

Process-Relational Thought and Islam: Proposing a Novel Framework for Constructive Engagement with Modernity

Jared Morningstar
December 7, 2022

One of the major challenges for contemporary Islamic intellectual projects is creatively engaging the nebulous and elusive concept of “modernity.” The various modern ideas that loom large in the consciousness of modern Muslims, such as the rights of women, the ideals of liberalism, the institution of the nation state, the structures of global capitalism, the scientific method and technological advancement, and secularism are all in relationship, one way or another, to this meta-concept of modernity. As such, developing a robust, dynamic, and flexible framework for approaching modernity in its various aspects is a requirement if Islamic engagement with these ideas is going to be more than a set of disconnected endeavors lacking a cohesive basis.

To date, a significant portion Muslim thinkers have tended to approach modernity with frameworks which either lead to a wholesale rejection of much of what is perceived as modern, or a broad adoption of the sensibilities of Western modernity. Both these responses leave something to be desired, as they lack a critical orientation to their own methodologies and presuppositions, whether these be traditionally-grounded or adapted from modern Western sources. Instead of simply reproducing either pre-modern tradition or exogenous Western modernity—moves which invariably lead to harmful forms of reductionism—I propose a bi-directional critical movement between tradition and modernity so that a creative synthesis may be achieved; a synthesis which avoids the trappings of both a naïve traditionalism which refuses to incorporate historical or contextualist thinking or a crude modernism which is blind to the integrity of a tradition and is careless in trying to import supposedly superior foreign intellectual material into the religion. To this end, process-relational philosophy may provide helpful philosophical resources. On the one hand, process thought undercuts and transforms many of the foundational epistemological and metaphysical ideas at the heart of modernity from thinkers like Kant and Descartes, while on the other hand it maintains appreciation of the value and insights of religious traditions in a way that avoids decadent romanticism by consider-

ing such matters as always in development and inseparable from context. These features of process-relational thought allow Muslim intellectuals to deconstruct dysfunctional ideas from both Western modernity and Islamic traditions while also encouraging the creative reconstruction and synthesis of material from both of these domains, leading to more holistic and dynamic responses to the challenges of our era.

To begin, it will be helpful to first outline existing Islamic responses to modernity, which can be divided into three basic camps: modernists, puritanical reformists, and traditionalists. In brief, modernists are inspired by Western intellectual achievements, particularly in social and scientific domains and seek to replicate this form of perceived progress in Islamic societies, whereas the puritanical reformists have the opposite orientation and point to supposed moral degradation and irreligiosity of the modern West, insisting a return to pure tradition is the necessary response. The traditionalists are distinguished from the puritanical reformists by a greater degree of fidelity to classic traditions of law, theology, and spirituality, seeing these as offering security in interpretation, whereas the reformists take a much more scripturalist and literalist approach, denouncing classical religious authorities and methodologies and seeking to return to what they see as the pure form of the religion.

This typology, presented by Joseph Lumbard et al. in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition*, offers a helpful general sketch, but if it is reified it can become misleading. Indeed, the boundaries between these responses are porous and there are areas of allegiance where two camps will come together on certain questions. While Lumbard and his coauthors in the volume seek to promote the perspective of traditionalism as the most capable framework for dynamically responding to the problems of modernity, I contend that there are under-examined tensions *within* this camp that require serious attention before traditionalism may become truly effective in providing navigation through modernity and beyond. This “big tent” style traditionalism, which typically identifies itself with the whole gamut of Islamic orthodoxy from Akbarian Sufism to the Hanbali school of law, lacks mechanisms for internal discernment and self-critique that are necessary as various factions within classical Islam attempt to put forth their own perspectives on modernity and the various particular issues it raises as “the traditional perspective.” Lumbard—following Seyyed Hossein Nasr and other writers in the aptly named “Traditionalist school”—takes the Sufi intellectual traditions as the most authoritative representatives of traditionalism, but although philosophical Sufism provides a dynamic and flexible

framework for addressing contemporary questions, if the traditionalists who identify themselves with this perspective are unwilling to criticize not only the Salafis and modernists who they see as breaking strongly from classical methodologies, but also their fellow traditionalists whose legal and theological thinking has ossified, then their project of responding more holistically to modernity will be continually frustrated.

Contra this typology, which prioritizes traditionalism as a dynamic middle path superior to the shared pathologies of both the puritanical reformists and modernists, I propose that all three of these factions are similarly entangled in a paradigm of *repetition*. Regardless of the affiliation, there is an uncritical adoption of a particular set of methodologies or values which are themselves used for critique, but not deeply exposed to the criticisms from the other factions. Alfred North Whitehead speaks poetically about this pathology of repetition towards the end of his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, offering instead a vision of harmony between order and novelty: "Order is not sufficient. What is required, is something much more complex. It is order entering upon novelty; so that the massiveness of order does not degenerate into mere repetition; and so that the novelty is always reflected upon the background of a system" (*Process and Reality*, 339).

Whitehead's thought, and the process tradition more broadly, teaches us that novelty is ontologically fundamental, and that this is something which may both require a response and be incorporated into the process of adaptive responsiveness. As such, the methodological repetition of the traditionalist or the scripturalist-literalist repetition of the puritanical reformist are like dead organisms—no longer able to bring sustenance into their internal constitution, cut off from reciprocal relationship with the environment that is the basis of ecological existence. These forms of repetition foreclose the possibility of new *modes* of thinking and being, yet such novel forms may be precisely what is required by the moment. What is unique about the puritanical reformists, however, is that their literalism leads them to uncritically accept certain aspects of modernity—as can be seen in the techno-capitalist bent of Saudi Arabia—so by lacking a more sophisticated methodology for interpretation and simply repeating scriptural sources they are left with few resources for grappling with developments and challenges that have no easy analogy in sacred texts.

The repetition of the Islamic modernist—who often simply repeats the forms of Western modernity in an Islamic idiom—fares no better, as they lack the deep connection with tradition that would allow for the

novelty of modernity to be "reflected upon the background of a system," which is in turn what would allow for genuine discernment in deciding how to incorporate this material. Without this, the repetition of the Islamic modernist will often take the form of a skin graft which is incompatible with the unique and individual physiological patient, conditioning a harmful immune response incompatible with healing. An additional problem here is that the Western modernity that is repeated is often seen as universal, whereas this too is historically contingent and of a certain context, so the project of modernizing Islam risks introducing certain reforms which in time are shown to be mere fads of a given age.

A process-relational approach has the potential to avoid these pitfalls of repetition while also incorporating the important insights from each of these three camps. Considering the modernist position, a process-relational framework agrees that tradition must be critically analyzed in the contemporary era and that there is much to be gained by engaging extra-Islamic intellectual traditions and incorporating perspectives from these sources. Along with the traditionalists, process-relational thinking maintains that there ought to be a deep continuity with and appreciation for that which has been handed down through tradition. And even in the case of the puritanical reformists there is something of value that is affirmed by a process-relational perspective: namely, that returning directly to sacred sources, without the mediation of institutionalized religious authorities, opens up the possibility for renewal in the now. Where the process-relational approach differs from all these perspectives is in insisting that this material should all be creatively interpreted to balance order and novelty, rather than transposing exact copies of existing ideas into the present Islamic context.

By grounding Islamic responses to modernity in a process-relational framework, many of the inspiring and creative projects contemporary Islamic thinkers are pursuing may be placed in a broader context. From discourses on *maqāsid al-sharī'a* to Fazlur Rahman's axiological hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an, process-relational thinking has the potential to incorporate the insights of such projects into a cohesive framework, allowing for a more holistic response to modernity, or perhaps the development of an authentically Islamic modernity.

References

1. Lumbard, Joseph E. B, editor. *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Bloomington, Ind.: World Wisdom, 2009.
2. Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
3. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality* Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York, NY: Free Press, 1985.