

“Islamic Modernism (الحداثة الإسلامية)”: An Attack on the Prophetic Sunnah

Islamic Modernism (الحداثة الإسلامية) refers to an idea that seeks to reinterpret Islam to align with the values and frameworks of the Western liberal world order. Emerging in the 19th century, this wave of reform was driven by influential figures such as Jamal ud Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Syed Ahmed Khan. Their efforts were aimed at reconciling Islam with evolving modern political, social, and economic systems. This reinterpretation, however, often involved the distortion of Islamic principles in order to fit the evolving norms of the modern world, including Western concepts like nationalism, capitalism, human legislation, human rights, gender equality, and interfaith harmony.

One of the central challenges modernism poses is the attempt to reshape Islam to justify Western notions like the invasion of Muslim lands, privatization of public resources, a Riba-based economy, and the establishment of nation-states, which are foreign to the Islamic thought. The modernist agenda, therefore, involves modifying Islamic teachings to make them appear compatible with Western ideologies and systems.

Modernism aims to find space within the Noble Quran and Prophetic Sunnah for the values of the Western world order. This process includes twisting the interpretation of Islamic texts in order to accommodate ideas such as occupation, economic exploitation, and the promotion of individual freedoms, all of which run counter to Islamic fundamentals. Proponents of modernism argue that Islam should adapt to the modern world, yet they often overlook the fact that the fundamental human needs have not changed. Humans still need to trade, own property, appoint rulers, and regulate social relations, etc. What has changed, however, is the means and styles by which these needs are fulfilled, thanks to technological advancements.

One of the key arguments presented by modernists is the claim that Islam does not provide detailed guidance for various systems, such as governance, the economy, or the legal framework of society. This assertion, however, fails to acknowledge the rich intellectual tradition within Islam, which offers extensive elaboration on these matters.

For example, classical Islamic scholars such as Al-Mawardi, Ibn Taymiyah, and Abu Yousaf wrote comprehensive works on governance, economics, and societal organization. *Ahkaam Sultaniya* by Al-Mawardi addresses the details of governance, including the qualifications of rulers and the rules of leadership in an Islamic state. *Al-Siyasah al-Shariyah* by Ibn Taymiyah offers insight into the role of the state and its relationship with the governed. *Kitab Al-Khiraj* by Abu Yousaf, a student of the renowned scholar Abu Hanifa, provides a detailed examination of economic practices, particularly regarding land taxation and public finance.

Additionally, the Hadith literature, records of the sayings, actions, and consent of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (saw), offers detailed guidance on governance, economics, social relations, and even individual conduct. So there are Ahadith which provide specific instructions on matters of ruling, like putting the qualification of being a male for rulers in the hadith «لَنْ يَفْلَحَ قَوْمٌ وَلَوْ أَمَرَهُمْ» “A people who appoints a woman as guardian (ruler) of their affairs will never be successful”, singularity of rulership in the hadith, «إِذَا بُوِيَ لَخْلِفَتَيْنِ، فَاغْتُلُوا الْآخَرَ مِنْهُمَا» “If two Khulafa are contracted, kill the later one”, and on delegation of authority on state matters as in the hadith «بَعَثَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ عُمَرَ عَلَى الصَّدَقَةِ» “Messenger of Allah (saw) appointed Umar (ra) on Sadaqah”. Similarly, we find details on matters of economy, how land should be owned and distributed, and how markets and trade should be regulated. For example, the Prophet Muhammad (saw) said, «النَّاسُ شُرَكَاءُ فِي الثَّلَاثِ: الْمَاءِ وَالْكَلَا وَالنَّارِ» “The people are partners in three things: water, pasture, and fire.” This statement outlines the concept of shared public resources, an essential aspect of governance and economic policy in Islam.

Sunnah also addresses matters such as the prohibition of monopolies like in the hadith, «مَنْ» “Whosoever monopolized is upon error”, indicating that monopolistic practices are forbidden in Islam, on matter of price-fixing, as in the hadith «بَلَّ اللَّهُ يَخْفِضُ وَيَرْفَعُ» “Allah reduces and raises the prices,” on matter of currency like in the hadith, «الْوَزْنُ وَزَنُّ أَهْلِ مَكَّةَ وَالْمِكْيَالُ»

«مِكْيَالُ أَهْلِ الْمَدِينَةِ» **“The weight is the weight of people of Makkah and the measure is the measure of people of Madina”**, which establishes the bimetallic currency standard of Silver Dirham of 2.975g and Golden Dinar of 4.25g. Similarly, he instructed the community on issues such as land ownership like in the hadith «مَنْ أَحْيَا أَرْضًا مَيْتَةً فَهِيَ لَهُ» **“Whosoever revived a dead land, it is his”**, and unjust taxation like in the hadith «لَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ صَاحِبُ الْمَكْسِ» **“One who takes (unlawful) tax will not enter Jannah”**, further illustrating the comprehensive guidance Islam offers on the political systems of life.

A significant challenge to modernism's reinterpretation of Islam is its treatment of Hadith. Some modernists argue that while the Quran is divinely protected, Hadith cannot be placed in the same category, as it is merely a collection of human narrations. However, this view overlooks the central role Hadith plays in explaining and elaborating on the Quranic text.

The Noble Quran itself affirms the Sunnah. It is decisively established that Sunnah is Revelation, decisive in text (thaboot) and decisive in evidencing (dalaalah). Allah said, ﴿وَمَا يَنْطِقُ﴾ **“Nor does he speak of desire.”** [TMQ Surah An-Najm 53:3]. In his Tafsir, Ibn Kathir stated regarding this ayah, «ما يقول قولاً عن هوى وغرض» “nothing the Prophet says of speech is of his desire or wish.” Imam Qurtubi stated in his Tafsir, «إنما هو يوحى من الله عز وجل» “nothing of what he speaks is of his own opinion. It is only what has been revealed by Allah the Exalted.” Allah (swt) said, ﴿إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَى﴾ **“It is only a revelation revealed.”** [TMQ Surah An-Najm 53:4]. Ibn Kathir stated, «he (saw) only conveys to the people what he was commanded to convey, in its entirety, without addition or deletion.” Without the Sunnah, many of the practical details of Islamic rules including the Ibadaat, such as the method of prayer, fasting, and other rules, would remain unclear.

Furthermore, the preservation of the Ahadith followed a similar methodology to that of the ayaat of the Noble Quran. Both were transmitted orally and then documented. The compilation of the Ahadith involved rigorous validation processes to ensure their authenticity. Muhadithoon, scholars of the Ahadith, such as Imam Bukhari, Imam Muslim and others, developed comprehensive methodologies for verifying the reliability of narrators and the accuracy of the content. This system of authentication ensured that only the most reliable narrations were preserved.

Despite the modernist argument that the Ahadith are not as rigorously preserved as the Noble Quran, historical evidence shows that the collection and preservation of Hadith was treated with the utmost care. The process involved not only the transmission of narrations but also the detailed examination of the narrators' character, memory, and reliability. For example, the Hadith about Abu Musa being questioned by Umar ibn al-Khattab demonstrates the care with which Hadiths were scrutinized, even at the time of Companions of Messenger of Allah (saw).

Al-Jariri narrated from Abu Nadra who narrated from Abu Sa'eed that Abu Musa greeted Umar with the *Salam* three times from behind the door but he was not given permission to enter. So he returned. Umar (ra) sent someone for him and asked him why did you return back? He said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (saw) say, «إِذَا سَلَّمَ أَحَدُكُمْ ثَلَاثًا فَلَمْ يُجِبْ فَلْيَرْجِعْ» **“When one of you gives salam three times and you are not answered, then let him turn back”** [Ahmad]. Umar replied, «لَتَأْتِيَنِي عَلَى ذَلِكَ بَيِّنَةٌ أَوْ لَأَفْعَلَنَّ بِكَ» **“You must bring me an evidence about this matter otherwise I will punish you.”** Abu Musa came to us while we were sitting down and his face was sweaty. We said: “What is the matter with you?” So he informed us and asked: “Did anyone of you hear this *Hadith*?” We replied: “Yes, all of us have heard this (*Hadith*).” So we sent a man from amongst us till he came to Umar (ra) and told him.

Similarly, Ali (ra) said, «إِذَا سَمِعْتَ مِنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ حَدِيثًا نَفَعَنِي اللَّهُ بِمَا شَاءَ مِنْهُ، وَإِذَا حَدَّثَنِي عَنْهُ مَحْدَثٌ اسْتَحْلَفْتَهُ فَإِنْ حَلَفَ لِي بِصِدْقَتِهِ» **“If I heard a *Hadith* from the Prophet of Allah (saw) which Allah (swt) benefited me with it, and if anyone talked to me about it, I would ask for an oath from him, and if he gave it to me then I would trust him.”**

Moreover, the efforts to preserve Hadith can be seen in the practices of the Companions (ra) of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). For instance, Abu Huraira (ra), one of the most prolific narrators of Hadith, famously said, «مَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ مِنْ أَصْحَابِ النَّبِيِّ أَكْثَرَ حَدِيثًا مِنِّي إِلَّا مَا كَانَ مِنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍ فَابْنَهُ كَانَ» **“No one from the Companions of the Prophet (saw) narrated more Hadith than me except Abdullah ibn Umar, for he used to write them down, while I did not.”** This

highlights the meticulous documentation efforts that were undertaken to preserve the teachings of the Messenger of Allah (saw) for future generations.

The modernist effort to undermine the authority of Hadith disregards the fact that Hadith is an indigenous legal source within Islam, on par with the Quran itself. Numerous Quranic verses emphasize the importance of obeying the Prophet Muhammad (saw) and following his teachings. For instance, Allah says, ﴿وَمَا آتَاكُمُ الرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَاكُمْ عَنْهُ فَانْتَهُوا﴾ **“Whatsoever the Messenger gives you, take it, and whatsoever he forbids you, abstain from it”** (TMQ Al-Hashr: 7). Similarly, Allah (swt) said in another verse, ﴿وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ * إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ﴾ **“Nor does he speak of his own desire. It is only a revelation that is inspired”** [TMQ Al-Najam 3-4]. These verses confirm that the Prophet’s actions and sayings are not just guidance, but Divine Revelation.

The Sunnah also addresses crucial legal and societal issues that are as binding as Quranic injunctions. For example, rules regarding the prohibition of free-mixing of genders, the regulation of economic transactions, and the proper conduct of marriage contracts are all derived from the Sunnah. Similarly, the Sunnah provides detailed rules for the appointment of rulers, the conduct of warfare, and the management of public affairs. These are all central to the functioning of a just and effective Islamic state.

The modernist movement often seeks to undermine the authority of Hadith, arguing that traditional Islamic teachings are outdated and incompatible with modern life. This argument is exemplified by the *Civil Democratic Islam* reportⁱ published by the RAND Corporation in 2004, which explicitly states in the appendix-A titled *“The Hadith Wars”*, that a body of “counterhadith” should be created to support more liberal, egalitarian, and democratic interpretations of Islam. This effort reflects the West’s desire to shape Islam in a way that aligns with its own values and systems, particularly its commitment to liberal democracy and secularism.

However, such efforts fail to recognize that Islam is a complete system of guidance, capable of addressing the needs of humanity, both in the past and present. The fundamental needs of humans—such as the need for justice, economic stability, governance, health, security, education and social cohesion—remain unchanged. The only aspect that has evolved is the means and styles by which these needs are addressed. Whether through modern banking systems, advanced communication technologies, or contemporary warfare, Islam remains adaptable to new methods and tools of the time. The traditional Islamic system, based on the Quran and Hadith, continues to provide relevant and comprehensive solutions for contemporary society.

“Islamic Modernism’s” attempt to reinterpret Islam in light of Western liberalism poses a direct challenge to the authenticity and authority of Hadith. By undermining the importance of the Sunnah, modernists seek to strip Islam of its comprehensive guidance on all aspects of life. However, the traditional Islamic system, rooted in both the Noble Quran and Prophetic Sunnah, remains a complete and viable framework for addressing human needs. The re-interpretation of Islam to fit modern Western ideals is not only misguided but also fails to recognize the timeless relevance of Islamic teachings. Through a rigorous process of preservation and authentication, Hadith remains as valid, relevant and authoritative today as it was during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (saw), offering timeless solutions to the challenges of the modern world.

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Idrees Pasha – Wilayah Pakistan**

ⁱ [Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies](#)