

## **Rationality, Humanity, and Modernism**

*Dr. Hassan Rahimpour*

*Dr. Rahimpour's paper, as written, comprised four parts. At the conference, he gave his audience this outline: "The first part concerns the definition of modernity. . . . In the second part I will discuss the [dual] approach that we have, or that Muslims have, to the problem and the fact that it's not a case with regard to modernity of [our] saying yes or no, but rather a case of saying yes and no. The third part will discuss issues of epistemology, modernity, and rationalism. The fourth part will concern man and God in modernity, and in this part there will be talk of humanism and human rights, and the second sub-topic will be the [Protestant] Reformation. [Also] the similarities between the Shi'ah Muslims and the Mennonites, with regard to the Reformation, will be discussed. . . ." In the paper as actually delivered, Dr. Rahimpour used the services of a translator, and in the reduced time available had to limit himself to discussing only some of the topics examined at greater length in his manuscript. What follows below is an edited version of the paper as delivered.*

*– Editor*

---

*Dr. Hassan Rahimpour, an expert in Islamic literature, philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence, teaches at the University of Tehran, Iran.*

---

*In the name of God, the Beneficent and the Merciful.*

I am very lucky to have the opportunity to speak to the Mennonite community here. The more the various windows and apertures of outlook to various cultures become open, the more it becomes clear at long last that the desires and truths we all seek are the same. If there [were more] dialogue in the world today, then man would not be forced to use weapons as much, as he would be able to use words in place of weapons. I am hopeful that these types of meetings and dialogues will continue, so that we can find our points of commonality and our points of divergence. Our points of commonality will bring us closer together, and our points of divergence won't lessen the friendship that we have. They will instead increase the opportunities for further thought and contemplation. . . . The topic of my discussion is Islam and modernity, rationality and humanism, or intellectualism and humanism.

Modernity, from the aspect of its ambiguity and variegated scope, has been compared to an accordion. It expands and contracts, playing many different tunes. "Modernity" is a multi-purpose label that is applied to many different and sometimes contradictory things. If modernity has somehow removed doubt in the Christian West, it has nonetheless created many ambiguities in the Muslim East.

What differentiates a modern phenomenon from one that is not modern? Is it a specific time, or exact historical event? Does it hinge upon any particular philosopher, theologian, or artist? or perhaps a certain place? Did modernity and the modern age begin in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, with the advent of the Renaissance and the revival of the humanism of antiquity in Italy? Was it then just a phenomenon restricted to literature and art, both the plastic arts and the canvas arts? Or did modernity begin with the Reformation of the sixteenth century, in defiance of the Catholic church in Rome, and the consequent appearance of Protestantism in Germany and England? Could it have been later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with Descartes, Kant, Hobbes, Locke, Galileo, Newton, that it got its inspiration? Perhaps it was at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of nineteenth centuries, at the time of industrial revolution and accompanying the formation of factories, new trades and industries, and the phenomena of organization in Europe. Or possibly the politics of republicanism in France and America ushered in the modern age.

[More questions abound.] In the realm of art, is it the realism of Courbet that best symbolizes modern painting, or the impressionism of Monet, or perhaps the abstract expressionism of Pollock? Was it Woolf, Joyce, or Hemingway who defined modern literature? Was it the counter melodies and off-key sounds of Schoenberg that were genuinely modern, or was it Stravinsky who revolutionized classical music? Is modern architecture seen in the works of Gropius or better in those of le Corbusier? In the area of religion, we could ask if tolerance and lenience is characteristic of modern religion, if religious tolerance increased in the sixteenth century (the century of reform), and which of the denominations that took shape in that century is truly representative of modern religion. What was the real and original purpose of defying the authority of the church?

In philosophy, is modern epistemology to be marked by the inductive methods of Bacon or the deductive ones of Descartes? Is classical British empiricism modern? Is positivism? As for the epistemological method of Locke or Berkeley, Hume, or Spinoza, or the critiques of Kant— which is more modern? The same can be asked of French neo-skepticism and relativism, English experientialism, German idealism, or American pragmatism. Does modernity claim the absolute possibility of knowledge, or its absolute impossibility?

Turning to the most significant social movements in the West, we observe that fascism, Stalinism, and liberalism are all products of the modern world. By way of imperialism they all made it to Islamic lands, where we have experienced them first-hand. In the philosophy of politics, is it centralization or decentralization and the distribution of power that characterizes modern government? Is it Rousseau's social contract, Locke's liberalism, or Marxist socialism, that is modern? Utopia or the opposite of utopia? Ideology or its absence? Democracy or totalitarianism? Capitalism or socialism? Nationalism or internationalism and globalization? We could also ask if it is Kant's practical morality that is modern, or Carnap's positivistic morality. Is modern morality made by defining, as Bentham and Mill did, the moral good to come from pleasure and benefit, whether social or individual, or is it a matter of feelings and intuitions? Is it a matter of natural morality, evolutionary morality, or moral nihilism?

In the mythology of the Greece of antiquity, man and the gods were at war with each other, the rule of the heavens was totalitarian, and the freedom and ability of man was basically an attack upon the authority and sanctity of the

gods. Man, who wanted freedom, was somebody who had risen against the gods. If he wanted to be in charge of his own destiny and of nature, then he would have to take over the place of the gods, including Zeus. Humanism in the west started off from this negative and pessimistic outlook with regard to the heavens. Prometheus gave the gift of fire from heaven to the people on earth, and by doing so he betrayed the gods. But in the Qur'an, the divine fires are equated with divine wisdom, which God has given directly to man. God calls the people from the darkness to the light.

In western humanism, god and man are enemies of one another, but in the Qur'an God instructs and orders the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam. It was Satan, because he did not prostrate himself, who was removed from the divine presence and sanctity. God has called Adam to be the teacher of the angels, and has said that if there is no intellectuality [to that teaching], what [will be taught] is very base and profane. The Prophet of Islam has said that he who does not have a correct intellect and rationality has no religion. God has given permission in the Qur'an for man to control his own environment and to subordinate nature to his desires without oppression or misuse. God also has not prohibited beauty and pleasure from man. The God of the Prophet did not disparage man and did not become an enemy of man's intellect. The management and ordering of nature is not regarded as opposed to man's spirituality.

Nor are human rights seen as diametrically opposed to the rights of God. Rather, human rights are just a branch and corollary of divine rights. In Islam, things such as power, pleasure, and wealth, and nature and sensuality, are not in themselves essentially lowly or profane. It is rather how we approach them, how we use them, that decides their nature and whether they end up becoming satanic or divine. For this very reason we cannot assign to God the responsibility of any corruption in society. Evil is not innately and intrinsically within nature . . . The same is true with regard to society. To become closer to God, it is not necessary to leave nature. Rather, by [applying] divine morality and the law of God, we can become closer to him.

Thus Islamic humanism is not in opposition to religion or materialism. The respect and honor of man is not gained by rising in opposition to God. Islamic law arose to save and safeguard the nobility of man. Religion is the way to the growth of man, not to its undermining. "Original sin" does not mean that all human beings are sinners and lowly. God does not manifest himself by sacrificing man; rather, the pleasure of God is obtained by serving

humanity and man. By proving and demonstrating the prophethood of prophets, we are really proving or establishing the reality of man. Man, in Islam, can change his human condition, his destiny, and it was God who gave him this power. In turn, man is asked to be responsible. Islam wants man to be God's representative, and to reach such a moral and spiritual stage that no longer is there bloodshed in the world, no right that is taken wrongfully, and no-one who is left hungry, downtrodden, or without shelter.

Islam has an optimistic outlook towards man, but it does not differentiate man's rights from his responsibilities; and it does not separate reality from values, the world from the afterlife, morality from economy, piety from politics, or religion from government. To separate these ideas and entities is to separate the wholeness that is man and to take apart religion. We believe in religious government, but not that religion should be used as a tool in the hands of politicians or be enforced by the use of power. Worship in Islam is not just prayers. It also the attempt to establish justice and to obtain the rights of people; power and wealth must be subordinated to issues of morality. Mysticism in Islam is not about going away and being by yourself; it is not individualistic. It may start that way but it very quickly becomes social. When this happens, then helping the poor and fighting wars for the establishment of justice becomes worship, and becomes mystical.

If Christianity or Buddhism or other religions can come together with secularism, Islam cannot do so, because Islam does not distinguish matters of spirituality from matters of the material world. . . . In Islam, bread is not separated from morality, because human rights do not pertain only to the earth and this order, but are a sacred affair. There is a tradition from the Prophet which says, in effect, that the sanctity of a human being is greater by many degrees than the sanctity of the kaaba. Human rights, its definition and what it involves, will change according to how we define the human being. If we define man [only] as an animal who makes tools, [then] homosexuality, abortion, and the nuclear destruction of other peoples in the name of democracy become counted as a part of human rights. But if we define man in a divine way, there will be differences among the rights that follow from this definition.

In Islam, it is impossible to take away human rights from a human being. But these rights are not such that they can be established by way of invention; they are not conventional, nor can they be taken away by convention. Human rights at root are divine. Man in the world must reach perfection, but

he cannot achieve that goal except by carrying out his responsibility to God and to people. But he cannot carry it out without also having achieved his worldly or material wants. This is why the Qur'an says that the prophets come for three things: to purify the soul, to teach wisdom, and to uphold justice. If a prophet of Islam formed a government, it was for these same reasons. The relationship between this world and the afterlife or other world is not oppositional, nor is it against progress. All the projects and plans foreseen in any acts of progress usually take into account only the forty or fifty years in which a person is normally alive. But this [ignores] the fact that man is an eternal being.

We are in the middle of two opposing trends: one is the eastern philosophies, mysticisms, which do not take into account the reality of the material world at all; the other is Western humanism, which sees only the life of this world and does not see man as an eternal being. To paraphrase a tradition from the Prophet: You must live in this world as if you were going to live in it forever (with regard to planning and so on, for your life here), but you must live for the other world as if you were going to die tomorrow.

Islam, while it is a religion which is for the individual and a religion of worship and morality, is also a social and political religion, and a religion which creates governance. If the *raison d'être* of secularism is to remove violence and war, Islam has an answer and a solution to those problems without needing to use secular methods. If secularism has come to put forward its program of progress, Islam also has its own program of progress without the need for secular ideology. Similarly, if what we mean by humanism is the safeguarding of the sanctity of a human being and humanity, in that sense we are humanists. But if humanism is taken to mean opposition to God and the afterlife, and if it is a call to worship humanity, then we are not humanists. If rationalism or intellectualism means having respect for the intellect, then we are rationalists; but if means rejecting inspiration and revelation, then we are not. In the same way, if instrumental reason is understood to mean living correctly and in an orderly fashion, then we are believers in instrumental reason; but if it implies opposing the higher levels of the intellect and the sacred intellect, then we do not accept it.

As well, if individualism is taken to mean freedom of choice and the creativity of the human spirit, then we are individualists; but if it implies hedonism — that is, the individualism of liberal capitalism — then we are not individualists. If to be worldly means allowing certain pleasures in this world, then we are

worldly, since we do not know pleasure to be an absolute taboo. But if to be worldly means to forget about the afterlife and anything higher than this world and its pleasures, then we are not.

With regard to the final part [of my paper as written] on the similarities between Islam and the Mennonite denomination, I [have] noticed that on eighty percent of the issues where the Mennonites distinguish themselves from other Christian denominations, the perspective of the Shi'ite Muslims is the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Respondent 1**

Your comments about the Anabaptists and the Shiites having eighty percent convergence is something that I have often felt in relationship to Islam. Particularly, the deep concern in Islam about the unity of everything under God and within his kingdom is [also] a deeply felt Anabaptist conviction. [So too is the idea] that the kingdom to come at the conclusion of history really begins in the presence of the kingdom breaking through now. . . . It seems to me it would be helpful for Muslims and Anabaptists to reflect in some depth as to the insights of Qur'anic anthropology. . . . You're touching a very deep issue when you say that when the person is viewed only as material, it becomes catastrophic. I feel very deeply about this, having lived in the former Soviet Union for four years, and [having seen] what happened in a whole culture when a person is viewed only as material. Your very profound statement calls for a critique of that kind of understanding.

### **Respondent 2**

On the accordion of modernity, what notes is Islam willing to play? That is, you said Islam says yes *and* no to modernity. How do you say yes?

### **Rahimpour** (*translated*)

[Consider] certain characteristics of modernity and modernism: rationalism and scientism, induction, skepticism in Christian theology, instrumental reason, technology, urbanization, the division of labor and organization, the bureaucracy of Weber, individualism, humanism, freedom, secularism, liberal catholic

democracy, the free market, consumerism, and progress. These characteristics can be divided into two general sections: one part involves the definition of intellect, its powers and potentials; the second part involves the definition of man, his rights and ability. With regard to the ideas just listed, we have a [two-pronged] approach. On some of them, we have similarities with the modern west, and in others we are closer to the Christian perspective. On other issues and items, we are close to both opinions. . . .

The revolutionary changes that have taken place in the West are understandable to us. It is possible that we are critical of a certain part of [those changes], but they [do] have a logical sequence to them. I'm not sure that what history has said about the dark ages is accurate, and whether or not they were as dark as they are portrayed to be. But what we see in the history of western civilization is that man can be viewed as a single individual. This individual in the middle ages was fanatical and a follower of authority; he didn't use his reason and he didn't know his rights. But this same person in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries became more critical of tradition. Now the movement was away from the Christian tradition towards a mentality of critique and criticism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, non- or anti-religious intellectuals who rose in rebellion [appeared] for the first time. Humanistic revolutions and freedom-seeking movements also arose at this time. The nineteenth century is a century of ideologies, with the secular ideology coming out in the open as anti-religious. It was in the twentieth century that some of these ideologies became empowered, such as Stalinism and fascism. At the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, it was openly acknowledged that the project of modernity was at its end.

If we take these two basic points of reference [as] pillars, one being the intellect and the other being humanity, Islam does not distinguish between reason and faith. This separation started in the middle ages, but it was [only] in the modern era that figures such as Hume and Kant turned it into a theory. In fideism, whether of the type of Kierkegaard or of Wittgenstein, there is no separation between reason and religion or reason and faith.

And [again], with regard to human rights, the worship of God is not diametrically opposed to humanism. If we want to extend the realm of human beings, it is not necessary to constrict the realm of God.



**Respondent 3**

You were talking about man's rights not being opposed to God's rights. How does that relate to the idea of humans as co-creative with God? (So that the life of humankind, of the believer, is working in conjunction with divine purposes, working together in creating creation.)

**Rahimpour** (*translated*)

If what you mean by cooperation is that man is cooperating in the act of creation, then we do not believe in this. God in his act of creation is not in need of any other agent. But if you mean, what is the position or status of humanity and of the human being in the eyes of God, and what is the role of man in the whole story of creation, then we can say that in the Qur'an, the forbidden fruit was not the intellect, was not reason, but was rather oblivion and forgetfulness. Man, in the Qur'an, is defined as the most noble and highest of all of God's creation. God wants man to be his symbol on earth. Man can become this through a certain superior morality. A tradition of the Prophet has God saying, "Oh, my servant, obey me so that I can make you of my own kind, or godlike." This refers to the same way that [from an Islamic perspective] Jesus was made to carry out certain divine acts and functions. The only difference is that he was one of the creations of God, that he was a created being, that he performed functions and acts which were of a divine nature, such as bringing back to life from death. This is why the Qur'an calls Jesus the Spirit of God, and the Word of God.

**Respondent 4**

The statement that probably there's eighty percent convergence between the Shi'a and the Mennonites reminded me of an incident that I once witnessed. The director general for international affairs of the Iranian Red Crescent Society spoke to the executive committee of the MCC board, and one of the members asked him, "What should I think when I see Iranians on TV saying, 'America the great Satan' or 'Death to America'?" He thought a bit and said, "The more that I have learned to know the Mennonites, the more I think that probably you object to the same kinds of things in American society and culture as we in Iran do." Another example of this convergence.

*In the discussion, Prof. Rahimpour elaborated further on some points of commonality between Shi'ah Muslims and Mennonites. The following is an edited version of his remarks. Headings supplied by CGR.— Ed.*

There are certain issues where Mennonites and Shi'ites differ, and on those issues we can't come to a common agreement and must take sides. [However,] there are some common points, and I'm going to list a few of them.

**1. Government and the People** We do not believe that by establishing a government all the difficulties of humanity will disappear. Establishing a humane, good, and just government is very difficult. We also believe that we must start with small communal or community projects. But this is [only] a good start, it's not the end. From what I hear, Mennonites were always an oppressed minority. Mennonites may be pessimistic with regard to government because of this historical experience. Dr. Reimer said it is not possible to arrive at the ideal utopia using the nation state. He didn't say we mustn't do it, he said it can't be done. We also agree that a government that is one hundred percent good is impossible.

**2. Use of Violence** The valid or just defense by nations of their own security is a very difficult question. It is not so much that we want to endorse violence, but what we're saying is that the defense mechanism of humanity must not be totally put aside. {Consider} AIDS: What it does in a human being's body is get rid of its immune (defense) system and make it vulnerable to all different types of bacteria and disease. The idea of jihad is the idea of defending the state from oppression. . . . The good morality Mennonites have is exactly the spirit that all the prophets from Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jesus and Mohammed have wanted to create in man. We mustn't kill so easily, take another human life so easily, because life is sanctified. We must defend life.

**3. Worship and the Believer** What I've heard about the Mennonites is that you are opposed to the organized form of worship of, say, the Catholic church, and the bartering of salvation. You also oppose the rule that Catholic priests are not allowed to get married, because you don't see marriage to be something that would take a person away from God. You don't see it to be an

impure or lowly act. We in Islam also believe that for worship and for repentance, there is no need for mediation. We also believe that confession can only be done in front of God and no one else. We don't believe that a person should go and confess in front of another human spiritual authority. Repentance and forgiveness is available to all. Marriage is allowed priests with the condition that they don't go overboard.

**4. Role of Scripture** Some people might see this as a form of fundamentalism, but it's our belief that referring to scripture, or being based in scripture, is to live a life according to the divine will. We believe that the Qur'an must be for the very fabric of our daily life. We are not opposed to the Qur'an being translated . . . but to understand the text we must know Arabic and the Arabic culture of the time. We know the audience of the Qur'an to be all people and all humanity. Every individual believer has the right to read the Qur'an, and an interpretation of the Qur'an must take place according to the time in which it is being done. . . The nature and methodology of the interpretation of scripture is a very exact science we can't go into here.

**5. Lifestyle** Mennonites are against living a luxurious, wasteful, and ostentatious life. This is also an Islamic value, but of course not all Islamic values are put into practice in Islamic society.

**6. Helping the Poor and Needy** We have heard that various Mennonite groups go all around the world helping other people. This humanitarianism is also one of the moral virtues of Islam. The Prophet of Islam has said that if in your city there is a person who is hungry and you are not aware of that person or not helping that person, then you are not of me, you are not of my community. Helping the poor without humiliating and belittling them is something that is necessary and called for in Islam. We're all responsible, and governments are more responsible than individuals.

**7. Family and Marriage** The integrity of family is one of the more important values in Islam. Consider some of the advice [given] in Islam for dealing with women. The interaction between men and women should not go out of the human sphere and become banal and animalistic. Woman must not be turned

into a commodity, because if this happens then the first insult will be to woman herself and the family structure would break apart.

**8. Responsibility toward Humanity** Both Mennonites and Muslims have a sense of this.

**9. Baptism and Maturity** Mennonites believe that baptism should occur only after maturity and with the decision and free choice of the individual, of the worshiper. In Islam also it is only with the advent of maturity that religious responsibility becomes obligatory for a boy or a girl. Of course, from a legal point of view, a child that is born into a Muslim family is Muslim in that sense, but as far as responsibility for carrying out the acts of religion, the responsibilities of religion, that doesn't come until maturity.

**10. Private Property** [*This point was not fleshed out.*]

**11. Intellect and Faith, or Reason and Faith** Shi'ite thinkers are rationalists, but they're not Cartesian. [Like Mennonites] they do not [take] reason to be sufficient in and of itself. In fact, they don't see the higher levels of the intellect to be sufficient without faith being involved. Faith, according to us, is not just a verbal discourse, it's not just words. Without sincerity, the intellect and reason is of no value. The Qur'an says that it is a guide for the pious.

**12. Pluralism** Pluralism, [as understood using] the meaning which Dr. Reimer enunciated, is [something else we have in common]. *See Reimer's article in this issue.—Ed.*

---

*Cover Photo: Iranian scholars visit an Old Order Mennonite farm in Waterloo County. L-R: A bemused onlooker, Hamid Parsania, Hassan Rahimpour, Aboulhassan Haghani, Ed Martin, Jim Reimer, Muhammad Farimani, Yousef Daneshvar. Photo supplied by TMTC.*