

Excerpts from A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern world, by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

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Session Two (page numbers are according to the online version)

Opposition to Religion

In the West . . . opposition began to be created against the authority of religion and against Catholicism in particular as a result of very complicated internal factors. These factors included the gradual loss of certain aspects of the inner teachings of Christianity, the excessive use of consolations and relics, the gradual rationalization of Christian religious thought and the skepticism inherent in late medieval nominalist theology. This opposition took several different forms during what has come to be known as the Renaissance. During this period, one can see, on the one hand, the rise of humanism and individualism which were to become later hallmarks of modern civilization and which opposed the domination of religion in general and the religious civilization of the Middle Ages in particular.

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On the Catholic side, for a long time the Church, at least in its purely religious if not in its artistic and social aspects, resisted the pressure of modernism and secularization until in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council, the movement which is called *aggiornamento* gained ascendancy and many of the teachings of the Church became modernized. As a result, even Latin which had been used as the liturgical language of the Catholic Church throughout Western Europe and later the Americas and elsewhere for nearly two thousand years was changed to the vernacular and local languages. It might appear that this modernization made dialogue between Catholics and followers of other religions easier, but in fact this is quite doubtful. Moreover, this movement has diluted the religious teachings of Catholicism and has therefore made it more difficult for Catholics to preserve the traditional point of view which had been held in the Catholic Church for such a long time and which is closer in depth to the traditional teachings of Islam. For those seeking the traditional teachings of the Church, the whole movement has been in fact a catastrophe leading to a greater segmentation within the Church than ever before. The modernizing movement within the Catholic Church spread very rapidly and yet did not become completely dominant.

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The history of the West has been marked during the last few centuries by a constant battle between the forces of religion and secularism and in fact the gaining of the upper hand by secularism and consequently the denial of the reality of religion and its pertinence to various domains of life. First of all, secularism gradually separated philosophy and then science from the realm of religion and then removed the various political, economic and social ideas and institutions which had possessed a religious significance in the medieval period in the West from the universe of religious meaning. This also holds true for Western art which in earlier centuries had not only received the patronage of religion, but was also deeply imbued with religious values and meaning. . . The process of secularization went a step further in the nineteenth century when even the domain of theology, which had until then remained naturally within the fold of religion, fell under the sway of secularism. At this time agnostic and atheistic ideologies began to challenge theology itself while the traditional theological

perspective began to retreat from the one domain which had been left to it, namely the domain of purely religious thought . . . In Christianity, all serious religious thought is related to theology and therefore the retreat of Christian theology to an ever greater degree from various realms of thought meant also the retreat of religion in the West to an ever greater extent from the everyday life and thought of Western man. This tendency reached such a stage in the twentieth century that much of theology itself became gradually secularized. During the last few decades, there have been such movements as "the death of God," Teilhardism, liberation theology and the like which have introduced various forms of secularism including the theory of evolution and Marxism into the very body of Christian theology.

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Today the role of religion in the West is very different from its role in the Islamic world. All Western societies claim to be secular and in fact consider law to derive not from religion but from the voice of the people at least where there are democracies. Certain countries such as the United States emphasize very strongly the separation of church and state while other countries such as England, where the ruler of the country is also the head of the Church or Sweden where the official religion is Lutheran Protestantism, nevertheless do not base their laws upon religion. The same holds true for social practices which are supposed to emanate from laws established through the will of human beings choosing their elected officials to a legislature which then devises and passes laws

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Modern Philosophy

For a young Muslim, as in fact for a young person who has grown up in any other non-Western culture, the significance of philosophy in the West and its role in the formation of modern civilization and what is known specifically as modernism is at first difficult to understand. As we have seen earlier, in the Islamic world, as in other traditional worlds, philosophy has always been closely allied to religion. It has always meant wisdom and has never sought to oppose the truths revealed by God through sacred texts which for Muslims is above all the Quran complemented by the Hadith. In the West for a long time the situation was more or less similar to that found in the Islamic world. While Christian civilization dominated over the West, philosophy was closely related and allied to theology and to the questions posed by the very presence of revelation. It sought to elucidate the deeper meaning of the religious message and to provide a rational understanding of a universe in which the religious reality of Christianity was very much present and where faith played a central role. It is only from the Renaissance and especially the eleventh/seventeenth century onward, that is, the beginning of the modern age, that the role of philosophy in the West begins to change considerably.

During the modern period philosophy in the West first separated itself from religion, then allied itself to the empirical and natural sciences and developed various modes of thinking which often sought to replace the truths of religion. Much of what one observes in the modern world today, whether it be in the realm of ethics or politics, the theoretical understanding of the nature of reality or epistemology, is rooted in modern philosophy which became more and more a rival and in many cases an opponent of theology, wisdom and

religion. As a result, some have come to call much of modern philosophy "misosophy" (literally hatred of wisdom rather than love for it which philosophy implies by its very etymology). Furthermore, in the thirteenth/nineteenth century philosophy began to see itself as a complete replacement for religion as one can see in the rise of the very idea of ideology at that time, a term used widely today even by Muslims who rarely realize the essentially secular and anti-religious character of the very concept of ideology which has gradually come to replace traditional religion in so many circles.

It is, therefore, important to comprehend the significance of philosophy in Western civilization in order to understand the nature of modernism. Without this understanding the meaning of modern phenomena, whether they be in the fields of science or art, politics or economics, social realities or even private behavior, is difficult to grasp. It is certainly true that Christianity and also Judaism have survived to some extent in the West, but the void that has been created by the partial disappearance of religion from the scene has become filled by modes of thinking which have arisen from various Western schools of philosophy or more specifically from what is called modern philosophy by the historians of philosophy in the West.

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At this particular juncture of human history critical understanding and study of the ideas and history of Western thought, (which is also to a great extent the history of modern thought) from the Islamic point of view is absolutely essential. Many Western historians have studied Islamic philosophy and Islamic intellectual history on the basis of their own philosophical assumptions, but very few Muslims have done the reverse, that is, study the West from the point of view of the Islamic tradition. Yet, it is this study which is essential in order for the Islamic intelligentsia to be able to have a deeper understanding of Western civilization and of modern thought which both directly and indirectly through science, technology, modern education as well as social, economic and political institutions are having such an impact upon the Islamic world today.

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Science

Western science is based on considering the natural world as a reality which is separate from both Allah and the higher levels of being. At best, Allah is accepted as the creator of the world, as a mason who has built a house which now stands on its own. His intrusion into the running of the world and His continuous sustenance of it are not accepted in the modern scientific worldview. There are in fact very profound differences between the worldview of Western science and that of Islamic science. To consider Western science simply as a continuation of Islamic science is, therefore, to misunderstand completely both the epistemological foundations of the two sciences and the relationship that each has to the world of faith and revelation. It is also to misunderstand the metaphysical and philosophical backgrounds of the two sciences. Islamic science always relates lower levels of being to the higher and considers the physical world to be simply the lowest plane in the hierarchic reality of the universe reflecting Allah's Wisdom, while modern science considers the physical world to be an independent reality which can be studied and known in an ultimate sense without any reference to a higher level of reality. (p.193)

Modern science was born through the Scientific Revolution in the eleventh/seventeenth century at a time when, as we saw earlier, European philosophy had itself rebelled against revelation and the religious world view. The background of modern science is a particular philosophical outlook which sees the parameters of the physical world, that is, space, time, matter, motion and energy to be realities that are independent of higher orders of being and cut off from the power of God, at least during the unfolding of the history of the cosmos. It views the physical world as being primarily the subject of mathematicization and quantification and, in a sense, absolutizes the mathematical study of nature relegating the non-quantifiable aspects of physical existence to irrelevance. It also sees the subject or "mind" which studies this world as being the individual consciousness of human beings identified with the power of reason and divorced from both revelation and intellection

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Scientific reductionism is one of the most powerful forces in the modern world. There is first of all, the innate sense of inferiority that most other disciplines feel vis-a-vis modern science which they try to emulate to the extent that there is now a whole category of disciplines called the social sciences or human sciences each trying to emulate the methods of the physical sciences by becoming as quantitative and "exact" as possible. Then there is the philosophical urge to reduce always the higher to the lower, to refuse to grant to life a reality which is above and beyond the material components which form a particular living cell, nor to the psyche any reality beyond the biological activities of the body which has psychic life, nor to the spirit any reality beyond the activities of the psyche. Belief in Allah is reduced to psychological complexes, consciousness to biological activity and life to molecular motion. In order to understand the modern world one must understand the power of scientific reductionism which lurks nearly everywhere in one form or another although it has been rejected by many a great scientist. In fact, one can say that scientific reductionism is one of the main components of what can be called scientism in contrast to science. Modern science can be conceived as a legitimate way of knowing certain aspects of the natural world, a way which is able to discover some of the characteristics of the natural or physical world but not all of that world. If its limited range of vision could be accepted, it could be integrated into a more general scheme or hierarchy of knowledge in which higher forms of knowledge would dominate over but not necessarily obliterate the knowledge of the quantitative aspect of nature gained by modern scientific methods. Scientism, however, is a philosophy which extends modern science to a total ideology, a way of looking at all things, and it is this outlook which has become so dominant in the modern worldview

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As a result of the domination of scientism, modern and even what some now call post-modern society looks upon scientists as earlier societies looked upon priests. In earlier societies the priests or the men of God were supposed to possess a knowledge which came from God, which was absolute and certain and upon which people relied, although they might not understand the essence or details of that knowledge. People trusted the priests and scholars of religion although they could not spend their lifetimes testing the validity of the knowledge which these people possessed. They went to them for the answers to ultimate questions and relied upon their answers for their salvation. Today, to a large extent these functions have been transferred to the shoulders of scientists as far as the general public is

concerned, even if individual scientists refuse to identify themselves with such functions. Nowadays, the majority of people, not only in the Western world but wherever modernism has spread, consider scientists to possess the ultimate answer to matters not only purely scientific but even to what lies beyond the domain of science. That is why books come out about the views of famous physicists concerning God or the immortality of the soul and even if some physicists make childish statements outside of their own field of competence, their views are considered to be very important precisely because they are physicists. It is essential to understand the function which the scientists fulfill in the modern world as the ultimate authorities to which both private citizens and governments turn in all societies dominated by modernism.

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As far as governments are concerned, their support for science, which is one of the main features of the modern world, comes not from the love of pure knowledge but from the love of power and wealth. One of the characteristics of modern science, which distinguishes it so much from Islamic and other traditional sciences, is that this science from the beginning had for its end power and dominion over nature as stated so clearly by the English philosopher Francis Bacon. It was because of this fact that the British Government from the eleventh/seventeenth century onward began to support science on the basis of the advice of men like him. Today, governments hope that through modern science they will gain power over nature and, therefore, economic and military advantages which they will be able to use to their advantage. Hence the support which they give to science throughout the Western world with, of course, very notable results as far as the military and economic domains are concerned.

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The relation of modern science to power has posed for a number of scientists the question of moral responsibility because it is the discoveries made by scientists, who are oftentimes themselves humble and ethical men, that has enabled those in power to create methods of mass destruction in the form of military arms all the way from smart bombs to the hydrogen bomb not to speak of countless ways of destroying the balance of the natural environment which now threatens the very fabric of life on earth. The question has risen in the modern world as to who is responsible for the calamitous situation facing humanity today. Until recently most scientists believed that their role was to seek knowledge and that they were not responsible for the use that would be made of their discoveries. This attitude was a result of the divorce between science and ethics which has characterized modern science from the moment of its inception down to our own days. The negative possibilities of the applications of the sciences has, however, become so great, and this includes not only war time applications but even so-called peace time uses in such areas as nuclear energy and genetic engineering, that a number of Western scientists have now openly come to accept the proposition that they are responsible for what they discover. They agree that they bear some responsibility for providing the knowledge which they leave in the hands of politicians or other groups driven by greed or even national interest which in both cases do not have the welfare of the whole of humanity in mind. Still, however, the question of responsibility for the discoveries of modern science has not been totally solved and remains one of the great dilemmas of the modern world. (p.200)