



THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO MODERNISM: CIVILIZATIONAL SHIFTS AND RELIGIOUS ADAPTATION

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Abstract: *Modernism, marked by rapid industrialization, secularization, and rationalist thought, has posed significant challenges and opportunities for religious traditions globally. Theological responses to modernism have ranged from reformist and revivalist movements to reactive fundamentalism. This paper explores how major world religions, particularly within Islamic, Christian, and Jewish frameworks, have interpreted and responded to the epistemological and social disruptions introduced by modernity. Focusing on civilizational shifts, the paper examines how theological discourses have evolved to maintain spiritual relevance while negotiating with the philosophical underpinnings of modernism. A special emphasis is placed on the adaptive mechanisms in Muslim societies, including Pakistan, where theologians attempt to reconcile tradition with transformation.*

INTRODUCTION:

Modernism, as both a cultural movement and philosophical orientation, emerged in response to the rapid transformations brought by the Enlightenment, industrialization, and scientific progress. It champions rationality, empiricism, individualism, and secular governance—ushering in an era where traditional metaphysical and religious worldviews were increasingly questioned or marginalized.

At its epistemological core, modernism prioritizes human reason as the ultimate arbiter of truth. This emphasis on empirical evidence and skepticism toward metaphysical claims created a paradigm shift that deeply affected religious thought and practice. The belief in progress,

autonomy of the self, and disillusionment with religious authority structures challenged long-standing theological frameworks.

Originating in Western Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries, modernism soon extended its influence globally through colonial expansion, education systems, and cultural diffusion. Non-Western societies—particularly in the Muslim world, including South Asia—faced the dilemma of reconciling their theological traditions with the aggressive secularism and scientism embedded in modernist ideology.

Religious scholars and theologians perceived modernism as a dual-edged sword: while it provided tools for critical reflection and reform, it also threatened core spiritual doctrines by emphasizing a human-centered, rather than God-centered, worldview. The tension between divine revelation and human rationalism lies at the heart of many theological responses to modernity.

2. Historical Context of Theological Challenges

The rise of modernism was closely tied to pivotal historical processes such as colonialism, the scientific revolution, and the institutionalization of secular governance. These developments profoundly impacted the theological landscapes of both Western and non-Western societies.

Colonialism not only imposed political domination but also exported Western epistemologies and secular frameworks to colonized regions. In Muslim-majority societies like the Indian subcontinent, traditional religious authority was undermined by colonial education systems and legal reforms that marginalized Islamic jurisprudence and theology.

Simultaneously, the scientific revolution and Enlightenment thought challenged theological narratives by promoting a worldview grounded in empiricism and materialism. The metaphysical aspects of religion—miracles, prophecy, divine intervention—were increasingly dismissed as irrational or unscientific.

This shift contributed to the erosion of ecclesiastical and scholarly authority. In Christianity, the authority of the Church was questioned, leading to schisms and doctrinal crises. In Islam, the role of the madrasa and the ulama was contested by secular intelligentsia. Similar challenges emerged in Judaism, where rabbinic authority was reevaluated in light of modern values like individual autonomy and historical criticism.

As secular institutions gained prominence—universities, parliaments, legal systems—religion was relegated to the private sphere. The disintegration of the sacred canopy (as described by Peter Berger) set the stage for theological reinterpretation, resistance, or reform.

3. Theological Responses in Major Religions

Islam

Islamic responses to modernism have ranged from intellectual reform to doctrinal rigidity. Reformers like **Sir Syed Ahmed Khan** (1817–1898) advocated reinterpretation (ijtihad) of Islamic teachings in light of modern science and reason. His emphasis on rationalist exegesis challenged traditionalist views and promoted compatibility between Islam and modern knowledge.

Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938) envisioned a dynamic and spiritually reawakened Muslim ummah. He rejected blind imitation (taqlid) and emphasized reconstructing Islamic thought to empower Muslims intellectually and politically in a post-colonial world.

Later scholars like **Fazlur Rahman** promoted contextual reinterpretation of the Qur'an, arguing for an ethical reading rather than a literalist approach. Such efforts highlight an adaptive Islamic theology engaging modern values without relinquishing core spiritual principles.

Christianity

Christian theology responded to modernism with both defensive and transformative strategies. **Neo-orthodoxy**, championed by theologians like Karl Barth, reasserted divine transcendence and biblical revelation in response to liberal theology's accommodation of modern thought.

Liberation Theology, particularly in Latin America, merged Christian doctrine with socio-political activism, arguing that faith must address economic and social injustices. This movement exemplified how theology adapted to the moral demands of modernity while resisting secular materialism.

The **Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962–1965)** marked a turning point for Catholicism. It opened dialogue with modern culture, encouraged liturgical reform, and recognized religious freedom—demonstrating institutional willingness to engage with the contemporary world while reaffirming doctrinal authority.

Judaism

Judaism's response to modernity produced three major movements:

- **Orthodox Judaism** retained traditional interpretations and practices, resisting secular influences.
- **Conservative Judaism** sought a middle path, preserving core practices while accommodating historical scholarship and modern values.
- **Reform Judaism** embraced modernity, reinterpreting Jewish law and ritual to align with contemporary ethical sensibilities.

These divisions reflect the ongoing negotiation between religious identity and the pressures of modern social, intellectual, and political life.

4. Civilizational Shifts and Religious Thought

The modern era has witnessed profound civilizational transformations, particularly the rise of **human rights discourse**, **pluralism**, and **individualism**—concepts that challenge traditional theological frameworks.

The modern emphasis on **human rights** promotes personal dignity, freedom of belief, and gender equality—often clashing with religious doctrines rooted in pre-modern contexts. For instance, concepts like freedom of religion, women's rights, and LGBTQ+ rights present complex theological challenges for religions with established moral codes and hierarchical traditions.

Pluralism, both cultural and religious, demands that theology confront the reality of coexistence. No longer confined to homogenous societies, religious communities now operate

within multicultural and multi-faith environments. This shift compels theologians to rethink exclusivist claims and explore interfaith dialogue, inclusivity, and tolerance as theological imperatives.

Individualism, a core tenet of modern liberal thought, privileges personal conscience and autonomy over collective or institutional authority. This has led to a decline in religious institutional loyalty and a rise in “spiritual but not religious” identities. For theology, the challenge lies in remaining authoritative without being authoritarian.

Post-Enlightenment thought, characterized by secular humanism, moral relativism, and skepticism towards metaphysical claims, has deeply influenced public discourse and education systems. The separation of church/mosque/synagogue and state has redefined the role of religion from a central authority to a private, often marginalized voice.

Media and digital technologies have reshaped religious narratives. Social media platforms have democratized religious interpretation, allowing laypersons and reformists to challenge clerical authority. Digital sermons, online fatwas, and virtual religious communities represent new modes of religious engagement, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers.

The convergence of these civilizational shifts demands a theology that is not only intellectually robust but socially responsive and morally persuasive in the age of globalization and digital culture.

5. Case Study: Theological Adaptation in Pakistan

Pakistan provides a compelling case study for understanding how theology negotiates the tensions between tradition and modernity in a post-colonial Muslim context.

Institutional Responses

Institutions like the **International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI)** and **Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Sciences** have attempted to address theological challenges posed by modernism. IIUI promotes Islamic scholarship through engagement with contemporary academic disciplines, offering platforms for discourse on Islamic economics, law, and philosophy.

Al-Mawrid, founded by Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, explicitly aims to reinterpret Islamic teachings in light of reason, ethics, and contextual understanding. It emphasizes the Quran as the central source and advocates for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) over *taqlid* (blind following).

Role of Key Scholars

Javed Ahmad Ghamidi represents a rationalist and reformist voice within contemporary Pakistani Islam. He supports democracy, human rights, and interfaith harmony, and advocates reinterpretation of contentious issues like jihad, hudood punishments, and women's roles based on a contextual reading of the Quran.

Fazlur Rahman, a pioneering 20th-century scholar, critiqued traditionalist literalism and emphasized ethical values in interpreting the Quran. He proposed a double-movement theory: understanding the historical context of revelation and reapplying its moral principles to the modern age.

Both scholars argue that Islamic teachings, when rightly understood, are not inherently incompatible with modern democratic values or scientific rationality.

Contemporary Challenges

Despite intellectual efforts, theological adaptation in Pakistan faces several obstacles:

- **Reconciling democracy and Shariah law** remains a contentious issue. While democratic governance is constitutionally affirmed, its practical implementation often clashes with clerical interpretations of Islamic law.
- **Gender rights** in Pakistan are hindered by patriarchal interpretations of religious texts, despite reformist arguments supporting equality and justice.
- **Sectarianism** and political misuse of religion further complicate the environment for meaningful theological reform.

These challenges highlight the complexity of religious adaptation in a state where Islamic identity is constitutionalized, yet modern civic ideals continue to exert pressure on religious discourse.

Summary:

The confrontation between modernism and traditional theology has catalyzed both conflict and creative renewal within religious traditions. As modernism advocates a secular, rational, and human-centered worldview, theology has responded with reform, resistance, and reinterpretation. This paper examines these responses across Islamic, Christian, and Jewish contexts, showing how each has negotiated modernist ideologies. A focused study on Pakistan illustrates how Islamic theology attempts to balance between doctrinal integrity and modern demands. Theological adaptation remains crucial in ensuring religion's continued relevance in shaping ethical, civilizational, and spiritual frameworks.

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