

On Critical Thinking and Freedom within Truth in Islam

“To be Muslim is not to be politically asleep, but rather to be in a permanent state of critique.”

Ian Almond (2018)

The renowned Enlightenment philosopher Leibniz said Muslims were so fatalistic they wouldn't even jump out of the way of carts. This old prejudice against Muslim societies has long lived over the centuries in the West. They even lacked the simple ability to think about themselves. So this unreflective enemy had been given by God as a punishment upon them.

Muslims, however, have had a long critical tradition of their own throughout the history. Firstly, and most importantly, Prophet Muhammad had been a harsh and constant critic of Meccan socio-political establishment from the very beginning. The language of the Revelation was also critical at its highest of the environment in which the new religion was born. It is equally remarkable that both Muhammad and the Qur'an sometimes denounce and condemn directly the elites –and their characteristics– who exercise power socially and politically at Mecca.

At Mecca, on the other hand, the fundamentals of a critical political thought were introduced gradually. This was accomplished under the guidance of the Meccan verses/ayath. Here, again, one can easily notice the Qur'anic critique opposes and challenges the socio-political order of the Meccan city-state as immoral and corrupt. However, it should be underlined that this was not done in a way that one might see in a history or political science book. We often perceive it through examples given from a historical continuity. Yet sometimes we find that the leadership of the Meccan establishment, the Quraysh, is addressed directly.

“Say: ‘O my people! Do whatever ye can, I will do (my part); but soon will ye know...’” (Surah Zumer, 39: 39 [Yusuf Ali translation]; see also 11: 93 and 11: 121)

After the Prophet, the new Muslim community did not give up. As one of the most dynamic societies of the pre-modern times in general, they persistently searched the different dimensions of the truth with a critical intellect. Of course, I don't mean the every individual of the society had associated with an investigative work. Yet those who engaged in such critical questioning about their own selves, the society in which they lived, the cosmos, and the meaning of existence had the capacity and dignity to carry a society intellectually. There is no doubt that these were free-thinking and broad-minded people. It was clear that they acted with a high sense of responsibility. In fact, their whole lives and critical attitudes in general stood out as a manifestation of their piety. They took this divine address as an example for themselves:

“Ye are the best community that hath been raised up for mankind [humanity]. Ye enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency; and ye believe in Allah...” (Surah Al-i Imran, 3: 110 [Pickthall translation])

On the other hand, there is a long tradition of political –and at the same time religious– opposition in the Islamic history. In her pioneering study *Al-Mu'arada fi'l-Fikri's-Siyasiyyi'l-Islami* (Cairo, 1985; *Opposition in Islamic Political Thought*), Egyptian political theorist Nevin Abdulhalik Mustafa puts forward the following important point:

“While the fundamentals and principles of Islam are fixed and single, we see that the ways of

understanding these principles are diverse. For this reason, all the visions of opposition movements in Islamic political thought emerged from the model of Islamic [prophetic] political practice as demonstrated by the Sunnah of the Prophet embodying the principles of the Qur'an." (p. 161)

Nevin Mustafa argues that opposition –as “the freedom to speak the truth in front of any person, regardless of his/her opinion and position”– was considered an acceptable, proper, and just behavior model that developed under the auspices and encouragement of the first Muslim polity/state itself during the reign of the Hulefa-i Raşidin. Afterwards, unfortunately however, beginning with the Umayyads, at the times of Islamicate empires, those who attempted such behavior were subjected to severe oppression and bullying (pp. 174-175).

One of the main contributions of Nevin Mustafa’s thought-provoking study to the political theory is that she distinguishes between mainly three different forms of opposition in Muslim political thought: the principle of revolution (devrim) and the revolutionist school; the concept of steadfastness (sabır, sebat, azim) and the steadfastness school; the condition of poise (temkin, temekkün, duruş, denge) and the poise school (pp. 216-360). She discusses these three schools of opposition at length. As a result, despite the differences in the methods they use, all of these schools find the roots of their criticism and opposition to political authority in their piety, consciousness and a sense of responsibility.

A similar thesis is more strongly expressed in Irfan Ahmad’s brilliant book, *Religion As Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace* (2017). If you’ll let me sum up one of the most important points in Ahmad’s book in one sentence, I would say that throughout Islamicate history there has been a very close relationship between truth and critique. First of all, according to Ahmad, Prophet Muhammad was “a critic of the Meccan social order,” and his age. Later on, from the first classical ages of Islam to date, from Hasan al-Basri and Abu Hanife to Namık Kemal, Hasan al-Benna and Abul Ala Maududi, there have been many great Muslim intellectuals and polymaths who have contributed to the tradition of Islamic(ate) critical thinking.

To be fair, there is one more dimension of the issue we have not yet touched upon –but must be mentioned now. It is about the old bias that relates the uncritical to the religious. Thus, the tradition of critical thinking will be confined to the secular and to the space of the West. But can this really be true? Is Critique Secular? In response to this crucial question, Talal Asad, Saba Mahmood, Judith Butler, and Wendy Brown made a terrific discussion at a UC Berkeley symposium in fall 2007. Here, I would like to quote just two important points. Wendy Brown, from the very beginning, proposes a methodological way of investigating this issue that could make our job easier: to dissociate the terms of the question, is critique secular? from one another:

“It may be helpful briefly to query the relation between the patently unfixed quality of the terms of the question, is critique secular? and the historical force of the impulse to fix each and bind them together. To this end, let us make each term wobble a bit and then consider what secures them so tightly to one another.” (p. 8)

Secondly, in her thoughtful article entitled “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” (pp. 64-101), the late Saba Mahmood begins with the debate over Danish cartoon affair in 2005. Then, she turns to a different dimension of the controversy which has rarely taken into account. For Mahmood, framing the entire controversy as a clash between “secular necessity and religious threat” is to “circumscribe our vocabulary to the limited conceptions of blasphemy and freedom of speech –the two poles that dominated the debate.” She, rather, interrogates the meaning of religious presumptions and Euro-Atlantic secular affect. After a series of arguments –which I cannot present the details here– Mahmood concludes:

“It is customary these days to tout critique as an achievement of secular culture and thought. Key to this coupling is the sense that unlike religious belief, critique is predicated upon a necessary distanciation between the subject and object and some form of reasoned deliberation... In a provocative essay, Michael Warner argues that such a conception of critique not only caricatures the religious Other but also, more importantly, remains blind to its own disciplines of subjectivity, affective attachments, and subject-object relationality... (I)t is clear from my arguments that the secular liberal principles of freedom of religion and speech are not neutral mechanisms for the negotiation of religious difference and that they remain quite partial to certain normative conceptions of religion, subject, language, and injury.” (p. 90)

For my part, I will close by the thoughts of one of the foremost scholars and sages of his day concerning the destiny, will, and freedom of mankind. He was Hasan al Basri (d. 728 CE). In Risale fi'l-Kader [Book of Destiny] his main argument follows: man is free, but at the same time responsible for his actions. As for Allah, Allah is just.