

Comprehension of Islam and Muhammad through Modern Paradigms

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*İdrâk-i me'âlî bu küçük akla gerekmez
Zira bu terazi bu kadar sıkleti çekmez.¹*
Ziya Pasha

Abstract

This study treats the attitude of the modern world and dominant system of thinking on religion and the religious, as well as its influence on Muslims, since we consider this problem as one that may influence efforts to comprehend the religion and prophecy of Islam, and may change the colour, even the character of endeavours to transfer it to our day.

One's worldview and manner of assessing events is directly related with surrounding conditions. Religion, sect, political party, nationality, surrounding geography, present political, ideological or scientific environment all make their mark on the worldview. "Historical knowledge cannot be separated from the historian who appreciates and weighs evidences. Historical fact can be perceived only within the scope of the historian's imagination. Even the most impartial historian belongs to an era and a country, and even the most objective historian is nothing but an impressionist. Therefore, it is not surprising if the present time sits between reality and his imagination. History builds the past via the present, pursuant to the era in which man reflects on past lives."² This is a much-referred argument while assessing the former significant personalities in the scientific world, analysing their works and ideas, and it is no doubt right. Nevertheless, one should remember these words are equally valid for modern-day man.

Modern-day people tend to consider themselves luckier, better equipped (informed) and more intelligent than their ancestors. (The science of the old brought with it modesty for them; our knowledge causes pride and prejudice.) Nevertheless, there is an obstacle before comprehension of the past, and it is particularly hard, since it is considered as an advantage: The dominant worldview or prejudices of today. Their ears are so familiar with the high volume, imposing and so-called necessary sounds (noises) of modern times that they can no longer hear or strive to hear the whisperings of the past.

Modern man reduces the activity of reflection to mind and brain. However, the meaning of verse, "Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon [their] hearts?"³ is well beyond this and it prescribes a relation between reflection and heart. Man tends to reflect pursuant to his convictions. And these convictions are mostly formed or determined by irrational and non-scientific elements. This is why modern man can, after throwing off the negative effects of the present world, open the door to the past and take the right steps toward understanding it. As Nietzsche puts it, "If something is not clear to us through living, then we have no ear to hear it."

This paper treats the attitude of the modern world and dominant system of thinking on religion and the religious, as well as its influence on Muslims, since we consider this problem as one that may influence efforts to comprehend the religion and prophecy of Islam, and may change the colour, even the character of endeavours to transfer it to our day.

¹ This little mind need not comprehend transcendence, since this scale cannot size-up such a weight. (translation of the author)

² Halkın, Leon-E., *Tarih Tenkidinin Unsurları*, trs. Bahaeddin Yediyıldız, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1989, pp. 11-12.

³ Quran, 47/24.

Secularism, which has its origins in Renaissance – and later becoming the milestone of modern civilisation by opposing the authority of religion, and especially of medieval religious civilisation – and is based on humanism and individualism, detached first philosophy, and then science from religion. Later on, it isolated various political, economic and social thoughts and institutions of the medieval West from their religious meanings. The secularisation process has taken one more step in the nineteenth century and established dominance on theology, which was until then naturally under the auspices of religion. Since then, agnostic and atheistic ideologies have begun to defy theology, and the traditional theological perspective had to retreat from a pure religious domain of thought, the only domain left for it. Since in Christianity, every serious religious thought is related to theology, the retreat of Christian theology from gradually wider areas of thought meant equally the retreat of religion from the everyday life and thinking of Western man.⁴

Once something above all humanly things, independent from human seizure and able to judge him, religion was now a by-product of human nature, an object which only exists by means of man and can be judged by him. As human beings, there is no distinction more vital than to separate the thing which rules us and the thing on which we have the power to make a judgment. It seems that man usually accepts there is nothing on which we cannot pass judgment. As a matter of fact, there is no greater unquestionable thing – not even religion.⁵

Profane view makes many claims that cannot be proved via the senses in the area of religion and cannot either be understood easily by masses. These claims are in general fundamental intellectual elements by nature. As a result, a religion which was more or less reduced to morals spread, the directive influence of intellectual elements were weakened, and all slid fast towards an entirely-emotional humanism that is defenceless against enemy attacks since its point of view is restricted to things on this world. Consequently, happiness, not salvation, becomes the highest, best and final objective, whereas pain, but not perdition, becomes the greatest evil and final fear.⁶

According to traditional view, world history has a divine beginning and a divine end. That is, it is neither perpetual nor obscure. On the other hand, for profane thought, history is an obscure thing with no definite beginning or end. In the first case, the reality of the world is a possible reality in view of the superior reality of the Creator; whereas according to the second, time, space and their contents constitute reality, and everything else, including religious truths, are mere assumptions. The former incorporates an absolute Truth which has its reflection most directly through religion, so only some practices of religion are questionable; while for the latter, entire truth is relative, and there is nothing but the observable and measurable, namely, the questionable.⁷

Through the eyes of a modern historical perspective, world history is the history of a progress from primitiveness to development; so entire history is interpreted pursuant to this conviction. All facts are assessed in consideration of the rules of modern science and through a rational perspective. Today, revelation and its influences on communities are considered categorically worthless, and excluded from such assessments. Science no more deals with whether an occurring event bears metaphysical and/or heavenly aspects. Modern science is the criterion with which to decide if an event is worth assessment and with which aspects it should be brought to the forefront. According to this standpoint, there is no difference between a prophet and a king. However, it is impossible to understand the ideas of a prophet or the influence of his religion unless one treats his connection with God, the phenomenon of revelation, the divine behaviour and assistance for a prophet, since these are crucial to comprehending the life of a prophet and the history of a religion.

For people of the past, religion was the atmosphere in which to determine life and surround man; and the prophet, its most important element, was the being at the centre of contemplation regarding existence and the universe, as well as of historical approach. In this sense, history was a timeframe which began with Adam and will end with the Day of Judgment; the most important theme of this period was human obedience towards God, and upon a lack of such obedience, the intervention of God by sending a prophet. The summit of prophets is the last, Muhammad (*pbuh*). His position is known and accepted by other prophets; even they have heralded his coming to their communities.

⁴ Nasr, Seyyid Hüseyin, *Genç Müslümana Modern Dünya Rehberi*, trs. Şahabeddin Yalçın, İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2003, pp. 165-172.

⁵ Northbourne, Lord, *Modern Dünyada Din*, trs. Şahabeddin Yalçın, İstanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 2003, p. 10.

⁶ Northbourne, *ibid*, p. 20.

⁷ Northbourne, *ibid*, p. 39.

Therefore, even though he is the last prophet by appearance, he is the first in terms of creation. Allah has extracted him from clean generations of parents. He was kept under continuous divine supervision before and after prophecy, and thus protected against falling into error. He was bestowed divine grace and assistance if needed and upon his request. Furthermore, such assistance was, for his ancestors, at times in question, and they were bestowed grace, prosperity and fertility for the sake of him. Muhammad (*pbuh*) is, on the one hand, the most perfect example for man, and on the other hand, he was in a deep relationship with divine revelation, whose meaning and circumstance cannot be comprehended by man. The Qur'an was only a part of the divine revelation (*wahy al-matluw*) addressed to him. Thanks to wisdom bestowed upon him, Muhammad heralded beforehand some possible future events. Furthermore, he will be at the highest position, as on this world, in the afterlife, and intercede for believers.

As for modern-day people, they have long ago left the prophet-centric concept of history, and seem to have adopted the linear and progressive historical approach of the West. According to this view, our Prophet (*pbuh*) is sent at a certain time within the flow of history. There is no preternaturalness before or after his prophecy, and he lived like others. His life and struggle to transfer the revelation are carried out within human limits, and it is a process that can/must be explained through certain cultural, economic, geographical and historical methods. He has lived as a human being. It is useless to look for extraordinary things in his life that are far from scientific and are a result of efforts to praise him.

Modern-day man argues that Muhammad's human aspect is emphasised in order to set him as an example for mankind, and that a prophet equipped with miracles, considered as an angel and almost divinised cannot serve as an example for man. However, this thought overlooks a point: Throughout Islamic history, apart from a few deviant sects, no one has ever overpraised him and seen him as an unreachable being. In other words, the abovementioned argument bears no historical value. Moreover, it contradicts with the facts. That is, a person can never see one, who is his equal in terms of all traits, as the final authority to be referred to on every subject. On the contrary, his prophecy and divine aspect, evidently lacking in ordinary people, makes him an example of perfection to be followed as a leader and a guide.

The consideration of Islamic history as a "cultural and historical" problem is adopted as a method by orientalists in order to ignore the fact that Islam is nothing but "surrender before Allah". Orientalists cannot see the transcendent reality in the Muslim tradition, and perceive it only as a cultural structure.⁸ And their prejudices shape the selection of problems regarding Islamic history. The results attained by the modern scientific method, whose method and methodology are developed by them via a secular approach, are more valuable for them. As David Waines says, "the verdict that one's own secular consequences are superior to the truths of religion arises from secular intellectual arrogance which claims its superiority over the truths of religion, even if it cannot exactly claim the rightness of its assumptions".⁹

There can be nothing less scientific than to reflect the modern mentality, which is an anomaly, in a period when man lived and thought in a religious world, when religious values determined life, and man, above all, strived to save his soul as his greatest task.¹⁰ An effort to comprehend and explain Islam via a secular and modern perspective, or under the influence of such a worldview, or even through concepts of this dominant mentality, will lead to a lack of understanding – and sometimes misunderstanding – in Islam, which is much more than as it is claimed by modern thought. What we understand may not be Islam; besides, it is possible that Islam and Muhammad are used for the sake of the validity and continuity of modern dominant worldview. Since welcoming these concepts and placing them in the centre, we accept in advance their central and de facto position. Then, it only rests on finding in Islamic history the relevant examples and listing them in reference to such clichés.

In conclusion, there is a difference between understanding Muhammad (*pbuh*) according to the time and conditions one lives in, and trying to assimilate a religion and its Prophet, who are not limited by any time or ground, within the scope of a paradigm that has appeared in a certain period of history under certain circumstances.

⁸ Pruett, Gordon E., "Islam and Orientalism", *Orientalism, Islam and Islamists*, Ed. Asaf Hussain, Robert W. Olson, Jamil A. Qureshi, Aman Books, 1984, p. 44.

⁹ Şenay, Bülent, "Another Introduction to Islam: The Myth of the Value-Free Study of Religion", *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 15, no: 2, Summer 1998, pp. 83-92, p. 91.

¹⁰ Nasr, *Islam: İdealler ve Gerçekler*, İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 1996, p. 102.