

Renewing Islam in the Modern World

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The modern world, marked by rapid change, globalisation, and technology, has reshaped life in unprecedented ways. Yet, it is also an era scarred by aggressive secularisation, rampant consumerism, and the erosion of moral and spiritual foundations. God-centredness is increasingly treated as a private matter, with religious authority increasingly pushed to the margins. As a result, Muslims (like many other faith communities) are left grappling with how to stay relevant, maintain identity, and find their place in public life.

Ironically, despite its remarkable progress, the modern world may be more in need of spiritual and ethical grounding than ever before. The relentless pursuit of economic growth, technological mastery, and personal freedom has produced societies that are materially prosperous yet morally fragile and spiritually adrift. Rising anxiety, inequality, environmental degradation, loneliness, and the breakdown of family and community life, and so on, all point to a deeper crisis of meaning, one in which individuals struggle to find authentic connection and lasting purpose beyond material success and fleeting pleasures.

In such a climate, as sincere believers, we see Islam's enduring spiritual, ethical and moral traditions as more vital than ever. In the remembrance of God not only do hearts find contentment (Qur'an, 13:28) but also a moral compass for us as individuals and as a society wrestling with questions of progress, justice, equity, and human dignity.

This presents a unique opportunity to bring Islamic paradigms into focus and to demonstrate how Islam speaks meaningfully to contemporary challenges, whether spiritual, social, economic or political. The modern world, rather than being a threat to religious identity, can be seen as a testing ground for renewal (*tajdid*), a space where Islamic values and God-centredness can affirm its relevance in promoting human flourishing, for all people.

For such a reframing to take place, Muslims, in perhaps every part of the world, must cultivate a deeper

level of religious literacy. To know one's religion is an inviolable imperative. Yet, as I will outline in this short essay, there are recurring pitfalls that too often hinder such efforts, diminishing our ability to renew Islam in the modern world, both for ourselves as believers and for the wider society to which we belong.

Removing problematic categories

As Muslims, we often place religion into unhelpful categories or draw false comparisons that hinder a fuller realisation of God's guidance. A common example is the way popular discourse sets *deen* (religion) against *dunya* (world), as if they are opposites. Yet such a dichotomy does not exist in Islam. *Deen* is for the *dunya*, the two are inseparable. It is within worldly life that we secure reward in the *Akhirah* (Hereafter) by living a God-centred, righteous life, striving sincerely so that our good deeds outweigh bad deeds on God's ultimate scales of judgment (*mizan*).

When we frame *deen* and *dunya* as rivals, we risk implying that religion is detached from the struggles, complexities, and dilemmas of modern life. But God commands us to seek goodness in this world as well as the next (Qur'an, 2:201). Our task is to make *deen* not only relevant but also empowering in the *dunya*, guiding us to navigate its challenges while orienting us towards success in the Hereafter (*Akhirah*).

Navigating the *dunya* with *deen* means recognising that religion and worldly life are intertwined, transforming daily living into spiritual and ethical growth and service to God (*'ubudiyyah*) and humanity (*khidmah*).

Similarly, we often use the term "secular" to avoid godly reasoning and responsibility. Yet, whatever sphere of life we find ourselves in, God is ever watchful and Islamic values such as justice, human dignity, integrity, stewardship of resources etc. remain relevant.

Embracing Islam's universal principles and outlook

Engaging with Islam's universal principles means recognising that its vision is not bound by culture, geography or external categories. At its core are values that speak to all people: justice, mercy, human dignity, care for the earth, and the oneness of humanity. The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) was sent as a mercy (*rahmah*) for all of creation. That is, what he brought, exemplified or stood for is beneficial not only to humanity but to all creation (Qur'an, 21:107).

Islam's outlook is expansive. It sees life as interconnected, where faith is expressed not only in rituals but in how we, for example, treat others, react to things, uphold fairness, protect what we have been entrusted with. Every act of kindness or effort to make others' lives easier (*birr / ihsan*) can become worship, and so on.

This expansive view recognises that Islam is not limited to personal spirituality but extends to social justice, environmental stewardship, and responsible leadership. It teaches that humanity is part of a larger system created by God, where every individual has a role as a caretaker (*khalifah*) on earth, responsible for promoting peace, equity, and care for all creation. True worship of God is visible through how we embody ethical values in everyday life, whether in family, community, business, or governance, and in making faith a practical force for good in the world.

This broad perspective encourages unity and respect for diversity, seeing individuals as part of a human family (*Banu Adam*), and souls on their own journeys back to God. It invites believers to connect their inner spiritual awareness with outward action, transforming society through mercy (*rahmah*), justice (*'adl*), truthfulness (*sidq*), integrity/steadfastness (*istiqamah*), patience/grit (*sabr*), and love (*muhabbah*). These are just some of the core values that ought to determine the actions and outlook of a sincere believer.

To embrace this universality is to look beyond division, religious identitarianism, and narrow and sectarian viewpoints. Reducing God's guidance to mere group identity, for example, narrows the spiritual and ethical scope of Islam, and often it leads to exclusionary belonging or rigid ways of thinking. Yet, God calls us to see the stranger as a neighbour (Qur'an, 49:13), to value diversity as part of God's design (Qur'an, 30:22), and to measure our worth by the good we leave behind (Qur'an, 2:26). In this way, Islam offers a framework for living with purpose, compassion,

humility, and responsibility in a shared world.

Similarly, reducing "Muslimness" to a fixed mode of identity, either fully "on" or "off," or squeezed into labels like "moderate," "progressive," or "conservative," misses the complexity and spectrum of what it means to be Muslim. When "Muslimness" is framed as mere "religious conservatism," Islam itself is cast as a suspicious "Other" within liberal, secular settings. When it is conflated with "Islamism," the faith is collapsed into a purely political project.

Such oversimplifications distort reality. Muslim life and practice cannot be pinned down to a single mode of being, nor neatly mapped onto outside categories of "reform," "tradition," "progress," "change". As believers we need to transcend these labels and embody Islam's universal vision, one that unites rather than divides, and that calls us to live as witnesses of justice, compassion, and human dignity for all.

Being realistic about the world today

The sociologist Phillip Lewis rightly writes that, *"All too often, journalistic and political commentary on Islam supposes that actual ethnic particularities are subordinate to the aspirational rhetoric of belonging to one, undivided, world-wide community – the umma. The reality is quite different"* (Lewis, 1994). Muslim communities whether in the West or across the world are far from monolithic; they are plural, internally diverse, and animated by the same human needs and interests as their fellow non-Muslim citizens. Yet media and even Muslims often collapse this diversity into simplistic categories.

Being realistic about the *ummah* means acknowledging both its power as an ethical and spiritual ideal, and its limits as a description of lived Muslim experience. Islam's universality does not erase difference; rather, it gives space for local cultures, languages, and practices to evolve while remaining rooted in shared principles of faith. To belong to the *ummah*, then, is not to dissolve into uniformity, but to carry a sense of solidarity that coexists with diversity. At the same time, we must recognise that for Muslims today, the *ummah* is experienced more as an emotional and spiritual concept than a political reality. Thus, while it inspires solidarity across borders, political, social, economic, and geographical conditions inevitably shape its practical expression, which is how it has always been.

This recognition matters, because many of the concerns Muslims grapple with, family, livelihood, dignity, justice, are not uniquely Muslim, but profoundly human. Islam has a framework where the universal



and the particular can meet. Where a sense of belonging to the wider *ummah* sits alongside an embrace of local contexts and the wider human fraternity and needs.

Being realistic about the world also extends to technological advances, especially emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI). While AI promises remarkable benefits, Muslims must approach these developments with thoughtful scepticism, assessing not only their practical utility but also their impact on spiritual, moral, and ethical foundations from an Islamic perspective.

Islamic ethics (based on justice (*ʿadl*), mercy (*rahmah*), human dignity (*karamah*), upright conduct (*ibsan*), and trustworthiness (*sidq*) and so on) offer a framework for evaluating AI's influence on human identity and relationships. These principles ensure that technology serves humanity rather than diminishing it. After all, as the Qur'an reminds us, God has "certainly honoured (*karramna*) the children of Adam" (Qur'an, 17:70), affirming that human dignity is sacred and must not be diminished by artificial intelligence.

The rise of AI raises important questions about privacy, accountability, bias, and the potential erosion of moral responsibility when decisions are delegated to machines. In the Qur'an God says: "And when he turns away, he strives throughout the land to spread mischief in it and destroy crops and cattle. And Allah does not like mischief" (Qur'an, 2:205). This verse highlights the destructive behaviour of someone who, after turning away from truth, causes corruption and harm on earth, which God disapproves. It is a reminder against spreading corruption, whether physical, social, or moral. In the context of technology (AI, media platforms, software applications, algorithms, automatic decisioning, chatbots etc.), Muslims are reminded to ensure technology aligns with values that uphold fairness, rights, compassion, and

accountability.

This stance does not reject technological innovation but insists on embedding these ethical values into the development and use of AI. It also calls for vigilance against uncritical application of new technologies that might undermine the spiritual meaning of being human, the sense of community, or the moral agency entrusted to individuals.

In this way, Muslims can contribute to global conversations on AI and technology, advocating for a balanced approach that safeguards ethical integrity, promotes social benefit, and respects the transcendent purpose of human life.

Becoming religiously literate

In an age of information, where often everything seems to meet and interpenetrate everything else, understanding religion and how to draw guidance from revelation, requires more than surface knowledge, titbits of information or watching endless short form videos. Religious literacy is the ability to engage deeply and critically with beliefs, practices, histories, and ideas without reducing them to stereotypes or slogans. It allows us to see the richness, diversity, and nuance within faith traditions, and to recognise how they interact with culture, politics, and daily life.

Islamic theology has always been a living tradition, capable of grappling with the dilemmas of any age. The Qur'an itself invites reflection, reasoning, and ethical discernment, urging believers to think, question, and apply its guidance to changing circumstances (Qur'an, 3:190-191). Across history, Muslim scholars drew on this theological depth to address new challenges, whether in philosophy, science, law, international relations, government or economics, without losing sight of Islam's universal principles like justice, mercy, and human dignity.

In the modern world, this depth remains vital. The dilemmas we face (e.g. climate change, technological



disruption, meaninglessness, economic development, inequality, questions of identity and belonging etc.) cannot be resolved by shallow appeals to rigid formulas or by reducing Islam to cultural identity. They require the careful work of theological reasoning: returning to revelation, engaging with the intellectual heritage of Islamic scholarship, and applying insights to contemporary contexts with both faithfulness and creativity.

When engaged with seriously, Islamic theology equips believers not only to preserve their faith but also to enrich the broader human conversation. Its intellectual and ethical reasoning show that religion is not opposed to modern life; rather, it offers moral clarity, depth, and guidance in navigating its uncertainties and upheavals.

But Muslims today can often find themselves caught in what might be described as a form of “medievalism”: an attachment to interpreting Islam strictly through the lens of historical contexts, legal rulings, and cultural norms frozen in a past era. This medievalism, while rooted in respect for tradition, sometimes hinders the vital process of translating Islamic thought into meaningful and dynamic applications for modern life and the experiences of Muslims now.

Such an approach may lead to a narrow or literalist view that overlooks the broader ethical, spiritual, and rational principles that underpin Islamic teachings. It often leaves believers struggling to reconcile faith with issues like modern governance, scientific progress, human rights, gender equity, and economic systems. The rich legacy of Islamic theology, which historically fostered intellectual inquiry, adaptability, and renewal (*tajdid*), can be overshadowed by a fear-driven focus on rituals over broader contextual understanding. This can often, and indeed does, contribute to the perception that Islam is incompatible with the modern world, reinforcing cultural alienation among some Muslims and fuelling external

misconceptions.

To move beyond medievalism, sincere believers and Muslim communities must develop a deeper religious literacy, one that goes beyond rote adherence and shallow or sectarian understanding. This involves revisiting primary sources, the Qur'an and Sunnah, with a critical, reflective, and principled lens, drawing on the body of intellectual heritage, reasoning and tools (such as in *fiqh*, *usul*, *tafsir*, *maqasid*, *kalam*) developed by scholars who engaged thoughtfully with their own contexts. It means recognising Islam's universal ethical values (e.g. justice, mercy, human dignity, stewardship of the earth, and so on) and applying them creatively, confidently and rationally to the realities today without compromising God-centeredness.

Moving beyond medievalism also requires fostering an ongoing critical dialogue between tradition and contemporary knowledge, while encouraging diverse voices within Muslim scholarship to engage with modern challenges. By doing so, Islam can continue its historic role as a living, vibrant tradition that speaks powerfully to today's world, equipping believers to live authentically God-centred lives in the modern era. This dynamic interpretation underscores that true commitment to Islam includes renewal (*tajdid*) and contextualisation (*takeef*) rather than rigid repetition or mere cultural preservation.

Learning the art of engagement and disengagement

Believers must learn to engage with the modern world without losing God-centredness. Islam does not call for withdrawal from life's blessings, but for balance: embracing the *dunya* as a path to success in the *Akhirah*. The Qur'an instructs: “And seek, through that which God has given you, the home of the Hereafter; but do not forget your share of the world” (Qur'an, 28:77).

The sincere believer's engagement with the world

starts from a foundation of spiritual awareness, keeping God at the centre of one's intentions and actions. Every effort to earn a lawful livelihood, care for family, contribute to society, and pursue personal development can become acts of worship when done with God-consciousness (*taqwa*).

Yet, believers must also cultivate the wisdom to disengage from excessive and wasteful materialism, and distractions that erode, faith, spiritual values and righteous character (*'amal al-salih*). God commands moderation, warning against extravagance and indulgence (Qur'an, 7:31). Through conscious reflection and self-discipline, Muslims can protect their hearts from becoming attached to fleeting pleasures and worldly obsession, maintaining a steadfast focus on life's moral and spiritual purpose.

Disengagement does not mean neglecting duties or ignoring the challenges of modern life, but setting boundaries that prioritise justice, dignity, and piety. It involves rejecting unethical practices, nurturing prayer and contemplation (*tadabbur*), and strengthening community ties. The Prophet embodied this balance, fulfilling worldly responsibilities while remaining rooted in worship. This balance requires continual awareness so the world remains a place of service to God (*'ubudiyyah*) and humanity (*khidmah*).

Conclusion

Renewing Islam in the modern world requires more than defending tradition or adopting whatever is in the modern world uncritically. It calls for recovering Islam's universal vision, rooted in remembrance of God, animated by justice, mercy, and human dignity, and expressed through balance in worldly engagement. By cultivating deeper religious literacy, rejecting narrow categories, and embracing Islam's expansive ethical outlook, believers can show that their faith is not a relic of the past but a living force for human flourishing. In an age marked by uncertainty, instability and moral fragmentation, Islam's enduring message offers clarity, grounding, and hope. True progress is not in material pursuits alone, but in aligning all aspects of life with God's guidance.

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