



Religion and Postmodernism

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss the implications of postmodernism on religious thought, with special reference to Islamic thought. Firstly, I discuss the nature and characteristics of postmodernist thinking, and the different schools of thought/'postmodernisms' that fall under that rubric. My contention is that postmodernism is a response to modernism rather than religion, although it has implications on religious thought. Secondly, I examine and compare the points of contention between modernism and postmodernism. I then argue that the differences are largely due to the privileging of nature and reasoning of modernists and the privileging of human/social and psychology of postmodernists. These, in turn, have implications on their metaphysics and epistemology, respectively. Thirdly, I provide an Islamic perspective on the modernist-postmodernist discourse, showing that the Islamic perspective transcends the natural-social divide, and how the tripartite relationship between God, man and nature, informs the discourse. The philosophy of language is also brought up in the discussion, where I suggest that Islam accepts the dual role of languages, that is, conveying the meaning in its literal sense (aka modernist), as well as being a symbol and an indirect reference (aka postmodernist). Finally, a close comparison is made between postmodernism and Islam, where both their incompatibilities as well as possible points of convergence are discussed.

Keywords: Modernism, Postmodernism, Islam

1. Introduction

The relationship between religion and postmodernism cannot be properly understood unless a discussion on modernism is included since postmodernism is largely a response to modernism rather than religion. In fact, history shows that modernism, or modernity, was deemed a response to the religiously dominated society and culture of the West. Therefore, the sequence is as follows: religion→modernity/modernism→postmodernism. Some, however, argue that the connection between modernism and postmodernism is more thematic than chronological, and that they co-exist at some point. Take for example the predecessor of the modernism-postmodernism divide, that is the opposition between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment philosophies (Berlin 2013). While Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant, Hume, Locke, and the French philosophes were well-known in the history of western thinking, there existed the opposite current of thought known as “Counter-Enlightenment”, which is found in the writings of lesser-known 18th century philosophers such as Vico, Herder and Hamann. The co-existence of rational and non-rational philosophies is also found in the 20th century; with rationalists seen in the form of Bertrand Russell, Frege, and the Logical Positivists, in general, while the ‘non-rationalists’ were phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger, and existentialists such as Sartre and Camus. However, one can nevertheless detect a distinct ‘rise of post-modernism’ beginning in the 1960s, marked by a watershed from the previous period which was dominated by ‘modernist thinking’. This can be clearly seen in the philosophy of science, which has been regarded as the arena of epistemological contestation between modernists and postmodernists. Before the 1960s, the philosophy of science was dominated by the Logical Positivists/Empiricists and rationalist philosophers such as Popper and Lakatos. In the 1960s challenges to the rationalist thinking of science was brought about by philosophers such as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, although they were described as ‘postpositivist’ rather than ‘postmodernist’. Further provocations by postmodernists were made by social constructivists such as Bruno Latour, Steven Shapin, Simon Schaffer, and Michel Foucault. Post-modernists added a twist to the development of scientific philosophies by widening the field itself. If Kuhn’s introduction of history to the philosophy of science was considered as novel, what came next was even more ‘shocking’. Sociology, Cultural Studies, Feminism, Social Epistemology etc., joined the foray of epistemological discourses on science, so much so that a new discipline, namely the broader field, known as “Science Studies”

emerged. The identification of science with rationality, objectivity, truth and progress was no longer taken for granted - in fact it was seriously challenged. Today, postmodernism in all its various forms is here to stay, and has penetrated several different fields, be it art, philosophy, social sciences, and even religious studies.

Given the novel and pervasive influence of post-modernism on contemporary thinking and culture, it makes sense to examine its influence and implications on religion. This article aims to do just that, i.e., discuss the nature and characteristics of post-modernist thinking and how it impinges on religion, focusing on Islam.

2. The Tripartite Relationship between Modernism, Postmodernism, and Religion

As mentioned earlier, postmodernism can generally be viewed as a response to modernism, while modernism itself, or rather modernity¹ can be seen as a form of thinking or mode of discourse based on 'Enlightenment Rationalism'—to borrow Gellner's (1992) phrase—a mode of thought based on the ideas of the Enlightenment philosophers with their emphasis on reason and science.

In this article, however, the three lines of thinking or rather 'ideologies', are not treated as part of a sequential development of the history of ideas, but rather as three competing ideologies in contemporary culture. In this regard, reference is made to the three main positions outlined in Gellner's book (Murad 1996), *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, namely: (i) Religion (or Religious Fundamentalism) (ii) Relativism or Postmodernism, and (iii) Enlightenment Rationalism (read 'Modernism'), which according to Gellner, are the 'three principal contestants for our intellectual loyalty' (Gellner 1992). A similar framework is adopted in this paper, with a slight modification, that is, the replacing of the term 'Enlightenment Rationalism' with 'Modernism', although the contents of both largely overlap². In his book, Gellner argued in favour of a third option, namely 'Enlightenment Rationalism', while rejecting both Relativism/Postmodernism, and Religious Tradition/Fundamentalism³. However, this paper takes a different position from Gellner's. The discussion starts by looking at the opposition between, and the polemics surrounding, the contestation between modernist and postmodernist thinking. Subsequently, the author took the novelty of giving his own intellectual intervention by viewing the dialogue between both positions as a contestation

between two secular ideologies, providing critique on both, and showing how they can be viewed within an Islamic perspective or framework of thought.

3. Modernist Thought: The Features Which Invite a Postmodernist Response

Modernistic thinking is characterized largely by the philosophies of the Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Locke, Hume, Comte, and the French *philosophes*. They value rational and empirical sources of knowledge, and adopt epistemologies based on either rationalism, empiricism, or a combination of both, just as Kant did. They also valued scientific knowledge and methods, and sought to extend their uses even to anthropology and social sciences. Modernist thinking, as laid down by Enlightenment thinkers of the 18th century, was revived in the 20th century through the philosophical works of Bertrand Russell, the Logical Positivists, and Karl Popper. It was linked to the Philosophy of Science in the early stages of its development. It cannot be denied that the Scientific Revolution in the 17th century and the subsequent progress of science became a model—even for philosophers—for what genuine knowledge is. Kant for example, was impressed by Newton and Newtonian physics, and even tried to elevate some of Newton's scientific ideas to metaphysical status. Abstract philosophical ideas such as rationalism and empiricism were vindicated through science, when science was shown to be based on rational and empirical sources of knowledge, as claimed by the Logical Positivists. The successes of science, especially physics, demonstrated how man can sought to achieve power through knowledge, without the aid of revelation or supernatural assistance. This fits in with another theme of the Enlightenment school of thought, that is, the courage for man to use his own rational powers and the five senses in formulating knowledge and charting the future course of his own civilisation whose glory lies ahead in time, as argued by Francis Bacon, and not somewhere in the medieval or distant past. Thus, science became the yardstick and the model by which philosophers set their epistemological standards, which then goes on to determine as to what counts as true and real. What initially applied to the natural or physical world, then became the universal standard for all, including determining the nature of truth and reality in the human world. This 'philosophical trick' of extending the epistemology and metaphysics of the natural world to the rest of existence, became the hallmark of modernist thinking, thereby sidelining other approaches such as that of religion or humanist.

Knowledge about the natural world as discovered through science, is considered as 'objective knowledge' which reflects true reality and is confirmed through the success of scientific practices. Thus, it is not surprising if modernist thinkers such as the Logical Positivists and Karl Popper, regard science as the only valid form of knowledge, being epistemologically privileged and that it should be emulated by all other forms of knowledge that seek to make a claim of authenticity. Following this thinking, there would not be any controversial matters had claims been confined or limited to the realm of science and the natural world. Science became controversial and a source of contention when it became the standard bearer of truth and reality, setting standards for all fields of knowledge and claims to truth and reality. Unlike Wittgenstein's language games, science sets the standards for all. Epistemological notions such as 'rationality', 'truth' and 'objectivity', became defined in terms of science, or at least the epistemology of science as viewed by modernists. To add value, science was also seen as 'progressive' knowledge, in that its development is a progress towards the truth as argued by Karl Popper through his theory of verisimilitude.

All these became grist for the postmodernists' mill, who refused to accept the authority of science and the resulting epistemological standards. Instead, postmodernists took a humanistic turn, and placed emphasis on the social and humanism, in determining the nature of truth and reality. Which explains why they vehemently objected to the notion of 'objective truth' or 'objective knowledge', of a singular monolithic rationality expressed by and through science, and the idea of a mind-independent reality accessible through rational and empirical means. The social constructivists for instance, went to the other end of the spectrum and argued that scientific knowledge is a social construction rather than a camera image of an objective external world. By combining Kant's idea of how the world 'fits into' our mind or the scaffolding provided by our mind, and Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge where knowledge is 'context-dependent', social constructivists had minimized the role of the external world and instead widened the role played by the human mind as well as the social interests that feed into the mind in explaining the nature of the knowledge formed. In so doing, they are thereby placing emphasis on the social over the natural, which typifies the postmodernist response to modernist claims.

In the case of the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty, who is also a postmodernist of sorts, an attempt was made to redefine epistemological notions such as rationality and objectivity, in human or social terms (Rorty 1991). According to Rorty, 'objectivity' can be seen as 'inter-subjectivity', which involves agreement between human seekers of knowledge⁴. Again, the connection is not between knowledge and 'external reality', but between human individuals involved in the construction process of knowledge. As for rationality, Rorty defined it more as a human attitude, rather than a method of approach aimed at achieving truth⁵.

4. Postmodernism: Some Defining Features

To highlight, Postmodernism is not a monolithic philosophy or school of thought, unlike Utilitarianism, Marxism or Logical Positivism. Under the broad umbrella of 'Postmodernism', different philosophies can be identified, namely; Existentialism, Phenomenology, Nihilism/Absurdism, Deconstruction, Social Constructivism, and Critical Theory. Despite their differences, there are certain common characteristics that qualify them as 'postmodernist'. Among these are: (i) their rejection of grand or meta-narratives (ii) a philosophy of language that rejects the notion of language having a 'fixed' relation to an objective reality (iii) the rejection of the idea of absolute truth, and the acceptance of relativism.

We begin with some of the 'differences' between these philosophies before moving on to shared commonalities. More often than not, these so-called differences are not differences in assertions on common themes, but rather differences in themes highlighted. For example, Deconstruction concerns itself with the philosophy of language, and to some extent, combination with sociology. Deconstructionists are critical of concepts expressed through words, since they reflect the ideologies of the ruling class, are socially and culturally constructed, and do not refer to 'essential truths'. Their criticism on binary concepts such as 'East and West', 'Male and Female', 'Master and Servant', 'Religious and Secular', 'Reason and Revelation', 'Active and Passive', reflects this. Critical theorists, on the other hand, took a critical view of society, and theorized about society. However, their analysis of society went beyond language and included perspectives drawn from philosophy, history, psychology etc. Nevertheless, this difference between Deconstruction and Critical

Theory does not imply that they are incompatible. It merely indicates the scope and range of their critical analysis of knowledge and society.

Next, we look at shared concepts that cut across different philosophies included under Postmodernism. Firstly, the opposition to metanarratives and grand theories, and the emphasis on the local and contextual. This feature of Postmodernist thinking derives its origins from Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard 1984), in which Lyotard criticized Habermas' overarching legitimating approach towards the foundations of a social order that is based on reason and rational communication. Metanarratives such as Marxism, Positivist theory of science, or even religions such as Christianity or Islam, tend to provide a unified view of the world, through which everything can be viewed and subjected to. Here, one can draw a parallel with Berlin's earlier theory of the 'hedgehog and the fox', where the hedgehog only knows one big thing but the fox knows many things, albeit in a piecemeal fashion (Berlin 2013). The postmodernist, like Berlin's fox, rejects the hedgehog's approach of reducing the world to a single framework, uniformizing under the pretext of unification. Instead, postmodernism puts emphasis on the local and contextual, where individual differences are acknowledged, and human liberty restored. Their rejection of metanarratives can also be seen as an implicit critical stance in which they include the analysis of society; their attempt to ensure that social reality is not straitjacketed into a prescribed or predetermined framework. While such an approach might help to preserve individual liberties, it nevertheless foregoes the possibility of seeing the world in totality, and basing a social order on such a vision.

The second feature of postmodernist thinking is the rejection of the idea that language has a fixed relationship with reality, or that language expresses essential realities or truths about the world. In terms of origins, this idea can perhaps be traced back to Wittgenstein's 'conversion' from his positivism in the philosophy of language, as seen in *Tractatus*, to the view of 'language games' that was developed in his later philosophy. According to Derrida, this idea might be interpreted as a rejection of the Platonic idea of the 'world of forms', and language as an expression of concepts drawn from them. Whatever the case might be, the emphasis is on the nature of the relationship between language and reality, that is there is no singular or unique way of relating them, or that there is no strict isomorphism between them. The idea here is the 'fluidity of language', although it does not necessarily

imply cognitive anarchy or a total breakdown in communication engendered by linguistic ambiguity. Again, we see how this goes against modernist or positivistic view of scientific language as a paradigm of linguistic and cognitive clarity, and how scientific meaning sets the standard for meaningful statements.

The third defining feature of postmodernist thinking is the rejection of the idea that there is an absolute truth which is universal. Instead, postmodernists accept relativism, where truth is relative to the perceiver or one's perspective. In some cases, there is denial of the existence of truth, as in the case of nihilists who deny all values. This reflects the postmodernists' attitude of rejection towards any secure base on which one can 'ground' oneself. It also reflects the liberal attitude of not denying the perspective of the Other. This belief cuts across the various philosophies identified as postmodernist such as Existentialism, Nihilism, Social Constructivism, and Critical Theory. For the existentialists, moral truth is to be sought through one's own effort and not given by some religious moral authority, hence the possibility of having different moral truths. For the nihilists, no value is sacred or grounded in any ontological essence. For the social constructivists, truth is a matter of how one constructs knowledge based on one's context and interests. Hence the idea of an objective truth that is universal and shaped by a belief in the existence of a mind-independent reality found in the natural world, is rejected as untenable by postmodernists. This rejection is perhaps motivated by postmodernists placing the human/social over the natural, where Kant's 'objective relativism/constructionism' finally transformed into a 'subjective relativism'.

5. Postmodernism as a Response to Modernism

The issue of 'Postmodernism and Religion' cannot be really discussed or understood in the absence of a prior discussion on how postmodernism can be seen as a response or reaction to Modernist thinking. This is because postmodernist thinking, in most cases, bears an indirect relationship to religion, whereas its relationship to modernism is more direct. Thus, in order to properly understand the relationship between postmodernism and religion, one must take a detour and discuss its relationship to modernism.

The essence of modernist thinking can be found in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which places emphasis on reason and science. As Rorty argued,

western epistemology has, since the 17th century, been preoccupied with the attempt to provide an epistemology that would serve as a tool that would enable the mind to represent reality more accurately (Rorty, 1979). The assumption here is that there exists an external reality 'out there', which the 'mind' is able to apprehend and represent through knowledge. The function of the mind, therefore, is to reflect external reality faithfully, just as how the camera provides a faithful image of the object which it represents. This approach to knowledge, was labelled by Derrida as 'logocentric', meaning that we associate words and language with the structure of reality, which the mind accurately represents. In this regard, Derrida refers to Plato as the iconic symbol of such a concept of knowledge, even going as far as locating reality in an ultimate world of forms. The idea of a 'transcendent reality' apprehended through the mind, finding the ultimate expression through language is what Derrida was referring to when describing such an enterprise as 'logocentric'. Postmodernists such as Derrida, Foucault and Rorty, reject such concepts of truth and knowledge, preferring instead to reinstate the multidimensional experience of knowledge (Derrida), the deconstruction of the notion of 'mind' in the case of Rorty, and emphasising the social role in the construction of knowledge in the case of Foucault.

As for the privileging of science as a form of knowledge and epistemology, critiques by post-positivists such as Kuhn and Feyerabend, and postmodernists such as Foucault, Rorty, and Latour are testaments of the rejection of the Enlightenment ideal of science as exhibiting the highest form of human knowledge, which sets the epistemological standard for knowledge as a whole, as claimed by the Logical Positivists. Thus, the conventional image of science as a form of knowledge that is rational, objective, true and progressive—as portrayed by modernist thinkers such as Popper and the Logical Positivists—was seriously challenged by post-positivist/postmodernist philosophers such as Kuhn, Feyerabend, Foucault, and Rorty.

Modernist thinking basically focuses on the natural world as the point of reference in determining the nature of truth and reality. The assumption is that there exists a mind-independent external reality 'out there' of which our minds and language should faithfully capture and represent as 'knowledge'. The mode of 'getting to' that external reality is through the correct application of the mind, and the 'net' or 'fabric' by which it is captured is through our linguistic representation. Given that

there is this ‘pivoting’ of the world of nature at one end and that of the ‘mind’ at the other, postmodernism in the form of social constructivism seeks to ‘de-privilege’ the natural world as the determiner of truth, and instead shift the focus of knowledge representation to the perceiver, i.e., the human individuals and the social world (McGuire 1992). Following Protagoras’ dictum that ‘man is the measure of all things’; postmodernists seek to articulate a concept of knowledge where the characteristics of man contribute to the outcome. Although it began as a rationalist project through Kant, where emphasis was placed on the human mind playing a role in the formulation and construction of knowledge (Kant’s Copernican revolution), this ‘mental scaffolding’ was later widened to include ‘human interests’, in general, in the articulation of knowledge.

6. The Impact of Postmodernism on Religious Thought

What are the implications of Postmodernism on religion? It is for certain that Postmodernism is against Modernism in terms of the central ideas. But is Postmodernism critical of religion or compatible? For a start, we must be mindful that the two categories (Postmodernism and religion) are broad categories and that there are differences within each category. Take for example, ‘Existentialism’, of which there are two versions, namely ‘Theistic Existentialism’ (Kierkegaard), and ‘Atheistic Existentialism’ (Sartre, Camus). As Sartre puts it (Sartre 2007, 20):

What complicates the matter is that there are two kinds of existentialists: on one hand, the Christians, among whom I would include Carl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, both professed Catholics; and, on the other, the atheistic existentialists, among whom we should place Heidegger, as well as the French existentialists and myself. What they have in common is simply their belief that existence precedes essence; or, if you prefer, that subjectivity must be our point of departure.

As for theistic existentialism, there is no real conflict with religion in matters of faith and doctrine, but perhaps in terms of their attitude towards organized religion, or the interpretation of those doctrines. However, atheistic existentialism has a clear rejection of the tenets of religion, especially the fundamentals on the existence of God, and what follows from it. In fact, Sartre remarked that ‘existentialism is the drawing out of the consequences for unbelief in God’. If one intends to lead an authentic moral life without a belief in God and the associated metaphysical

ontology associated that underwrite our moral codes and values, what form would our beliefs and worldview take? The existentialist project aims to do just that - provide a humanist philosophy that would fill the vacuum left by religious commitment. In other words, Existentialism provides an alternative to religion to thinking individuals who seek guidance in life, whereby 'guidance' is not meant 'dependency on some external authority', but a reliance on oneself as one's own source of moral compass.

Despite the exception in theistic existentialism, majority of schools of thought classified under Postmodernism are not in favour of religion; be it Nihilism, Phenomenology, Deconstruction, Social Constructivism, or Critical Theory. This stems largely from their attitude towards God and organized religion, and the social practice of religion.

The incompatibility between Postmodernism and religion stems largely from the differences in their fundamental assumptions. While religion affirms the existence of absolute truths, and presents a unified view of the world to be embraced by the believers, postmodernist thinking rejects the idea of an absolute and transcendent truth/reality, and sees unified views of the world as metanarratives which postmodernists should reject. Also, the philosophy of language espoused by a typical postmodernist, would go against the grain of religious thinking where religious dogma is unambiguously communicated through language, and not subjected to the fluidity of multiple interpretations.

The crux of the matter lies in the differences between the metaphysics and epistemology of the two groups. While religion posits the existence of a transcendent reality, postmodernist thinking would insist on the primacy and precedence of existence over essence up to the point of denying reality to an intrinsic, independently subsisting essence be it God, angels or spirits. In this regard, as Sartre correctly stated, existentialism is a form of humanism, where there is no higher reality or authority that the individual human being should subject himself to. This difference in ontology and metaphysics between postmodernism and religion, then spills over into epistemology. For the postmodernist, since 'essences' and transcendent realities do not exist, there can therefore be no real knowledge of them. Claims about their existence have to be interpreted accordingly, in line with

humanism. This is the approach adopted by social anthropologists, for example, who interpret worship in social contexts, not as communion with God, but as an act of social bonding.

In religion, the source of moral values is found in religious teachings derived from scripture and is believed to have been revealed to the prophets or the founders of the religion. In the case of organized religions such as Islam, it is even enshrined in the legal code or the *Shariah*. The believer thus inherits a set of moral values through the religious community, where its origin is believed to be from a divine source. For the existentialists and nihilists, there is no such intrinsic moral code from a divine or transcendent source. Human beings discover their own moral values as they engage in and struggle through life—it is not something given to them from the skies. These differences in perspectives about the nature of truth, reality and human life would lead to different beliefs and actions between the two groups. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that a postmodernist approach to religion, albeit with qualifications, can lead to authentic beliefs. One way this might occur is through one's individual search of encountering the 'greater force' within, where the force no longer appears as 'transcendent' but is assimilated into one's own field of experience. Such experiences might be associated with mysticism, but in this case, individuals from both sides could potentially find a common ground—the world of individual experience.

7. An Islamic Response to Postmodernism

Thus far, our discussion has only referred to religion in general. In this section, we will focus on the response from the Islamic religion. The discussion will focus on two things: (i) the Islamic philosophy of language, and (ii) the Islamic perspective on the relationship between Allah, man and nature.

A central feature of postmodernist thinking is their focus on the philosophy of language, for example in Derrida's deconstruction, and through Wittgenstein's concept of 'language games'. The essence of the postmodernist philosophy of language is the relationship between language and reality, where the relationship is seen as more complex and fluid than normally understood. The earlier Wittgenstein, for example, viewed language as having a 'structural isomorphism' with external reality, i.e., the structure of language reflects the structure of reality. As such,

language submits itself to the positivist's criterion of meaningful statement, where words in a sentence have a direct reference which can be empirically verified. These two aspects of Wittgenstein's earlier theory of language, where words have a direct reference, and sentential structure (unpacked through logic) reflecting the structural relations of objects and/or events, seem to eliminate any ambiguity in linguistic expression. However, in Wittgenstein's later theory of language, such a view was overturned and replaced by his theory of 'language games', where meaning is context-dependent and not context-free like before. For example, the word 'dragon', which would be meaningless by the positivist's criterion, can be accepted as meaningful in different socio-cultural contexts when we refer to the 'dragon dance' in Chinese culture. The use of language, according to Wittgenstein, is like a game with its own set of rules, just as different games have different rules. Thus, what could be meaningless in a scientific context, could be meaningful in a cultural context, where the linguistic community uses the language socially and confers meaning to it. Similarly, Derrida did not view the relationship between language and what it represents as something direct and straightforward. In fact, for Derrida, language contains its own inherent bias, as seen in his critique of 'binary oppositions' such as 'East-West', 'Male-Female', 'Active-Passive', 'Master-Servant', which he opined reflects hierarchy and power relations. Furthermore, Derrida did not view linguistic expressions as 'unidimensional', but rather 'multidimensional', where the reduction to the cognitive sphere of meaning is labelled as 'logocentric'.

Similar to the postmodernist view of language, Islam also has its own say on language, which has been articulated through an understanding of the Islamic distinction between: (i) *Muhakamat* and *Mutashabihat* statements, and (ii) the notions of *tafsir* and *ta'wil*. The terms *Muhakamat* and *Mutashabihat* can be found in Surah Al-Imran, Verse 7, which reads:

It is He who has sent down to you the Book (Quran). In it are verses that are entirely clear [*Muhakamat*], they are the foundations of the Book; and others not entirely clear [*Mutashabihat*]. So, as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation (from the truth), they follow that which is not entirely clear thereof, seeking *Al-Fitnah*, and seeking for its hidden meanings, but none knows its hidden meanings except Allah.

Clear examples are verses referring to hudud laws, inheritance laws, and religious duties such as praying and fasting. Such statements indeed have to be unambiguous since they impact the actions and practices of the believer. For example, if inheritance laws are ambiguous, then it could lead to conflict between family members since they can be interpreted differently by different individuals in order to benefit the claimant. However, apart from these verses, there are also ambiguous ones, i.e., the *Mutashabihat* statements, which can be subjected to different interpretations. This could also be a source of trouble, since it could be deviously manipulated to serve one's interest or prejudicial view, as referred to in the Quran as 'those in whose hearts is a deviation...'. Nevertheless, there is the understanding that *Mutashabihat* statements contain 'hidden meanings', only known to Allah and those to whom He grants such knowledge. This brings us to the distinction between *tafsir*, understood as 'translation', and *ta'wil* which has been understood as 'hermeneutic interpretation' involving allegories and symbolism, and more applicable to *Mutashabihat* sentences. Some verses in the Quran contain 'layers of meaning'—some literal, some symbolic and metaphorical—where their true meaning cannot be unveiled merely through *tafsir* or direct translation. For example, expressions like 'the face of God', 'the hand of God', or 'God ascending the Throne', cannot be interpreted literally since it would contradict the Islamic belief that God is unlike anything that we know or imagine (Quran 42:11; 112:4). Hence, Islamic philosophy of language accepts the two central features or functions of language, i.e., clear unambiguous linguistic expressions on one hand, and on the other, ambiguous ones capable of multiple or indirect interpretations. However, Islam does not accept 'linguistic anarchy' where sentences bear no reliable or stable relation to what is signified or expressed. This is because any statement could mean anything, defeating the purpose of language as a medium of communication. Another aspect of the Islamic view of language is the role ascribed to the agent or speaker in regards to intent and ethics. While Derrida sees language as already containing a structure imposed through social and cultural conditioning, so much so that a binary like 'Male-Female' already presupposes a hierarchy where the male is dominant, Islam ascribes responsibility to the agent in ascribing meaning to his/her utterance since the 'condition of the heart' matters as stated in the Quran, which says, 'those in whose hearts...'. Following this, the suggested hierarchy then need not exist if the utterer does not intend so, treating both males and females as different but on par or as a complementary relationship in the sense of Yin and Yang.

Apart from the Islamic response to the postmodernist philosophy of language, how the modernist-postmodernist debate is viewed from an Islamic perspective is elaborated in this section. In the debate between modernists and postmodernists, we see that modernists privilege the natural and rational over social/human and the intuitive/psychological, while postmodernists, like the Counter-Enlightenment thinkers, privilege the social and psychological over the natural and rational. By taking science, i.e., study and knowledge of the natural world as the standard yardstick or model which determines rationality, objectivity and truth, we subject our judgement about humanity to scientific and naturalistic criteria, even though human reality cannot be reduced to that of the inanimate natural world. At the other end of the spectrum, postmodernists emphasise the human or social aspect over the natural, forgetting that there is a mind-independent reality in relation to the natural world to which our human whims and fancies carry no influence. Islam, in contrast, does not privilege one aspect over the other, but rather sees both in subservient relation to God. Due to the secularisation of western thinking, God no longer features in mainstream intellectual or academic discourse, hence limiting the field of intellectual vision to the natural and human/social since they alone are amenable to rational and empirical enquiry. Islam though, claims the authenticity, affirms the idea and existence of God, even in the face of the more fashionable secular contemporary western thinking. In Islam, there is a tripartite relationship between God, man and nature, where man has to establish a proper relationship with all three in order to achieve true happiness; i.e., proper and harmonious relationships between man and God, man and man, and man and nature (Nasr 1997). What this implies in the context of the modernist-postmodernist debate is that neither man nor nature are better than the other in the Islamic worldview. Instead, both man and nature, being creations of God, are seen as realities not in themselves as such but in relation to God's power and authority. In this regard, I quote verses from the Surah Ar Rahman, verses 4-8:

(4) The sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed; (5) and the herbs/stars and the trees, both alike, bow down in adoration/prostration (6) and the firmament has he raised high, and he has set up the balance (of justice), (7) in order that ye may not transgress (due) balance. (8) So, establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance.

Verse 4 refers to a natural process and the law which binds its behaviour. The regularity that occurs in nature is '*sunnatullah*' or God's decree on nature and not an autonomous act of nature. Verse 5 refers to nature but not in a straightforward manner. In fact, Al Kindi interpreted it as meaning 'the stars and the trees submitting to the will of Allah' since they cannot literally 'bow down' (Fakhry 2009, 29). Thus verse 4 is closer to a 'modernist' perspective since it is nature-based and can be literally interpreted, while verse 5 can be better understood from a postmodernist view on language as it involves metaphors and symbols. In fact, a similar reference can be found in Surah Yusuf, verses 4-6⁶, that supports the view of nature as a symbolic reference involving the human subconscious.

Both approaches, namely, nature-centred (ala 'modernist'), and man-centred (ala 'postmodernist') are needed, and should be set or seen 'in balance'. To privilege one over the other is to lose this balance, resulting in a lop-sided perspective of knowledge and reality. As humans, we possess characteristics that cannot be reduced to the natural, for example the inner life of the mind, that has led to the so-called 'mind-body problem' whose resolution cannot be at the expense of the immaterial mind. In contrast, we also have to accept the existence of a mind-independent physical world that has its own nature, characteristics and laws which are not 'socially constructed'. In Islam, however, nature is not seen as something autonomous or operates in a self-regulating way according to 'the laws of nature'. Instead, the regulating of natural behaviour is interpreted as '*sunnatullah*', that is following the course set by Allah. Thus, nature is bound to God in two ways; as a creation of God, and as behaving according to the order set by God. Similarly, man is also bound to God; as God's creation, and as a servant of God. As such, both man and nature are bound to God and are not independent of God. In order to appreciate the Islamic point of view, an understanding of this tripartite relationship involving God, man and nature is necessary so that we do not have a distorted vision of reality.

Finally, in this section, the relationship between Postmodernism and the Muslim profession of faith, namely the *Kalimah Syahadah* that 'there is no God but Allah', will be examined. Most schools of thought regarded as postmodernist, such as Existentialism and Nihilism, would consider God as non-existent. They concur with the first part of the *syahadah*, the denial, although they fall short of its following

affirmation. One way of looking at it, and perhaps a way which is charitable and not condescending, is to see Postmodernism as having the potential to reach affirmation but not in an explicit manner that would be routinised and dogmatized. Should that happen, it would then remind us of Prophet Ibrahim's journey in search of God as related in Surah al-An'am, verses 76-79, where he went through several phases before finding God:

“(76) When the night covered him over with darkness, he saw a star. He said: ‘This is my Lord’. But when it set, he said: ‘I like not those that set. (77) When he saw the moon rising up, he said: ‘This is my Lord’. But when it set, he said: ‘Unless my Lord guides me, I shall surely be among the people who went astray.’ (78) When he saw the sun rising up, he said: ‘This is my Lord. This is greater.’ But when it set, he said: ‘O my people! I am indeed free from all that you join as partners (in worship with Allah). (79) Verily, I have turned my face towards Him who has created the heavens and the earth ...

Notice that in the narrative above even a prophet such as Ibrahim (Abraham) went through phases whereby he was enamored by things which appeared God-like, but in the end turned out not to be the real God. His redemption, however, lies in him recognising that they are not true gods once he has seen the real thing. This positive affirmation is something which lies in the realm of inner consciousness at first, to which a linguistic utterance conveys a pale shadow of that inner reality at best, but is nevertheless necessary in order to avoid solipsism and maintain a modicum of social communication. The sentence which mediates between his denial and his affirmation is given in verse 78 which reads: ‘...I am indeed free from all that you join as partners (in worship with Allah)’. Being free of those idols/partners creates that crucial space for God's presence to be realised. Again, the first part can be explicitly stated but the second has no real substitute—not even through a linguistic statement—except through inner experience. This reminds me of Wittgenstein's remark that ‘that of which once cannot speak, thereof one should remain silent’, which concurs with the description of the Tao as given in the *Tao Te Ching*, which says that the Tao that can be spoken of is not the real Tao⁷.

Thus, postmodernists' skepticism towards beliefs associated with God could have the effect of wiping out hypocritical and unauthentic beliefs in relation to God, provided

that it is not itself underlaid and motivated by an egoistic desire to assert the Self. A positive aspect of Postmodernism is the quest for authenticity, which calls for honesty and sincerity. Such a quest, if not tainted by egoism, could lead towards individual enlightenment.

8. Conclusion

The discussion on 'Religion and Postmodernism' began by the laying out of three main ideological positions in contemporary thinking, namely Modernism, Postmodernism, and Religion. Before embarking on the discussion of postmodernism in relation to religion, the relationship between postmodernism and modernism was first discussed. Through the latter, it was found that postmodernism can be regarded as a reaction or response to modernism, more so than to religion. Having laid out the discourse on modernism and postmodernism and examining their points of contention, a view from a religious aspect was then presented, specifically that of Islam. The argument was that the modernist-postmodernist discourse was basically framed by different groundings and privileging, where the modernist privileges the natural and rational, while the postmodernist privileges the human/social and the psychological. It was concluded that Islam privileges neither. Instead, Islam views the matter based on the tripartite relationship between God, man and nature, where both man and nature are subservient to God. Narrowing the discussion to the relationship between postmodernism and religion/Islam, it was argued that Postmodernism and Islam are incompatible and this was illustrated using the philosophy of language. However, there was a caveat which acknowledges that despite the differing views of Postmodernism and religion, some of the former's fundamental assumptions of knowledge, metaphysics and epistemology have the potential to complement religious quests at the inner and individual level of human consciousness.

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Endnote:

¹ Here I would like to clarify that although the term 'modernism' is sometimes used in relation to a movement in art or the philosophy of art, which tends to move away from 'naïve realism' in paintings, and where modern art is mainly abstract art rather than a faithful reproduction of external reality in pictorial form, I have used the term more towards the sense of 'modernity', emphasising on reason, science, and progress. In so doing, postmodernist thinking as found in the works of philosophers such as Sartre, Camus, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard, can be seen and understood as a response to rationalist/modernist thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, the Logical Positivists, the analytic philosophers, Popper, and Habermas.

² For a construal of modernism in terms of modernity, see (Rouse 1991, 146) where he lists down 'secularism' and 'rationalisation' as two of the seven traits of modernity in his discussion of the philosophy of science situated within the larger context of the discourse on modernity.

³ See my review of Gellner's (1992) in Mohd Hazim Shah Abdul Murad, 'Islam and Contemporary Western Thought: Islam and Postmodernism,' published in *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Summer 1996, vol.13, no. 2, pp. 250-259.

⁴ To quote Rorty: "For pragmatists the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can" (Richard Rorty 1991:23).

⁵ Rorty redefines 'rational' as follows, thereby turning an epistemological notion into something ethical: "Another meaning for "rational" is, in fact, available. In this sense, the word means something like "sane" or "reasonable" rather than "methodical". It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force. These are the virtues which members of a civilized society must possess if the society is to endure. In this sense of "rational," the word means something more like "civilized" than like "methodical"...On this construction, to be rational is simply to discuss any topic -- religious, literary, or scientific -- in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous indignation" (Richard Rorty 1991:37).

⁶ Verses 4-6 of Surah Yusuf translates as follows: "(4) Remember when Yusuf said to his father: 'O my father! Verily, I saw (in a dream) eleven stars and the sun and the moon—I saw them prostrating themselves to me.'... (5) The father said: 'Oh my son! Relate not your vision to your brothers, lest they should arrange a plot against you... (6) 'Thus will your Lord choose you and teach you the interpretation of dreams (and other things) and perfect His favour on you...'.
The passage above contains a dialogue between the Prophet Yusuf and his father, Prophet Ya'qub (Jacob), Yusuf relates his dream involving the stars, sun and moon to his father. Here, the natural objects, such as stars, sun and moon, serve as symbols whose meaning can only be unveiled by the initiated, and in Yusuf's case, through knowledge given by Allah. The Swiss psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung had, in fact, studied symbolic dreams and came up with his theory of 'Archetypes'. What this serves to show is that the world of nature and the world of man can interact in 'strange ways', where the limited worldview of the Positivist cannot be of help.

⁷ In chapter one of the Tao Te Ching, we find (English and Feng 1972) :

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
This appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.