

Authoritative Points of Reference as the Grounding for Innovation and Progress

[THEME I]

The Concept of Marja'iyah and the Matter of Identity

THE TRILITERAL ROOT *r-j-ʿ* conveys the sense of ‘returning’. A derivative of this root occurs in *Sūrah al-ʿAlaq*, 96:8, which reads, “For, behold, unto your Sustainer all must return (*innā ilā rabbika al-rujʿā*).” Hence, the term *marjaʿiyyah* refers to something or someone to whom one ‘returns’, that is, to which people appeal, such as a universal, inclusive principle, in order to resolve a conflict or disagreement.

The term *marjaʿiyyah* occurs frequently in contemporary writings. Of course, what one individual or group appeals to as a source of authority will differ from what some other individual or group appeals to, since the principles, premises and figures to which one appeals will differ depending on one’s fundamental philosophy or approach to life. When we speak of an overall, standardized authority, our intent is not to force all intellectual trends into rigid molds. On the contrary, attempts to do just this are what we have been criticizing from the start, for such a constriction would cancel out the Muslim community’s unique identity as a growing, evolving historical entity. However, we do advocate an inclusive framework that unites and lends direction to the Muslim community’s interests, concerns and endeavors regardless of which thought trends they represent.

The circumstances in which the Muslim community now finds itself do not allow for the degree of variety, disagreement, and even

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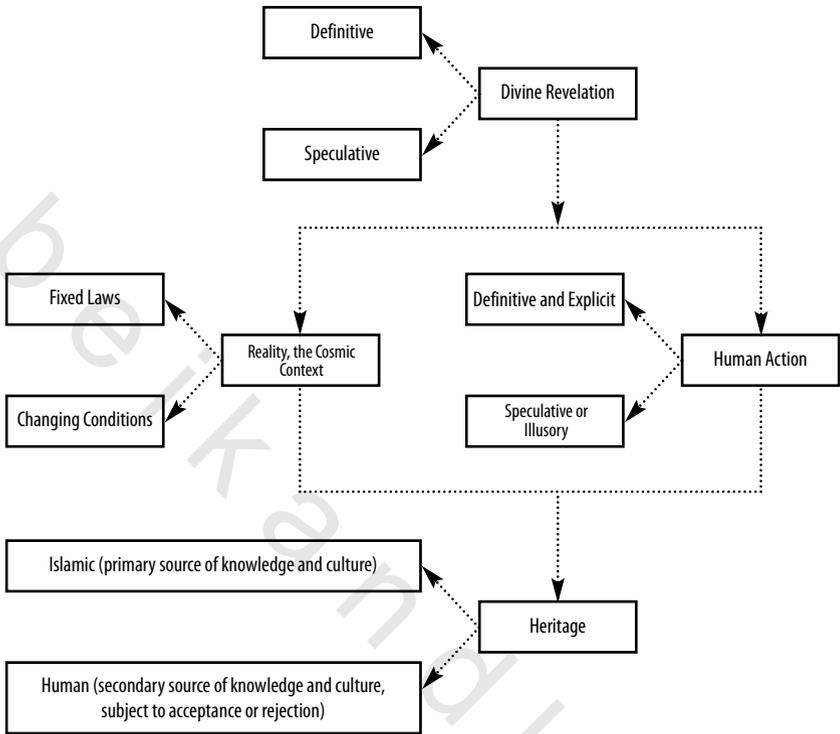
contradiction that Muslim civilization and culture were able to accommodate when they were at their apex and, as a consequence, were strong, cohesive and autonomous. The situation that prevails at the present time calls for greater unification around critical issues, which need to be addressed through a series of clearly defined steps and in light of clearly defined aims. It should be borne in mind that despite the many, varied and even contradictory intellectual, political and religious trends that have emerged in the West since the Renaissance Age, the West has what we might term an ideological ceiling through which none of these trends is allowed to break.

Indeed, such Western standards have become the highest authority for many modern Arab thought trends as well. However, in the context of Arab-Islamic civilization, the highest authority can be none other than the divine revelation. The Islamic revelation, which serves as Muslims' supreme guide in the realms of both doctrine and conduct, is what underlies the unprecedented transition that was witnessed by Arab society during the Islamic era, at which time the Muslim community became the vehicle by means of which new values for ordering worship, material development and social progress were introduced into numerous areas of the world.

In the view of Burhan Ghalioun, the moral crisis through which Arab society is passing manifests itself in the inability of modernization to provide a reasoned foundation for morals while, at the same time, destroying the religious support for such morals. For while Islam was able in its earlier years to reconcile people's needs for personal freedom with the need to build and preserve state power, one finds that nationalist trends by contrast, give the religious factor secondary importance, while secularist trends, in their zeal to promote 'openness' and 'modernity', relegate religion to the private sphere alone. As for Islamist trends, they give priority to the religious factor while spurning the positive contributions that non-religious factors can make to society by strengthening national unity and providing expertise and knowledge from sources other than religious ones.

This brings us to the model proposed by AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, which aims to accommodate a balanced mix of societal and religious factors. The organizational scheme proposed by AbuSulayman is

illustrated in the diagram below:



The authoritative sources listed in this diagram are those which, if the Muslim community unites around them and uses them as guides to action, will help to ensure ongoing unity among the community's various trends and schools of thought by resolving the various disputes that arise among the community's members. For in addition to knowledge and technology, every community that hopes to survive and thrive also needs authoritative spiritual, symbolic, and moral frameworks to sustain and inspire it, to unify its experience, to modulate and guide its reactions, and to focus its overall vision.

Although disagreements sometimes arise over how to define what constitutes 'authoritative sources', such disagreements nevertheless assume a shared acceptance of the idea of appealing to an authority, which is generally seen to be centered in the revealed text. There is thus

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a critical difference between criticism for the sake of correcting our method or approach, and criticism for the sake of abolishing the source of authority itself. There are those who see the notion of “returning to the source” as more problematic than it is helpful, since this notion is sometimes associated with calls to reject or reverse changes that are actually natural and good, such as those that accompany revolutionary socialist movements and scientific breakthroughs that are written off as expressions of atheism or materialism.

A legitimate, self-authenticating source of authority will be based on three major foundations, namely: (1) revelation, (2) human reason, and (3) the cosmos. Such an authority will be capable of assimilating many types of human effort while fostering balance, moderation and stability. Indeed, many forms of deviance and extremism, including personality cults and the like, result from the absence of the guiding, regulating principles contained in revelation.

The issue of authority and the sources from which we derive it is frequently linked to questions of identity, which tend to arise in the context of defending one’s identity in the face of some external threat or challenge. After all, identity consists of the distinguishing features of a culture or civilization and its individual members. Like that of other communities, the identity of the Muslim community or ummah derives from two elements: (1) the pattern of relationships that bind its individual members, and (2) the ideological matrix that gave rise to this pattern.

[THEME 2]

Authority and ‘Euro-Americentrism’

The western model has set itself up as the universal standard against which all cultural experiments are to be measured, and in relation to which they remain in a state of perpetual dependency, marginalization and inferiority.

Consequently, certain methodological foundations have to be laid from the outset in conceptualizing our own sources of authority in relation to the Other. An example of such a foundation is Ibn Taymiyyah’s

rejection of Greek logic and philosophy in favor of Islamic empirical logic. Living during a time when Islamic civilization was collapsing, Ibn Taymiyyah came to the realization that one of the major causes underlying this collapse was a reliance on Aristotelian logic. Ibn Taymiyyah discovered that when he applied the rules of Greek logic, he was led consistently to positions that were squarely opposed to Islamic beliefs. What he concluded was that Aristotelian logic is founded upon a metaphysics and theology that stand in opposition to those of Islam.

The historical experience of conditioned openness between one world civilization and another clearly reflects this discerning approach. Early Muslim civilization was open to numerous other civilizations, yet without merging with any of them. From Indian civilization it derived arithmetic and astronomy without also adopting Indian philosophy; it took certain administrative arrangements from the Persians yet without adopting the Persians' religious doctrines; in like manner, it opened itself to Greek civilization, from which it derived the natural and empirical sciences, yet without adopting Greek theology and myths, and took over the practice of keeping government records from the Romans without also adopting Roman law. Conversely, when Western civilization was in the ascendancy during its Renaissance Age, it adopted the empirical sciences and the foundations of the empirical method from Islamic civilization without accepting Islamic monotheism or its associated values, laws and cosmology; similarly, Western thinkers benefited from Ibn Rushd's commentaries on Aristotle, yet without acknowledging his contributions as a Muslim judge and jurist.

Al-Jabiri offers the suggestion that the West has come to project on Islam everything it fears, which in turn allows for the construction of a more positive identity for itself. For instance, if we look at Orientalism as a discipline, whilst clad in the 'objective', 'neutral' garb of academia, it has the power to 'modify', 'transform' and 'correct' its subject of study, that is, 'the Orient.'

There was a time when Western thinkers appealed to reason and strict deductions. Now, however, the tables appear to have been turned entirely, as power has been transferred to the audiovisual image. All it takes to convey the meaning of 'Islam' to one's audience is to flash an

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image of a masked man or veiled woman on the screen, while the image of a Muslim congregation in prayer – standing, bowing, prostrating – is enough to convince viewers of the ‘danger’ Islam poses to their communities. In this way, according to al-Jabiri, Western public opinion has been taken captive to the images displayed through the audiovisual media.

If we exclude the opposite ends of the spectrum – that is, both total rejection and total acceptance of Western civilization – we find a number of other approaches that reflect inconsistent attitudes toward Self and the West. What we need, however, is an approach that establishes methodological foundations for dealing with information and authoritative frameworks within which to determine what to accept and what to reject.

Hasan Hanafi has observed that those who are dazzled with the West see all of Western philosophy as a kind of ‘new creation.’ By contrast, he urges, it should be understood that the notion of ‘separation of church and state’ is a problem that arose in a purely European environment due to the various catastrophes that had befallen Christian society as a result of ecclesiastical abuses of power, and that the legitimate approach to religion and state is to ensure that the state rules in keeping with Islamic law. In Hanafi’s view, our increased knowledge should be used to do away with Eurocentrism and restore the proper balance to the relationship between West and East by disposing of the myth that the West represents all of humanity, and by opening the way for non-European peoples to liberate themselves and affirm their own unique and creative contributions to the world.

Algerian scholar Mohammad Arkoun (1928-2010), who spent decades of his life in the West, dedicated himself to fulfilling the role of mediator between Islamic and European thought. However, Arkoun was unable in the end to produce any impact on what he termed the West’s ‘unchanging and contemptuous’ view of Islam. In fact, he failed even to change Westerners’ views of him as a Muslim intellectual despite his having adopted the Western scientific method and applied it to the Islamic heritage. However, in the face of Arabs’ and Muslims’ repeated failures to change the West’s views of Arabs and Islam, Arkoun wrote:

We have no choice but to conclude that this repeated failure may indicate, not the impossibility of changing this view but, rather, the incorrectness of the Arab or Islamic strategy that banks entirely on changing the West's view of us [without our changing ourselves] ... The Other's view of us will only change when we change ourselves. Doesn't our own Scripture say, "...Verily, God does not change men's condition unless they change their inner selves;..." (*Sūrah al-Ra'ad*, 13:11)? The Other's view is not, after all, purely based on illusion. Rather, it is governed by a kind of physical mechanism. Hence, so long as we fail to present it with a different concrete reality, their mirror will go on reflecting the same image it always has...

In so saying, Arkoun appears to be justifying his defeat by adopting Western standards as his logical point of departure.