

## Genuflect to Progress: Islam, Modernity, & Time

Jordan Yearsley

### Abstract:

The so-called dilemma confronting “Islam and the West,” however justified, is currently the topic of much debate and speculation. This paper examines “Western” conceptions of time, juxtaposing them with their “Islamic” counterparts as elucidated by several contemporary Muslim theologians and scholars. Through a careful analysis of the contemporary dynamics of modernity and the challenges it poses, this paper seeks to develop an understanding of the framework within which many Muslims have encountered Western thought, with particular emphasis on the difficult reconciliation of past and present, and the varied responses that it engenders.

---

### History, Bureaucracy, and Western Conceptions of Time

*It is true that one is sometimes said to be in dread of the past, and this seems to be a contradiction. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection it appears that this manner of speaking points in one way or another to the future. The past of which I am supposed to be in dread must stand in a relation of possibility to me. If I am in dread of a past misfortune, this is not in so far as it is past, but in so far as it may be repeated, i.e. become future.*

– Søren Kierkegaard

*The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.*

– Walter Benjamin

How one treats the past is fundamental in their action in the present and their attitude toward the future. Is the past to be feared? Or, rather is it a source of inspiration in terms of setting precedents for living? Through a comprehensive analysis of Western and Islamic<sup>i</sup> conceptions of time as represented by the writings of certain scholars concerned with modernity, I will contend that the West, by succumbing to a distorted view of world history as well as a classification of the present as evolving, improving, and progressing, sees time linearly and is characterized by a profound concern in the near-future, in which the actions of the present contribute to an ensuing betterment of society. The West does not “dread” the past, because, as Benjamin warns, it does not remember it as it was, instead focusing on the continual and unstoppable momentum of time, always forward facing, never looking back nor ever looking too far forward. In contrast, the Islamic conception of time, profoundly affected by the actions of the West and modernity, does dread the past in that it represents an encounter in which the West exploitatively profited. Their understanding of the past differs markedly from that of the West, and instead of seeing time as a phenomenon wherein things

get better, they associate modernity and the passing of time as denigrating, moving farther and farther from the ideal of the Prophet and the rightly-guided caliphs. The primary focus of this paper is understanding rather than argumentation; I propose to develop a particular interpretation of certain Western and Islamic tendencies given my reading of certain representative texts. Through this investigation it is hoped that a greater cognizance of how certain experiences inform worldviews is achieved, in particular an understanding that the complexities of the modern world, above all else, necessitate a deep and more nuanced treatment of other cultures and an inwardly-critical mindset.

In any discussion of modernity, which Bruce Lawrence defines as “the emergence of a new index of human life shaped, above all, by increasing bureaucratization and rationalization as well as technical capacities and global exchange unthinkable in the premodern era” (1989: 27), teleological questions of the ultimate purpose and movement of humanity, which center around conceptions of time, inevitably must be addressed. Talal Asad, further elaborating on the specific characteristics of modernity,<sup>ii</sup> claims that it should be thought of as a “project,” whose goals of democracy and human rights are transmitted through technologies and “generate new experiences of space and time” (2003: 13). Acknowledging Weberian dialecticism, Asad links the project of modernity to the idea of disenchantment, contending that modernity presupposes “a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred” (2003: 13). Although both would, generally, agree as to the fundamental qualities of modernity, they differ in that Asad employs the term “modernity” to describe an entity as well as a particular worldview, while Lawrence disarticulates modernity from modernism, the former referring to what modernity *is*, and the latter to what modernity *entails*. That is, Asad tends toward an interpretation that highlights the principles associated with modernity, in contrast to Lawrence, who designates this task to modernism, or “the search for individual autonomy driven by a set of socially encoded values” (1989: 27).<sup>iii</sup> Regardless of the terminological specificities, modernity seems to be necessarily entangled with both its tangible components as well as the abstract values with which it is deemed compatible. – in addition to being an economic and technological event, it also has profound sociopolitical implications. Despite the endlessly debatable characteristics of modernity, the affect on the ways in which one looks at the world and how one conceives of time is undeniable. What will follow is a more detailed analysis of the conceptual transformations accompanied with modernity, with particular emphasis on the individual’s relationship to time.

The effects of modernity on the contemporary modes of thought are diverse and numerous in that modernity entails, as Asad notes, certain patters of thought and “experiences of space and time,” while at the same time these characteristics extend to not only the individual but the societal/collective as well. Lawrence, invoking linguistics as a lens through which to understand these phenomena, examines the “modernist context,” which, “may be seen as the subliminal elements that frame our current way of thinking, leading us to choose words, express feelings, and pursue actions the conform to the social expectations of what is modern” (1989: 28). Identifying three broad categories essential to the modern mind – counting, comparing, and systematizing – Lawrence investigates the ways in which these three elements have permeated and influenced scientific discourse and analysis, asserting their function as creating “symbolic reference” (1989:

28-30). Counting, exalted as the “basic premise of all science,” acquires, in the modern context, a “utilitarian or instrumentalist outlook...[which] infuses all forms of life and all fields of intellectual endeavor” (Lawrence 1989: 29). Seeing linguistic specificities as metonymic to larger contemporary realities concerning the permeation of scientific inquiry and structured rationality, Lawrence states: “To speak in the modern idiom is to genuflect toward mathematical references” (1989: 29). Closely related to and latently involved in counting is comparison, which, beginning as simply “comparing for the purpose of contrasting,” has since developed into “the cornerstone of intellectual discourse,” embodied in dialectical reasoning where doubles become “disengaged others, pitted in deadly combat as incommensurate opposites” (Lawrence 1989: 29). The final consideration, systematization, “depends on counting and comparing, yet goes beyond them,” attempting to posit a “holistic reordering of diversity,” often by summary, reduction, and compression (Lawrence 1989: 29). So, through the use of language as a starting point, Lawrence characterizes the modern world as premised upon, above all, *organization*.

This insistence on organization can, I would argue, be applied to the understanding of modern conceptions of time, and in particular, how these conceptions are reflected in the study of history. Walter Benjamin, in his influential work on the failings of contemporary historical inquiry wherein he contrasts the paradigm of historicism with that of historical materialism, notes the idea that the study history presumes a certain interpretation of time, claiming that:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as a “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time (Benjamin 1968: 263).

The juxtaposition of two opposing views of time – that of historicism, which imprecisely sees time as “homogenous” and “empty,”<sup>iv</sup> and that of historical materialism, according to which time is “filled by the time of the now” – can serve as a link to Lawrence’s ideas of counting, comparing, and systematizing. While each framework is decidedly modern, employing all three cognitive and methodological constructs, they differ in their relative selections with respect to the latter two – *what* to compare and *how* to systematize. Historicist thought, rooted in the nineteenth century and the belief that certain linkages can be made between disparate time periods or event, became a situation in which “history too was regarded as a change of events, a process whereby every happening contributed to the causation of future events” (Aveni 1998: 315). Counting, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as a preposition “taking account of when reaching a total,” can be thought of in terms of aggregation. Assembling parts to create a continuous whole, in the study of history, means the examination of past events in relation to the present, which, Benjamin would argue, involves counting *and* comparing, if done in the historicist manner of fallaciously ascribing the past to the present (Benjamin 1968: 263). Two scholars, Zachary Lockman and J.M. Blaut, have

more precisely elaborated on the ways in which counting, comparing, and systematizing have historically been utilized in the analysis of the so-called “European Miracle,” much to the detriment of a comprehensive and unbiased understanding of the world. Lockman, referring to the issue of comparing, claims that positions which identify ancient Greece as possessing the origins of the “West” rely on the presumptions of monolithic civilizations as well as the exclusion of the historical events and cultural borrowing taking place between fall of Greece and the rise of the West (Lockman 2004: 8-37). Blaut, focusing more on systematization, argues that world history has been summarized and assembled in such a way as to support the myth that “the economic and social modernization of Europe is fundamentally a result of Europe’s *internal* qualities, not of interaction with the societies of Africa, Asia, and America after 1492” (Blaut 1993: 1-2). WEBER says science tells you how to do things.

The institutional culmination of modernity, some would argue, is democratic institutions charged with ensuring the ideals of free-market capitalism and human rights; however, this would refer to the types of institutions and their purpose, as opposed to their structure. Bureaucratization, characterized as the organization of civil society as contingent upon emphasizing efficiency over outcome, process over consequences, and offering “the optimum possibility for carrying through the principle of specializing administrative functions according purely objective considerations” (Gerth & Mills 1970: 214). The process by which the values, ideals, and actions of modernity are implemented, then, is carried out through the structural organization of the modern bureaucracy, which emphasizes efficiency and productivity in pursuit of stated objectives. Two fundamental components of this efficiency are the division of labor and technical expertise<sup>v</sup> that, in addition to increasing productivity can, as Zygmunt Bauman has attempted to show in his discussion of modernity and the Holocaust, cause alienation from the task itself as well as its consequences (2002: 125-128). The division of labor, which “creates a distance between most of the contributors to the final outcome of collective activity, and the outcome itself,” so compartmentalizes and sunders the process from the product that “everything one does is in principle *multifinal*; that is, it can be combined and integrated into more than one meaning-determining totality” (Bauman 2002: 126, 127). Closely related is the idea of technical proficiency, which refers to the scenario in which one “forgets that the action [bureaucratic task] is a means to something other than itself” and “the bureaucrat’s own act becomes an end in itself” (Bauman 127, 128). The bureaucratic process effectively severs the future from the present, in that the bureaucrat’s prime considerations become the very immediate future, i.e. the successful completion of a task, rather than the recognition that each individual task, microcosmic in its mimicry of larger task, renders the big picture obscured and marginalized.

So, as evidenced in the working of the modern bureaucracy, how one views the present implies a latent idea of the future. While generalizing about the West, presuming “a more or less coherent with its own distinctive core values, beliefs and principles, [and] its own unifying spirit or essence” (Lockman 2004: 9), would be unproductive, we can draw conclusions from representative Western institutions embodying their own principles. Because the present is infused with a purpose, to progress, the modern mind sees “future dates as expedient signposts for noting portentous change” (Lawrence 1989: 24). As “third world planners grapple with five year plans” (Lawrence 1989: 24),

the future becomes stripped of its uncertainty and thus transforms into a knowable entity representing what is being created. The future becomes objectified as not a mystical alterity, but as a decidedly graspable event bound to happen in the not-so-distant future. Western conceptions of time, or rather, those conceptions reflected in the traditional study of history and the internal structural organization of society, rely both the view of the past as a chain of events, a process whereby every happening contributed to the causation of future events” (Aveni 1998: 315), and a view of the present as the necessary and logical culmination of these events as predicted. Following a linear, causal transmission, time is *counted*, whereby the present is transitional, aggregative, and contributing as a link between past and future events” (Benjamin 1968: 262). Historical events of the past are thus the contributing factors in a sequence of logical series of later events, creating a situation that Benjamin examines through the painting *The approach to time and temporality* becomes analogous to the characteristics of a functional bureaucracy embodying the modern ideals of counting, comparing, and systematizing. The infinitely expanding and endless goal of progress is achieved through past and present events. Time becomes reified and functionalized, existing not merely as an abstraction but as an actual contributor to the present and future. The bureaucracy of time is to proceed linearly and aggregate, coherently accumulating, in determined units consisting of selected historical events, as human society progress. This type of thinking is adequately represented in the form of Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, a philosophical conceptualization of God that is the catalyst for the “development of the consciousness that the Spirit has of its freedom and also the evolution of the understanding that the Spirit obtains through such consciousness” (Hegel 1955: 167). Evolutionary metaphors dominate as the necessarily eternality of development becomes a terminal goal – history and time are invested in a process as if it were a project.<sup>vi</sup> A particular manifestation of the mindset occurs in the study of history, which, historically, has been arranged such that certain events, beginning with the Neolithic Revolution, have causally occurred over the course of time,<sup>vii</sup> each one contributing toward the ideals of modern liberal democracy, said to have culminated in the West, which is charged with diffusing their ideals. The Western attitude of time is thus a product of and analogous to its characteristics; it creates a framework with which to think and reflects that mindset.

The analogy of bureaucracy and the way the Western world thinks of time can also be thought of, as Another Aveni has argued, as the “metaphor of mechanism.” Invoking the Western obsession with function, efficiency, and linearity, Aveni maintains, “we [the West] have come to have faith in the machine, to believe in mechanism for understanding” (1989: 36). Further elaborating on the implications for this type of thought on cognitive processes is the idea that “we try account for natural events by inventing mental models that parallel the way things behave” (Aveni 1989: 36). The ubiquity of organization in the modern world is evident in the study of history and the structure of bureaucracies, as well as having a distinct impact on worldviews and modes of thought.

## Islam and the Muslim Encounter with the West

The interaction between the Western and Islamic countries is suffused with the legacy of colonialism and, in the post-WWII era, “the United States’ imperialism-without-colonies” which, through economic, military, and social means, wields influence “as massive as any colonial regime” (McClintock 2000: 180). In the preceding sections, we have examined the primary components of modernity, as advanced by several scholars who offered various insights into the modern world through the lenses of history, bureaucracy, and linguistics. These particular insights were then related to conceptions of time in the West, who, as the catalyst of modernization, represent the most whole embodiment of the principles of modernity. While no characterization is entirely accurate due to the hybridity and diversity of any presumed entity, Western Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and later the United States are arguably the most representative examples of modernity in its practical form. However, what of other countries affected by modernity and the hegemony of the West? Modernity, while primarily located in the West, has had profound implications for the Islamic community throughout the world. Unfortunately, Muslims of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, through the mediator of colonialism, experienced “a mixture of aggressive Christian proselytism and of the new secularism,” resulting in a division between Muslim and European that “came to dominate all attitudes and approaches to questions related to religion, politics, and the social order” (Filali-Ansary 2003: 195-196). Despite the fact that there are difficulties in assuming the Islamic religion as a monolithic entity from which one can make sweeping generalizations and characterizations, I would subscribe to the belief, expressed by Khaled Abou El Fadl in his discussion of the religiosity of Osama bin Laden, that “what a Muslim does in the name of Islam is in fact a part of the Islamic experience” (El Fadl 2003: 73). The purpose of this next section is to examine contemporary scholars of Islam and their viewpoints, as authors in the modern area from countries enveloped in the shadow of colonialism and foreign intervention, concerning the state of Islam (the vacuum of authority) and the prospects for the future. I propose to ultimately analyze these dilemmas, again, through the lens of time.

The centrality of the Qur’an as the primary locus of authenticity in the Islamic tradition is widely recognized and enjoys considerable consensus;<sup>viii</sup> however, there are diverse hermeneutical and methodological approaches to Qur’anic study, each offering their own particular insights, advantages, and perspective. Because of the primacy of a 7<sup>th</sup> century text, as well as the particular social implications and precedents set by Muhammad and his followers (Bellah 1970), the past inevitably factors into contemporary realities, and the Islamic conceptions of time are profoundly informed by both historical-religious paradigms and the specter of colonialism and the Muslim encounter with modernity. As such, the writings of William Chittick, Ebrahim Moosa, Fazlur Rahman, and El Fadl each offer differing approaches to the tradition, forwarding certain ways in which to view Islamic history and its intimations for the present and future.

William Chittick, in his article concerning Muslim theology and prescriptions, “Islam and the Loss of Equilibrium,” examines the societal implications found in the Qur’an and the Hadith, arguing that “the ideal Islamic civilization, by maintaining an equilibrium among *islam* (“or the Shari’ah”) *iman* (“or faith and doctrine”), and *ihsan* (“or virtue and spirituality”), would allow a full flowing of

every domain of human activity that is in harmony with man's ultimate destiny" (Chittick 1986:174). Claiming that "the heart of the Islamic tradition is the first *shahada* (testimony of faith): 'there is no God but God,'" (Chittick 1986:165), he offers a unique interpretation rooted in classical Islamic theology that eschews the temporal in favor of the preeminence of the eternal. Asserting that "Islam can nevertheless offer its own diagnosis of the disease from which we are suffering," (Chittick 1986: 165), Chittick minimizes the temporal, proclaiming that "the attitude toward the present world that Islam seeks to instill is that of detachment." (1986: 170). Therefore, social institutions "must be oriented toward the next world" (Chittick 1986 :170) in order to return to ideal world, which "was achieved, to the greatest extent possible, during the lifetime of the Prophet" (Chittick 1986: 174). By emphasizing the precedent of the Prophet as a social and religious reality to which to return, Chittick valorizes the past while seeking to think of the present as constantly defined by and in the context of the "next world," thereby renouncing interreligious dialogue by claiming that the present is irrelevant in light of the future: "It is best not to busy oneself with the business of the human situation...if in the meantime men destroy this world, well, the next world is a better place" (Chittick 1986: 178). So, Chittick is advocating a worldview that, stressing a view of time that is rooted in the past and millenarian in its nature, places particular emphasis on the temporal as inseparable from and dependent on the eternal. Time is therefore, in Chittick's view, not exclusively and irrevocably concerned with progress in the worldly and secular domains, but contingent upon and centered around the next world. Because "the world is going where it is going, according to God's will, whether we talk to [to other religions] or not," (Chittick 1986: 178) Muslims thus must resign themselves to acceptance of present actualities in the acceptance of the future world as both superior to and transcendent. Furthering this idea of the subordination of the present, Chittick contends that "Islamic society has been disrupted by outside influences [and] the lost of these dimensions as living realities becomes tragic for the civilization" (1986: 175). In the face of Western hegemony, the religious are to seek solace in the authentic tenets of Islam and work to achieve a return to an Islam that "has been emptied of its spirit" (Chittick 1986: 177). The begrudging relationship between the secular and the religious is apparent in social institutions and Shari'ah law, which serve "to establish a stable framework within which man may take care of the necessary affairs of this world without being seduced by them" (Chittick 1986:170).

Fazlur Rahman, primarily concerned with methodological approaches to Qur'anic study, affirms the centrality of the next world; however, he offers a markedly different interpretation. While Chittick sees the Last Day as trivializing and devaluing the present or this world, Rahman holds that "there is no doubt that belief in God and human accountability play a strictly functional role," because "no real morality is possible without the regulative ideas of God and the Last Judgment" (Rahman 1982: 14). In light of the social aspects presented in the time of the Prophet, "the substantive...teaching of the Prophet and the Qur'an is undoubtedly for *action in this world*, since it provides guidance for man concerning his behavior on earth in relation to other men" (Rahman 1982: 14). So, in contrast to Chittick, who saw social institutions as a necessary evil that should be oriented toward this world, the view forwarded here is that the implication of final judgment is to sanctify humanity and the temporal life. Taking this position to its logical end, Rahman also sees the past as dictating the present and future; however, he does not advocate a return as such. Stressing the importance of

“occasions of revelation,” or the background and historical context of Qur’anic legislation, Rahman denies “*literal* implementation of the rules of the Qur’an,” arguing that “shutting one’s eyes to the social change that has occurred...is tantamount to deliberately defeating its [the Qur’an’s] moral-social purposes and objectives” (Rahman 1982: 19). Rahman proposes to take the past into account in the way in which one deals with the present, using the principles of the Qur’an and Muhammad as guidance, not simply as examples to which to return. Eschewing the “bane of later medieval Islam,” in which “God was made the exclusive object of experience...instead of men’s seeking values from this experience, the experience became the end in itself” (Rahman 1982: 14), the author seeks a return to Qur’anic doctrine in order to move forward; Rahman advocates reform of the Islamic tradition as well as Islamic academic inquiry and education, emphasizing progress and change.

While each interlocutor espouses distinct understandings of the Islamic tradition, they both value the Qur’an and point to the historical precedent of Muhammad; Chittick expounds a distancing from the present in light of the eternal future while Rahman concludes that “the central concern of the Qur’an is the conduct of man” (1982:14) and advocates reform. They share, above all else, a valorization of the past as central to the Islamic faith, although each proposes individual conclusions about how to act in the world. Two more critical scholars, Moosa and El Fadl, are condemnatory of the obsession with the past. Moosa, seemingly in direct response to the viewpoints of scholars like Chittick and Rahman, says:

But this desire to find justification in the past, in a text or the practice of a founder, suggests that Muslims can act confidently in the present only if the matter in question was already prefigured in the past. Such a perpetually retrospective approach to religious understanding is the sign of a profound lack of dynamism among the contemporary adherents of the tradition (Moosa 2003: 122).

In this position, a blind loyalty to the past necessarily cripples the tradition, rendering it stagnant and unable to adapt. Moosa, arguing for reform and progression with Islam, cites the fact that “the predisposition among many Muslim apologists is not to understand history, but rather try to fix or correct it, with the enormous condescension of posterity” (Moosa 2003: 121) as an impediment to a growing and vibrant faith. The elevation and sanctification of the past not only “implies that the present is always despised and viewed as fallen,” but allows for Muslims to “discredit the legitimacy of their experience in the present and refuse to allow this experience to be the grounds for innovation” (Moosa 2003: 122, 123). This is not to say that the author does not agree that the Qur’an and the precedent of the Prophet Muhammad are essential, rather, he desires an exploration of “multiple interpretive methods...to discover the creativity they invested” (Moosa :126). Emphasizing transformation over stagnation, Moosa, working within the tradition and its tenets, argues in favor of new methodological and hermeneutic methods of inquiry, “in order to allow its [the Qur’an’s] full breath and vision to speak to us in a transformative way “ (2003:126).



El Fadl, tracing the theoretical and historical lineage of Islamic fundamentalism, characterizes the modern strain as a synthesis of Wahhabism and Salafism, which he styles Salafabism. Putting forward a framework with which to think of contemporary Islamic theology, the author characterizes Wahhabism as advocating “the return to the pristine and pure origins of Islam” while rejecting the “cumulative weight of historical baggage and insist[ing] on a return to the precedents of the rightly guided early generations” (El Fadl 2003: 88). Salafism, developing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a modernizing movement, “appealed to a very basic and fundamental concept in Islam: that Muslims ought to follow the rightly guided precedent of the Prophet and his companions” (El Fadl 2003: 89). The linkages between the two earlier scholars and the principles of these two ideologies are clear; both Chittick and Rahman stress the importance and preeminence of historical precedents of Muhammad, the former working with classical Islamic and Sufi thought, the latter spurning earlier theology in favor of his own. Chittick more than Rahman forwards a more extreme position, in that Rahman is concerned with development and progression based on application of Qur’anic principles while Chittick does not even see progress as desirable – his concern is transcendent and mystical, seeing the worldly as subordinate and undesirable. El Fadl does indeed forward his own solution, which, more in line with Moosa and Rahman, sees the duty of Muslims as “to evaluate once’s relationship to the world in which one lives” (2003: 95). Using the concept of *ta’mir* (“to civilize, build, and construct”) as his foundation, the author views the Muslim project on earth as centered on “establishing the conditions for a habitable earth,” claiming that one must focus on the present “as a way of honoring human life, and honoring God’s creation” (El Fadl: 96, 95). So, life is to be seen in the more benevolent sense of progression and improvement of the social condition of humanity, rather than exclusively Muslim or apathetic to the present.

In the preceding section, several competing theological discourses concerning Muslim conceptions of time and this world have been presented in the hopes that a sense of the current debate and some generalizations may be attempted. While no writing can be wholly representative, there are still conclusions to be drawn and insights to be gained from these brief samples. In general, each author, working within the Islamic tradition and drawing from the same sources (the Qur’an and Muhammad’s precedent), each saw the past at the heart of the tradition, while drawing starkly contrasting prescriptions for the future. Time, then, is not necessarily thought of as naturally ushering in improvements and *positive* change, in fact quite the opposite. Each author acknowledged, to put it in El Fadl’s terminology, the “siege mentality in contemporary Islam” (2003: 79), resulting from the Muslim encounter with the West and the unfortunate consequences of colonialism and modernity. The exact opposite connotations of time are to be found within Islamic contexts, largely due to the fact that the West’s rise was contingent upon the exploitation of a large part of the world (Blaut 1993, Hodgson 1993). Regardless of the specificities of the aforementioned authors and their differences, it is perhaps telling that each author recognized the fact that the present situation for a vast majority of Muslims is difficult. El Fadl and Moosa concerned themselves with present realities and offered interpretations of the tradition that placed a strong emphasis on action in this world – this implies that things must change. Rahman was concerned

with reform as well, but primarily in an academic setting. Chittick, in contrast, took an approach that trivialized the present and expressed an extreme marginalization of the present. On the whole, the current Islamic worldviews are diverse and varied; however, in this instance, the majority view is relatively progressive and oriented toward change.<sup>ix</sup>

### **The Machinery of Time**

Martin Luther King Jr., in his inspired *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, denounces the beliefs of his white religious supporters, who urged him to slow his quest for equality, by saying that “such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely rational notion that there is something in the flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills” (1963). Although writing in a different context, this insight can nonetheless be applied to the modern, Western mind, which seems to adhere to this view. By claiming modernization as the pinnacle of human civilization, the West has unfortunately placed their belief that a process will result in a freedom from oppression and necessary enhancement of society. As evidenced by the Holocaust, modernity merely provides tools, with which great destruction can also be achieved. To claim that modernity in and of itself is a solution is to disregard the fact that “human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability” (King 1963). The linearization of time that has befallen the West renders the world and their existence “a string of endless *nows*, a sequence of completed successive stages, each unique and nonrecurrent” (Aveni 1989). This outlook has not only affected the West itself, but other cultures around the world. As seen in the examination of contemporary Muslim writers, modernity has not ushered in tremendous growth and positive social change but the opposite, contributing to crises of authority within the Islamic tradition in which many different conceptions of time and the world are expounded. All are oriented toward the past and the fundamentals of Muslim doctrine; however, there are those who valorize the past while trivializing the present; there are those who use the past as a catalyst for change; and there are those who, as seen in the West, manipulate and distort the past to their own ends. Despite the varying interpretations and stances, this much is clear: productive dialogue and comprehensive, unbiased understanding of others are at the heart of adaptation to the modern world.

### **Notes:**

- i. Although I employ the traditional binaries of West and non-West, specifically referring to the West in contradistinction to Islam, I do not presume to be speaking for these entities, none of which I presume as monolithic or necessarily unique. I fully acknowledge many contemporary scholars’ critiques of civilizational approaches to the study of history (Lockman 2004) and the danger of dialectical reasoning as facilitating mutually exclusive and contradictory oppositions (Lawrence 1989).

- ii. More precisely, Asad states: “Modernity is a *project* – or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of market – and secularism. It employs proliferating technologies (of production, warfare, travel, entertainment, medicine) that generate new experiences of space and time, of cruelty and health, of consumption and knowledge” (2003: 13).
- iii. Asad, by characterizing modernity as a project, seems to assign to it the task of advocating and valorizing capitalism (2003: 16), while Lawrence claims that modernism “enthrones one economic strategy, consumer-oriented capitalism, as the surest means to technological progress that will eliminate social unrest and physical discomfort” (1989: 27).
- iv. Benjamin is critical of this stance, with emphasis on the undesirable results of its employment: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate” (Benjamin 1968: 261).
- v. Division of labor can be defined as “the assignment of different parts of the manufacturing processor task to different people in order to improve efficiency” (OED). Technical expertise, on the other hand, refers to the primary concern of workers in a bureaucracy being *how* they physically complete a task rather than *what* the task is and its consequences” (Bauman 2002: 125-128).
- vi. This insight was offered by Zachary Smith, in conversation.
- vii. J.M. Blaut organizes these foundations of Western beliefs about the world, claiming that history has been retroactively arranged as a logical and causal process (1993: 7-8).
- viii. See Chittick (1986), Moosa (2003), Rahman (1982), El Fadl (2003).
- ix. Rachid Al-Ghannouchi further reinforces this view in his article “Secularism in the Arab Maghreb,” in which he outlines “pseudo-secularism” and argues for reform in the former French colonies.

## Literature:

- Al-Ghannouchi, R. (2000). Secularism in the Arab Maghreb. In J.L. Esposito and A. Tamimi (Eds.), *Islam and secularism in the Middle East* (pp. 97-123). New York: New York University Press.
- Asad, T. (1993). *Genealogies of religion: Discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Aveni, A.F. (1989). *Empires of time: Calenders, clocks, and cultures*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers.
- Aveni, A.F. (1998). Time. In M.C. Taylor (Ed.) *Critical terms for religious studies* (314-334). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Bauman, Z. (2002). Modernity and the Holocaust. In A.L. Hinton (Ed.) *Genocide: An anthropological reader* (pp. 110-133). Blackwell.
- Bellah, R. (1970). Islamic tradition and the problems of modernization. In R. Bellah (Ed.) *Beyond belief: Essays on religion in a post-traditional world* (pp.147-167). New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.
- Benjamin, W (1968). Theses on the philosophy of History,” in Hannah Arendt (Ed.) *Illuminations* (Harry Zohn. Schocken, Trans.) (pp. 253-265). New York.
- Benavides, G. (1998). Modernity. In M.C. Taylor (Ed.) *Critical terms for religious studies* (186-205). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Blaut, J.M. (1993). *The colonizer’s model of the world: Geographical diffusionism and Eurocentric history*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Chittick, W.C. (1986). Islam and the loss of equilibrium. *Islamic Quarterly*, 165-178.
- Dussel, E. (1993). Eurocentrism and Modernity. *Boundary 2*, 20(3), 65-76).
- El Fadl, K.A. (2003). 9/11 and the Muslim transformation. In M.L. Dudziak (Ed.), *September 11<sup>th</sup> in history: A watershed moment?* (pp. 70-112). Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Filali-Ansary, A. (2003). Muslims and Democracy. In L. Diamond, M.F. Plattner, and D. Brumberg (Eds.) *Islam and Democracy in the Middle East* (pp. 193-207). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Gerth, H.H. and Mills, C.W. (1970). *From Max Weber*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hodgson, M.G.S. (1993). *Rethinking world history: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- King, M.L.K. Jr. (1963). *Letter from Birmingham jail*.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1944). *The concept of dread*. (W. Lowrie, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lawrence, B.B. (1989). *Defenders of God: The fundamentalist revolt against the modern age*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers.

- Lockman, Z. (2004). *Contending visions of the Middle East: The history and politics of Orientalism*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- McClintock, A. (2000). The angel of progress: Pitfalls of the term “Post-Colonialism.” In D. Brydon (Ed.) *Postcolonialism: Critical concepts in literary and cultural studies, vol. 1* (pp. 175-189). London: Routledge.
- Moosa, E. (2003). The debts and burdens of critical Islam. In O. Safi (Ed.), *Progressive Muslims: On justice, gender and pluralism* (pp.111-127). Oxford: OneWorld.
- Rahman, F. (1982). *Islam and modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

**Information about the author:**

Jordan Yearsley, Connecticut

E-Mail: jmyea@conncoll.edu or Jordan.yearsley@gmail.com

© Yearsley, Jordan (Connecticut, 2010), Marburg Journal of Religion, ISSN 1612-2941