

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CAUGHT BETWEEN A ROCK  
AND A HARD PLACE?  
MUSLIMS AND A MULTIDIMENSIONAL  
EMANCIPATORY DISCOURSE

MOJTABA MAHDAVI  
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

**Executive Summary**

The Muslim World today is in a profound crisis. It is caught between a number of rocks and many hard places: between extremism in the name of Jihad and neoliberal imperial hegemony; between religious fundamentalism and neoliberal market fundamentalism; between tyrannical theocracy and militant secularism; and between the cultural essentialism of “the Clash of Civilizations” theory (Huntington, 1996) -- meaning Muslims and the West are in a constant cultural clash -- and the hegemonic universalist discourse of “the End of History” -- i.e. the neoliberal western model is the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” (Fukuyama, 1989).

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Islamic Fundamentalism, *Salafiyyah*, *velayat-e faqih*, Mahdi return, emancipatory discourse, Muslims politics of care, post-Islamism.

**Introduction**

This chapter proposes that nostalgia for ancient forms of spirituality in either a religious or political form is not a solution to the current crisis. Instead, Muslims need to promote and pursue a five-dimensional emancipatory discourse, or a multidimensional exit strategy to move forward. The first dimension explores the possibility of the idea of

“multiple modernities/democracies” in the Muslim context, meaning modernity and democracy in the context of Muslim majority societies will not be the same as in a Western experience. The second component urges for the “historicity” of the Islamic tradition. The third element demonstrates the emancipatory discourse of “Muslims Cosmopolitanism,” i.e. Islamic civilization has always been the “dialogical outcome” of Muslims interactions with the dominant moral and intellectual forces in the world. Muslims need to retrieve such “worldliness and cosmopolitanism” to make a meaningful contribution to the world (Dabashi, 2012). The fourth factor dismantles the idea of the Islamic State; it demonstrates why the Islamic State is an “impossible State” (Hallaq, 2013) and no state acts as God’s proxy (Abu-El Fadl, 2013). It investigates the possibility of a secular state in a Muslim context. The fifth dimension explores the potentials of a “Post-Islamist turn” (Bayat, 2007; 2013) in the intellectual discourse and social reality of contemporary Muslim-majority societies.

### **Being Muslim Today**

Being a Muslim today is not easy. Ordinary Muslims, the overwhelming majority of 1.6 billion Muslims from Indonesia to Tunisia, from North America to Australia, from Asia Pacific to Africa – Muslims all over the world in five continents are caught between a number of rocks and many hard places. The rise of *Daesh*/ISIS/ISIL in Iraq and Syria, the civil/proxy war in Syria and Yemen, the return of military junta in Egypt, and the deep political crisis in post-Gaddafi Libya have empowered the Islamophobia industry. The current crises in the Middle East have contributed to the revival of an old discourse of “Muslim Exceptionalism,” meaning Muslims are exceptionally immune to the process of democratization; Muslims resist democracy and pluralism.

Ordinary Muslims today are being caught between extremism in the name of jihad and the arrogance of neoliberal imperial hegemony – *McWorld* (Barber, 1995); between acting terror (by al-Qaeda and *Daesh*/ISIS) and orchestrating the Global War on Terror (by leading Western liberal democracies and their regional allies); between creating fear (by terrorists) and constructing politics of fear (by states); between the discourse of “the Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington, 1996) (that Muslims and the West are in constant cultural conflicts) and the discourse of “the End of History” (Fukuyama, 1989) (that neoliberal West is the end point of human evolution); between religious fundamentalism and neoliberal market fundamentalism; and between “tyrannical theocracy and a militant

secularism”. This dichotomy is a clash of two different faces of fundamentalisms, two faces of militancy, and two faces of ignorance and arrogance; this is a “clash of ignorance” (Said, 2001).

The world dis/order is changing. Muslims could be part of this emerging order by offering new ideas for a better world. *Daesh/ISIS*, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and al-Shabaab do not represent the richness and diversity of the Muslim tradition; they “reinvent” the tradition in the age of neoliberal globalization. They are children of colonial modernity, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, and the hegemonic discourse of the Global War on Terror.

### **Putting a Rock and a Hard Place in Theoretical Context<sup>1</sup>**

Muslims encountered Western modernity through European colonialism. The Muslim response to this challenge has taken many forms: radical and moderate secularism or modernism, different versions of Islamic reform, and traditionalism. While the radical secularists/state-sponsored modernists perceive Western modernity as the solution to the crisis of Muslim societies, the traditionalists see it as the major problem; the solution, they argue, is a return to the Islamic traditions. However, a return to the Islamic tradition is a modern response to the crisis of Muslim societies in the postcolonial era. Traditionalism in the form of Islamism is a modern phenomenon; it does not represent the tradition, it reinvents the tradition (Mahdavi, 213: 57).

Interestingly, the Western Orientalists argument resonates with the radical Islamists perception of a fundamental clash between Islam and modern notions of democracy, secularism, and human rights. Classical Orientalists such as Ernest Renan and contemporary Orientalists such as Ernest Gellner (1991; 1992), Bernard Lewis (1988; 1990) and Samuel Huntington (1996) argue that there is a fundamentally irresolvable clash of values between Islam and modernity.

The Muslim response to the question of modernity, however, has not been limited to the radical modernist/secularists and traditionalist Islamism. A third group of Muslims calls for an alternative approach to the question of Muslims and modernity. This approach calls for a critical dialogue and negotiation between tradition and modernity and expedites the possibility of emerging Muslim modernities. It challenges both a hegemonic voice of a singular and superior colonial modernity and an essentialist Islamist response to modernity. This approach is an invitation to acknowledge

multiple modernities, the emerging Muslim modernities, and a gradual shift from Islamism toward post-Islamism (Mahdavi, 2013: 58).

## **Islam and Modernity: Orientalism and Islamism**

### ***Orientalism***

Western Orientalism suggests that the absence of democracy and the crisis of modernity in the Muslim world is the fact of “Muslim Exceptionalism.” Islamic tradition and modernity are incompatible, and the public role of Islam would ultimately result in autocracy. Modernity, rationalism, and democracy are Western in origin and uniquely suited to Western culture. According to Ernest Gellner (1991, 2), Muslim societies are essentially different from others in that “no secularization has taken place in the world of Islam.” In *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, Gellner (1992) argues that Islam has been exceptionally immune to the forces of secularization and modernization has increased this immunization. Likewise, Bernard Lewis (1990) and Samuel Huntington (1996) argue that Western culture is unique and essentially differs from other civilizations in general and Islam in particular. According to Huntington, while “in Islam, God is Caesar,” in the West “God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual and temporal authority have been a prevailing dualism” (1996, 70).

For Huntington (1996, 217), “the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism,” it is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and “obsessed with the inferiority of their power.” According to Asef Bayat (2007, 6), three factors have contributed to the currency of such an “exceptionalist” view in the study of Muslim countries. “The first is the continuing relevance of Orientalist/essentializing thought in the West.” The second is “the persistent authoritarian rule” in the Middle East supported by the West. And the third is the emergence of “Islamist movements that have often displaced socially conservative and undemocratic dispositions.” Likewise, Casanova (2001, 1050-1051) argues that for the Orientalists, modernity is a “civilizational achievement of the Christian West and therefore not easily transferable to other civilizations other than through Western hegemonic imposition, or through the conversion to Western norms” (Mahdavi, 2013: 58-59).

As such, it is not *Islamic fundamentalism* but the *fundamental* essence of Islam that makes it incompatible with modernity. Similarly, for Bernard Lewis (1988), the inevitable fusion of religion and state is something that

is historically and intellectually attached to Islam. Implicit in his argument is that the “Islamic mind” and modernity are mutually exclusive. In his critique of cultural essentialism, Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid (2002) challenges this Orientalist perception. He writes: “To speak about an ‘Islamic Mind’ in abstraction from all constraints of geography and history, and in isolation from the social and cultural conditioning of Islamic societies, can only lead us into unrealistic, even metaphysical, speculations.” Instead, we need to “look for the root of this panic reaction,” meaning “the crisis of modernization and complicated relationship between the Islamic world and the West.” Ibrahim Abu-Rabi (2010, xvii) echoes Abu Zeid: “In many Muslim countries, hopes for a healthy process of modernization were dashed in the 1960s and 1970s.” More specifically, “The petrodollars and the U.S. patronage made the postcolonial Muslim states more dependent on the global market and less on its people. It also released the forces of ‘puritanical Islam’ and ‘militant Salafiyah,’ which endorse violence to eliminate the ‘modern jahiliyyah’ both at the local and global arenas.” (Abu-Rabi, 2010, xvii-xviii)

### *Islamism*

According to Ibrahim Abu-Rabi (2010, xxiii), “the term ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ or revivalism might not be adequate to describe the social and political phenomenon that we call the Islamic movement.” For Abu-Rabi (2004, 373), “the Islamic movement is basically a social/political movement, which adopts a religious ideology with the primary aim of bringing the whole of society under the rule of the Shari’ah.” Hence, “Islamic movement is primarily a social movement” (Mahdavi, 2013: 59).

“In Edward Said’s words,” Abu-Rabi (2010, ix) argues, “we need to understand the many ‘political actualities’ that the ‘return to Islam’ embodies.” In this approach, Islamism is not a cultural and civilizational product of the Islamic tradition. Instead, “Islamism is both a social and political movement with a clear religious worldview” (2010, xxiii). It is true that “Islamism was initially established by charismatic religious leaders who, more or less, had a well-defined mission: the establishment of an Islamic state or society” (2004, 372). But, one must contextualize the Islamists call for the establishment of an Islamic state in the modern context. In so doing, Abu-Rabi (2010, vii) echoes Susan Buck-Morss (2003, 49-50) and argues that for the “critical theorists” Islamism is “a political discourse...far more than the dogmatic fundamentalism and terrorist violence.” Islamism, he argues, is also a powerful force “against

the undemocratic imposition of a new world order” and “against the economic and ecological violence of neoliberalism, the fundamental orthodoxies of which fuel the growing divide between rich and poor.” Modern Islamism is “primarily the product of the modern capitalist system created by several Western powers over the past two centuries.” It seeks “alternative ways of imagining and building new Arab and Muslim societies” (Abu-Rabi, 2010, ix).

For Abu-Rabi (2010, xx), “Islamist political imagination is not simply controlled by the paradigm of the first ancestors” (xx). He challenges Roy’s (1994, 12) argument that “there is an Islamic political imagination dominated by a single paradigm: that of the first community of believers at the time of the Prophet and of the first four caliphs.” The Orientalist argument “is untenable for the simple reason that there is too much that is contemporary in the Islamic movement to constitute one single paradigm, even if that paradigm was the ideal way of the Prophet and his Companions” (Mahdavi, 2013:60).

Moreover, Abu-Rabi (2010, ix) quotes Immanuel Wallerstein (2003, 120-1) to make his argument crystal clear: Islamism

... is simply one variant of what has been going on everywhere in the peripheral zones of the world-system. The basic interpretation of these events has to revolve around the historic rise of antisystemic movements, their seeming success and their political failure, the consequent disillusionment, and the search for alternative strategies.

Hence, the Islamist solution is “not to re-embodiment an Islamic past as much as to build a modern and aggressive Islamic political and economic system that reflects Islamic ideals.” (2010, x) That is why Islamism is a challenge to both the state’s autocratic modernization and the “official” interpretation of the religious authorities allied with the state (2010, xviii).

Abul A’la Maududi of Pakistan, Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt and Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran are among the classic examples of modern Islamism whose Islamist alternatives are modern responses to modern problems. Khomeini’s theory of *velayat-e faqih* (the Guardianship of Jurist), for example, is an example of an alternative Islamist vision of state and society to the Pahlavi’s modern secular autocracy and the orthodoxy of the official apolitical religious establishment in pre-revolutionary Iran. He introduced and reinvented the traditional concept of the *velayat-e faqih* into the existing modern structure of the state. His

concept of Islamic state puts God's sovereignty above and beyond the people's will.

In his vision of the Islamic state, "the rulers are subject to a certain set of conditions in governing and administrating the country, conditions that are set forth in the Noble Quran and the *Sunnah* of the Most Noble Messenger" (Khomeini, 1981, 55). Similarly, Ali Khamenei (2002), Khomeini's successor, describes the exclusive merits of the Islamic state. He argues that when the 12<sup>th</sup> Shiite *imam* known as *Mahdi* returns from his occultation, he will rely on the pious to lay the foundation for a universally popular government; "but this popular government is *totally different* from the governments that claim to be popular and democratic in today's world...The world's democracies are based on propaganda, whereas the democracy of the Lord of the Age, [*imam* Madhi] religious democracy, is totally different." In reality, however, what makes this polity different from the world's democracies is that the political power in the form of the *velayat-e faqih* belongs to a male clerical Muslim jurist (*faqih*). The scope of people's rights and the degree of people's inclusion are subject to the interpretation of the *faqih*. The nature of people's sovereignty remains ambiguous and instrumental in the hands of political authorities.

The Islamist, NOT ISLAMIC, vision of politics and state essentializes Muslim culture and traditions; it echoes the Orientalist stereotype of "Islamic Exceptionalism." Although different in power relations, both Orientalist and radical Islamist discourses advocate cultural essentialism (Mahdavi, 2013: 60-62; Mahdavi, 2009). These particularist approaches undermine the possibility of a modern democratic Muslim society and polity. The world of cultural essentialism – Orientalism and Islamism – is small, but small is not always beautiful. The world of neoliberal modernity/the hegemonic universalism is big, but big is not always better; it is big but not inclusive enough to appreciate diversity. How do we then free ourselves from a rock of colonial modernity/hegemonic universalism and a hard place of cultural essentialism/the particularist discourses of Orientalism and Islamism?

### **Exit Strategies/Emancipatory Discourses**

The third alternative is a bottom-up, minimum, inclusive universalism: a *universalism from below*. This approach promotes multiple modernities, including various forms of Muslim (not Islamic) modernities. Universalism from below (Mahdavi, 2009) is a result of open and uncoerced cross-cultural dialogues between and within various moral values.

To use Michael Walzer's analogy, "it is everyone's morality because it is no one's in particular" (1994, xi, 6). "There is a thin man inside every fat man," George Orwell once wrote. In the same way, this is "the making of a thin and universalist morality inside every thick and particularistic morality." Universalism from below is the combination of universalism and a politics of difference. It will produce a number of different "roads" to modernity and democracy and a variety of modernities and democracies "at the end of the road" (Mahdavi, 2013:63).

Muslims and the Islamic traditions have contributed to pluralism. There is vast historical evidence, and there are rich intellectual debates in the Muslim context on the value of tolerance, pluralism, the celebration of differences, plural paths toward a common good/welfare, or *maslaha*. Many Muslims, for example, read and reinterpret the following Quran verse in support of diversity and pluralism: (The Quran, 5: 48):

To each of you we have given a law and a way and a pattern of life. *If God had pleased He could surely have made you one people (professing one faith)*. But He wished to try and test you by that which He has given each of you. So try to excel in good deeds. To Him will you all return in the end; it is he that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute (italic added).

Moreover, Prophet Mohammad's famous *hadith* indicates that differences of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) within the scholars of the community (*ulama-o Ummati*) are sources of mercy (*rahmah*). The Muslim Golden Age is another indication of tolerance in this tradition: Muslims welcomed, facilitated and promoted dialogue, debate, and pluralism between and among Jews, Christians, non-believers, and various readings of Islam. Different schools of thought always lived together: Hanafis, Shafies, Malikis, Hanbalis, Mutazilites, Asharites, Shias, Sufis, theologians, philosophers, ulama, fuqaha, and urafa.

In a modern and contemporary context, the great contribution of Muslim scholars to the literature on pluralism, citizenship, , social justice and democracy is evident. To name a few: Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010) from Algeria/France; Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905), Ali Abdel Raziq (1888-1966), Nasr Hamid Abu-Zaid (1943-2010) and Hassan Hanafi (1936-) from Egypt; Talal Asad (1932-) from Saudi Arabia; Khaled Abou El Fadl (1963-) from Kuwait; Sadeq al-Azam (1934-) from Syria; Mohamed Talbi (1921-) and Rachid al-Ghannouchi (1941-) from Tunisia; Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (1935-2010) from Morocco; Ali Shariati (1933-1977) and Abdolkarim Soroush (1945-) from Iran; Mahmoud Mohammed

Taha (1909-1985) and Abdullahi Ahmed an-Nai'm (1946-) from Sudan; Muhammad Iqbal Lahori (1877-1938) and Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988) from Pakistan; Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) from Iran/Afghanistan; Abdulaziz Sachedina (1942) from Tanzania; Ali Mazrui (1933-2014) from Kenya; Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009) and other major scholars of Civil Islam in Indonesia, and Tariq Ramadan (1962-) from Switzerland/Europe. Last but certainly not the least, many women Muslim reformists/feminists such as Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) from Morocco; Leila Ahmed (1940-), Saba Mahmood (1962-) from Egypt; Amina Wadud (1952-) from the United States, Nadia Yassine (1958-) from Morocco; Azam Taleghani (1944-), Shahla Sherkat (1956-) and Susan Shariati (1960 -) from Iran, as well as many other great women's rights advocates in Muslim-majority states.

For these Muslim scholars, nostalgia for ancient forms of spirituality or polity is not a solution to the Muslims crisis. Muslims need to think forward and to live in the modern/contemporary era. And for doing this, they would need to think and act along the following five exit strategies/emancipatory discourses.

### ***1. The Possibility of Muslim Modernities/Democracies***

One has to de-essentialize Islam and modernity and acknowledge many faces of Islams, Muslims, and modernities. We need to delink modernity from its historical experience of Western modernity and welcome and facilitate the rise of multiple modernities. Equally important is to recognize two opposing faces of Western modernity, i.e. domination and emancipation; colonialism and democracy; and genocide and human rights.

Moreover, we need to move beyond a cliché (essentialist) question of “is *Islam* compatible with modernity and democracy?” As Asef Bayat (2007, 10) reminds us, this is the wrong question. The right question is “under what conditions *Muslims* can *make* them compatible.” In this *sociological/dynamic* approach rather than a *textual/static* methodology, Muslims as social agents/actors read and reinterpret their traditions in their own particular social-political contexts. Furthermore, Muslim societies are not unique in their religiosity; they should not be measured by the “‘exceptionalist’ yardstick of religio-centrism” (Bayat, 2007:6). Muslims hold hybrid identities, which include various degrees of religious affiliation, national cultures, socio-economic contexts, historical experiences, and political settings. In short, the essentialist, scripturalist,

ahistorical approach to the study of Muslim society and politics is misleading.

The empirical study of Norris and Inglehart (2004: 154-155) demonstrate that “support for democracy is surprisingly widespread among Islamic publics, even among those who live in authoritarian societies.” This empirical evidence, Norris and Inglehart argue, urges “strong caution in generalizing from the type of regime to the state of public opinion.” Authoritarian politics, Islamist or otherwise, do not represent the state of Muslims’ public opinion.

Furthermore, “there is nothing specifically ‘Islamic,’” argues Fred Halliday (1996, 116), which hinders democratic polity in Muslim societies; though some of these obstacles “tend to be legitimized in terms of Islamic doctrine.” Any argument about incompatibility or compatibility between Islam and democracy adopts “the false premise that there is one true, traditionally established ‘Islamic’ answer to the question, and this timeless ‘Islam’ rules social and political practices. There is no such answer and no such ‘Islam’” (Mahdavi, 2013: 64-65).

Muslims are capable of making their own modernities and democracies. As will be shown in the following sections, the emerging progressive and post-Islamist social and intellectual movements in the Muslim World have already contributed to the rise of Muslim modernities and democracies.

## ***2. Historicity of the Islamic Tradition and Legal Pluralism in Islamic Tradition***

“Of all the intellectual issues facing Muslim communities,” argues Ebrahim Moosa (2003: 120), “the one area that is most troubling is the area of Sharia law.” However, as Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2013: 11) argues, the word *Shariah* does not mean Islamic law; it means “the pathway of goodness.” The objective of *Shariah* (*maqased al-shariah*) is “serving the physical and spiritual welfare/well-being of people.” Islamic law is not a literalist reading of the Quran and *Sunnah*. Only a very limited portion of the Quran contains specific positive legal ordinances. Much of the Quranic discourse contains normative principles (*maqased al-shariah*); scholars work on legal hermeneutics to explore the ethical and legal implications of the Quranic discourse. For examples, there are traditional legal debates on the “occasions of revelation” (*asbab al-nozul*); they study the context/circumstance surrounding the revelation of a particular verse. There is also

an issue of abrogation (*naskh*), of which certain verses were nullified or voided under the time of the prophet (Abou El-Fadl, 2013:10).

Equally important is the debates on historicity and the authenticity of the *hadith* (oral traditions attributed to the Prophet) and the *Sunnah* (historical narratives about the prophet and his companions). More importantly, even if a tradition is reliable and authentic, Muslim jurists argue that it does not necessarily mean that it is normatively binding because the prophet performed many roles and not everything he did or said was an obligation to Muslims. There is a clear distinction between the prophet's sacred and temporal roles (Abou El-Fadl, 2013:9-11).

In the classical Islamic tradition, the *Shariah* is divine but "*fiqh* (the human understanding of *Shariah*) was recognized to be only potentially so, and it is the distinction between *Shariah* and *fiqh* that fueled and legitimized the practice of legal pluralism in Islamic history." Such a conceptual distinction "was the result of recognizing the limitations of human agency and also a reflection of the Islamic dogma that perfection belongs only to God" (Abou El-Fadl, 2013:12).

For Abou El-Fadl (2013: 19-20), in the colonial and postcolonial era, colonial elite and some of their native allies realized that their economic interests were not well served by pluralism and the indeterminacy of Islamic legal institutions. Great Britain, for example, "created hybrid legal institutions such as the Mixed Courts of Egypt or the Anglo-Muhammadan courts in India." They also controlled the autonomous religious endowments (*awqaf*) and traditional legal networks. As such, "the institutional replacement of Islamic traditional system was accompanied by a process of cultural transformation that led to the deconstruction of the very epistemological foundations of Islamic jurisprudence. Colonial powers exerted considerable pressure toward greater uniformity and determinism," which ultimately led to the collapse of old schools of *shariah*. Hence, the pluralistic "epistemological foundation of Islamic legal system" was challenged. In fact, what happened was "a radical reinvention of Islamic law from a common law-like system" to a system tailored after the French civil law/code of 1804.

In the 1970s and 80s, argues Abou El-Fadl (2013:21-22), in the midst of deep political crises in several corrupt authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world and the rise of radical Islamism, there was a series of demands for the implementation of *Shariah* by the Islamists who had no training in legal tradition (mainly trained in engineering or computer science!).

Moreover, autocratic elites initiated a process of Islamization from above in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Sudan. The “Islamization campaign” by the autocrats aimed to use the *Shariah* law to legitimize their autocracy; they added to the constitution that *Shariah* is the source of legislation – implementing the penal code of the *hudud*!

In sum, postcolonial politics was a major harm to the pluralistic legal Islamic tradition. It pushed for more uniformity and determinism, and the codification of *Shariah* law in the context of the modern nation-state. Ironically, modernity (a hegemonic authoritarian modernity) codified/unified/institutionalized the *Shariah*!

“The task before the modern Muslim is, therefore, immense,” argued the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1934:168 quoted from Moosa 2003:111): “He has to rethink the whole system of Islam without completely breaking with the past ... The only course open to us is to approach modern knowledge with a respectful but independent attitude and to appreciate the teachings of Islam in the light of that knowledge, even though we may be led to differ from those who have gone before us.” (2003:111). In other words, the task of historicizing Islamic Tradition requires radical *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), openness, and a critical engagement with tradition and modernity.

### ***3. Muslims Cosmopolitanism and Politics of Care***

From the Umayyads and the Abbasids to the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughal, Hamid Dabashi (2012: 10) argues, “Muslims have been the defining moments of world historic empires. The task today is not the delusional fantasy of retrieving those empires but to recollect the cosmopolitan worldliness that flourished under those empires.” In other words, “Islam has always been the dialogical outcome of Muslim collective consciousness engaging in conversation with the dominant moral and intellectual forces in the world.” Hence, “Muslims will now have to retrieve that habitual dialogue.” Muslims engaged in dialogue with classical Greek thought, Indian, and Chinese philosophies, Jewish theology, Christian asceticism, Hindu and Buddhist Gnosticism, Neoplatonic philosophy, Pahlavi and Sanskrit literature, and modern post-Enlightenment philosophy. Islamic civilization/tradition was not isolated. More specifically, purifying Islamic culture is self-defeating – what is needed is not a local nativist, and essentialist Islamist discourse. Quite the contrary, Muslims today need a more cosmopolitan discourse.

Being a Muslim today, as Dabashi argues (2012:4-5), requires a critical rethinking of Islamic cosmopolitanism as Muslims lived it over many centuries. It means retrieving pre-colonial Muslim worldliness. Such worldliness and cosmopolitanism would pave the way for a meaningful contribution to the world. In the Islamic tradition, the prophet Mohammad, as the Quran (21:107) says is *rahmatanlela'alam* -- “a mercy to all the worlds,” not just to Muslims or other religious people, but also to everyone. Being a Muslim today requires such an attitude to others. Such an approach goes beyond the idea of tolerance and respecting others; this is a call for a new epistemological shift from the current politics of ego-centrism toward a *politics of care and mercy*, or, to use the concept of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1996), towards “hospitality.”

Being Muslim today requires a contribution to a politics of care, mercy, hospitality and progressive spirituality. The Islamic tradition can contribute to our postmodern condition – and to this new epistemology, new thinking, and new way.

#### ***4. Islamic State is an “Impossible State” – State is not “God’s Proxy”***

Orientalists and radical Islamists, to use Talal Asad’s (1997) remarkable insight, share “the idea that Islam was originally – and therefore essentially – a theocratic state.” For the Islamists, however, “this history constituted the betrayal of a sacred ideal that Muslims are required as believers to restore;” and for the Orientalists “it defines a schizophrenic compromise that has always prevented a progressive reform of Islam.” Nevertheless, the reality is that the Islamic state is not so much a product of some Islamic essence as “it is the product of modern politics and the modernizing state.”

The state is a secular entity and cannot be Islamized. An Islamic state, in theory, is an oxymoron; it is, to use Wael Hallaq’s (2013) concept, “the impossible state.” The Islamic state, Abdullahi An-Na’im (2008) argues, is a modern postcolonial invention. The Islamic state is a secular entity ruled by Islamist elites who act and speak on behalf of their human interpretation of Islam. They may act in accordance with some elements of democratic or authoritarian principles. The fact remains is that political leaders, not abstract dogmas, speak or act for the state. Islamic state is not divine; it is an *Islamist* state – a secular institution ruled by some politicians. No state represents God; it represents the will and interests of political leaders.

Moreover, as Khaled Abou El-Fadl (2013: 12) argues, the classical Muslim jurists always said that the “divine law is unattainable” and “no person or institution has the authority to claim certitude in realizing God’s will.” Muslim jurists for the most part “spoke in terms of probabilities, or only God possesses perfect knowledge – human knowledge in legal matters is tentative or even speculative.” Muslim jurists always understood that they were “not making binding laws, but issuing scholarly legal opinions.”

Contemporary religious fundamentalists and Western essentialist Orientalists “imagine Islamic law to be highly deterministic.” This determinism is in sharp contrast to “the epistemology and institutions of the Islamic legal tradition that supported the existence of multiple equally orthodox and authoritative legal schools of thought, all of which are valid representations of the divine will.” Indeed, the Islamic tradition was founded on a markedly “pluralistic, discursive, and exploratory ethos that became the very heart of its distinctive character.” No one jurist, institution, or juristic tradition may have an exclusive claim to divine truth, and hence, the state does not have the authority to recognize the orthodoxy of one school of thought to the exclusion of all others (*al-Seuti, ekhtelaf al-mazaheb* in Khaled Abou El-Fadl, 2013:12). The state cannot act as a proxy of God.

Furthermore, all Islamic laws are divided into two categories of *ibadat* (sacred/private - relationship between human and God) and *mu’amelat* (profane/public - the relationship of humans with one another). In the case of *mu’amelat*, innovations or creative determinations are always favored. There has been a debate on which human act belongs to which category. The classical distinction in Islamic jurisprudence between sacred and profane is the categorical differentiation between the rights of God (*hoquqallah*) and the rights of humans (*hoquq al-eba’ad*). The latter did not refer to public/common rights, but to the material rights of the individual. More importantly, no one needs to protect/promote the rights of God because God is fully capable of doing that, but the rights of people need to be protected by the state. The state is obliged to protect the rights of people but has no business protecting the rights of God. The “state is not God’s representative” (Abou El-Fadl, 2013: 15-18).

The Islamic state, in sum, is an outdated project; it is an asynchronous phenomenon. There are strong counter arguments both from within the religious tradition and from without to challenge the conceptual and

political legitimacy of the Islamic state. More importantly, ordinary Muslims have already challenged this phenomenon.

### ***5. Being a Muslim Today: Beyond Islamism; Towards Post-Islamism***

Islamism does not represent the dominant trend of Muslim societies. For the most part, Muslims have already entered into a new era of post-Islamism. As Asef Bayat (2007; 2013) argues, post-Islamism is a radical call for a critical dialogue between sacred and secular, faith and freedom, revelation and reason, tradition and modernity, religiosity and rights, and local and global paradigms. Post-Islamism is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic. It is not post-Islam; it is post-Islamism. Like Islamism, it encourages the public role of religion in civil society and political society. However, unlike Islamism, it challenges the concept and legitimacy of an Islamic state. The state is a secular entity and cannot be Islamized. Abdullahi An-Na'im's (2008: 267) words probably best represent the intellectual basis of post-Islamist discourse. He writes: "Instead of sharp dichotomies between religion and secularism that relegate Islam to the purely personal and private domain, I call for balancing the two by separating Islam from the state and regulating the role of religion in politics" (Mahdavi, 2013: 66; Mahdavi, 2011).

As Bayat (2007; 2013) argues, post-Islamism "represents both a condition and a project." It refers to a condition where Islamism "becomes compelled, both by its own internal contradictions and by societal pressure, to reinvent itself." It is also a project, "a conscious attempt to conceptualize and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political, and intellectual domains." Post-Islamism signifies the impact of secular exigencies on a religious discourse.<sup>2</sup> Post-Islamism has been used as historical and analytical categories in reference to diverse politico-intellectual and social trends such as the Centre Party/*Hizb al-Wasat* and the younger generation of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimeen*/Muslim Brotherhood (not the old guard) in Egypt, the Gezi Park Movement in Turkey, civil Islam in Indonesia, Imran Khan's Movement for Justice/*Tehreek-e-Insaf* in Pakistan, the *Hizb al-Nahda*/Renaissance Party of Tunisia, and various forms of Muslim reformist trends in post-revolutionary Iran (Mahdavi, 2013: 66; Mahdavi, 2011).

The Arab Spring and Iran's pro-democracy Green Movement symbolize a post-Islamist turn in the Muslim world. There was no clear demand for a

“religious government” during the mass uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011-2012. The *al-Nahda* Party in Tunisia and the *younger* generation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt did not seek to replicate an Islamic state modeled after Ayatollah Khomeini’s doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* in post-revolutionary Iran. The Muslim Brothers, however, committed terrible political mistakes and paid a heavy price. It is worth noting that the *al-Nour* party in Egypt – the political arm of *Al-Dawa Al-Salafiyya* – and the Salafi movement, in general, are not post-Islamists (Mahdavi, 2013: 67).

What is important is that neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the Salafis represent the real picture of the Arab Spring. Popular slogans in the Arab streets were human dignity, liberty, and social justice – not an Islamic state. The popular mode, however, was not anti-religion; the Arab Spring, “dearly upholds religion” (Bayat, 2013, 260). The Arab Spring does not reject the public role of religion; it challenges the false dichotomy of religion and secularism. It transcends the religious-secular divide to a social movement against authoritarianism and in the service of democratization. It demonstrates a shift from Islamism to post-Islamism as it highlights the citizens’ rights.

The mass protests in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria (2011-2012) did not call for the imposition of *Shariah* law or the establishment of an Islamic state. People wanted political liberty, citizenship rights, the rule of law, accountable government, and socio-political justice. *Shariah’s norms*, however, may have played a role for some people to the extent that they chanted *Allahoakbar*, “God is greatest” (Abou El-Fadl, 2013:23).

Moreover, *Shariah* played a different role in the Arab Spring. On the one hand, the Saudi Grand Mufti, Abdul Aziz Al ash-Sheikh spoke out against the protests, claiming that the enemies of Islam orchestrated them (*Shariah in the service of autocracy*)! On the other hand, the Egyptian jurist, sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi supported the revolution in the name of *Shariah*. Also, there was a proclamation (*Wathiqat al-Azhar*) by sheikh al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayyeb issued on Feb. 16, 2011, in which human rights, full citizenship rights for all citizens, democracy, etc. were seen as fundamental to *Shariah* law (Abou El-Fadl, 2013: 23-24).

Likewise, the Tunisian *al-Nadha* statements contain numerous “buzz phrases” such as the need for a “thriving democracy with mutual respect,” the desire for a “culture of moderation,” the guarantee of “equality for all

citizens” and the “affirmation of political pluralism” (Ennahda, 2011). The *al-Nahda* “rejected a Khomeini type revolution and viewed a civil and democratic state as compatible with the spirit of Islam” (Bayat, 2013:261). Moreover, Rachid al-Ghannouchi and other leaders of the *al-Nahda* Party used the concept of *dowla madaniyah*/civil state, instead of *almaniyah*/secularism (which carries anti-religious baggage) to distance the post-revolutionary Tunisian state from a religious state (Stepan, 2012, 94-97). Muslim democrats often point to the key Quranic concepts of *showra*/consultation, *ijma'*/consensus and *adala*/justice to support democracy. Rachid al-Ghannouchi explicitly argues, “his party should embrace the historic specificity that Tunisia for more than sixty years has had the Arab World’s most progressive and women-friendly family code” (Stepan, 2012, 94-97).

Let us remember that democracy does not require the French *laïcité* or a complete separation of religion and state. What is needed for both democracy and religion to flourish is “a significant degree of institutional differentiation between religion and the state” – a “twin tolerations.” That is, “religious authorities do not control democratic officials who are acting constitutionally, while democratic officials do not control religion so long as religious actors respect other citizens’ rights” (Stepan & Linz, 2013: 17; Mahdavi, 2013: 67-69).

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this chapter is fourfold. First, Muslims need to promote and pursue a five-dimensional emancipatory discourse, or a multidimensional exit strategy to move forward: exploring and materializing the idea of “multiple modernities/democracies” in the Muslim context; acknowledging the “historicity” of the Islamic tradition; promoting the progressive concept of “Muslim Cosmopolitanism” in order to make a meaningful contribution to the world; dismantling the idea of Islamic state; and strengthening the material and intellectual basis of a “post-Islamist turn” in the intellectual discourse and social reality of contemporary Muslim-majority societies. These exit strategies will contribute to the emancipation of Muslim societies from many rocks and hard places they are facing today.

Secondly, the relations between tradition and modernity, local and global paradigms, and religion and democracy are not simple relations of mutual exclusion. Neither the hegemonic western universalism nor cultural essentialism of Islamism captures the complexity of Muslim societies. The

challenge is to find a theoretical stance that is equally free from the self-congratulating arrogance of the hegemonic universal West and the self-misleading illusion of the Islamist particular paradigm. Such an alternative approach is a call for a grassroots and homegrown *universalism from below* to materialize Muslim modernities and Muslim democracies (Mahdavi, 213: 67). The emerging post-Islamist trends in the Muslim societies may contribute to this alternative path.

Thirdly, the discourse of the Clash of Civilizations is misleading. Contemporary global tensions between the West and extremists in the Muslim world can more accurately be described as “A *Clash of Fundamentalisms*” (Tariq Ali, 2002). This clash is between market fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism, a clash between two versions of political extremism, a clash between two tiny aggravated minorities who exploit religious/cultural rhetoric and discourse for political purposes. This tension amounts to little more than a ‘clash of ignorance,’ (Edward Said, 2001) in which democracy and social justice are caught between a rock and a hard place (Mahdavi & Knight, 2012: 12).

Fourth, it is becoming increasingly evident that the Western policy of the Global War on Terror, the promotion of regime change and other forms of neo/colonial intervention are bound to fail. This policy exacerbates extremism. One has to deconstruct the concepts of extremism and terrorism by challenging the dominant western-centric discourse, which serves the interest of the global oligarchy. Moreover, since the root causes of extremism and terrorism are multiple, any public policy response should indeed also be multiple. These multiple approaches would allow for the development of alternative policies to the “Global War on Terror,” such as promoting a more *critical* and *inclusive* policy of multiculturalism, and a *radical* approach toward accommodating difference. Such policy responses should facilitate the economic and political inclusion of disadvantaged/minority/excluded groups, as opposed to a militaristic response. It should also address the problem at both local and global levels by proposing practical solutions for the democratization of political and economic institutions. At the global level, we need to democratize global economic and political institutions and to *democratize globalization*. “The war against jihad will not succeed,” Benjamin Barber (1996) argues, “unless McWorld is also addressed” (Mahdavi & Knight, 2012:19).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Some sections of this chapter have been published in: Mojtaba Mahdavi, "Muslims and Modernities: From Islamism to Post-Islamism?" *Religious Studies and Theology*, 32:1 (2013), 57-71.

<sup>2</sup> The historical roots of post-Islamism can be traced back to the nineteenth century. For example, Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966) in his classic book *Islam and the Foundations of Governance* (1925), argued that the Quran does not offer any system of government and the post-Prophet political systems had no basis in Islamic *fiqh* (jurisprudence); they were expedient tyrannical structures adopted by the Arab oligarchies.