

# ISLAM AND MODERNITY: A CONSTRUCTION ACCORDING TO BELLAH'S AND RAHMAN'S THOUGHT

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## *Abstract*

Two scholars have been thinking of modernity using different methods. Bellah employs a comparative-historical-sociological method, which places Islam in the historical context and compares it to the existence of Abraham religions prior to Islam, especially considering the social system. Meanwhile, Rahman employs a hermeneutic method, especially in approaching al-Qur'an. Rahman's method double movement hermeneutics. Bellah uses an inductive thinking style in a short formulation, while Rahman uses a deductive way of thinking.

## **Abstrak**

Dua orang sarjana telah mengembangkan pemahaman dengan dua metode berbeda. Bellah menggunakan suatu pendekatan komparatif-historis-sosiologis yang menempatkan Islam dalam konteks dan membandingkannya dengan keberadaan agama Abraham, yang hadir lebih dulu sebelum Islam, khususnya berdasarkan sistem sosial yang melingkunginya. Sedangkan Rahman menggunakan metode hermeneutik, khususnya dalam memahami al-Qur'an. Metode yang diterapkan Rahman adalah hermeneutika gerak rangkap. Bellah menerapkan gaya pikir induktif dalam formulasi singkat, sedangkan Rahman menerapkan gaya pikir deduktif.

**Kata kunci:** *Islam, modernitas*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

All nations are involved in modernization process. The manifestation of the process is at first seen in eighteenth century England and well-known as Industry Revolution. The indication of the revolution is since then widespread across the world. The spread is considered as normal that there is no more space for a nation not to be involved in the process.

Modern people have their own varying beliefs in themselves and in the modern era. There are those who feel liberated from their tradition and praise the change. There are also those who

believe that modern people are extracted from their traditional values and way of life. They worry that the change results in the loss of the value of their prior social life. They refer to an active consumer society as the evidence of the impact of modern society. It is clearly observed in the every changing life style of the consumers as a result of the industry of mass communication.

Such a modernization is at the sociological level a bureaucratic process that establishes complex social systems. The identity of the modernity is characterized by the differentiation of social world and subjective world with complex

institutional and also consciousness structures. Religion as a part of the consciousness structure provides modern people with the normative and cognitive structures in dealing with their world. Max Weber in his book *Protestantische Etik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* proposes a description of the impact of Christianity on the working ethics that results in the emergence of the capitalism. It means that religious values are able to support modernization process.

This brief paper represents an attempt to find the correlation between Islam and modernity referring to the two articles by Robert Bellah entitled "*Islamic Tradition and the Problem of Modernization*" and Fazlur Rahman in his book "*Islam and Modernity*". It is organized in four following sections: introduction, the historical background of modernity, a descriptive analysis of Bellah's and Rahman's thoughts on Islam and modernity, and closing.

## II. DISCUSSION

### 2.1. Glance at Modernity

Considering its historical roots, modernity is characterized by the epistemological separation between subject and object by Descartes through his concept of methodological doubts.

Descartes radically makes the separation between subject and object and it has been the point of departure of modern thoughts. In other words, modern philosophy begins with the reversal of the realm center that human being is the master and the ruler of the world. "It is not the mind of human being that has to adjust to the physical environment, but the nature to the norms in the mind of human being." Cosmocentrism has changed into anthropocentrism. Thus, rationality and consciousness are the key words into the discourse of rationality.

Descartes' view of *cogito ergo sum* (I think and hence I am) implicates in the loss of the enchantment of the world. Physical environment with its fear stimulating mystical power and at the same time an enchantment does not influence and form human mind. The natural environment is challenged and given meaning as material realm or merely as object (Hardiman, 1993; 120). Consequently, there emerges the autonomy and the very freedom of the subject in interpreting the reality.

Such autonomy and freedom are increasingly

crystallized and grow excessively with the increase in the role played by the reasoning as the device of self-expression. For Hegel, reality represents a manifesting process of the reason and hence human being are in its development. Human being is a process and is not the substance, but the subject. The reality as a process constitutes the act of making explicit and negation, that is the reality that makes itself the object by alienating itself and finding new identity in the alienation. Human being is involved in the process that they find themselves in their negation. Since rationality represents itself through negativity, the negativity includes the principle meaning of progress both in the reality and in the meaning of the reality and in both (Magnis-Suseno, 1992; 23).

The process of making itself explicit and the negation has resulted in the human being awareness of the "distance" between itself and the objective world. At the phase, human being considers the world and the things within it as an ever-changing process.

It is the self of human being that serves as subject in a constant relationship between subject and object. That way the object becomes alienated and seems to be something threatening. The salvation of the self against the world of threatening objects is possible only by making the objective world the objectification of the subject's self. The objectification is achieved when the subject is able to make itself an object in the things and then considers itself as being within the object. It is achieved in working and creating because human being gives the natural things a human form that the things become human and the human threatening and alienated nature disappears. Thus, working becomes the expression of human being itself. For instance, human being feels increasingly human and has complete dignity when they manage to transform the things into certain device in satisfying their needs.

The implication of Hegel's thought on rationality-negativity is the increasingly strong thoughts of dialectics in the history. It is the point of modernity in term that history is essentially considered as progressive history. Particularly, each individual knows more and collectively in a commune it is unavoidable, sooner or later, that they have to learn something new though it poses the thoughts to the filter of ta-

boos and cultural restriction.

Following Hegel, the discourse of the modernity with its rationality-negativity continues. The dialectics of reason goes into progressive history that is variously interpreted. At least, there is a dichotomy between the right Hegelian and the left Hegelian. The word "right" means the interpretation of the dialectics ends in the absolute reason and is of religious transcendent. Meanwhile, the left Hegelian has its radical insight that the dialectic process has not ended and barely rejects the interpretation of absolute reason as the manifestation of something religious and transcendent. Even the left Hegelian, as Marx radically criticizes Hegel by suggesting "Hegel has transformed the understanding of the world and not transformed the world per se".

The course of modernity concept from the separation of the subject and object has resulted in the other modern consciousness, which are: 1) progress, 2) individuation, 3) emancipation, and 4) secularization. Progress represents a consciousness that time flows and can not be reversed. Subjectivity is described as an individual who tries to free itself from collective entities or 'individuation'. The individual tends to be conscious of itself and autonomous in term of being able to its own nomos (laws). Emancipation is the drive of the individuals to transform its existence related to the social structure and secularization is the consciousness to separate the sacred from the profane. In short, modern consciousness is the sequence of human consciousness changes and developments (Hardiman, 1993; 121-124).

Using the same tone both Bellah and Fazlur Rahman organize their thoughts of Islam and modernity. Bellah uses what so-called dramatic universality as the point of departure that is later applied in the history of Islam. He defines a dramatic universe is at the extreme end of fusion, undifferentiation, and lack of personal choice, and one at the other extreme that is open, highly differentiated, and has the maximum element of personal choice. Needless to say these are ideal types, heuristic devices. Subsequently, he formulates the intrinsic values of modernity in Islam and the problem it deals with (Bellah, 1970; 147)

Meanwhile, Rahman (1984; 152) begins its description of the modernity using the signifi-

cant difference between Islam and the western world he considers to be the pioneer in 'the mastery' of modernity themes. Once he has established his oppositional attitude, he begins his discussion of the modernity to bring Islam to further advancement through education. First of all he suggests how al-Quran and Sunnah are supposed to be interpreted on the basis of the al-Quran and Sunnah in whole and comprehensive manner considering their history, and not to interpret them on the basis of other sources in a partial manner. And then, he uses the history of Islam as his reference, especially at the time when al-Quran become so inspiring for the development of science that Islamic science is not something impossible to materialize and finally, he proposes the areas considered to be strategic in the science and necessary to work out.

## ***2.2. The Searching of Islam and Modernity***

Bellah begin on Islamic monotheism. He writes, the act and word of God stand outside the natural world and break or threaten to break every natural structure. Here an individual, first of all Muhammad but after him, (at least in principle) every Muslim, is called upon to stand out from every tie of kinship and polity if need be. A higher obligation to God makes every man not in the first place a member of a given clan or triber or town, but self in direct relation to eternal deity. (Bellah, 1970; 149)

There is no question but that under Muhammad, Arabian society made remarkable leap forward in social complexity and political capacity. When the structure that took shape under the prophet was extended by the early caliphs to provide the organizing principle for a world empire, the result is something that for its time and place is remarkable modern. It is modern in the high degree of commitment, involvement, and participation expected from the rank-and-file members of community. It is modern in the openness of its leadership positions to ability judged on universalistic grounds and symbolized in the attempt to institutionalize a nonhereditary top leadership. On same ways, Bellah (1970; 151-152) shows a structural dramatic universal of early Islam society. He writes, in way the failure of the early community, the relapse into pre-Islamic principles of social organization, is an added proof of the modernity of the early exper-

iment. It was too modern to succeed. It is another indication that something precious was lost with the collapse of the early experiment, something that would continue to exercise the pressure of an ideal through subsequent centuries.

In this situation the state and the political realm in the Islamic world failed to develop an inner coherence and integrity. The state as a legitimate realm of thought and action with its indispensable role of citizen failed to emerge. The Muslim community itself, even though without any effective means to exercise power, continued to express the only legitimate political self-consciousness in the society, and the role of adult Muslim believer, not that of citizen, was the only inclusive political role. Thus political resources of the Islamic tradition in the modern world have been limited to the powerful but necessarily utopian — in advanced traditional societies not to speak of industrial society — image of the fusion of religion and politics in the first decades of Islam.

Bellah (1970; 152) explore another theme of modernity, e.g. family, to look how Islamic values gives room for individual and women. He writes, the Islamic family as it took shape under the prophet's guidance was to reflect the reduced significance of extended kinship in the new Muslim community and to express the enhanced dignity of the individual, including women and children, as persons standing in direct relation to God. But in the other ways, while a family ideal of mutual respect and obligation between all family members continued to be enjoined as exemplary, in fact practice tending to undermine inner family equality and solidarity and elevate patriarchal arbitrariness were pronounced legitimate. Traditional Islam thus presented a mixed heritage to the modern family reformers.

Finally, Bellah (1984; 155) back to symbolism argument of God. The symbolic reference to God in the Qur'an that God is understood first of all neither as king nor as father but simply as God. The only analogy for God is God. This is an accurate reflection of the fact that the key reference point in Muhammad's thought was not king or father but the God of Israel. Biblical thought is far more degrading than any current social model. The combination of arbitrariness and illegitimacy in all worldly power creates a kind of uneasy absolutism which is hardly favor-

able political soil for the institutional innovations required by modernization.

In medieval Islam, Bellah (1970; 156-157), argue that great religious regression might be characterized under the rubric of "the rise of Sufism". It was a great compromise formation, but one that allowed Islam to spread halfway around the globe and to penetrate social strata to which the original austere faith had never appealed. In many ways it was a complementary opposite of Quranic religion. Above all it was comfortable and local, with inner shrines, local cults and local saints.

This late medieval Islamic society is not here of interest in its self. Its only relevance is that it was into this world, enraptured in its Sufi dreams, that the modern West abruptly and loudly entered. It should not be forgotten that no Muslim country is more than decades away from this very different Islam. Nor even now is it entirely. It still suffuses the unconscious ways of thinking and habits of action of the masses of the people and to some extent of even the intellectuals. (Bellah, 1970; 157)

Fazlur Rahman affirm implicitly with Bellah's argument. In other words, Muslims have inferior state of mind when they stand face to face with modernity. Secularism on modernity gives a dilemma for Muslims. Rahman describe on his book entitled 'Islam and Modernity'. According to him, the essential Islamic education based on "Intellectualism Islam". On chapter IV he declare a mapping of Muslim on modernity. A question which he come out is how Islamic education become meaningful in the modern intellectual and spiritual setting, not so much to save religion from modernity — which is, after all, only a partisan interest — but to save modern man from himself through religion. (Rahman, 1984; 140)

According to Rahman, the first essential step to relieve the vicious circle just mentioned is, for the Muslim, to distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam. If the spark for the modernization of old Islam learning and for the Islamization of the new is to arise, then the original thrust of Islam — of the Qur'an and Muhammad — must be clearly resurrected so that the conformities and deformities of historical Islam may be clearly judged by it. But in same ways he put out a significant question: What is, then guarantee, or at least the likelihood,

that the pursuit of the new solution will not be arrested at a certain point, or that the result reached will not be so bewilderingly chaotic and contradictory?

The answer is that neither the fundamentalist nor the modernist had a clear enough method. That fundamentalist movements in Islam have been arrested is not due to their claims, for they claimed *ijtihad*, that is, new thinking in Islam. It is also something of an irony to pit the so-called Muslim fundamentalists against the Muslim modernists, since, so far as their acclaimed procedure goes, the Muslim modernists say exactly the same things the so-called Muslim fundamentalists say: that Muslims must go back to the original and definitive sources of Islam and perform *ijtihad* on that basis. This was undoubtedly sound, but for the rest the premodernist revivalist neither had nor bothered to seek a methodology of Qur'anic interpretation that would be sound in scholarship, rationally reliable, and faithful to the Qur'an itself. (Rahman, 1984; 142)

It is only because the Qur'an was not treated as a coherent whole by many Muslim thinkers that the metaphysical part, which should form the necessary backdrop to a coherent elaboration of the moral, social, and legal message of the Qur'an, in particular received the wildest interpretations at the hands of the so-called esoteric school, be they Sufis, Batinis, philosophers, or even some *mutakallimun* (theologians), while the majority of the orthodox became dusty-dry literalists far removed from any genuine insight into the depths of the Qur'an. (Rahman, 1984; 143)

For Rahman (1984; 144), the Qur'an is a document that grew within a background, from the flesh and blood of actual history; it is therefore both as "straight-forward" and as organically coherent as life itself. Any attempt to take it with a literalist, partialist superficiality and lifeless rigidity will, to use A.J. Arberry's phrase, "crush its gossamer wings to powder." To insist on absolute uniformity of interpretation is therefore neither possible nor desirable. What is important is first of all to use the kind of method, e.g. to distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam, which he was advocating to eliminate vagrant interpretations.

For the first logical step now is the creation of new intellectual materials, since the mechanical

part of the process of reform in terms of combining old and new subjects in new reformed schools or setting up afternoon Islamic schools to supplement the morning "regular schools" is by now well underway in virtually all Muslim lands. The greatest difficulty that will be experienced is not the new step itself but extricating one's feet from the stagnant waters of the old Qur'anic exegesis, which may contain many pearls but which, on the whole, impedes rather than promotes a real understanding of the Qur'an. The new step simply consists in studying the Qur'an in its total and specific background (and doing this study systematically in a historical order), not just studying it verse by verse or passage by passage with an isolated "occasion of revelation" (*sha'n al-nusul*). (Rahman, 1984; 145)

Rahman (1984; 145) makes a map and shows a strategic step as he calls 'Reconstruction of the Islamic Sciences' to reform the system of Islamic education. On that statement, the condition should be attention first, e.g. that movement must be a historical movement. Even he gives sub-title: historical period. He stressed two points about Muslims should be. For one thing, the thoroughness and comprehensiveness required call for a massive effort, and the West cannot be expected to make such a large-scale investment. Second, it is Muslims who require this historical study so they can further assess the values of these historical developments in order to reconstruct Islamic disciplines for the future.

The argument, Rahman (1984; 151-162) gives a priority realm of sciences to work out step by step and wholistic. He uses sub-title 'Systematic Reconstruction' are: Theology, Law and Ethics, Philosophy, and the social sciences.

### III. CLOSING

Based on the discussion above there is a similarity between Bellah's and Rahman's thoughts, which is the use of al-Qur'an and the prophet Mohammed as their main reference. Both are in the agreement that the major value in Islam is to transfer egalitarian message.

The major difference between Bellah and Rahman's thoughts lies in their understanding of modernity. Bellah (1970; 158) construes the modernity is enormously complex and by no

mean well understand. Some things relatively clear. Structurally it involves increases in complexity, efficiency, adaptability, and productivity. Ideologically it involves an increased sense of dignity of the individual and his right to be included as a full and equal participant in a society with some minimal guarantee of material and personal security. Rahman (1984; 162) see it as related to the special issues of democracy, science, and women status. Even, he considers the issues as included in the classic understanding of the modernity, which is equivalent with the postmodernist fundamentalism. Thus, Rahman tries to transcend the phenomena of modernity. Some observers consider him as a contemporary and neo-modernist Islamic thinker. It means that the entire attempt to give identity to the tendency in Islamic thoughts that have emerged in some latest decades. Such identity serves as the bridge and event transcend previous traditionalism and modernity (Damanhuri Muhammed, 2003; 3)

Another difference between Bellah and Rahman lies in their understanding of seculariza-

tion. Bellah considers the secularism in Islam as neutral, while Rahman considers it as a distortion resulting from the normative approach to al-Qur'an

Methodologically, the two thinkers are different. Bellah employs a comparative-historical-sociological method, which places Islam in the historical context and compares it to the existence of Abraham religions prior to Islam, especially considering the social system. Meanwhile, Rahman employs a hermeneutic method, especially in approaching al-Qur'an. Damanhuri Muhammed (2003; 8) calls Rahman's method double movement hermeneutics. Bellah uses an inductive thinking style in a short formulation, while Rahman uses a deductive way of thinking.

Concerning to Islamic community, Bella proposes the following agendas: Islam and political issues, family institution, individual personality and Islam as the system of symbols, while Rahman proposes some strategic stages in overcoming the problems in Islam, especially those related to the secularization in the phenomena of modernity.

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