

Ebrahim Moosa and Postmodernism: Some Close Resemblances and Implications

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Abstract

This article is aimed at cursory discussion on the structure of the thoughts of Ebrahim Moosa and its implications on the doctrinal aspects of Islam. More precisely, it studies Moosa's interpretation of Islam. In exploring his thoughts, this article shall focus on some aspects of Moosa's thoughts, notably: metaphysics, anthropology and exegesis, and conclude that Moosa's *ethos* of interpretation and representation of Islam is, with some concern, postmodern. Also, it will conclude with some remarks on the de-essentialising implications of such a postmodern approach on the understanding of Islam's essence. Lastly, his thoughts can be characteristically categorised as being (post) colonialistic in its insistence on interpreting Islam based not on its own worldview and vocabularies.

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Keywords

Ebrahim Moosa, postmodernism, Islam, *dihlīz*, essence.

Introduction

In one of his essays entitled “The Unbearable Intimacy of Thought and Language in Islam,”¹ Ebrahim Moosa surveys the history of the interpretations of Islam by the scholars of the past. He arrives at the conclusion that the evolutions observable within the Islamic thoughts throughout history prove many postmodern theses: the most prevailing of which, in this case, is that “(the) text are (sic) essentially language-games—free-floating signs and the uncertainty of meaning being the only certainties.”² In such a case, Islam is not an exception to the rule. This writer thus, contends that Moosa’s thesis on Islam moving away from *authority* to *metaphoricity*³ is itself a metaphoricity—a reading of his own assumptions into Islam, or specifically, an eisegesis.

The eisegesis method is Moosa’s way of pretexting Islam for postmodern hegemonic interpretations—regardless of an awareness on his part or a lack thereof. In other words, he insists on understanding Islam not within its own terms, rather with postmodern vocabularies that are permeated with postmodern philosophy. Moosa insists on imposing an artificial compatibility between Islam and postmodernism. Such a method is problematic in that it enforces upon Islam structures that it does not originally have.

However, the argument which shall be put forth in this article, although not intended to be categorical, is, in away, intense. Moosa does—in many instances—provide insightful

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1. Ebrahim Moosa, “The Unbearable Intimacy of Language and Thought in Islam,” in *How Should We Talk About Religion? Perspectives, Contexts, Particularities*, ed. James Boyd White (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 300–326.
 2. Ebrahim Moosa, “Textuality in the Muslim Imagination: From Authority to Metaphoricity,” *Acta Academica Supplementum* (1995): 54–65.
 3. *Ibid.*, 63.

remarks and analyses on the structural features of Islamic thoughts. For example, in his study on the transcendent dimension of Islamic law where Islamic law is viewed as an archetype, being able to be contextualised accordingly.⁴

Nevertheless, the remarks remain incomprehensive due to its rather general conclusions when the insights are attempted to be placed in his overall postmodern system of thought.⁵ This is because the insights that he discovered are still being understood through the lens of postmodernism, thereby altering the internal conceptual structures of Islamic terms. Hence, this writer contends that such is a new form of colonialism, for it makes Islam admit alien grammar into its system. Therefore, Moosa can still be held accountable for ushering in postmodern confusions into the matrix of the paradigmatic⁶ worldview of Islam.

The approach to be adopted henceforth is not to counterpoint relativism with relativism although such an approach is not without its own noteworthy merits.⁷ The steps which will be pursued in this line of thoughts are as the following: to mark an entry, Moosa's thought-system will be explored by opting to survey on his metaphysics as the pigeonhole, followed by his anthropology and then his methodological approach of exegesis.

In his metaphysical representation of Islamic metaphysics, one could easily notice the poststructuralist tinges of Jacques Derrida with his deconstructive *metaphysics of absence*. Indeed, Moosa even repeatedly conjures the name as his source of

4. Ebrahim Moosa, "Allegory of the Rule (*Hukm*): Law as Simulacrum in Islam?" *History of Religions* 38, no. 1 (1998): 1–24. www.jstor.org/stable/3176517 (accessed 20 April 2020).

5. *Ibid.*

6. All of the word "*paradigm*" throughout this study is to be understood in Hallaq's terms. See Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7.

7. *Ibid.*

inspiration.⁸ This metaphysics allows for, by virtue of the absence of an objective *transcendental signifier*, “non-essentializing” and “non-totalizing” claims on Islam and its nature.⁹

Through his anthropology, Moosa tries incredibly hard to retain Islamic grammar¹⁰ while at the same time fails to shake off the accompanying Derridian *liminal subjectivity*;¹¹ as well as the Foucauldian subjectivity that is subject to the power-knowledge relationship. As a result, his anthropology of *Islamic humanism*¹² betrays a metaphysical immanentism, where man is ever-bound in an epistemic solipsism and is confined within the equation of power, that he can only execute this thought processes through and in the epistemic framework of the state.

Of course, being deprived of any metaphysical presence in his Derrida-influenced metaphysics, Moosa naturally resorts to a secularised method of exegesis. His is a resonance of Derrida’s “empty text,” Foucault’s “power-knowledge” and Barthes’s “death of author”— all three are amalgamated into one and dissonantly synthesised with Islam. In Moosa’s schematics, God is the “dead author;” the interpreting subject is the confined subject; and the Quran is the “empty text.” Further, to escape from the

8. The fairly even distribution of Derrida’s name in one of the major works of Moosa even attests to this fact. See Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 339; see also Moosa, “Allegory of the Rule (*Hukm*).”

9. In fact, Derrida himself has enacted a similar de-essentialising encounter with Islam. See Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2007), 61.

10. Wittgenstein defines *grammar* as a set of rules of language which enables the uses of language to be verified as either meaningful or not. However, he goes further to propose that theology is an instance of this set of rules, enabling theological discourse to be meaningful and that which annuls it as meaningless. Ironically, this grammar is just that, grammar. It does not correspond to anything objectively real. See Michael G. Harvey, “Wittgenstein’s Notion of Theology as Grammar,” *Religious Studies* 25, no. 1 (1989): 89–103.

11. See footnote 16.

12. Adis Duderija, *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 12.

epistemic solipsism and self-reference, he resorts to a strategy of epistemological pluralism.¹³ Such a strategy gives way to reinterpretations of the Quran and Islam.

Lastly, the postmodern representation of Islam formulated by Moosa will be analysed against the background of the true self-representation of Islam—understood in its own historical experiences. His premises and conclusions will be paradigmatically responded with a critique. However, Moosa does not, to this writer's knowledge, come up with liberal reinterpretations of Islamic teachings. His primary focus falls mainly within the structural constitutions of Islamic thoughts—the structures of metaphysics, anthropology and exegesis—rather than its productional and practical aspects which are more related to empirical issues. In fact, Moosa is considered to be a major theoretician of the “progressive Islam” movement.¹⁴ Nevertheless, such an interpretation of Islam does allow, in the final analysis, the space for such remote (re)interpretations of the Quran and Islam.

Metaphysics

Indeed, attempts at uncovering the metaphysical thoughts of Moosa is truly challenging. This is because Moosa himself does not exposit any proper metaphysics. In his works, lamentations can be found on the “large chunks of Muslim thought that are predicated on religious metaphysics.”¹⁵ He does not offer an alternative metaphysics. However, some “allusions” to his thoughts metaphysical can be identified.

Moosa's metaphysics of Islam paints a clearer postmodern picture than an Islamic one which it purports to represent. This is manifest in the term “*metaphysics of absence*.”¹⁶ The metaphysics

13. See footnote 35.

14. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 3.

15. *Ibid.*, 23.

16. According to Derrida, the history of metaphysics has always been a series of supposing the “presence” of something transcendent. And man ascribes to this transcendence a foundational significance in

is a recommendation by Derrida, after surveying the long history of metaphysics, to be considered seriously as an alternative to the repetitive failures of Western metaphysics to grab a hold on one unwavering signifier—which he coined the *transcendent signifier*.¹⁷ Such a failure, he explains, is due to the insistence of a *presence*, that is, the signifier. Man assumes that something—whatever it is—is to be taken as a given so as to serve as a foundation upon which all else are anchored. Man, throughout history, has been subscribing to the *metaphysics of presence*,¹⁸ a derogatory term that signifies failure.

For example, Plato founded his system on the *presence* of Archetypes or Ideas. These Ideas are the foundation of all else. One only needs to access these Ideas in order to have a total understanding of reality. The Ideas are the signifier by which everything else can be made intelligible. Similarly, Christianity appeals to God for the same role Platonic Ideals supposedly play. The Greeks to Logos; the Enlightenment to Universal Reason; and so on and so forth.¹⁹ Accepting Derrida’s historical analysis of the history of metaphysics, Moosa includes Islamic metaphysics, too, as an attempt to appeal to its *transcendent signifier*, which is God and, hence, a failure too.²⁰

Moosa adds to this logic a so-called Islamic nuance—as if to imply that even Derrida realised something that is originally Islamic—a fragment of truth which belongs natively to Islam. Here, he subscribes to the notion of God’s inexhaustible

that in discussing everything, the “transcendence” must be the pivot. For example, Plato ascribes Ideas as the transcendence, Christianity to God, and so on and so forth. See Gerasimos Kakoliris, “Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years,” *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, no. 4 (2017): 43–62, <https://1drv.ms/b/s!AoLCD3Gv8Q3WhUtz175qyUr3IT4f>.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 515.

20. Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 96. See also Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 23.

infiniteness. Because of this, He cannot be subjected to a totalising and essentialising manner of qualification.²¹ Not because it is forbidden, but because of man's inherent incapacity to exhaust Him comprehensively. As a result, a dimension of Islamic metaphysics is understood in isolation and be made a justification for Derrida's metaphysics. Our understanding of God is nothing but an effect of *différance*.²²

In addition, as *presence* is not a helpful metaphysical postulate, Derrida opts for *absence* instead. He affirms the *absence* of any objective Supreme Entity that regulates meaningful relations between things. The world is not vested with inherent meanings by a *presence*, but is imposed with meanings externally due to an *absence*; as things do not have meanings inherently, we naturally impose our own meanings on them. Only *absence* could account for the workings of meanings. Because no authority could be ascribed with such a position, anything can fit the shoes of a *signifier*, only to be replaced later—by *deconstruction*—by another equally valid *signifier*. Cosmic significance is an absurdity, or at least only a pragmatic expedience.²³

Moosa's version of Derridian metaphysics is not an *absence* of such an entity, rather an absence of real inner connections between man and the entity. In other words, man is separated from having inner connections with God. Man and God are two separate and distinct entities without having ontological connections aside from God being the efficient and final cause of the existence of man. God is always described as the mysterious "Other."²⁴

As a result, this metaphysics assumes somewhat an immanent characteristic in which what is available to man is only of this physical world. Nothing externally and transcendent

21. Ibid., 108.

22. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor, ed., *A Companion to Derrida* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 466.

23. Kakoliris, "Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics," 43–62.

24. Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 108.

could have access to this world without being limited to its constitutional terms. Therefore, an ontological gap or break rather than ontological difference between man and God necessarily implies an epistemological gap.

Such a break implies the impossibility of a return to God, because the relationship between the two has been rendered unidirectional. It also implies that as God's ontological domain does not intercept—much less penetrate—with the world's ontological domain, His *presence* in this world is only partially felt. Hence, only rationality is the aspect that can be felt. Moosa's Islamic metaphysics, therefore, is a metaphysics of total separated existence between man and God.

As such, Moosa's epistemological break is confused with the Ghazālīan *humility*.²⁵ Humility, in Moosa's interpretation of al-Ghazālī, results in an admission of inability to really know God. Inversely, al-Ghazālī himself believes that it is trust, and not humility, in God that will produce true and actual knowledge. For it is God Himself who produces knowledge in our mind and it is He who guarantees that the knowledge corresponds with the actual condition of reality.²⁶ Indeed, trust has its root in humility. This exemplifies what Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas terms as “false modesty,” which generalises one's incapability of knowing a subject matter to everyone else who is not necessarily hindered by such a limitation.²⁷

Anthropology

The immanent metaphysics leads to a certain kind of formation of a knowing subject. The ontological gap between man and God, then, alienates man. He is, therefore, placed in a condition

25. Ibid., 187.

26. Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 156.

27. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Comments on the Re-Examination of al-Rānīrī's Hujjat al-Siddiq: A Refutation* (Kuala Lumpur: Muzium Negara, 1975), 1.

of *liminality*.²⁸ In Moosa's term, the *dihlīz*²⁹ is a station where man has passed a certain phase but has not quite entered a new one. He cannot return to the previous station much like a baby cannot be put back into his mother's womb once born. Its only option is to live a life of its own. It is a station of possibility.³⁰ Moosa's subject is always in an "event."³¹

To substantiate his anthropological conception, Moosa conjures up al-Ghazālī as the paragon of the *dihlīzian* anthropology.³² In his *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, his *poesies* imperative makes itself manifest through the figure of al-Ghazālī. He analyses al-Ghazālī from this anthropology and claims him as his. Al-Ghazālī's spiritual autobiography is treated not as a journey to return to God with certainty, but to actualise the *dihlīzian potential*—as if in the mind of a Ghazālī, the Derridian metaphysics is lurking without him knowing or, worse, otherwise. Al-Shāṭibī, too, is celebrated in light of this view in that his theory of *maqāṣid* is seen to convey a break—a *dihlīzian* creativity—from the classical and conventional *uṣūl al-fiqh*.³³

However, such a possibility is rather imposing. In that man has no option but to keep on marching forward—to "progress." Yet, the progress is not given a destination, only the path—not even much of the path as much as it is only the junction, with the path behind him quickly closing in. How could it not? For his *signifier* is eviscerating as quickly as it emerges. Its *absence* is haunting its *presence*. Moosa's subject, similar to Derrida's, is a subject of this world, but not quite in it. It is exiled in his own residence. Moosa extends the paradox in that man is to reach God but not quite capable in moving nearer to Him. It is always

28. Ibid., 39.

29. Ibid., 272.

30. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 14.

31. Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination*, 125.

32. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 28.

33. Ebrahim Moosa, "On Reading Shāṭibī in Rabat and Tunis," *The Muslim World* 104, no. 4 (2014): 451–464.

only an asymptote. This existential gridlock is exactly that which justifies the *poesies* imperative as moving without a clear direction is at least better than not moving at all.

Due to the curse of being required to complete a task but not being able to perform it, man is doomed to only grasp what is and not so much what *ought* to be.³⁴ He can only know *facts* and not so much *values*.³⁵ God's prescription can never be understood in its entirety due to the mutual ontological exclusivity between the two domains. Total subjectivity is the only most general category, an epistemic solipsism. As a result, *ought* is conflated into *is*. What Islam is *ought* to be is what we interpret it to be. A male, for example, can only understand Islam based on his patriarchal paradigm.³⁶ But what he understands—in that patriarchally limited manner—is still Islam, or at least its fragment. Although limited, we have no other alternatives except to accept it in its limitedness, because the real and total *ought* is out of reach, we can only content ourselves with what is available. *Ought* is conflated into *is*; again, an epistemological solipsism.

Another example of Moosa's postmodern ethos is his adopting Foucault's analysis of power relations in understanding Islamic history. What Foucault unearthed with his archaeology of (Western) knowledge, i.e. its inextricable link between knowledge and power and how the latter shapes the former to further feedback it into more elaborate consolidations, Moosa imposes on Islamic historical experiences. He even laments that "logocentrism reduces the political, anthropological, cultural *determinants* of language to a secondary importance in the general

34. Wael B. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 92.

35. Moosa does admit that fact and value are not separate. However, the unseparated relationship between the two is determined by the self, and not, in contrast with the Ash'arite thesis, externally established by God. See Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 241.

36. Ebrahim Moosa. "The *Sufahā*' in the Qur'ān Literature: A Problem in Semiosis," *Der Islam* (1998): 25.

approach,³⁷ while at the same time he does the same to the religious and metaphysical *determinants*. Which means to say that Moosa urges to seriously consider the influences of the terrestrial determinants on the understanding of religion in a primary importance, sidelining religious and revelatory determinants as if the terrestrial ones have a more primary metaphysical reality and influence than God Himself.

Muslim subjects are seen as subsumed within the epistemic sovereignty of the state, or other political and power institutions that Islam has in its historical repertoire that are structurally equivalent to the state. The modern *episteme* is imposed upon Muslim premodern contexts.³⁸ When Foucault diagnoses that the modern man has forgotten the *technology of the self*³⁹—the taking care of the self—due to his being epistemically subsumed by the state, Moosa extends this diagnosis to the *self* of a Muslim. Therefore, his conclusion is that Islam’s understanding of language has moved towards *logocentrism* due to its “social reconfiguration” from a minority to a majority. Its discourse moved from a “minoritarian kerygmatic faith”⁴⁰ to a “triumphalist ethos of empire.”⁴¹ If it did not have the monopoly of power, its discourse was then the discourse of Islam of the oppressed. Yet, when it has assumed the position of power, it then developed a paradigm of universal sovereignty. Muslim subjectivity too, according to Moosa, is held sway by the shifts of his paradigm.

What Moosa fails to see is that the mere existence of the institutions of power does not necessarily entail its influence, much less it being undeniably paradigmatic. The concepts of “citizenship,” “law,” “power” and many others are not the same, not even similar, between the two civilisations. For example, for

37. Moosa, “The *Sufahā*’ in the Qur’ān Literature,” 1–27.

38. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 158.

39. Mark Kelly, “Foucault, Subjectivity, and Technologies of the Self,” in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Leary, and Jana Sawicki (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 510–525.

40. Moosa, “The *Sufahā*’ in the Qur’ān Literature,” 3.

41. *Ibid.*

the concept of “law,” the modern state conceives it as positivistic;⁴² in other words, it is what it is. Law is what the states legislates it to be.⁴³ His is one of the effects of the Distinction of *Is/Ought*.⁴⁴ In this conception, it makes sense that power is to be postulated as a given in the equation. Therefore, the modern subject, the *homo modernus*, is a citizen first, then a person. In fact, even Foucault himself admits that his diagnosis of the Western paradoxes does not find its equivalent counterparts in the Muslim context, even in the modern times.⁴⁵

In contrast, Islamic “law” is not positivistic, but neither is it entirely deontological. It is, above all, moral. It is founded upon the morality of *virtue ethics*—for the lack of a better English term. Law is simply an extension of the virtuous ethics.⁴⁶ Law and duty are to serve the moral purpose, not the other way around.⁴⁷ Such a moral purpose is the self-formation of the Muslim subject through his/her connection with God⁴⁸. Unlike the modern subject whose formation of the self, or rather, only the formation of the body, in fact, is through the state.⁴⁹

The ontological unidirectionality, therefore, at this point extends as an epistemological unidirectionality. Man’s interaction with God is inevitably tempered by the very fact of their mutual ontological exclusivity. On the part of God, He imparts commands and prohibitions through the Quran as the text, but man can never really acquire it comprehensively. When God imparts the *ought*, man can only comprehend the *is*. The *is* is within the confines that his earthly condition permits. Trapped in the sensible world of the here and now, modern “Western”

42. Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 81.

43. *Ibid.*, 29.

44. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 92.

45. Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists*, 41.

46. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 77.

47. Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 85–86.

48. Hallaq, *The Impossible State*, 134.

49. *Ibid.*, 96.

man has become self-enclosed in a locked system beyond which higher forms of reality are incomprehensible.

Exegesis

Moosa's immanent and limited epistemology and anthropology, therefore, inescapably limit man in his historical and temporal contexts. For example, the evolution of exegesis in Islamic jurisprudential term *sufahā*' in the Quran from al-Ṭabarī to al-Rāzī reflects a growing structural dominance of a patriarchal structure of power, narrowing down the semantic of the term *sufahā*' from denoting everyone who could be categorised under the term to refer only to women and children.⁵⁰ It is used as if the unconscious gender superiority of the male overtakes the spiritual integrity of the scholars of exegesis.

Moreover, the anthropological construction of man leads to what Moosa coins as *heteroglossia*.⁵¹ The nature of the immanent man is caused by, or perhaps causes, the heteroglot nature of all speeches. This Moosa derives from Bakhtin in which he explains that all languages are subject to certain forces that disrupt the integrity of meanings and, over time, established meanings are erased and replaced with new ones.⁵² Not only man's epistemological constitution is immanently limited, even the integrity of his tools of knowledge articulation also is burdened with the same fate.

However, for Moosa, the scope of the *is* can be widened after all. Perhaps the *is*-ness is not restrictive, or a piece of *ought* can be salvaged. As a viable strategy to escape such an epistemic solipsism, collective subjectivity might be a plausible alternative. The way is to accumulate as many *is* (facts) as possible and the collective *is* is perhaps the glimpse of *ought* (values) that one can muster. Empiricism is opted to capture metaphysics.

50. Moosa, "The *Sufahā*' in the Qur'an Literature," 25.

51. Moosa, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination*, 102.

52. *Ibid.*, 103.

Hence, Moosa suggests for an epistemological pluralism.⁵³ As every person's experience of God and religion is *grammatically*⁵⁴ different, therefore accumulating the different experiences into a whole coherent picture might provide a chance at grasping the meanings of the Quran.

Naturally, this epistemological attitude leads to a contempt towards any claims to epistemological sovereignty. Any epistemology that claims itself to be the ultimate epistemology in understanding Islam is a hegemony, or a monopoly of God. Therefore, if one insists on retaining the classical *qawā'id* of exegesis, one is actually enacting the play of power to jealously guard one's own claims to truth.⁵⁵

Another characteristic which this metaphysics leads to is the "*death of the author*."⁵⁶ When God is understood in the Aristotelian *prima causa* sense, then the world does not have an axiological link with God. For it is His presence that establishes values and meanings in this world. His absence, thus, would mean that values are withdrawn along with Him. There is no reason, then, to refer to God because He is done with this world. There is no need to think of the Author as long as we have the text, because the Author's authority—in the world and in the text—is no longer ontologically binding.⁵⁷

Summative Remarks and Critiques

Analysed against the background of Islamic metaphysics, some implications that are remotely Islamic can be seen. Firstly, the nature of Islamic worldview and its components are *tawhīdīc* in the sense that everything is connected in one way or another,

53. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 12.

54. In the Wittgensteinian term. See footnote 10.

55. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 23.

56. Seymour Laura, *An Analysis of Roland Barthes's The Death of the Author* (London: Macat International Limited, 2018).

57. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 95.

that no one element is preferred more above another but all of them are combined coherently.⁵⁸ Within such networks of connection, God is pivotal in the sense that everything will fall apart without Him as the centre piece.⁵⁹

Ontologically, there is never a gap between man and God. Indeed, there is a difference. The difference lies in the status of existence in which God is the substrate of all existence. While all else exist only metaphorically, He exists in the full sense of the term. Al-Ghazālī himself, in his *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, affirms as such.⁶⁰ To state an ontological break between the two is to uphold that man could exist independently, that man possesses an equal ontology to God. Therefore, God's *presence* is real and the connection between Him and man is also real.⁶¹

Since man is internally linked with God, therefore his origin and his return are both from and to God respectively. The visual representation of man's relationship with God perhaps can be considered as a circle. Man originates from a certain point, that is God, and returns to the same point. Since it is a circle, the direction of origin and destination can be both to and fro. Man can therefore progress from God to God, and he returns to God from God. Man's relationship with God, therefore, is understood on spatial terms rather than temporal ones. His movements in relation to God is dynamic, while the relationship between God and man is bilateral.⁶²

58. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 3.

59. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'an* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2008), 76.

60. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār [The Niche of Lights: A Parallel English-Arabic Text]*, trans. David Buchman (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), 16.

61. Al-Qūnawī terms this relationship *nisba 'ilmīyyah*. For a more elaborate discussion, see Richard Todd, *The Sufi Doctrine of Man: Sadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī's Metaphysical Anthropology* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2014), 86–88.

62. Izutsu, *God and Man*, 158.

When Moosa states “progressive Islam,” his underlying assumption of the concept “progress” is a peculiar one. While the modern understanding of progress is something linear, his is branchial, except that the branches are hypothetical.⁶³ In other words, while modernity’s progress is forward, Moosa’s postmodernist progress is uncertain. Forward is as plausible as any other directions.

As long as one does not stagnate in one position, nurtures his spirit of *poesies*, realises his ever-persisting *dihlāzīan* condition, and jumps into another possibility, then he has relevantised Islam to his situational moment. Moosa’s man-God visual relationship, thus, is a point and another point. Both points are separated from each other. It is an irony, therefore, to urge progress while at the same time being unable to perform it.

Secondly, such an immanent metaphysics has hindered Moosa from understanding the metaphysical status of *principles*. Seeing immutability as fixity, he affirms that the insistence on loyalty to the past as an aversion towards progress. What this immanentism metaphysics—or more frankly, materialistic metaphysics—is unable to conceive is that immutability does not stand in contrast with change, it is above it. Therefore, a subject that has found his ontological equilibrium does not need to sit in a *dihlāz*.

Thirdly, in Islam, God’s omnipotence in the perpetual recreation of the world marks His perpetual omnipresence. Such a never-absent God is exemplified by the metaphysics of occasionalism of al-Bāqillānī and *Wahdat al-Wujūd* of the Ṣūfis. His ever-presence, thus, means that the axiological integrity and the moral order of this world are maintained and that His commands and existential significance can be properly understood and meaningful.⁶⁴ In other words, remote

63. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 16.

64. For example, in the account of Ibn Fūrak’s theology where he analyses the concept of *mā hā* as having both theological and cognitive significance. See Alexander Key, *Language Between God and the Poets: Mā hā in the Eleventh Century* (California: University of California Press, 2018), 132.

interpretations of Islam are not legitimately possible, for The Author is never dead.

Conclusion

The postmodern interpretation of Islam—indeed, all “progressive” interpretations—rests on imperatives which are thoroughly western, and modern ones at that. Indeed, their programmes are to question the atrocities and the misgivings of modernity. In combating such predicaments, they try to derive inspirations from Islamic sources.⁶⁵ Yet, trying to escape from modern symptoms without shaking off its modern structure is an absurdity. Indeed, one cannot reject what one accepts.

Moreover, adopting the elements of a paradigm or a worldview is an adoption of the worldview itself. A paradigm is like an ecosystem.⁶⁶ When a biological unit is introduced into a new ecosystem, for example, a snail into a garden, the resultant product is not the old ecosystem, plus the new biological unit. However, the resultant product is a whole new ecosystem altogether. Similarly, when an element of a paradigm is introduced into another paradigm—provided that the conceptual content of the element is still intact, it reconstitutes the target paradigm into a whole new paradigm. Hence, when a postmodern concept is applied to the Islamic paradigm—which is a form of introduction—the resultant product is no more Islam in its accurate sense, but a whole new “progressed” Islam altogether.

Notwithstanding the above, one could respond that some elements of the worldview of Islam are also adopted into the postmodern thought, how does this not amount to a total adoption of an Islamic worldview? The adoption process that

65. Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 15.

66. To borrow Postman’s aptly used metaphor. See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 18.

they conduct is not symmetrical in that both worldviews are given equal or indifferent preliminary considerations. The operative spectacle in this regard is clearly postmodern. Even Islamic elements are being understood and appropriated in light of a postmodern lens. Therefore, it is not much an adoption of concepts as much as it is only an adoption of terms. In other words, postmodern employments of Islamic elements are only terminological instead of truly methodological and conceptual. Their central domain remains postmodern. They only adopt Islamic terms, but not Islam's total concepts and meanings.

Furthermore, this critique can be widened to a more general application. It can be said that all parts of the postmodern project have been a mishandling of data of Islam in that they have been trying to understand Islam and its historical experiences from Western experiences. For example, the application—or, more precisely, a misapplication—of Foucauldian power-knowledge analysis on the intellectual history of Islam clearly imposes the superstructure of modern nation-state upon the premodern history of Islam.⁶⁷ Another example is the imposing of the metaphysics of history as conceived by the philosophy of “progress” upon Islam's linear-cyclical metaphysics of history.

The two abovementioned examples prove a second point: that a paradigm or a worldview cannot be overturned by presenting an internal critique, for it is not in the functions of a paradigm to provide tools of critique and reconstitution of itself. This is because the critiques cannot transcend its epistemological framework. Every critique is thus destined to re-enact or at best revise an aspect of a paradigm, but the same paradigm nonetheless,⁶⁸ unless if a critique comes from another paradigm.

Thus, this explains why remote understandings of Islam are possible in the first place. As an alien paradigm is being utilised upon Islam, the produced conclusions, therefore, make total sense as a critique towards Islam but not towards itself.

67. As exemplified in Moosa, “The *Sufahā*’ in the Qur’ān Literature,” 4.

68. Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism*, 164.

Similarly, a critique towards modernity and all of its predicaments can only come from external paradigm, for example Islam, and not from itself.

The methodological incompetence of *Progressive Islam*, in particular, of Moosa's, therefore, is exposed. The mistake is in vesting the Western paradigm—a product of historical contingencies—with the status of an ahistorical metaphysic, insisting its epistemological universality and sovereignty. Meanwhile, Islam is relegated to a historical status thus allowing the notion of “relevance” and “progress”—the notion of “out of time”—in its consideration. Islam always has to remain relevant in the lens of progress, while modernity is taken as given, or pre-given, in fact. In other words, the Western paradigm is, unfortunately, unconsciously being considered as superior to the Islamic paradigm.

Indeed, such methodological handicaps are the results of an existential misplacement. The existential misplacement takes the form of democratisation of knowledge, levelling the hierarchy of authorities. It starts with the ontological levelling of God's existence with that of man's that renders man a distinct existence from God. This is followed by the levelling of spiritual epistemology with ordinary experiences epistemology—empiricism and rationalism. All men are seen equal, both empirically and spiritually. For example, a spiritually lacking person is seen to have an equal spiritual predisposition with a sage. Disenchantment of nature, deconsecration of values and desecralisation of politics are all operative here.⁶⁹

As a result, an insolent form of arrogance creeps in. Everyone is merely human. They make mistakes, including the Prophet. Everyone is limited in their knowledge-formation of the religion, including the mostly male *'ulamā'* whose monopolising congregations have subsumed Islam under its structural patriarchy. What this prejudice fails to see is that it

69. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 18.

imposes human weaknesses only to the sincere scholars of the past without taking into consideration of the fact that they, too, are merely humans. If mistake is an inherent function of man, then what makes them think that their mistakes are no less dangerous? Why should we seriously consider the grave implications of the mistakes of the *‘ulamā*’ instead of theirs? The *loss of ādāb* is, then, also operative in their thoughts.

Additionally, the terrestrial factors—social, political, anthropological, and others—are not so much determinants as they are loci. These forces do not delimit God’s manifestation in the sense that they alter it. They, however, are loci through which God manifests His perfections. Interpretations of the Quran, therefore, are not reconfigurations of meanings, but manifestations (*tajalliyāt*) of a higher metaphysical Reality, which is of God’s will. This is understood, of course, with the provision that the interpreting subjects attune their *subjective moods*⁷⁰ properly—instilling sincerity, piousness, humility, gratitude, and others—according to the Quranic prescriptions. Such a *subjective mood* is what al-Ghazālī terms as *tawakkul*—an epistemological trust in God that He will always provide man with true knowledge.⁷¹ The approach is contrary to the epistemological pluralism propounded by Moosa.

In line with such a thought, therefore, it is not so much an interpretation as it is a reception. Man is not really an active interpreter of the text. He, however, is a passive recipient. The only active role he plays is the attunement of his subjective moods so as to be aligned with the required state of the soul to be able to receive the transcendent truth. Analogically, one can only understand the instruction of a superior only if one listens the way the superior wants him to listen. In other words, Islamic anthropology or psychology allows a part of man’s ontological construction to rise above its terrestrial conditionings to a higher spiritual state, connecting itself to the transcendent realm as

70. Alparslan Açıkgöç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit IKIM, 2014), 215.

71. Griffel, *Al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology*, 162.

is represented by the schematics of the soul⁷² in Avicenna's psychology.

Clearly, therefore, the Islam that is conceived by Moosa is an Islam without any essence. His is not so much an "Islamic humanism" as it is a "postmodern humanism."⁷³ Islam in his *poesies* is always positioned in a threshold of the Schrödingerian cat, being both this and that simultaneously until it is taken out of the box of its *māhiyyah* and becomes an "event." Even though Moosa attempts at decolonialism, it is not of Islam from modernism inasmuch as it is of Islam from itself through postmodernism.⁷⁴ It is still an outlook that shares a common denominator with Orientalism and colonialism that remains an epistemic superiority, in which the reverence it offers to Islam comes with a dose of epistemic self-confidence that still assumes, consciously or not, the validity of postmodernism. Indeed, it is, to borrow an expression, postmodernism in Islamic garments.⁷⁵

72. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 162.

73. The concept of "postmodern humanism" as applied here is derived from two terms that are ascribed to Ebrahim Moosa who is a representative theoretician of the movement of progressive Islam. These two terms are "Islamic humanism" and "postmodernism." The first pertains to the objective of Moosa's project in which he tries to formulate a humanism based on Islam, while the second refers to the primary methods and resources that influence his thoughts. As a result, the term "postmodern humanism," the researcher thinks, is a more apt term to label this approach. See Duderija, *Progressive Islam*, 10. On the misapplication of the term "humanism" on the Islamic thoughts, see Alexander Key, "The Applicability of the Term 'Humanism' to Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī," *Studia Islamica* 101, no. 100 (2005): 71–112.

74. *Ibid.*, 14.

75. Al-Attas considers, for example, the *Bātiniyyah*, among others, as being instances of attempts at understanding Islam not according to its own worldview and vocabularies, but from those of foreign imports. In the case of the *Bātiniyyah*, they imported the worldview of Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, and Mazdakism in trying to understand Islam. See Al-Attas, *Hujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 189.

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