

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

(<https://traditionalhikma.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/A-Young-Muslims-Guide-to-the-Modern-World-by-Seyyed-Hosseini-Nasr.pdf>)

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

Political life

In contrast to the Islamic World where, from the very beginning, both religious and political authority issued from the revelation itself and the Prophet was himself both the founder of the religion and of the first Islamic society and state, in Christianity the spiritual and temporal authorities were divided from the beginning

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For many centuries there existed in the traditional civilization of the West two authorities: spiritual authority based, as far as Western Christianity was concerned, on the institution of the papacy and the hierarchy which issued from it, and temporal authority vested in the Holy Roman Empire on the one hand and in local kings--especially those of France and England--who wielded a great deal of power, on the other. There was also a hierarchy between these two authorities in the sense that the spiritual authority was always considered to be higher than the temporal, and it was, in fact, the Pope who blessed and legitimized the rule of various kings and even emperors. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, however, an important event took place which had far reaching consequences and which had to do with the rebellion of the temporal authority against the papacy. A concrete incident which marks the commencement of this general tendency was the abducting of the popes and their imprisonment in France in the eighth/fourteenth century. Gradually, the temporal authority began to consider itself independent of the spiritual authority of the papacy resulting in a protracted struggle between the two which had a great deal to do with the downfall of the unified Christian civilization of the Middle Ages.

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When one looks upon the political history of the West during the last 600 years, one sees that there were during the Middle Ages four important powers or classes within Western society, namely, the spiritual or priestly class associated with the Church, the aristocracy associated with kings and the monarchy, the bourgeoisie [middle class] and the proletariat[working class]. There occurred first of all the rebellion of the aristocracy against the priestly class, then that of the bourgeoisie against the aristocracy and finally the proletariat against the bourgeoisie . . . During this long history another important event took place which is of the utmost importance for Muslims to understand. This event was the gradual transfer of ultimate political power from Allah to the people. Originally Christians, like Muslims, believed that all power including the political came from God and kings ruled by divine right and reflected the presence of God in society in the same way that God is the King of heaven. With the signing of the Magna Carta in England in the seventh/thirteenth century, certain rights were transferred to the people and that marked the beginning of the even greater transfer of power from the Divine to the people or what the West conceived as transformation from theocracy to democracy which means literally in Greek the rule of the people. p.206

The idea of democracy as dominating over political life has been combined until very recently in the West with the idea of nationalism which became particularly strong in the thirteenth/seventeenth century. The nation became nearly absolute in the West, asking of its citizens complete allegiance and, in a sense, replaced religion itself, creating a "civil religion" in the place of or complementary to revealed religion . . . Another very important factor to consider in understanding political life in the West is, of course, the role played by economic and material factors. There are many who claim, in fact, that economics is the underlying determining factor of political life while others believe that ideas, ideologies and other non-material factors play a more important role without denying the economic dimension.

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Social Life

The rise of the power of the aristocracy, then the bourgeoisie followed by the proletariat and the revolutions which have been brought about as a result of these transformations . . . all have been combined with upheavals in the social structure of the modern world whose traditional social structure has been for the most part destroyed, but again, not completely . . . As a result, society became more atomized and much greater mobility was created, while at the same time many of the social bonds which had kept society together were weakened and are now faced with the possibility of being completely severed. Already in the thirteenth/nineteenth century, the rise of the Industrial Revolution not only caused the depleting of much of the countryside whose labor force came to the big cities, but also brought about the weakening of family bonds and the exploitation of men, women and even children by the machine and the new industrial complex.

In the West, as in the Islamic world, the main unit of society has always been the family. Christianity sanctified the monogamous family consisting of the father, the wife and the children but in earlier times, often grandparents, aunts and uncles and other relatives lived together in what is called the extended family which had a function very similar to what one finds in the Islamic world today.

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But gradually, as a result of the pressures of the Industrial Revolution and the transformation it brought about, for most of Western society the family came mean the atomized family, that is, the family consisting of the husband, wife and their children. During the past two generations the atomized family has also begun to break up almost like the splitting of the atom. The rate of divorce, which for a long time was banned by the Catholic Church, has risen so sharply that today more than 50% of all marriages in the big urban centers of America and much of Europe lead to divorce and many children are brought up in single parent families. Moreover, there are now even those who attempt to break the traditional meaning of marriage as being between the opposite sexes and try to give a new meaning to marriage as being any bond between two human beings even of the same sex as long as they want to live together. Therefore, in this last phase of modernism to which, as already stated, some refer as post-modernism, even the meaning of the family as it has existed throughout the ages is under severe attack

The major force behind the changes that occur so abruptly in the social order in the modern world, to the extent that by the time one comes to study the pattern it has already changed- is what is called individualism or the rights of the individual. Individualism is one of the most important philosophical elements that issued from the Renaissance idea of humanism. It became much more strengthened, especially in America and the rest of the so-called New World, where the social bonds were weaker and where the possibilities of expansion physically, materially and economically were greater than in Europe, becoming part and parcel of the character of much of American culture and gradually spreading back into Europe as well. Individualism considers the right of the individual to be supreme, that is, above the rights of God, in a certain sense, and even of society to the extent possible.

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Another important element in the social life of the modern world, as far as both America and Western Europe are concerned, is the question of the relationship between races. Although modernism is very much rooted in the idea of individualism and the rights of the individual, there is also the element of race which has continued to play an important role in European and especially American history. It is difficult for Muslims, brought up in a world in which race plays really a secondary and minor role, without our wanting to deny that racism is totally absent there, to understand the central problem of racism as it exists in the West. In the thirteenth/nineteenth century when many European colonial powers invaded Africa on the pretext of stopping the Arab trade of Black slaves, no one bothered to ask the question what had happened to these slaves who had been taken to Arabia. If they had studied the situation more carefully, they would have seen that all of the Blacks who were taken to Arabia were completely absorbed within Islamic society, very different from what happened in America. In fact, there is not a single Islamic country that has a black ghetto like Harlem. The Blacks who were brought to Arabia, the Persian Gulf or other Muslim countries, like the Turks before them from Central Asia, were rapidly integrated into Islamic society, some becoming rulers.

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In studying the complex social patterns that one can observe in the modern West, we have mentioned an ever greater migration of people from the countryside to the city and the destruction of farm life, the growth of industrial and urban centers with their negative impact on the environment, a greater degree of individualism, atomization of the family, the loss of meaningful relationships resulting often times in isolation and nihilism and the rise of psychological imbalance, maladies so common in big cities today. Moreover, these processes are not simply confined to the West but are spreading to other parts of the world along with the spread of modernism. One might say that the whole trend in the social transformation of the last few decades which is itself the result of what has been going on for several centuries in the West, is the uprootedness of individuals, cut off not only from their religious traditions but also from their family and social traditions. The new situation offers often great challenges, inviting at least some individuals to seek to reach their full potential, but it also often confronts human beings with a sense of despair in a world in which extreme competition and constant struggle and strife combined with the eclipse of spirituality leave their deep psychological and social scars.

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