

Defining Modernity

Basit Bilal Koshul

There is a great deal of material available regarding the political, military, and even economic encounter between the Muslim world and the modern West. The political factors that made possible the penetration of the West into the Muslim world, the military confrontation that often ensued, and the economic costs and benefits affecting the parties involved — these topics have all been well documented. Political scientists and area studies specialists have produced a wealth of information regarding these issues. In the present work, therefore, I propose to study the encounter between Islam and the West from a different perspective, because it is my position that prior to being a political, military, or economic challenge to the Muslim world, the West represents an intellectual challenge.

One would not be far off the mark by noting that the political, economic, and military triumph of Western powers across the globe is a by-product of the triumph of Western thought and ideas. Currently there is considerable debate regarding the longevity of this period of Western domination. One school of thought, best represented by Francis Fukuyama, argues that the triumph of Western thought and ideas is permanent and irreversible. An opposing view, best represented by Samuel Huntington, argues that even though Western thought has triumphed across the globe, its continued domination in the indefinite future is not a sure thing. In spite of their differences regarding the future course of events, both schools of thought agree that the closing decades of the 20th century have witnessed the global triumph of Western thought and ideas. In light of this discussion, it makes sense to ask the question: How the Muslims have

The writer is Ph.D. candidate at Drew University, New Jersey (USA). His unpublished work, *Recounting the Milestones: An Appraisal of Islam's Encounter with Modernity*, will be serialized in these pages.

responded, on the intellectual level, to the onslaught of Western thought? This question needs to be asked because the response at the intellectual level determines the concrete policies that are adopted to meet the challenge. It is the goal of our current survey to analyze the various responses that the Muslims have formulated over the past century or so to the intellectual challenge posed by the West.

The necessity of such a survey is highlighted by the fact that Western ideas and thought are exercising ever-increasing influence on not only the Muslim world but throughout the globe as a whole — the global village is in reality a Western village. The proposition that Western thought and ideas have been generally accepted throughout the world is a curious one in light of the fact that today the globe is more politically fragmented than ever before. But a closer look behind the facade of political fragmentation reveals that the political and intellectual elite in virtually all the countries share similar values and ideas — values and ideas that are rooted in Western thought. The intensity of the impact of the West in the 20th century can be best measured by glancing at the oppositional ideologies that have arisen as a challenge to the West. To a greater or lesser degree, even these oppositional movements have been shaped by Western thought. As in the case of fascism and communism, some of them have been nothing more than extreme expressions of the very thought that they ostensibly opposed.

In the following pages I will first identify the fundamental concepts which have shaped the modern West. These will be identified as being an epistemology based on scientism, a sociology based on secularism, and an ideology based on capitalism. It will be argued that the cumulative effect of these concepts in the modern West is a total loss of faith in any transcendent, spiritual, and/or metaphysical reality, i.e., a loss of faith in the possibility that a reality other than the one which we can comprehend with our physical senses may exist. This loss of faith will be identified as being the one characteristic that differentiates

modernity and its progenitor (the modern West) from all pre-modern modes of thought and all pre-modern societies. It should be stated at this stage that the real purpose behind this survey is to present evidence to support the argument that even the contemporary Islamic resurgence has been significantly impacted by Western thoughts and ideas — the protests of the Islamists notwithstanding. The Islamists clearly recognize and loudly assert that Islam strikes a balance between worldly concerns and concerns for the Hereafter. In other words, it deals with matters of the spirit as well as the temporal affairs of the world. But when one looks beyond this initial statement and analyzes modern Islamic thought in some detail, it becomes apparent that, practically speaking, this balance is nowhere to be found. Comparatively speaking, the emphasis on the aspect of Islam which deals with worldly affairs is so pronounced in modern Islamic thought and the emphasis on the metaphysical and spiritual aspect of Islam is so paltry, that any talk of a "balance" between these two aspects is rendered meaningless. This loss of balance is a direct result of the penetration of modern Western thought into the Muslim world.

This work is a survey of Islam's encounter with the *modern* West. It is necessary to make this qualification because the dynamics of Islam's encounter with medieval Christianity were quite different from what they are today. Even though the modern West is the product of an organic process of the development of medieval Christianity (which itself was significantly influenced by Islam), its unique characteristics are truly novel inventions. The fundamental concepts on which the modern West is built represent a rupture in the intellectual tradition of not only the West but of humanity. The following survey of these fundamental concepts will show that these concepts are not only entirely novel, but they have come to be commonly accepted only after a long and bitter struggle. In other words the conceptual paradigm is the result of a historical process, not of any self-evident truths that have suddenly become apparent to everyone.

Each human society contains certain unique characteristics that distinguish it from other societies, and imbue it with its peculiar character. These unique characteristics are invariably based upon certain intellectual propositions that shape and mold the visible institutions and practices of the society. In the following pages we shall identify those characteristics of the modern West which set it apart from other human societies. In other words, we will identify the foundational intellectual propositions on which modern Western thought is based, which in turn are responsible for the unique character of not only modern Western thought but also of modern Western society.

Scientism as Epistemology

How does one arrive at an accurate description of Reality and Truth? Epistemology is the study of the various ways in which man has attempted to answer this question. This question has been the preoccupation of all civilizations known to man, and the manner in which this particular question was answered greatly determined the character of each civilization. Modern Western thought has answered this question by categorically stating that only "scientific" knowledge is capable of providing an accurate description of Reality and Truth. There are varying definitions of "scientific" knowledge, some of which seem to be at great variance with others. But in spite of the apparent differences, there is a common theme that runs through all these definitions, viz., "scientific knowledge" refers to all the information that can be collected using the five human senses and synthesized using the powers of the human intellect. Scientism is the belief that "scientific" knowledge alone is capable of providing an accurate description of Reality and Truth, to the exclusion of all other sources of knowledge. In other words, it is the belief that scientific knowledge is the only reliable source of knowledge. It is worth noting that there are sources of knowledge which scientism does not regard as being valid and reliable, i.e., Divine Revelation, individual religious experience, and inner intuition.

Here, a distinction needs to be made between "science" and "scientism." "Science" is a particular way of investigating and exploring the nature of reality, while "scientism" is the belief that science provides the only reliable and valid way of carrying out this investigation. Throughout the present work, the focus will be on *scientism the belief*, not *science the method*. A corollary to this belief is the conviction that technology and "scientific" methods are capable of solving all the problems that affect human individuals and society.

Even though the selection of science as the only reliable source of knowledge is a subjective choice, it is by no means an irrational one. Nearly three hundred years of European history made this choice virtually inevitable, and the past century or so seems to have justified this choice. The only other contender that could, and did, challenge science's designation to this privileged status was religion — or the Catholic Church, to be more specific. While tensions between the established religious authorities and a few individual scientists were present just under the surface in the 16th century, the conflict between religion and science exploded into the open in the first quarter of the 17th century. The catalyst for this explosion was Galileo's observational finding that confirmed Copernicus' heliocentric theory. This confirmation of heliocentrism conflicted with the official Church view that advocated a geocentric view of the cosmos.

Prior to the advent of modern science, all religious and philosophical systems in the West assigned man a special and central place in the universe. The Aristotelian, Ptolemaic, Augustinian, and Thomist systems place the earth in the center of the universe and man as unique among all the inhabitants of the earth. According to this traditional view of the cosmos, the whole drama of creation is centered around the earth and humanity, and the geocentric model was an expression of this belief. For obvious reasons the geocentric model corresponded with the religious teachings of the Church. Copernicus's heliocentric model removed the earth from its

privileged, central place in the cosmos and made it just one of the many heavenly bodies orbiting the sun, thus directly challenging Church teachings. Following in the footsteps of Copernicus and Kepler (who provided the mathematical proof supporting the heliocentric model), Galileo came up with the observational evidence confirming Copernicus's theory, using a powerful new invention, the telescope. Even though the Church authorities were temporarily able to silence Galileo, the passage of time only strengthened his position. The scientific description of Reality and Truth proved to be sounder than the "religious" description.

This victory of science over religion in the 17th century, significant as it was, proved to be minor when compared to the events in the 18th century. The debate between the geocentric and heliocentric models revolved around a single issue and in this particular debate science had proven its worth. The 18th century witnessed the triumph of the Newtonian description of the universe. This description posed a systemic challenge to religion because it professed to describe universal laws that governed the cosmos. Moreover, this was not a capricious claim; it was confirmed by overwhelming and incontrovertible evidence in the form of mathematical equations and precise predictions of planetary motion. The claims of the religious authorities that the heavenly bodies obeyed the "the Will of God" which was beyond the comprehension of mere mortals, sounded dry and pale when compared to Newton's laws and descriptions. The Newtonian description of the universe was so accurate and astounding that progressively all alternative and competing descriptions had to be discarded — including the religious one. This point is poignantly illustrated by Pierre Simon de Laplace's comment when he presented a book he had written to Napoleon. The book, titled *Philosophical Essays on Probabilities*, dealt with various laws governing the working of the universe. When asked why his book contained no mention of the Creator, Laplace firmly replied: "I have no need of that hypothesis."¹

By the beginning of the 19th century there

was hardly any doubt among the intellectual elite in Europe that, epistemologically, science was far superior than religion. So when science turned its gaze upon man himself in the middle of the 19th century, its findings carried the same import that Divine Revelation had carried at an earlier stage in history. Whereas the heliocentric theory had removed the earth from its privileged place in the universe, Darwin's theory of evolution completed the task by removing man from his privileged place on earth. The defense raised by the religious authorities to uphold the belief that man is a special creation of God was far less vigorous than had been the case two and a half centuries earlier during the confrontation with Galileo. The result of the confrontation between the religious view and the Darwinian view of human origins was a foregone conclusion. By the end of the 19th century, therefore, the belief in scientism was not only confined to the intellectual elite in Europe but was found to be spreading among the general population as well. The spread of this belief among the populace had less to do with the discovery of heliocentrism or the theory of Natural Selection and more to do with the practical fruit of science — technology.

During the period of its decay, which lasted several centuries, religion had begun to preach that one's fate in this life was a matter of Divine Decree and this fate should be accepted passively. Often in league with the political authorities, the religious authorities preached a doctrine of passivity that promised the believers immense rewards in the Hereafter for patiently accepting all the difficulties in the present life. At certain times the religious authorities went even further and preached that any attempt to change the social-political order of the day was a sin against God. In the midst of this fatalistic view of human potentialities came science, which not only advocated that one should work to improve one's conditions but also provided the wherewithal with which to do it. New technology continually increased man's control over space, time, and nature — consequently increasing his control over his own fate. At just the time that belief in scientism was reaching a

pitch among the intellectuals in the West, the masses began to taste the fruits of the Industrial Revolution. Beginning in England and then quickly spreading to the rest of Europe and North America, the byproducts of science radically altered the living conditions of the ordinary citizen.

By the beginning of the 20th century the results of the centuries old struggle between religion and science came to an end and science emerged as the clear victor. The exuberance of the victory is aptly portrayed in these words of an Italian futurist written in 1910:

Comrades, we tell you now that the triumphant progress of science makes changes in humanity inevitable, changes that are hacking an abyss between those docile slaves of tradition and us free moderns who are confident in the radiant splendor of our future.¹

The confidence of these moderns in a radiant and splendid future produced by science suffered an unexpected and severe shock with the outbreak of WWI. The very science and technology that was supposed to create a virtual heaven on earth was employed to wreak havoc and destruction of unprecedented proportions. A brief glimpse of the magnitude of this destruction was provided by the outcome of one of the numerous battles during the war. At the Battle of Somme in 1915 "...more lives were lost than in the whole previous centuries of conflicts."² As terrible as the events of WWI were, they proved to be only a prelude to what was to come. The following decades saw the birth of Fascism, totalitarianism, total war, the Final Solution, and the Atomic bomb — all made possible by the very science and technology that were previously believed to be capable of producing only beneficial results for mankind.

The fact that faith in scientism survived these cataclysmic events seems remarkable. But as recorded by history, not only has this faith survived, it has in fact become stronger in the post-WWII years. The second half of the 20th century has witnessed a revival of the total commitment to scientism. The doubts engendered by

the events of the first half of the present century have been nullified by the explanation that "evil people" were the root cause of all the death and destruction, not science and technology. Subsequent experience apparently vindicates this view. Science has broadened man's knowledge to unparalleled heights, giving him profound insight into the workings of the universe as well as his own self. Sputnik, Moonshot, the Hubble telescope, gray matter, DNA, and the Genome Project are all fruits of modern science. Similarly, technology and "scientific" planning and methods have produced a standard of living in the West to which the rest of the world aspires. This is a standard of living that no human society has achieved in recorded history.

The following quote by Jawaharlal Nehru not only expresses the basic tenets of scientism but also reflects the globalization of an idea originating in the West:

It is science alone that can solve the problems of hunger and poverty, of insanitation and illiteracy, of superstition and deadening custom, of vast resources running to waste, of a rich country inhabited by starving people... Who indeed can afford to ignore science today? At every turn we have to seek its aid... The future belongs to science and those who make friends with science.³

In the closing decades of the 20th century, leading scientists are confident that science has the capacity to not only fulfill the material needs of man, but also to answer the most perplexing questions that have haunted man for eons. In their search for the Grand Unified Theory (also called the *Theory of Everything*), theoretical physicists are looking for an equation that will enable man to answer any question which comes to his mind, whether the question deals with physics or metaphysics. The discovery of this equation would enable man not only to definitively explain the origin and history of the universe but also its ultimate end. The explanatory power of this equation is to be so all-embracing that, with its aid, a scientist will be able to precisely outline the personal history, present circumstances, and

future fate of any individual down to the minutest detail by just plugging in the variables into the equation. The quest for this equation has been likened to the quest for the "...mind of God." And if the contemporary prophets of scientism are to be believed, we are only a decade or so away from finding this equation.⁴

The claim of modern science that it has the ability to unravel the mystery of the "mind of God" marks the point where science enters the field of philosophy and metaphysics, those fields which it has consciously avoided in the past. The fact that modern science is delving into these fields denotes the confidence which contemporary scientists have in their faith in scientism. The claim that science has the ability to understand the mind of God is an explicit statement that Truth and Reality can be adequately discerned through the medium of science — that science is the root of epistemology.

The remarkable similarity between the methodology used by Karl Marx and Francis Fukuyama arguing for the ultimate triumph of their respective socio-political systems aptly summarizes the degree to which scientism has come to dominate Western epistemology. Marx claimed that he had discerned certain "scientific" laws that govern the evolution of human society, laws that his later followers developed into the theory of dialectical materialism. According to Marx, the analysis of human history in the light of his materialist interpretation of history made it inevitable that all of humanity would eventually come to be organized into a global communist society. A century and a half after Marx, Fukuyama claims that the "...historical directionality implied by modern natural science"⁵ makes the emergence of a global liberal-bourgeois society inevitable. Leaving aside the question as to whether one agrees with the one thinker or the other, the point to note is that the fundamental root of their argument rests on "scientific" principles. For both thinkers "the logic of science" combined with man's need to acquire material comforts make the ultimate triumph of their respective socioeconomic systems inevitable. The similarity

in the epistemological basis of the leading contemporary ideologue of liberal-bourgeoisie society and the father of Marxism illustrates the degree to which scientism has come to dominate the modern Western mind.

Secularism as Sociology

Secularism is often associated with the notion of rejection of religion. In the context of the present discussion, however, it refers not to the total rejection of religion but confining it merely to the private sphere. Secularism is the attitude that religion has no role to play in the public affairs of society and that it should strictly remain the private affair of the individual. This may appear to be an extension of the concept of scientism, but the two terms are not synonymous. There are two major reasons for treating scientism and secularism separately. Firstly, early scientists whose work contributed to the emergence of scientism were by no means secularists. Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton were profoundly religious men who viewed their work as contributing to a better understanding of the working of the Creator, and this is expressly stated in their own writings. None of them had nearly the antagonistic attitude towards religion that their latter-day followers display. Secondly, whereas scientism emerged as a result of the advances in the physical sciences, secularism is a product of the evolution of the social sciences and institutions in Europe. And it is well known that the development of the social sciences is distinct from, and has lagged behind, the development of the physical sciences.

When one looks for the factors that provided the initial impetus for the rise of secularism in Europe, two major factors stand out: a) the violence that engulfed virtually all of Europe in the Reformation vs. Counter-Reformation debate, and b) the Church's alliance with the *ancien regime*.

Even though it initially began as a reform movement within Catholicism, the Reformation quickly evolved into an open schism. Seeing the ecclesiastical authority of the Church being challenged along with their own political

preeminence, the leading Catholic countries, Spain and Italy, initiated a Counter-Reformation at the Council of Trent in 1543. Generally speaking, the rest of the 16th century saw the demarcation of the Catholic-Protestant divide in Europe. This proved to be significant in the religio-political conflicts that erupted in the 17th century. Commenting on the overall character of the 17th century, a contemporary historian notes: "...European rulers and their people indulged in the seventeenth century in an orgy of hatred, bigotry, massacre, torture, and brutality which has no parallel until the twentieth century."⁶ This violence and bloodletting ran across the Protestant-Catholic divide that had emerged in the previous century.

The scale and intensity of the violence that erupted in the aftermath of these "religious" debates led to an indelible impact on the Western psyche. Having the advantage of hindsight, today it is clear that much of the violence that expressed itself in religious idiom was actually a demonstration of simmering social and political grievances. Not having the advantage of hindsight, however, some of the leading intellectuals of the day blamed the violence and bloodshed of these wars entirely on religion. By the end of the 17th century, therefore, more than a few people in Europe were attempting to formulate new principles of political organization that would extricate the political state from theological issues. Even though the practical implementation of this idea did not occur until the founding of the United States of America in 1776, the factors that led to the desire for such an order are rooted in the religio-political violence from the Reformation vs. Counter-Reformation period.

The alliance of the Church with the *ancien regime* is another significant factor that contributed to the emergence of secularism. In this case, the Church was allied with a system of social thought and organization that was being bypassed by history. The concept of the "Divine right of kings" to rule their subjects without any restrictions was expressed in religious terms and, more often than not, officially advocated by

the religious authorities. Additionally, the Church itself was the largest landlord in Europe. As the demise of feudalism set in, the Church was perceived to be the major defender of this antiquated institution. Consequently, religious authorities were seen as a major obstacle in the development of social institutions.

The bloody history of 17th century Europe and the Church's continued support of the *ancien regime* made religion vulnerable to criticism from a number of quarters. This criticism found its most articulate expression in the writings of the French *philosophes* during the last quarter of the 18th century. Symbolizing a movement that has come to be known as the Enlightenment, the attacks of the *philosophes* on traditional religion and traditional modes of thought provided the intellectual framework in which the principles of secularism were eloquently expressed. Holding the Church to be responsible for practically all the bigotry and intolerance that was to be found in the European society, the *philosophes* argued that religious teachings were the major obstacle to the growth and progress of man. Under the guidance of Denis Diderot they compiled the *Encyclopedie*, with the purpose of demonstrating the grandeur of human achievements if rational and empirical thought was adopted, contrasted against the conservatism and obscurantism of religious authorities. The enlightenment attitude towards religion is best expressed in the thought of Voltaire. The only redeeming feature that Voltaire could find in religion was that it provided the masses with an incentive to behave morally. For Voltaire, if the masses were to find out the real nature of religion they would all lose faith in its doctrine, thus leading to anarchy in society.

By the end of the 18th century, the Enlightenment critique of religion had become a part of the intellectual debate taking place in Europe. The position of the *philosophes* on the need to remove religion from the public sphere was strengthened by developments in the socio-political realm. The modern nation-state was emerging to challenge the political supremacy of the Church in Europe. Centralization and

administrative uniformity are essential prerequisites for the efficient functioning of a modern nation-state. But this is hardly possible if the very geographical land on which the state is based is not under its jurisdiction and neither are the educational institutions that are present in its realm. This was the situation that faced the forerunners of today's European republics. And everywhere it was the Church that was proving to be an obstacle in the way of "modernization" and "development." The claims of the Church carried the weight of tradition, cannon law, and papal authority behind them. A rival claim to jurisdiction over lands and institutions implies a critique of the very principles on which the established claim is based. Hence, by the end of the 18th century, we find the development of a political theory in Europe that totally divorces the process of legislation from any reference to religious authority.

By the beginning of the 19th century, the principle of legislative sovereignty became an integral part of progressive political theory. The European mind came to accept the principle that as long as the political authority of the state is in legitimate hands, the state is absolutely free to draft any legislation as it sees fit. The only argument in this context is regarding the definition of legitimate political authority. The thinkers following the Hobbesian tradition place this legitimacy in the hands of a single ruler, those following the Lockean tradition place this authority in an elected assembly. But it is clear to all that absolute legislative sovereignty now rests with mortals, without any need for a reference to the Divine. The acceptance of this idea was a radical break from the past because it had always been assumed that there were certain laws, dictated by God, that could not be superseded by those of man.

The acceptance of the principle of legislative sovereignty was a clear signal that religion had become marginalized in the public affairs of society. Even though it was marginalized at the societal level, religion found a refuge in the individual conscience of

the believer. But the events of the 19th century would prove that religion was not safe even in the private sphere. Whereas the leading intellectuals of 17th and 18th century had argued that the interference of religion in the public affairs of society hampered society's progress, the 19th century saw the emergence of thinkers who argued that the effects of religion are so pernicious that it should be banished from even the psyche of the individual. The 19th century thinkers gave numerous arguments, some of them contradictory, for the expulsion of religion from the private sphere as well. Nietzsche argued that religion had been invented by the weak to fool the strong, Marx argued that religion was the product of the dominant mode of production (thereby reflecting the interests of the strong) that legitimized existing exploitative social relations, Feuerbach saw religion as merely a projection of human wishes, and Freud viewed religion as a manifestation of infantile regression.

The ideas of these critics of religion carried added force because of developments in a new academic discipline called "biblical criticism." This discipline applied critical and empirical methods to a historical study of the Bible, and in the end the conclusion was reached that fundamental teachings of Christianity could not be traced back to Jesus, but were additions from later periods. One of the seminal works in this field was by a committed Christian, David Friedrich Strauss, who wrote *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* in 1836. After noting that it was not possible to establish the historical authenticity of the person of Jesus, the book made an attempt to get around the question of historical authenticity and still keep central Christian teachings intact by explaining the teachings in purely allegorical terms. The effects of this approach to religious belief can be gauged by the fact that the person who translated it into English, George Eliot, spurned belief in Christianity after reading the book.⁷

But this attempt to keep the Christian teachings relevant by giving them allegorical significance failed because further research

revealed that even the authenticity of the allegories was questionable. Another committed Christian, Albrecht Ritschl, argued that the doctrine of Trinity had nothing to do with authentic Christian teachings. In his book *Theology and Metaphysics*, Ritschl argued that the doctrine of Trinity was introduced into Christianity as a result of Greek influence. If the allegories in which religious doctrines were expressed proved to be of questionable origin themselves, the question naturally arose regarding the authenticity of religion itself. This vacuum of legitimacy was filled by the philosophies of thinkers like Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Marx and by the end of the 19th century the concept of the "death of God" had become the accepted norm among the intellectual elite in Europe.

By the beginning of the 20th century all the elements were in place that would eventually lead to the spread of the notion of "death of God" among the masses. Sigmund Freud in his *Future of an Illusion* notes that the educated elite, those responsible for constructing and maintaining human society, have largely replaced religious motives for civilized behavior by secular motives. Because "...such people are to a large extent themselves vehicles of civilization," it is only a matter of time before the masses at large are also infected with this "enlightened" attitude. Freud goes on to state that

criticism has whittled away the evidential value of religious documents, natural science has shown up the errors in them, and comparative research has been struck by the fatal resemblance between the religious ideas which we revere and the mental products of primitive peoples. ⁸

During roughly the same time period that Freud was expressing his views, the concept of secularism received a "scientific" stamp of approval from some of the leading mathematicians of the 20th century. Bertrand Russell's work gave rise to a philosophical school called logical positivism. The fundamental axiom of this philosophy is that "any statement that cannot be

proven or disproven is meaningless." The statement that "God exists" cannot be empirically verified or refuted, thus any discussion regarding it in any context is an exercise in futility. Even though Logical Positivism has been supplanted by other philosophical schools in academic circles, the application of its fundamental axiom to religious issues is common among the masses even today.

In principle, secularism allows an individual the right to hold religious beliefs, but in the contemporary West it is expected that an educated and enlightened individual not hold any religious conviction. Any suggestion that a particular matter of public concern should in any way be referred to a religious context is to be totally rejected. In the 20th century socialism, fascism, communism, liberalism, and often a motley mixture of one or more of these -isms has characterized the collective affairs of European societies. The important point to note is that in a sociological setup based on any of these -isms, religion at best plays only a marginal role and even then it is sometime actively fought against. If sociology is taken to refer to the collective affairs of society, then secularism is the cardinal principle that determines the sociological character of modern Western society.

Capitalism as Ideology

Capitalism is the one element that has imbued the modern West with its dynamic character. Keeping in mind the fact that the "modern West" was earlier defined in socio-cultural terms, not merely geographic terms, the penetration of Western culture into the non-Western world has been fueled by the birth and expansion of the capitalist economic system. It is well known that the need for cheap raw materials and new markets provided a significant portion of the impetus for the colonizing enterprise undertaken by the West in the 18th and 19th centuries. Furthermore, the fact that the establishment of the capitalist market system in a given society is an essential pre-requisite for the spread of socio-political liberalism in that society is a point on which most liberal and socialist theoreticians agree.

In spite of the fact that capitalism plays such a critical role in shaping the character of the modern world, it is not an easy term to define. The fundamental principle underlying capitalist theory is that the collective interests of society are best served if each individual is afforded the maximum opportunity to pursue his own self-defined selfish interests. And it is taken for granted that the selfish interest of each individual would drive him to accumulate as much private wealth as possible. But before the capitalist ethos could become acceptable even for the political and intellectual elite in Europe a number of conceptual thresholds had to be crossed. The foremost among these thresholds is the concept of interest.

In a tradition dating back to Aristotle and Seneca, continuing through the early Church Fathers and the great medieval theologians, the charging of interest on loans was held to be an anathema by the Europeans. As recently as the Council of Vienna of 1311, the Catholic Church declared the charging of interest to be a crime punishable by excommunication. And there were anti-usury laws on the statute books of Western countries even in the closing decades of the 19th century. It is impossible to speak of the emergence of a capitalist economy in the absence of the concept of interest. Consequently, it is not surprising to see such an economy emerge in embryonic form in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation, because Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli all favored the allowance of the charging of interest.

Whereas capitalism imbues the modern West with its dynamic character, capitalism owes its own dynamism to a banking system based on interest!

A related concept that had to be accepted in order for a capitalist economy to come into existence was the notion of "profit." The simple idea that engaging in a business enterprise in order to accumulate personal wealth so that one would be able to use that wealth to obtain more wealth ran contrary to the teachings of a thousand year old religious tradition. As

late as the mid-17th century, people were being put on trial in the American colonies for engaging in commerce that resulted in accruing a profit of as little as sixpence on a shilling. One of the basic teachings of the Church in the Middle Ages was this: "No Christian ought to be a merchant." The force of the precept against the accumulation of wealth can be gauged by the apologetic that was produced in order to justify it. John Locke in his famous *Second Treatise on Government* dedicates a whole chapter — "On Property" — endeavoring to prove that the accumulation of wealth is sanctioned by morality, the Scriptures, and is above all also logical. Not content to prove that the simple accumulation of wealth is moral, Locke's main argument was that unlimited accumulation of wealth was also moral, religiously sanctioned, and logical. Similarly, Adam Smith's masterpiece *The Wealth of Nations* attempted to maintain an "objective" balance while discussing the benefits of wealth accumulation and its negative effects. But in the end Smith comes down definitively on the side of the positive benefits of wealth accumulation. The notion that one should work hard, accumulate wealth, and improve one's standard of living still had not taken root in the minds of 17th century Europeans. During this period, those who engaged in commerce and work in order to accumulate wealth were the outcasts of society, not its pillars.

A third concept that was crystallized in the Western mind with the emergence and development of the capitalist ethos can be described as "commodification." Even though today the buying and selling of land causes the modern individual no conceptual — to say nothing of spiritual — malaise, for a medieval baron such a concept simply did not make sense. For him the "selling" of his land made as much sense as the buying and selling of a Fulbright or Rhodes scholarship makes to a modern individual. Even though land has existed before man, it has become a commodity only in modern times. Similarly, even though work is as old as man himself, its commodified version — labor — is a modern invention. The notion that one has to "work" in order to earn a "wage" simply did not make

sense to a medieval European, and even in the early part of the 20th century to most inhabitants of the non-Western world.

By the middle of the 18th century, then, the concepts of interest on money, profit, and commodity had become acceptable to a significant enough portion of the European population to give birth to a new way of conducting trade. In these early years there was a great deal of confusion regarding the mechanisms and rules that governed this new method of exchange, and a number of bizarre and contradictory theories were offered as explanations. It was the genius of Adam Smith to rise above the conceptual morass that was surrounding the subject and write his monumental work, titled *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, in the fateful year of 1776. He argued that the matter of exchange of goods among the citizens should not be regulated by any authority or restricted by custom. Smith argued that a mechanism called "the market" is best suited to provide the optimal results in the area of trade, if it is allowed to function freely. In providing evidence to support his argument, Smith noted that if each individual is allowed the maximum freedom to pursue his own selfish interest then society as a whole will accrue the maximum benefit. The proposition that the collective interests of society would be best served if each individual in society is allowed to pursue his own selfish interest is in sharp contrast to the opposing assertion that the collective interests of society are best served if the individuals in society obey the edicts of a central government or certain traditional or religious principles. If anything, in the capitalistic ethos the interference of the governmental, traditional, and/or religious authorities in the private affairs of individuals (be they economic or otherwise) are deemed to be negative factors in the development of society. Even though this basic premise underlying the capitalistic ethos is taken for granted today, having the status of a self-evident truism, it has not always been the case. In fact it is only over the last few decades that this premise has come to be accepted by the majority of the inhabitants of the West, to say nothing of the

rest of the globe.

Less than eighty years after Smith wrote his book detailing the benefits of an economy governed by the market mechanism, the survival of a market economy in Europe seemed to be in serious jeopardy due to strong challenges from two opposing quarters. First, there was the revolutionary upheaval of 1848, which the feudal aristocrats attempted to manipulate to their own benefit and ride the revolutionary wave back into a position of prominence. These aristocrats were the bitter enemies of the emerging capitalists because it was at their hands that they had lost their political and economic clout. As Marx has noted, the French Revolution of 1789 abolished feudal property in favor of capitalist property. And in 1848 the feudal lords made a desperate attempt to undo the events of the previous six decades, and for a while they succeeded. The events of 1848 in both France and Germany were a sharp reaction to the unsettling effects of a market economy and an attempt to return to the safe and familiar world of the guilds, manors, and apprenticeships.

While the still emerging capitalist system was facing a political challenge from the conservative quarters in the middle of the 19th century, it suddenly had to face an ideological challenge formulated by a young man named Karl Marx. Whereas the revolutionary upheaval of 1848 represented the disaffection of the peasants and aristocrats with the capitalist system, the ideological challenge of Marx was the voice of the disaffected industrial working class. Marx argued that all the misery that was the lot of the industrial working class was the result of the workings of a market economy. He argued that the only way to alleviate this misery is to adopt a planned economy that would be run by the workers, not the capitalists.

By the close of the 19th century, it was not entirely clear whether capitalism would survive on mainland Europe. Powerful forces were advocating the organization of society's economic system according to the dictates of a central authority, not to the working of a free market.

While capitalism was being challenged on both the ideological and political fronts on mainland Europe, the capitalist system continued to mature in England and the United States. Comparatively speaking, these two countries remained unaffected by upheaval on mainland Europe. And it is not a coincidence that it was these very two countries that emerged as the dominant economic and political powers in the West in the first quarter of the 20th century. The citizens of the United States enjoyed a standard of living that no previous generation in recorded history had achieved. And England for its part ruled an overseas empire that was greater in extent than any empire in history. The spectacular performance of these two countries vindicated the capitalist system in spite of the shocks that it suffered in mid 19th century. And, quite naturally, people began to once again take note of the benefits of a market economy. But this confidence in the market economy suffered a severe blow in 1929 with the crash of the stock market.

The effects of this shock to the capitalist system were more severe and longer lasting than any of the previous shocks. In order for the United States to dig out from the collapse of the stock market, strong intervention on the part of the government was needed, and it is doubtful if even this intervention would have sufficed had it not been for WWII. The two decades after WWII proved to be even more trying because of the emergence of a rival system that claimed to be the successor of the failing capitalist system. Due to both the unsettling domestic situation in the United States and the rapid expansion of communist influence throughout the Third World in the 1950s and '60s, it was almost taken for granted that communism would very soon supplant capitalism as the dominant global power. But by the end of the 1980s communism itself, to say nothing of its claim to global domination, had collapsed and capitalism had emerged as the clear victor in this ideological struggle.

Even though Marx and his followers had astutely recognized the weaknesses of the capitalist system — the cycle of boom and bust,

the concentration of capital in fewer and fewer hands, the disruption of social development etc. — they grossly underestimated its one strength. The Marxists failed to realize that capitalism had the ability to improve the standard of living of the industrial worker much more competently than their own proposed alternative, and that it had the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

The days when apologists had to put forth arguments justifying the charging of interest on money and the concepts of profit and commodity have been long forgotten. Today it is often assumed that the legitimacy of these concepts has always been accepted by all people since the dawn of time, that these concepts are part and parcel of the natural order of things. Today, the concepts on which capitalism is based carry the import of self-evident, eternal, universal truths. It would be tedious to go into a detailed discussion regarding the degree to which the market system has become the dominant instrument that is shaping the modern West. It would suffice to discuss the broad outlines of Milton Friedman's and Francis Fukuyama's thoughts on this issue.

These thinkers are the leading ideologues of liberal-bourgeoisie society. Both of them see a direct correlation between the emergence of a capitalist economy in a given society and the emergence of a liberal/democratic political system. They argue that the emergence of economic capitalism is a pre-requisite for the emergence of political liberalism. The converse of this argument also holds true. Friedman and Fukuyama contend that government interference in the free workings of the market economy is either a prelude to or a symptom of the usurpation of political freedom. In the developed societies of the West the free-market economy is the principle guarantor of political freedom, and in the developing countries the adoption of the capitalist system is the principal pre-requisite for political liberalism.

This is not the place to discuss the validity, or the lack thereof, of these arguments. It merely needs to be noted that the

drive to maintain and strengthen the existing free-market system on the domestic level is justified by the claim that the free-market is the best guarantor of political freedoms and economic well-being. In the domain of foreign policy the incorporation of those areas that are still outside the global market system (and a more efficient exploitation of those already within) is the principal factor that shapes the foreign policies. If ideology is defined as a conceptual framework used by a group in order to justify its actions to itself, then capitalism is the ideology of the modern West!

At the end of this discussion, it is worth noting that this description of the fundamental characteristics of modernity is neither novel nor original. The manner in which the argument has been presented may be different, but the fundamental ideas underlying the above description of the modern West closely approximates the position of some of the leading thinkers who have studied the birth and development of modernity. J. Lyotard, Marshall Berman, Bryan Appleyard, and Anthony Giddens are among the thinkers whose analysis of the development of the modern West at least partially resembles the description presented above. It would be tedious to discuss the position of each on the subject, but it would be certainly useful to choose one and look at his thought in some detail.

Anthony Giddens identifies the institutional dimensions of modernity as being capitalism, industrialism, military power, and surveillance. He goes on to describe capitalism and the nation-state as being "...the great institutional elements promoting the acceleration and expansion of modern institutions."⁹ He agrees with Marx that it is the dynamism inherent in the capitalist system that imbued the modern West with its aggressive expansionist impulse. Giddens notes that from "...its early origins capitalism is international in scope."¹⁰ Even though he never identifies capitalism as being the dominant ideology of the modern West in as explicit terms as we have done above, he is keenly aware of the fact that the elite in the

West justify their actions to themselves largely according to concepts rooted in capitalist thought. He notes that the stimulus to accelerate the rate of economic growth in the West is so overwhelming that it "...inevitably pushes economic interests to the forefront of the policies which states pursue in the international arena."¹¹ Samuel Wallerstein is even more candid in identifying capitalism as being the dominant factor that shapes the behavior of the modern West.

Giddens also recognizes the importance of the nation-state in the modernization enterprise, and criticizes Wallerstein for overlooking the role that this institution has played and is playing. He notes that the coming of the nation-state into existence was essential for the proper functioning of a capitalist economy. He goes so far as to state that, "[a] capitalist society is a 'society' because it is a nation-state."¹²

In light of the critical importance that Giddens attaches to the role played by the nation-state, it is very curious that he does not discuss the pivotal role played by the emergence of secular political thought. Medieval Christianity saw itself as a universal enterprise that was not limited to any geographical locality and also saw itself as the instrument through which the dictates of God were to be implemented on earth. Two crucial concepts on which the modern nation-state is built are absent from the medieval political arrangement, a) territorial boundaries (i.e., well defined borders), and b) absolute legislative sovereignty. We cannot imagine the emergence of the modern nation-state in the absence of a political theory limiting the administrative powers of a claimant within certain geographical boundaries, and also providing the claimant with absolute legislative sovereignty. Such a political theory can only emerge outside the framework of a religious reference. The fact that Giddens recognizes the key role played by the nation-state in the project of modernity, while simultaneously disregarding the contribution of secularism, represents a noticeable oversight on his part.

Giddens notes that before a break with

tradition could even be contemplated, a new criterion for establishing certitude had to be articulated. He maintains that the project of modernity was made possible by the enthronement of reason as the yardstick to measure certitude. The enthronement of reason replaced revelation and tradition as being the supreme source of knowledge regarding Truth and Certainty. This shift of the epistemological sources marked the beginning of a new process and represented a new (i.e., modern) way of looking at the universe and of man's place in it. It is only after this shift had been made that concepts such as the nation-state, capitalism, secularism, etc., could even be envisioned by the modern mind that was emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries. Consequently we find that Giddens explicitly identifies capitalism and scientism as being the two fundamental pillars of modernity and the third (i.e., secularism) is implicit in his discussion of the modern nation-state.

Modernity and the Death of the Transcendent

The cumulative effects of an epistemology based on scientism, a sociology based on secularism, and an ideology based on capitalism has given birth to a society that has lost all faith in transcendence. Concepts such as God, life after death, beauty, honor, virtue, vice, evil, etc., are virtually meaningless in the modern world. In the words of Vaclav Havel, these terms and concepts "...represent merely some kind of psychological idiosyncrasy, or some kind of stray relic from times past..."¹³ One cannot discuss the validity, or the lack thereof, of any of these concepts within a conceptual framework that is defined by scientism, secularism, and capitalism. If anything, the discussion of some of these terms and concepts is emphatically held to be not only worthless in the modern setting but exceedingly deleterious to the well-being of the individual and society, because discussions about such concepts is a waste of valuable energy and time. Huston Smith notes that the modern mind is capable of taking ideas, concepts, and propositions seriously only to the degree that they can be quantified. The realm of the transcendent, metaphysical, and spiritual reality

is relegated to the category of "excluded knowledge,"¹⁴ because this realm cannot be defined and/or explored using the modern quantitative methods. During the pre-modern era, the human mind was profoundly concerned with issues related to God, vice, virtue, evil, beauty, demons, and angels, etc. Relegating discussion about these things to the domain of "excluded knowledge" is a radical shift in human concerns. Smith summarizes the parable of the map that E. F. Schumacher used to describe the philosophical education that he received at Cambridge University:

Most of the things that most of mankind has considered most important throughout its history didn't show on it. Or if they did, they showed as museum pieces — things people used to believe about the world but believe no longer.¹⁵

It is exceedingly important to get a full grasp of the significance of the loss of faith in the transcendent, metaphysical, and spiritual realm in the modern setting if one is to fully appreciate the complex issues surrounding the encounter between the modern West and Islam. A failure to realize the import of this issue is responsible for much of the misunderstanding that characterizes the relationship between the two.

Before being anything else, Islam is a belief system centered on belief in One God, the institution of Prophethood, and life after death — these are all transcendental principles whose validity cannot be determined by any instrument or theory available to modern science. In other words, these are transcendent, metaphysical realities that cannot be discovered and/or described using modern quantitative methods. On the other hand the modern West, because of its utter inability to accept the existence of transcendent, metaphysical, and spiritual realities, is unable to comprehend the importance of belief in such principles as being a legitimate motivating factor in the behavior of individuals. Consequently, Western scholars have offered a myriad of explanations for the "revival" of Islam in recent decades, arguing that it is the result of oil money, an

inferiority complex, a way to justify their poverty to themselves, or a reaction to the modernization process on the part of the Muslims, etc. The simple notion that Muslims might be adhering to at least some Islamic principles simply as a matter of faith is not even in the realm of possibility as far as many Western "experts" are concerned. Similarly, the Muslims often take every perceived hostile action on the part of the West to be evidence of its hatred of Islam. The possibility that the West's (perceived) hostility towards Islam is not the result of some special attitude towards Islam *per se* but a byproduct of hostility towards any system of belief based on transcendent values is left unconsidered by the Muslims. Both parties often address each other from within the confines of their own particular conceptual framework, without taking into account the fact that the categories and concepts often do not make sense to the other side.

To bridge this gap of miscommunication is reason enough to investigate, in greater detail, the modern West's loss of faith in a reality that lies beyond science and the instruments of science. But for the purposes of our current discussion this is of secondary importance. The central purpose of this investigation is to outline the ways in which this loss of faith has caused a radical shift in the Western view of reality, and to describe the alternative vision of reality that has replaced the old.

Since the very dawn of modernity in the 17th century, Western philosophers have been keenly aware that the birth of this new phenomenon signaled the death of transcendence, and consequently of certainty itself. Any description of Truth and Reality exclusively based on science is, in the final analysis, open to revision and change, and is therefore fraught with uncertainty. Whereas traditionally knowledge was considered to be the gateway to certainty, in modernity the relationship between the two is shattered because the propositions made by scientific knowledge always remain subject to modification.

The fact that science cannot provide a firm

basis for certainty was recognized by the individuals who not only witnessed the birth of modern science but also served as midwives. Writing in the middle of the 17th century — the century of Newton — Blaise Pascal noted in his masterpiece, *Pensées*,

It is in vain oh men that you seek within yourselves the cure for your miseries. All your insight only leads you to the knowledge that is not in yourselves that you will discover the true and the good. The philosophers [i.e., the scientists] promised them to you and they have not been able to keep their promise.¹⁶

Echoing the sentiments of the early moderns like Pascal and Descartes, Ludwig Wittgenstien noted three centuries later that, "we feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched."¹⁷

It has been clear to many astute thinkers throughout the past three centuries that not only does science not have the ability to provide a firm basis for certainty, but that it is quite limited regarding issues of crucial importance to the individual human being. The problems that such a flux would present for an individual, to say nothing of society at large, alarmed the early moderns. They attempted to formulate philosophical systems in which transcendent principles would remain meaningful in spite of the corrosive effects of science. Pascal and Descartes from the 17th century and John Wesley, Rousseau, Berkeley, and Kant from the 18th century represent thinkers who attempted to construct philosophical systems in which a reality beyond scientific equations and instruments remains meaningful. It must be noted that for a limited time their efforts did bear fruit. It would be useful to look at the thought of one thinker from each century in order to gain additional insight into the issue.

The attempt to keep the transcendent alive in the face of advancing modernity is clearly visible in the thought of René Descartes. Considered the father of modern philosophy, Descartes asserted that reality consists of two

dimensions. One dimension is the realm of matter, which is characterized by spatial extension; and the other dimension is the realm of consciousness, which is characterized by the process of thought. For Descartes, both of these dimensions exist independent of each other with no mediating agent. Consequently, it is the individual's awareness of his/her own existence that provides the foundational basis for certainty, as expressed in his famous assertion "I think, therefore I am." These assertions easily allow themselves to be formulated into a theory in which thinking/cogitating minds survey a materialistic and mechanistic nature in order to arrive at an accurate description of reality. As noted above, this is the fundamental premise on which modernity is based, but Descartes managed to keep transcendence meaningful in his philosophy by noting that in the end it was God who was the foundation of all things. As Whitehead has noted, this Cartesian dualism signaled the onset of a process where "...science took charge of [describing] the materialist nature and philosophy took charge of [describing] the cogitating minds."¹⁸ This was to have profound repercussion in the coming centuries. According to Descartes, the certainty of his thought process could only be supported by a belief structure whose foundation was God, because it was easier and more certain to know about the existence of God than anything else.

But it must be noted that Descartes's God could hardly be recognized by a medieval Christian, because his God is not to be found in the natural world insofar as the workings of nature point towards the existence of God. He argued that the existence of God could only be proven because the process of human reasoning led to this conclusion. He maintained that it was possible to explain the workings of the universe without reference to Divine interference. Armstrong notes that "instead of using the world to prove the existence of God, Descartes had used the idea of God to give him faith in the reality of the world."¹⁹

By the beginning of the 18th century faith in a transcendent reality was still alive in the

West, though its condition was very precarious. This is best illustrated by the fact that, in his famous work *Discourse on Method*, Descartes argues that it is possible to devise a system of inquiry that would put all truth at the disposal of humanity. In other words, it was within the ability of the human mind to arrive at an accurate description of Truth and Reality without any reference to external sources.

A century after Descartes, Kant took a different approach to the problem of keeping a transcendent reality meaningful in an age when the progress of science continued to weaken such a proposition. Kant caused a furor among his contemporaries when he wrote *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781. In this book he argued that none of the traditional arguments for the existence of God are valid. Any attempt to prove the existence of God based on logic and reason is doomed to fail, because every such argument can be proved to be self-contradictory or incomplete. The same could be said for any arguments that purport to prove the nonexistence of God. At this stage Kant's critique seemed to nullify the precarious foundations on which Descartes had built his argument in favor of the existence of God. But in a companion volume written in 1788, titled *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant put forth his own evidence supporting the contention that a transcendent reality, in the form a Supreme Creator and Supreme Judge, does exist.

In this second volume Kant argued that a careful, concerted contemplation focusing on "the starred heaven above" and "the moral law within" provides one with the most compelling evidence for the existence of God. Armstrong notes that Kant attempted to do in the Christian world what Al-Ghazzali had done centuries earlier in the Muslim world, i.e., make personal experience a valid source of religious knowledge."²⁰ Taking this as his starting point, Kant was able to formulate a philosophy in which the determinism of science is challenged, the irreducibility of the human being is asserted and a metaphysical basis for belief and morality is provided.²¹ In other words, Kant was able to construct the philosophical foundations of a

reality that cannot be measured by any scientific instrument, but whose existence is nonetheless very real. Even though Kant's argument began from a different starting point and followed a different route, he essentially concluded his argument on the same terminus as Descartes, i.e., proof for the existence of God is to be found within the human being.

It was noted earlier that the attempts of these early moderns to keep transcendental values alive in the West were not entirely in vain; for a while their efforts did bear fruit. But a stream in the historical process strongly worked against their efforts, and they could not achieve any lasting success. The Cartesian dualism of mind and matter provided room for a division of the sphere of influence between science and philosophy, and, as Whitehead notes, this division of the sphere of influence was not only affirmed but also actualized. The world of matter was to be studied by science, the world of the human mind by philosophy. This "division of labor" remained possible only as long as science concentrated its gaze on the natural and material world, but as we noted in our discussion on *Secularism as Sociology*, by the beginning of the 19th century science was already turning its gaze upon man himself. Initially it was only the institutions built by man which were studied, but eventually his body and ultimately his mind also fell within the domain of scientific inquiry. Once this happened, philosophy was gradually squeezed out by the increasing intrusion of science. By the beginning of the 20th century, philosophy ceased to exist as an independent entity, and the survival of its very name in the closing decades of the 20th century is only made possible by the fact that it now merely serves as the hand-maiden of science. With the disappearance of philosophy it is not surprising the philosophical systems laboriously constructed by Descartes, Kant, and others attempting to keep a vision of the transcendent alive in the face of the corrosive effects of science have also disappeared.

Up till this point in our discussion we have offered a very general definition of

“transcendence,” much more general than what we have in mind, because it was deemed more necessary to understand the fate of “transcendence” in the modern West than its specific meaning. At this point we will spell out in greater detail what we mean by the death of transcendental idealism in the modern West.

All cultures known to man have been profoundly concerned with metaphysical questions, and each society has shaped itself in accordance with its understanding of certain metaphysical beliefs. Questions concerning the nature of God (or gods), the nature of the human spirit/soul, and the nature of life after death are to be found in every culture studied by anthropologists. To list the ways in which the modern West is distinguishable from all other cultures known to historians and anthropologists could fill up many pages. If we were to summarize this list in two sentences then the following would provide a good summary: *The thought process in the modern West is dominated by the study of the material reality, to the exclusion of concern for metaphysical and spiritual issues.* Consequently, all of its mental faculties and attention are focused on the study of the material universe, man’s physical needs, and providing the means to make man’s earthly existence as comfortable as possible. Comparing this position to the traditional approach, the modern West has chosen to focus its attention on the created universe to the exclusion of the Creator, on the human body to the exclusion of the human soul, and on earthly existence to the exclusion of concern for the life after death. One way of illustrating the distinction between modernity and pre-modernity is the following:

The Shift from Pre-Modernity to Modernity		
The Creator of the Universe	→	The Created Universe
The Human Soul	→	The Human Body
Life Hereafter	→	Life Here-and-Now

Metaphysics & Spirituality & Materialism	→	Physics
-------------------------------------------------------------------	---	----------------

Since the beginning of the 19th century, nearly twenty different philosophical schools of thought have emerged in the West. Such diverse and distinct philosophies as naturalism, humanism, dialectical materialism, existentialism, and behaviorism, to name only a few, are a part of this group. But in spite of their diversity, the one common characteristic that all of these philosophical schools share is the disregard for ideational and transcendental concepts. As far as all of these schools are concerned, concrete fact and physical phenomena are to be the sole subject of human inquiry. The concepts of God, soul, and the Hereafter are not a part of the conceptual framework of modern Western thought. On the theoretical level, some of these schools of thought leave open the possibility that God, soul, and Hereafter may exist, their existence and hence their importance is neither affirmed nor rejected. But in practice this avowedly agnostic position has led, quite naturally, to the gradual elimination of these concepts from the realm of inquiry. The only philosophical school to emerge during this time period that maintained the validity of a transcendent reality is idealism. Tracing its lineage all the way back to Plato, idealism asserts that the physical world is only a defective replica of actual reality. Because the human being and the human mind are a part of this imperfect replica, they can only have imperfect knowledge of true reality. Plato attempted to illustrate this point in his famous allegory of the "people of the cave." In modern times, idealism did find proponents, most notably in the thought of Kant as we have already discussed. Even in the late 19th century, *Appearance and Reality* (1897) by F. H. Bradley stands out as a first rate work of philosophy. But the lone voice of idealism has been easily overwhelmed by the combined weight of the other materialist philosophies. Today, idealism is considered to be only a curiosity that challenged the dominant assumption of the 19th and 20th centuries, viz.,

that which cannot be measured or explored by science is not worthy of investigation.

It is again worth noting that we have not offered any original insight by pointing out that the modern West has no regard for ideational and transcendental concepts. Throughout the modern period leading thinkers have recognized this condition, and some have even voiced grave concerns regarding it. Reviewing the history of modern Western thought it is difficult to find a person who recognized the death of transcendence with such brutal clarity as Nietzsche. Hannah Arendt points out that for Nietzsche "God" symbolized "...the suprasensual realm as understood by metaphysics."²² Taking this insight into consideration Nietzsche's utterance regarding "the death of God" in his famous work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* takes on a new significance. He clearly recognized the fact that it was the work of man himself that was destroying his faith in any metaphysical reality, and he described this loss of faith in metaphysics as "the death of God." He was acutely aware of the fact that any attempt to keep any transcendent value meaningful in the absence of belief in some metaphysical principles was an exercise in futility. He urged modern man to recognize this reality and stop wasting his energies trying to salvage the morality, ethics, and metaphysics of a bygone era. Nietzsche preached that it would be better if modern man spent his energies creating his own morality, ethics, and metaphysics; in fact, this was the need of the hour. He considered the attempts of Kant and others to preserve the traditional values of Christianity in the face of advancing modernity with hostile disgust. This is clearly evident in his description of Kant as "a catastrophic spider."²³

The 20th century has also produced prominent thinkers who have noticed the death of transcendence and metaphysics in the West. Rene Guenon, one of the leading French intellectuals of the inter-war period, noted that a "normal" civilization is;

...one that is based on principles, in the true sense of the word, one where everything is

arranged in hierarchy to conform to these principles, so that everything in it is seen as the application and extension of a doctrine whose essence is purely intellectual and metaphysical.²⁴

Guenon goes on to note that the "doctrine" on which the modern West is based is neither "purely intellectual" nor "purely metaphysical." Looking at the work of some of the leading Post-WWII thinkers, it becomes clear that neither "pure intellectualism" nor "pure metaphysics" are to be found anywhere in the modern West. Lyotard describes the nature and function of "knowledge" being produced by the modern Western intellect in these words: "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be consumed, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production."²⁵ He has accurately described the degeneration of intellectualism into crass consumerist operationalism. Marcuse describes the last rites that have been performed over metaphysics in the West. He notes that the disciples of positivism have seen to it that "...the metaphysical dimension, formerly a genuine field of rational thought"²⁶ is relegated to the realm of irrational hysterics. The triumph of positivistic rationality has meant that metaphysics is consigned to the realm of "...obscurationist and regressive modes of thought," along with all other idealism and transcendentalisms.²⁷

Thus, it was this modern West — profoundly shaped by scientism, secularism, and capitalism and divorced from any connection with metaphysics, idealism, or transcendence — that swept across the Muslim world in the 19th century. The West's occupation of the Muslim world was two-dimensional: military and political on the one hand and cultural and ideological on the other. In its early stages the Muslims saw this occupation primarily as a military/political challenge and reacted accordingly. They attempted to achieve military parity with the West through adopting modern weapons and methods. Consequently, we witness the drive to modernize the Egyptian military, initiated by Muhammad Ali, in the aftermath of the humiliating defeat at the hands of Napoleon in the first decade of the 19th

century. After two disastrous wars with Russia in 1813 and 1823, Iran embarked on a military modernization campaign. The Tanzimat Reforms (1839-76) in the Ottoman Empire also focused on military modernization to counter the increasing gains being made by the West in Eastern Europe. Military recovery, reform, and strength were seen by a vast majority of Muslims as the primary vehicle that would lead to societal regeneration, up till the last decades of the 19th century.

Towards the end of the 19th century, a more sophisticated view linking the socio-political backwardness of Muslim societies to the existing institutions began to be articulated by influential Muslim thinkers. The exponents of this view argued that the superiority of the West was rooted in its socio-political institutions and principles, not in its military strength. Therefore, they argued, the Muslims had to adopt Western principles and institutions if they were to have any hope of escaping from their backwardness. It is at this juncture that the intellectual encounter between the modern West and Islam began, thus providing us with the starting point of our analysis.

The realization that military superiority was only the most obvious manifestation of strength rooted in ideas and institutions inevitably led at least some Muslims to start to grapple with Western ideas and institutions. This encounter on the intellectual level was to profoundly change the character of Muslim society during the 20th century. It is well known that a Westernized ruling elite soon emerged in the Muslim world, whose attitude towards the metaphysics and transcendental themes in Islam hardly differed from the attitude of their Western teachers towards Christian metaphysics and transcendental themes. But the reaction of this segment of Muslim society to the Western intellectual challenge is not of pressing concern to us, because they totally disregarded any reference to an Islamic framework in the course of their interaction with Western thought. Of more pressing concern to us are the attempts consciously designed to keep Islamic teachings meaningful in the face of the Western onslaught.

It will be shown in the following analysis that even this "religious" response to the Western challenge has been profoundly shaped by Western ideas. All Muslim thinkers who formulated a religious response to the West acknowledged the fact that a balanced attitude towards metaphysical and spiritual concerns on the one hand and worldly concerns on the other is a defining characteristic of Islamic teachings. According to them, Islam contains the prescription for both worldly (i.e., material) success and salvation in the hereafter (i.e., spiritual bliss). But a careful scrutiny of this religious response reveals that their emphasis on the prescription for worldly success offered by Islam is so pronounced in modern Islamic thought, and reference to the metaphysical and spiritual dimension of Islam so paltry and insignificant, that any talk of a "balance" between the two is rendered meaningless.

Summary

The modern West is shaped by three fundamental concepts that emerged during the 17th and 18th centuries, and evolved and matured in the 19th and 20th centuries.

*Scientism as Epistemology: Scientism is the belief that scientific methods and instruments alone are capable of providing an accurate description of Truth and Reality. A corollary to this is the belief that technology and "scientific" planning can solve all the problems which afflict individuals as well as society at large. Modern Western epistemology is based on scientism.

*Secularism as Sociology: Secularism is the belief that religion has no role to play in the public/collective affairs of society and should remain the private affair of the individual believer. The exclusive claim to legislative and territorial sovereignty on the part of the modern nation-state is the starting point as well as the most pronounced evidence of secularism. Secularism is the foundation of modern Western sociology.

*Capitalism as Ideology: The underlying assertion on which capitalist theory is based is

that the interests of the society as a whole are best served if each individual is afforded the maximum opportunity to pursue his own self-defined selfish interests. The role of the state is limited to assuring the smooth working of the free-market, not being a hindrance in the process of its expansion. The modern West justifies its actions to itself and to others almost totally within the context of the capitalist logic, thus making capitalism the ideology of the modern West.

The combined effects of scientism, secularism, and capitalism have led to the death of transcendence and metaphysics in the modern West. This is evidenced by the loss of faith in anything that lies beyond the visible material universe, and which therefore cannot be measured by scientific instruments. This is the defining characteristic that distinguishes the modern West from all pre-modern societies.

Endnotes

1. Quoted by Marshall Berman in *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (NY: Penguin Books, 1988) pp.24f.
2. Appleyard, B., *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Man* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993) p.111.
3. Quoted by Appleyard in *ibid*, pp.3f.
4. These claims are being made by such prominent scientists as Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies, and to some extent Roger Penrose.
5. Fukuyama, F., *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) p.81.
6. Roberts, J.M., *The History of the World* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1991) p.480.
7. Appleyard, *op. cit.*, p.93
8. Freud, S., "The Future of an Illusion" in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961) vol. xxi, p.38.
9. Giddens, A., *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, California: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990) p.62.
10. *Ibid.*, p.57
11. *Ibid.*, p.72
12. *Ibid.*, p.57
13. Havel, V., "Vaclav Havel's New Year Address" in

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14. Smith, H., *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 62f.
 15. Ibid., p. 72.
 16. Quoted by M. Muggeridge in *The End of Christendom* (London: Scribner Press, 1978) p.12.
 17. Quoted by Appleyard in op cit. pg. 15.
 18. Whitehead, A. N., *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Mentor Books, 1964) p. 131.
 19. Armstrong, K., *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991) p. 301.
 20. Ibid., p.315.
 21. Appleyard, op. cit., pp. 64f.
 22. Hannah Arendt quoted by Huston Smith "Can Modernity Accommodate Transcendence" in *Modernity and Religion*, ed. William Nichols (Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1987) p. 162.
 23. Quoted by Appleyard in op cit., p.78.
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 25. Lyotard, J.F., *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minnesota: The Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984) p.5.
 26. Marcuse, H., *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) p.172.
 27. Ibid.