I cannot get out of it. From the point of the Qur'anic worldview, this 'hermeneutical imprisonment' is rooted in modernity's existential predicament. It is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of being, which is itself the result of the perception of the self *vis á vis* the world and *vis a vis* its own Maker.

The dogmas of modernity are rooted in a paradigm where everything is visualized as owning itself and existing of itself independently of its Maker (eventhough the existence of God may not be denied). This afflicted paradigm takes ontological awareness for granted; routine activities sustain it but cannot ground it: 'being' has meaning only as opposed to 'non-being;' one exists because he is not non-existent. In 'ordinary' circumstances, modern man feels relatively in control of his life; he knows what to do and how to act. His framework of security is based on the feeling that things around him are real and permanent but its lacks any ontological foundations and hence it is extremely fragile. When routines are disturbed, existential crises are likely to occur. At such moments, moral and existential questions present themselves in pressingly. He is forced to confront concerns, which otherwise are kept away from consciousness with the smooth working of daily activities. At such moments, modern man comes face to face with reality: he realizes that in fact nothing is under his control, nothing is essential to him, not even his own existence. In other words, he realizes that the 'rationality' of modernity is baseless and unjustifiable; it contradicts the ontological reality of the world.

The modern individual may experience his ontological reality as dreadful to the extent he has been existentially secluded from the moral and spiritual resources needed for him to find out the meaning of life. He may choose to escape it and avoid rethinking fundamental aspects of his existence. Indeed, without answers, the threat of personal meaninglessness becomes a source of unspecific and pervasive anxieties. For our answers to existential questions

²⁹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271.

constitute our framework of reality without which we cannot answer even the simplest query. Without such framework of reality, modern man needs constantly to keep himself busy in order to 'put aside' the strong feelings of anxiety arising from his unanswered questions. However, whenever 'things go wrong' and he is compelled to confront the fictive character of his world, his sense of security is likely to come under immediate strain. If such an individual comes face to face with death for instance, he is likely to experience shock. Death seems unintelligible to him because it contradicts his taken-for-granted view on existence. Death reminds him that contrary to what modern society assumes, existence is not intrinsic to him, it is not under his control. That is death reminds him that he is ontologically unsecure. An individual in this position is always on the brink of a crisis of meaning. He perceives everything that reminds him his transience (and everything is transient) as a threat, because it reminds him of the meaninglessness of his life; it reminds him that he lacks that point of support that human consciousness yearns for. As Helen Lynd says, "We have become strangers in a world where we thought we were at home. We experience anxiety in becoming aware that we cannot trust our answers to the questions, "who am I?", "Where do I belong?" ...with every recurrent violation of trust we become again children unsure of ourselves in an alien world."²⁹³

To be ontologically secure is to possess well-founded answers to fundamental existential questions, questions that deal with our sense of self, our aims, our values, etc. In pursuing answers, values, we are inescapably confronted with problem of meaning, with the issue of what life is all about. Ultimately, we are faced with questions, which we need to answer in order to acquire an ontological understanding of reality and of self-identity: who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? In the view of Charles Taylor, "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we became, and of where we are going."²⁹⁴ Self-knowledge is important because it is the point of reference for knowledge of the 'Other.' How can one claim to know the world when he does know his own self? Similarly,

²⁹³ H.M.Lynd, *Shame and the search for Identity* (London: Routledge, 1958), 46-47.

²⁹⁴ C.Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4

according to what can reason be self-sufficient when it is ontologically contingent and limited?

Given the dogmatism of ‘critical reason,’ it would make no sense that Islam affirms this dogma. Quite the opposite, Islam needs to engage modernity, and confront its dogmas. In particular, it needs to question self-sufficient reason with the hope of ‘reconstituting the practices of modern Intelligence as practices of reflecting on the rules of scriptural reasoning,’²⁹⁵ for there is not much possibility for modernity to reform itself if it does not wake up to the irrationality and circularity of its dogmatic Promethean reason. Moreover, the Islamic spirit of wisdom and mercy requires that the deconstruction of modern reason should include the seeds of restitution. At this point, I should call to attention that the dogmas of modernity are the dogmas of the Muslims too, in as much as they are part of modernity and modernity is part of their reality and thus the ‘squaring of the circle’ needs to proceed in the manner of the ‘circling of the square.’ As A. Murad has elegantly put it, Islam can play the crucial role of “a prophetic, dissenting witness *within* the reality of the modern world.”²⁹⁶

Basit koshul rightly points out that the possibility of a meaningful dissenting voice within the modern world requires that the dissenting voice shares some common ground with the modern world. He argues, with reason, that the common ground cannot be religion; I will add that it cannot be dogmatic reason either. Islam need not “show consideration for the Enlightenment enshrinement of reason.” Its task is rather to debunk this very ‘rationality,’ using a language that it understands but certainly not its categories, for the secular reason of the Enlightenment is at the root of the problems of modernity and its antagonistic attitude towards the Divine. If we conceded to this reason, not only would we fall in clear contradiction with our project of scriptural reasoning, but also we would not find the means to start a meaningful conversation, we would only perpetuate the confusion of the modern world. As I have previously stated, this Promethean reason is in conflict with the intellect or the faculty of reasoning mentioned in the

²⁹⁵ Ochs, “SSR: The Rules of Scriptural Reasoning,” 2.

²⁹⁶ Murad, A. (2002) “Faith in the Future: Islam After the Enlightenment” at <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/postEnlight.htm>

Qur'an. From the point of view of Qur'anic logic, a 'rationality' that disparages revelation is simply irrational because unaided reason cannot hope to solve the problems of life without help from the Granter of life. As The Qur'an expounds it:

Is man, then, not aware that it is We who create him out of a (mere) drop of sperm, whereupon he becomes an open contender in argument! (36:77 See also 16:4) Concerning those who deny the fact of divine revelation, the Qur'an says, Is it their minds that bid them (to take) this (attitude) or are they simply people filled with overweening arrogance? Or do they say, "He himself has composed this (message)? Nay but they are not willing to believe! But then (if they deem it the work of a mere mortal) let them produce another discourse like it, if what they say be true! Have they themselves been created without anything (that might cause their creation)? Or were they perchance, their own creators? And have they created the heavens and the earth? Nay, but they have no certainty of anything! (52:32-36).

The Qur'an challenges the addressee, but in doing so, it asks questions that help him check himself if he is ready to 'listen;' it teaches him to ask the right questions and the way to the answers. The Qur'an shows the circularity and absurdity of a 'reason that is not grounded in ontological reality.' From this aspect, the Qur'an is a source of both wisdom and mercy. It constantly says that there are signs in everything and it points to those signs in many ways,

Let man, then, observe out of what he has been created. (86:5)

And now ask those (who deny the truth) to enlighten you: were they more difficult to create than all those (untold marvels) that we have created? For behold, We have created them out of (mere) clay commingled with water. (37:11)

It is We who created you, why then, do you not accept the truth? Have you ever considered that which you emit? Is it you who create it or are We the Creator? We have indeed decreed that death shall be (ever-present) among you: but there is nothing to prevent Us from changing the nature of your existence and bringing you into being anew in a manner (as yet) unknown to you. And (since) you are indeed aware of the (miracle of your) coming into being in the first instance, why, then, do you not bethink yourselves? Have you ever considered the seed which you cast into the soil? Is it you

cause it to grow, or are We the cause of its growth? (For), were it to Our will, We could indeed turn into chaff, and you would be left to wonder (and lament)...Have you ever considered the water which you drink? Is it you who cause it to come down from the clouds, or are We the cause of its coming down? It comes down sweet but were it Our will, We could make it burningly salty and bitter: why then, do you not give thanks? Have you ever considered the fire which you kindle? Is it you who have brought into being the tree that serves as its fuel, or are We the cause of its coming into being? It is We who have made it a means to remind (you of Us), and a comfort for all who are lost and hungry in the wilderness (of their lives). Extol then, the limitless glory of your sustainer's mighty name! (56:57-74)

The Qur'an puts the answers in the mouth of the prophet Abraham (peace be upon him), who is also referred to as a model for the believers,²⁹⁷

(Abraham) said, have you, then, ever considered what it is that you have been worshipping you and those forbears of yours? Now (as for me, I know that) verily, these (false deities) are my enemies, (and that none is my helper) save the Sustainer of all worlds, who has created me and is the One who guides me, and when I fall ill, is the One who restores me to health, and who will cause to die and then will bring me back to life, and who, I hope, will forgive me my faults on Judgment Day! (26:75-82)

Yes, we need to start from a common ground and we actually do share a common ground. But it is imperative to realize that the conversation is not with modernity or the enlightenment as ideologies but with modernity as a condition that includes all of us; our addressees are people shaped by modernity like us. Moreover, all people share the *fitra* (innate nature). The Muslim scholar al-Ghazali (d.1111) observed that the term 'intellect' (*'aql*) refers to an innate (*bi al-tab'*) intellect and to an acquired (*bi al-iktisab*) intellect. He explains that "the first, namely the innate (*matbu'*) intellect, was intended by the Prophet when he said,"God has not created a more honored thing than the intellect (*'aql*)." The second, namely the acquired intellect, was intended by the prophet when he said, "When you draw near unto God

²⁹⁷ *Indeed, you have a good example in Abraham and those who followed him, when they said unto their idolatrous people: "Verily, we are quit of you and of all that you worship instead of God:we deny the truth of whatever you believe; and between us and you there has arisen enmity and hatred, to last until such a time as you come to believe in the One God! (60:4)*

through righteousness and good works, you draw near unto Him through your learning.”²⁹⁸ It is the first innate intellect that all humans share and it is from there that the conversation can start. Islam is actually in a unique position to launch such a conversation for the Qur’an addresses this innate intellect, and it draws its evidence from the physical world, which we also all share. It restores man his dignity as the addressee and guest of the Divine, and reinstates the world its significative value by disclosing the sign-nature of everything. Moreover, by addressing all humanity²⁹⁹ in a way all understand, the Qur’anic message declares the equality of all before the divine law of mercy and wisdom. From the vantage point that the Qur’an provides, we can see that the secular rationality of modernity is ontologically untenable. This will prepare the stage for us to appreciate that a scriptural basis can give a ‘rational’ account of what the reason of Enlightenment has attempted to explain. We should note though that ‘rational’ here means not only cogent, sound reasoning and logic but more importantly that which is in accordance with the *fitra* (human nature) and human beings’ most ultimate and essential concerns such as the meaning of death, final destiny, etc.³⁰⁰

The role of the ‘prophetic, dissenting voice’ has two main dimensions: wisdom and mercy. Wisdom because the prophetic witness needs to question the prejudices and claims of the existing dominant paradigm in order to establish the validity of the divine message. In doing so, he appeals to the ‘innate intellect’ of his addressees and cultivates it into a ‘scripturally acquired intellect’, an *intellectus fidei* (or ‘*aql imani*). In this sense, we can say that “the prophetic witness offers a revelatory affirmation of some of the real but dormant aspirations and potentialities at the very heart of its socio-cultural environment, whose emergence and maturation is being forestalled by neglect and forgetfulness.” (Basit, p. 9) However, the prophetic witness does not speak in terms of the existing dominant paradigm. The prophet typically questions the prevalent social values and feels deeply dissatisfied with them.

²⁹⁸ Al-Ghazali, *The Book of Knowledge*, Trans. N.A. Faris (Lahore: Ashraf press, 1962), 228.

²⁹⁹ Just as the Qur’an is a universal address to all humanity, The Prophet of Islam too said, ‘Every prophet was sent to his own people; but I am sent to all mankind’ (*bu’ithtu li’l-nasi kaffa*).

³⁰⁰ In the Qur’an the intellect is mentioned (in the verbal form) as a function of the heart, i.e. the seat of feelings and emotions, *Have they, then, never journeyed about the earth, letting their hearts reason and gain wisdom?* (22:46)

Next, he makes *hijra* (migration, self-separation from one's fellows); that is he feels very deeply the inadequacy of the prejudices and claims which stem from the dominant existing paradigm, he rejects them as inconsistent and false but does not claim that he has the answers. In the Qur'an, Abraham says, *Verily, I shall (leave this land) and go wherever my sustainer will guide! (inni dhabibun ila rabbi sayahdin 37:99)*. He is like saying to his people, "I do not *know* yet, but I am sure that the beginning is to leave you and that which you worship." The prophet trusts in God and submits to Him and this assuredly an essential element of the practice of hearing God's speech. As he realizes his need for help from an external source, he becomes receptive to the divine speech, which he confirms and believes in.

Then he returns to his people to heal them with compassion and the society with the teaching of wisdom. He invites his people to "migrate unto God," and strive in His way: *Verily, they who have attained to faith, and they who migrate unto God, and are striving hard in God's cause- these it is who may look forward to God's grace: for God is much forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (2:218; see also 8:74)* He does not compromise the content of the message but looks for compassionate ways of delivering it. He returns out of mercy but he returns as 'a dissenting prophetic voice from within'. The scripture teaches that, "*They would love to see you deny the truth even as they have denied it, so that you should be like them. Do not, therefore, take them for allies until they migrate unto God for the sake of God.*" (4: 88) At this point, looking back into history, it may be said that the failure of Muslims was not because Islam didn't "complete rationalization and integration of the resources in the Enlightenment ideals into relevant institutions" (Basit, p. 16-17) but because they didn't find the resources to confront modernity and deliver the message of Islam. The very notion of "institutionalizing" values belongs in modernity. "Institutionalization" is not only about the establishment of values but also about monopolizing them using those values to legitimize any activity; hence it opens up the possibility of exercising oppression and domination under the mask of liberation. In Islam, values are embodied; they are lived, experienced and practiced. They are not mere 'ideals' but ontological realities. In fact, it is precisely because Islam 'failed' to adapt itself to the Enlightenment, that it has preserved its purity; a feature that puts it in a unique position vis a vis the plight of modernity. If we are going to break the circularity of modernity and come up with solutions, we need to realize that conversation is not about adjusting the

message to modernity but about how we could make those resources of wisdom, compassion, and healing available to those who need them and seek them. This ‘failure’ might be a means for the preservation of the traditional worldview until it finds its aspiration again. This ‘failure’ is perhaps what protected Islam from the fate of Christianity and Judaism, which were disemboweled and made into ‘modern liberal religions’ in the service of a secular modernity. “They became shallow reflections of enlightenment ideals and supplied superficial prooftexts to legitimate and not challenge the new modern economic, political, social, and cultural order. “ (S. Kepnes, last page)

My reading of the story of the fall as it occurs in the Qur’an begins with an important factor, which Koshul’s narrative did not pick up. He correctly asserts that the fall is not “some catastrophic tragedy in some absolute ontological sense;” (Koshul, p. 25) the fall with its possibility of freedom made goodness and faith possible. However, there are two conditions for the fall to be transformed into goodness. First, one has to be aware of the state of fall, but this is not sufficient, it is essential that the individual be penitent, that he repents and asks for forgiveness. The Qur’an relates that after they had disobeyed and tasted the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve could not sense their fall and thus could not find the way out of it until God brought it to their attention, inspiring them with the prayer of *tawbah* (repentance),

The two replied, “Our sustainer! We have sinned against ourselves and unless you grant us forgiveness and bestow your mercy upon us, we shall most certainly be lost!”
(7:23)

Prior to their repentance, the Qur’an narrates how God revealed to Adam his ‘predicament’, his powerlessness vis-à-vis this predicament, and inspired ‘some words of prayer to say to that effect. This point is crucial: even the awareness of the fall is divinely inspired! The Qur’an says that after the fall,

Adam learned from his Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord turned towards him; for He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. We said: "Get down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes to you Guidance from me, whosoever follows My guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. But those who reject Faith and belie Our Signs, they shall be Companions of the Fire; they shall abide therein. (2:37-39)

According to the Qur'anic narrative, Adam's "transgression was forgiven" but on condition of accepting the guidance from God and following it. If man does not realize his state of fall and does not repent and give up the arrogance of self-sufficiency, how can he find his way out? The fall is not ontologically evil; it is a source of good but under which conditions? As Iqbal says, "The Fall does not mean any moral depravity; it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flashes of self-consciousness," (quoted in Basit, p. 25) But from a scriptural reasoning point of view, this is only possible with the help and guidance of revelation. Certainly, the Qur'anic narrative opens up possibilities for self-enhancement because of man's predicament. However, it is unlike the existentialist argument, which is based on the axiomatic: as man falls, he awakens. It is not obvious that man knows that he is falling and the danger is that he may not awake at all. I reiterate that it is the compassionate critique of self-sufficient reason under the guidance of the scriptures that can clear the heedlessness dormant in its operation and consequently bring about awakening and healing. SR is in a sense the representative of the dissenting prophetic voice from within. It follows the example of Adam in that it wants to go back to the scriptures to listen out for God's guidance in order to find out a solution to our predicament, which is not peculiar to modernity as the story of the fall of Adam indicates; it is a basic human condition.

Modern man needs to realize that he is falling. He need to falsify logically and ontologically the claim of the Promethean reason. When that is done the *fitra* (human nature) will seek a point of support. It is will be brought to a state of listening to revelation because it reaches the state of searching for a source outside itself, namely the *ghayb* (the unseen transcendent). To see degeneration and criticize it as so is not sufficient. One needs to repent. Adam and Eve were forgiven because as soon as they were prompted to realize their fall they repented. Their awareness of their fall is not to be confused with secular existentialism. To critique modernity and condemn some of its ills is not evidence for the awakening from the fall. One could well criticize modernity superficially i.e. without questioning its ontological basis. For instance, Rousseau saw the degeneration as a fact, which for him was an existential predicament, but he attempted to solve it without having recourse to the notion of the fall, which inherently points towards a transcendent origin. His 'solution' was neither theological nor metaphysical: it was

modern. He accepted degeneration (the fall of man) but attributed it neither to man himself nor to God. He invented a new agent of degeneration: society. Hence, social contract was the source of salvation. “The meaning of life was in social justice.” But how could justice be established if there was no ontological ground for morality? Freud described the rational Ego as “an island floating on a sea of irrationality,” while professing rationalism. With Freud, reason, that single principle behind the organization of personal and collective life, came to be identified as an element of the human psyche, something not so rational; but whatever the name, man was still self-sufficient. In none of these cases, the critique is followed by repentance because these philosophers did not accept that man was falling away from his divine origin; it is just an ‘existential fall’ if we may say. They attempted to come with a solution from themselves, thus perpetuating that Promethean state so characteristic of the fall. “In fact one may argue that the logic of existentialism is not much unlike Cartesian logic in that in the end it does not rid itself of ‘self-sufficient reason; for while the latter’s famous dictum is “ I think therefore I am”, the former seems to say: “ I am falling therefore I exist””³⁰¹

No doubt, we may certainly view the present cultural and intellectual conditions as good omens for renewal (*tajdid*) but it is incumbent on seeing the Enlightenment for what it is, i.e. an un-enlightened go at the prospects! It is true that the open possibilities cannot be pursued by following the examples of the traditional schools of philosophy, which have short-circuited the very ‘reason’ they have to engage. Similarly, they cannot be pursued by simply accepting that the Enlightenment has an inherently good side to it. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, makes it clear that although abstract rational enquiry made it look as though it may be possible to reconcile secular reason with scriptural wisdom, “the social and political upheaval that shook history and undermined society with a shocking effect on humanity refuted the possibility of such combination.”³⁰² According to Nursi, the fact that “the Enlightenment’s stance towards non-Enlightenment paradigms is one of critique-condemn-replace” is not a fortuitous result. This attitude, he asserts,

³⁰¹ R. Ameer, personal discussion.

³⁰² T. Abdel Rahman, “The Separation of Human Philosophy from the wisdom of the Qur’an” in *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. I. M. Abu rabi (Albany: SUNY, 2003), 201-202.

is the logical concomitant of its philosophy. Nursi's conclusion is the result of an analysis of the very essentials of the Enlightenment, both logically and ontologically. The fact that the modern predicament of mankind contains the seeds of great goodness is momentous. To realize this possibility, the mission of the Qur'an is to confront, engage, compel and debunk not only the rationality of the Enlightenment, but also its sources of knowledge, which are wanting in relation to the project it wishes to implement. Koshul proposes a "redeem, reform, embrace" approach to the Enlightenment, perhaps to remain in a Qur'anically reasoned context, we might suggest a condemn/redeem, critique/reform, replace/embrace at the same time for one can summon all the courage there is but never know in which context he is, within or without?