Modernization and Religion

written by Araz Bagirov

The Azerbaijani reader is likely familiar with debates concerning the extent to which “Islamic values” are compatible with “Western values.” Put simply, in such discussions one side (secularists) argues that we should strive for values such as human rights, women’s rights, and democracy even if they do not align with Islamic values, while the other side (religious adherents) maintains that there is, in essence, no contradiction between Islamic values and the aforementioned values, or at least many of them. The generalization implied by the above claim is largely accurate for the secular side. However, not all religious individuals defend the view that there is no essential contradiction between Islamic and Western values. That is, a significant portion of religious believers argues that we should reject Western values, which they perceive as “alien” to them, and instead defend or return to “our own values.” This article is devoted precisely to a theoretical examination of the relationship between religion and a fundamentally new (modern) order that gradually emerged in Western Europe from the late Middle Ages onward and subsequently spread throughout the world, along with the values associated with that order.

In previous discussions on this platform concerning theories of secularization, I briefly touched upon the relationship between modernization and secularization.[i] However, the distancing of society from religion and the relegation of religion to the private sphere that often accompanies modernization is not the only possible response of religious practitioners to the process of modernization. In fact, as a given society modernizes, or as modern values gain strength within it, religious communities tend, broadly speaking, to follow one of two possible paths. They may defend traditional values against the perceived negative effects of

modernization, such as individualization, the weakening of communal cohesion, and the erosion of traditional hierarchies (for example, gender hierarchies), thereby rejecting these changes. Alternatively, religious actors may attempt to modernize religion itself. In this case, movements belonging to this second category may challenge the claim that the aforementioned traditional values are inherently religious, in other words, they may seek to demonstrate that religion does not conflict with modern values. In sociological and historical literature, religious movements that adopt the values that became dominant with the European Enlightenment, the development of capitalism, and modernization, and that aspire to such values beyond the West as well, are referred to as modernist religions.

In the case of Islam, attempts to adapt religion to the modern world emerged from the mid-nineteenth century onward, as Muslim intellectuals sought to understand the reasons behind the rapid development of Western societies through scientific and industrial revolutions, as well as the direct consequences of this development, including the transformation of a significant portion of the Muslim world into Western colonies and the substantial dependence of even those Muslim countries that retained their independence on Western powers. However, this type of response is not unique to Muslim societies or to other cultures that fell under Western domination. Indeed, within Western societies themselves, the weakening of religion’s position prompted religious institutions to develop similar responses.

Before examining modernist religion, however, it is essential to understand the process of modernization itself. Contrary to common assumptions, modernization is not characterized solely by the advancement of science and the consequent loss of religion’s credibility. Although the development of science ultimately contributed to weakening the position of religion, many of the pioneers of the scientific revolution were not distant from religion; on the contrary, they were often quite

devout. How, then, did modernization come to result in the weakening of religion's position and compel religious institutions to seek new responses to this process?

In this article, I will attempt to describe the process of modernization and its consequences within a theoretical framework. With the exception of certain illustrative examples that I will address where necessary, this text does not focus on specific cases but rather examines theoretical categories developed in the literature to better understand the general situation. Nevertheless, it is clear that this article, which is intended to provide a theoretical foundation for future writings devoted to the study of modernist religion, should be read primarily as an introduction to the relationship between Islam and modernization. More broadly, in this article and in the subsequent pieces I plan to write to complement it, I seek to demonstrate how certain approaches that are now quite prominent, and that for many appear to constitute one of the fundamental claims of Islam, emerged through historical processes and what gave rise to them. For example, the claim that Islam "commands reading" or that reading constitutes the "first command of Islam" is now accepted by nearly all Muslims as a transhistorical truth. However, I will attempt to show in these writings that although this command is not new in itself, it acquired its present meaning relatively recently.

Modernization, Modernity, Modernism

The term "modern" is of Latin origin and may be translated into Azerbaijani as *müasir* or, through Turkish influence, as *çağdaş*, both meaning "contemporary." The word entered Western languages with its present meaning during the Renaissance and was used to distinguish a qualitatively new stage that was beginning to take shape from the Middle Ages. By "modernism," one usually refers to artistic movements that dominated from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, as well as to artists whose work embodies the principles of modernism. However, in the twentieth century, "modernization" came to

denote not only developments in the arts but also changes in social institutions, generally understood as progressive.[ii] For example, the emergence of the modern state, along with the radical differences between its various institutions (such as systems of punishment and their purposes) and their predecessors, is among the outcomes of modernization.

In contemporary sociological literature, "modernity"[iii] refers both to a specific historical period and to the distinctive characteristics of that period. Although Azerbaijani historiography typically refers to this period as the "modern era" in a literal sense (*yeni dövr*), I consider this designation to be inadequate. Because "modern" and related terms refer in sociological and historical literature to a wide spectrum of transformations, it is more appropriate to use these terms without translation.

In sociology, modernization and related concepts describe the transition from agrarian cultures grounded in tradition and dogma to industrial societies based on reason, a framework that largely derives from the sociological tradition pioneered by Max Weber. This does not imply that individuals in traditional societies did not use reason, or that tradition is entirely insignificant in modern societies. Rather, it indicates that tradition has ceded its primary position as a point of epistemic reference to reason. In his well-known work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that capitalism emerged from the "worldly asceticism" of Protestant sects and that, over time, this work ethic spread to other spheres of society. As belief in predestination, that is, the doctrine that the ultimate fate of all individuals in the afterlife is predetermined by God, became widespread among Protestants, attempts to alter one's fate through religious or other supernatural means declined.[iv] Instead, individuals were left to believe that they might belong to the elect and to demonstrate this belief through dedication to their work. In this way, Puritan sects rejected

the otherworldly asceticism dominant in Catholicism and embraced worldly asceticism[v], making capitalism possible by subordinating all goals to the fulfillment of one's divinely assigned calling. Over time, however, this work ethic shed its religious character and became the operating principle of industrial society. This worldview, an essential component of the modern economic order, ultimately lost its character as a consciously embraced vocation and turned into a rigid and colorless "iron cage."[vi]

In sociology, Marxist theory is often presented as an alternative to Weber's account in explaining these transformations, yet it similarly agrees that capitalism results in a structure resembling an "iron cage." However, Marxists locate the source of this qualitative transformation not in a radical rupture in the dominant religious worldview, but in a revolution in the relations of production. Indeed, Weber's "iron cage" passage at the end of *The Protestant Ethic* and the famous "all that is solid melts into air"[vii] passage from Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* convey a similar meaning. In that passage, Marx argues that capitalism strips all traditional values of their significance and transforms all relations into relations of profit. Likewise, Weber contends that capitalism and bureaucratization, originating in Protestant work ethics, ultimately permeate all of society. In other words, whereas early Calvinists strove for success in their work as a sign of divine grace, success in work later became an end in itself.

As noted, although these theories are often treated as competing frameworks, neither the Weberian nor the Marxist perspective alone is sufficient to explain the phenomenon of modernist religion. While their conclusions are similar, their differing points of departure necessitate drawing on both approaches. For instance, given that modernist Islamic movements appear to have a significant class dimension, engagement with Marxist analysis is essential.

Weber also identifies rationalization as a defining feature of both the capitalist mode of production and modern society. In modern society, tradition loses its central importance, and economic activity is guided by calculated rationality.[viii] As emphasized above, this does not mean that people in pre-modern societies were incapable of rational decision-making; rather, with modernization, tradition, belief, and similar motivations lose their central role in decision-making. For example, in religion, which is a product of traditional society, the validation of a claim often depends more on locating a reference in sacred texts than on supporting it with rational arguments. In contrast, in science, which is a modern institution, even the most established theories can be refuted through empirical evidence. Weber describes this condition as the "disenchantment of the world." In such a world, comprehensive systems of belief that claim to explain everything lose their credibility, and all forms of activity come to be organized on the basis of precise specialization, rationality, and calculated efficiency.[ix]

Within the Marxist tradition, this "disenchantment" is described as the dissolution of all traditional economic systems based on mutual aid, as well as the collapse of local exchange markets. With the rise of capitalism, the global market absorbs all smaller alternatives, and all other forms of motivation are replaced by activities aimed at maximizing continuous profit, with no goal beyond profit itself.[x]

Thus, modernization refers to the process by which traditional systems that once dominated all aspects of life, from the economic organization of local communities to the interpretation of the surrounding world, prior to the scientific and industrial revolutions and the emergence of capitalist relations, have been replaced by forms of rational organization that now appear ordinary to us. This does not mean that no elements of the pre-modern era persist in the modern world; rather, it indicates that institutions that

function effectively or systematically in modern society operate on a dry, bureaucratic foundation. In other words, even institutions inherited from earlier periods must adapt to the demands of new conditions. Because modernization leads to, or aims at, specialization and bureaucratization, individuals come to possess knowledge only within their own domains, while claims to total knowledge lose their credibility.[xi] Modernization produces "specialists without spirit."[xii]

It should now be clear that all of these transformations must have profound implications for religion. At the very least, from a Weberian perspective, one of the most significant consequences of this transformative process, which began within religion itself with the European Reformation, a movement directed against the theological authority of the Vatican in Catholic Europe, is that it ultimately poses a serious challenge to religion. In traditional societies, many domains that modern science and bureaucracy now claim as their own once fell under the authority of religion. It is therefore evident that in a "disenchanted" world, religion cannot continue to operate as if nothing has changed.

The Impact of Modernization on Religion

In traditional societies, religion fulfills a wide range of important and diverse roles. In other words, religion regulates not only the relationship between human beings and the supernatural, but also relations among individuals, as well as between individuals and society. It provides meaning and explanation for the surrounding world, legitimizes existing structures, and performs numerous other functions. However, the process that began in the West with the Reformation, while not eliminating the significant role of religion in individual life, nonetheless "severs the umbilical cord between heaven and earth"[xiii] and, over time, reduces religion to merely one aspect of an individual's life. Religion, which once permeated all areas of life, exercising

comprehensive control and defining human existence as a whole, is now confined within the walls of places of worship.

As noted above, this decline is not the result of the Reformation's deliberate attempt to restrict the sphere of religion. Rather, it is a consequence of the broader process of modernization and the specialization it entails. What is at issue here is not simply the separation of religious and secular activities, but the differentiation and specialization of all social institutions. Clear examples of this specialization include, on the one hand, the development of science, which has challenged religion's claim to a monopoly over knowledge about the world and its origins, and, on the other hand, the emergence of the modern state, which has undermined religion's hegemony in areas such as law.[xiv] In other words, whereas all political systems prior to the modern period were in one way or another tied to a particular religion, the modern state that emerged in the West is not bound by such a connection.[xv] This does not mean that religious communities no longer exert any influence over the state or politics, nor that political actors never draw upon religion as a source of motivation. However, in the modern state, religion is no longer the source of legitimacy, nor does it serve as the primary reference point for systems such as law.

Moreover, in what Weber describes as a "disenchanted" world, religion can no longer operate within even its own designated sphere as it once did. In other words, even in matters considered entirely "religious," religion must now speak in the language of secular institutions,[xvi] a point that will be clarified below. Yet this is not the only possible response of religion to modernization. Religion may also reject the space assigned to it and resist the process of modernization.[xvii] In the case of Islam, examples of this include the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the Taliban, and various radical religious

movements in the Middle East, although it should be said that they are themselves in many ways modern. All of these movements can be understood, in essence, as bottom-up reactions to failed modernization projects. That is, such radical religious movements in the Muslim world have often succeeded because they were able to organize the anger of lower social classes around religion in response to socioeconomic injustices. Even in this case, however, it is impossible to interpret "politicized Islam" without reference to the process of modernization, since even the rejection of the modern is itself one of the possible, albeit undesirable from a modernist perspective, outcomes of modernization.

Modernist Religion

By "modernist religion," I refer to religious movements that reject features of religion that are incompatible with reason, or that appear so at first glance, as well as aspects that, on a purely normative level, seem "backward" to us today. In the case of Islam, such movements began to emerge across the Islamic world from the mid-nineteenth century onward.[xviii] Their demands, including calls for modernization, women's rights, education, and the pursuit of science, are well known. However, it should be noted that similar attempts to adopt what are often described as "Western values" within the Islamic world also have parallels in the history of Western churches. For example, the Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965 in order to adapt its doctrine to the demands of the time, resulting in significant changes to church canon.[xix]

It would be incorrect, however, to understand the modernization of religion solely as a top-down process, that is, as an effort by clergy to adapt religion to contemporary conditions. Attempts to modernize religion should be understood as a long-term process and, in many cases, not merely as the adaptation of doctrine to an already established

reality, but as a struggle by religious communities to shape that very reality.[xx]

When discussing modernist religion, it is important to consider the social class character of modernist religiosity. Under the conditions of the modern world, those who seek to preserve their faith while also accepting the challenges of modernization tend to belong to what may be described as the educated middle class. Members of lower social strata, by contrast, often either maintain adherence to what may be called popular religion or gravitate toward orthodox movements. In this context, modernists find themselves simultaneously opposing both popular and orthodox forms of religion. For example, modernists may regard both shrine visitation and practices such as the absolute authority of husbands over their wives, including domestic violence, as contrary to Islam. In other words, modernist Muslims reject the former as a manifestation of idolatry and the latter, for instance, as a distortion of sacred texts.[xxi]

As noted, modernists typically do not claim that they are reforming Islam. Like all religious movements, they present themselves as propagating the "true religion."[xxii] For example, they argue that certain Qur'anic verses concerning women have been misunderstood, distorted, or mistranslated up to the present. Modernist religion is also characterized by a selective use of sacred texts. In other words, modernist Muslims may reject the authority and authenticity of texts other than the Qur'an (Qur'anists), or they may argue that certain hadiths and even some Qur'anic verses are valid only within their original historical context (historicists). This type of innovation can be explained through the concept of "disenchantment." Whereas divine order was previously accepted without question and without being subjected to evaluation in terms of human reason and justice, it is now interpreted through the filter of reason.

Similar tendencies can be observed in matters related to religious practice. For instance, widely familiar claims about the “health benefits of fasting” are themselves manifestations of a modern approach. Regardless of whether a given practice actually has positive effects on human health, presenting religious observance as a rational choice or encouraging it on such grounds does not belong to traditional religious rhetoric. In principle, in traditional societies, the obligation to fast is justified by the fact that God has commanded it. However, the modern individual demands a convincing reason for abstaining from food throughout the day. Thus, religious practice is now promoted not only as obedience to divine command and a means of attaining salvation in the afterlife, but also through an emphasis on its supposed benefits for the body.

Science also assumes great importance in this context. This is not merely a matter of aligning scientific discoveries with religious narratives of divine order. Modernist religion also accepts the authority of science even in cases that appear, at first glance, to undermine religious narratives, such as the theory of evolution. Moreover, when modernist religion challenges popular beliefs, it does so not primarily because they contradict religious doctrine, but because they do not conform to a scientifically informed understanding of the world. Phenomena such as astrology, fortune-telling, and similar practices are rejected not because they are religiously forbidden, but because the notion of predicting the future or of planetary movements influencing human life is considered implausible. Although such debates are outwardly framed in terms of whether these phenomena align with the “true religion,” closer examination of specific cases frequently shows that the primary points of reference are science and reason, though this varies depending on context.

For example, the critique by modernist theologians of attempts to treat illness through prayer or similar practices aimed at “manipulating” supernatural forces can only be understood in

this context. Traditionally, healing through prayer, not only in the form of personal supplication but also through rituals conducted under the guidance of individuals specializing in such practices, has been a common practice. However, the institutions of the modern world require that healthcare, like all other domains, be entrusted to trained specialists.

In making these observations, I do not claim that religion has traditionally had no connection to reason, or that teleology is entirely devoid of rational foundations. In the case of Islam, from its earliest periods there have been efforts to understand both religious obligations and matters of belief on a rational basis.[xxiii] However, such approaches were largely confined to intellectual elites. With modernization, these approaches have become democratized and accessible to broader segments of society.

Thus, as is clear from the foregoing discussion, modernist religion essentially argues that religion is not in conflict with modern values, while traditional values are not only incompatible with the modern but also contrary to the "true religion." In this framework, doctrines that were previously accepted without question on the basis that they were divine commands are subjected to the scrutiny of reason. As a result, they are either accepted because they are deemed conducive to human well-being, rather than simply because they are divinely ordained, or they lose their status as divine commands if they fail to meet these criteria.

Conclusion

Although different schools of sociology attribute it to different processes, the modernization that began in Western Europe resulted in a qualitatively new kind of world. This modern world is characterized by strict specialization, bureaucratization, and rationality. Whereas tradition, personal relationships, and belief played a central role in traditional societies, in the modern world these have been

replaced by impersonal bureaucracy, calculation, and sharp specialization.

The new order that emerged as a result deprived religion of its authority over comprehensive knowledge about the surrounding world and its origins, as well as its role in legitimizing existing conditions and shaping legal systems. In effect, modernization required religion to withdraw into the sphere of private life and to limit its function to regulating the relationship between the individual and the supernatural. Over time, however, it became clear that religions were unwilling to accept this narrowly defined sphere of activity.

Different religions have sought, in various ways, to carve out new domains of activity within the modern world. The phenomenon of modernist religion represents only one of the possible responses of religion to the process of modernization.

The principal distinguishing feature of modernist religion is the replacement of tradition and dogma, which were previously the primary sources for answering specific questions, with reason and science. These movements, which largely serve the demands of an educated social stratum inclined to preserve its faith, accept or reject particular values not on the basis of their conformity with sacred texts, but according to their compatibility with reason and the findings of science.

Notes and References

[i] Araz Bağırov (2026), *The Religious Landscape in Azerbaijan, Part II: Why Are We Becoming More Religious?* Baku Research Institute: https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/the-religious-landscape-in-azerbaijan-part-ii-why-are-we-becoming-more-religious/

[ii] Raymond Williams (2015), *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture*

and Society, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 155–156.

[iii] The translation of the term “modernity” into Azerbaijani as *modernlik* is contested, as the term may also be interpreted as “modernness,” which can be confusing. However, I will not engage in this debate here and will use *modernlik* as the most suitable available option for the time being.

[iv] Max Weber (2005), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge, London, pp. 41–42.

[v] Ibid., p. 74.

[vi] Ibid., p. 123.

[vii] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2002), *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin Books, London, p. 223.

[viii] Max Weber (2019), *Economy and Society*, Harvard University Press, London, pp. 101–108.

[ix] Ibid., p. 66.

[x] Marshall Berman (1998), *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin Books, New York, pp. 90–97.

[xi] Max Weber (2019), *Economy and Society*, pp. 350–352.

[xii] Max Weber (2005), *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 124.

[xiii] Peter L. Berger (1990), *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Anchor, New York, pp. 131–132.

[xiv] José Casanova (1994), *Public Religions in the Modern World*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp. 21–23.

[xv] Charles Taylor (2007), *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press, London, pp. 1–2.

[xvi] Ibid., p. 21.

[xvii] See: José Casanova (1994), *Public Religions in the Modern World*.

[xviii] See: Charles Kurzman (ed.) (2002), *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

[xix] For these changes and their impact, see: José Casanova (1994), *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chapter 7.

[xx] For example, the struggle to abolish the institution of slavery, which was permitted under the doctrines of all Abrahamic religions, was also carried out under the leadership of religious communities. For the history of slavery and its abolition in Islamic societies, see: Jonathan Brown (2018), *Slavery and Islam*, OneWorld, Tamil Nadu.

[xxi] In subsequent writings, I will attempt to provide specific examples when discussing particular modernist movements.

[xxii] Neither here nor in subsequent writings do I take a position on which interpretation among competing religious currents represents the "true religion." Since religion is inherently a matter of interpretation, all sides may be considered justified from their own perspectives. A researcher approaching this issue from the outside can only attempt to analyze how each side substantiates its arguments, which sources it relies upon, and what methodology it employs, but cannot determine the "truth" of any given position.

[xxiii] For an example, see: Sabine Schmidtke (ed.) (2016), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, for instance Chapters 1 and 8.