



## Epistemological Openness and Fluidity in Progressive Muslim Thought

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the idea of epistemological openness and fluidity proposed by several progressive Muslim thinkers. In so doing, it combines theoretical investigation and analysis of the works of several leading Muslim thinkers of this persuasion. It argues that in strengthening the spirit to build a world order (in terms of economic, political, cultural and knowledge systems) that is more just, dialogical and contributive to solving humanitarian and ecological problems, epistemological openness and fluidity offered by progressive Muslim thinkers should be considered as an alternative basis for the revitalization of the Islamic civilization that is inclusive, cosmopolitan and dialogical, yet critical of all forms of hegemony and injustice.

**Keywords** *Epistemological Openness and Fluidity, Progressive Islam*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to examine the idea of epistemological openness and fluidity promoted and developed by several leading progressive Muslim thinkers. Based on theoretical investigation and analysis of the works of some of these thinkers, the paper will argue that in strengthening the spirit to build a world order (both in terms of economic, political, cultural and knowledge systems) that is more just, dialogical and contributive to solving humanitarian and ecological problems, the epistemological openness offered by progressive Muslim thinkers should be considered as an alternative basis for the revitalization of the Islamic civilization which is inclusive, cosmopolitan and dialogical, yet critical of all forms of hegemony and injustice.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Progressive Islam is an umbrella term encompassing approaches to Islamic tradition and modernity that are 'progressive' or 'critical' in character. In terms of its overall worldview, Progressive Islam is characterized primarily by its commitment to certain ideals, values, practices, and goals expressed in many ways and embodied in several different themes. These themes primarily concern issues pertaining to the critical attitude of progressive Muslims regarding (1) the hegemonic economic, political, social, and cultural power of the countries of the Global North, (2) patriarchal, exclusive, and rigid interpretations of their own treasures: the Islamic tradition, and (3) the values underlying Enlightenment modernity and radical forms of postmodern thought. The critical attitudes of progressive Muslim thinkers simultaneously challenge these (neotraditional and puritanical Islamic hegemonic discourse on many issues (including debates about modernity, human rights, gender equality and justice, democracy, and the place and role of religion in society and politics) and Western-centric conceptualizations and interpretations deeply embedded in values, worldviews, and the assumptions that underpin the Enlightenment (Duderija, 2017).

Progressive Muslim thinkers do not subscribe to commonly used dichotomies such as tradition vs modernity, secularism vs religion, or West vs Islam (Duderija, 2011). Instead, they engage in a multiheaded approach based on simultaneous critiques of the many communities and

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discourses they belong to. At the broadest level, a critical-progressive attitude means challenging, rejecting, and attempting to overthrow structures of injustice regardless of ideational and historical origins (Safi, 2003). According to Omid Safi, one of the leaders of this movement, progressive Muslim thinkers offer a multiple critique approach in looking at various problems (Safi, 2003, p. 2). The basis of this criticism stems from the fundamental value that every Muslim and non-Muslim human being, male and female, rich and poor, and so on, has the same value. In Safi's view, injustice may have occurred in the name of Islam, but on the other hand, Western hegemony has also perpetuated injustice; both are parts that must be dismantled and repaired (Safi, 2003, p. 4).

One feature of progressive Muslim thought that distinguishes it from other types of Muslim thought orientation is its concept and view of Islamic civilization and its relation to other civilizations, including Western civilization. For many progressive Muslim thinkers, Islam is, in Karamustafa's terms, "a dynamic, inclusive and at the same time interactive civilizational project in progress, with reference to the diverse cultures, nationalities and ethnicities, while still drawing on the historical heritage of the Prophet Muhammad. A similar view is also expressed by Abou el-Fadl (2018), who asserts that at various stages and contexts of Islamic history, the doctrine of shahada provides a strong impetus for Muslims to explore and integrate so many traditions and cultures such as Greek, Persian, Roman, Indian, Chinese, Berber, Kurdish, Turkish, Habashi (Ethiopian), Tajik, Uzbek, Malay, Javanese and many more.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This paper focuses on the ideas, perspectives and arguments—the discourse—developed by progressive Muslim thinkers with special reference to their epistemological discourse. In so doing, it combines theoretical investigation and documentary analysis. Data were gathered and analyzed primarily through analyzing the scholarly works of several leading progressive Muslim thinkers.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

One major feature that describes progressive Muslim thought (in relation to other contemporary schools of Muslim thought) is its openness to and/or willingness to incorporate epistemological and methodological pluralism into conceptualizations and attempts to reinterpret tradition (*turats*). The epistemological openness and fluidity of these proponents of progressive Muslim thought are consistent with what Moosa calls 'poiesis', i.e., the spirit to critically and creatively incorporate social science-based contemporary humanities theories derived from modern episteme (further) to engage and reinterpret Islamic tradition (Duderija, 2011, pp. 130–136). According to Moosa, in doing so, progressive Muslims are reviving the best aspects of tradition. In other words, Moosa considers epistemological and methodological openness as the most important symbol of what tradition has and offers.

Moosa describes his famous book "Ghazali and Poetics of Imagination" as "a dialogical conversation taking place in a heterogeneous environment" of disciplines that takes inspiration from non-secular and non-Western contexts as well as from the widely understood tradition of knowledge as the Western humanities" (Moosa, 2005, p. 35). In the same spirit, Moosa characterizes his own thought as a 'dialogical' effort in the Bakhtinian sense, a knowledge that knows no boundaries and is not limited by any intellectual or cultural/civilizational lineage (Moosa, 2005, p. 51). Moosa's epistemological and methodological malleability is also exemplified in his statement that "wisdom demands Muslims look at their own past while simultaneously exploring experiences and sources of knowledge in other cultures and traditions" (Moosa, 2011, p. 113). Moreover, Moosa repeatedly stressed the need for contemporary Muslims to constantly search for knowledge that would assist them in finding creative solutions and new possibilities to their

problems (Moosa in Safi, 2007).

However, Moosa's argument about the need for epistemological and methodological flexibility and openness in contemporary Muslim thought is not framed in terms of an unreflective and unproblematic view of the episteme of modernity that favours only the present over the past. In contrast, epistemological and methodological openness has a specific purpose of serving. For Moosa, this goal is ultimately to advance an emancipatory and humane discursive tradition, which is an intellectual heritage to which Muslims can make meaningful contributions (Moosa, 2005, p. 35). In this context, Moosa spoke about developing Islamic humanism (Moosa, 2011).

On a general level, Moosa (1994, 63–64) also supports the weakness of this version of the postmodern episteme. Johnston (2007, 187) describes Moosa's works as "progressive works in postmodernist epistemology". However, Moosa also questions the radical deconstructionist project often associated with a strong version of postmodernism. For example, regarding the critical interrogation and deconstruction of Islamic traditions, Moosa (2005, 265; 2011, 113) questions the imitation of certain types of postmodernism that tend to deconstruct for the sake of deconstruction as if deconstruction were the end goal.

Moosa's thinking regarding the modernity-postmodernity distinction represents progressive Muslim thought in general (Duderija, 2011, pp. 117–139). Moosa (2003b, 117) argues that contemporary progressive Muslim thought owes a great debt of gratitude to the hard work of 19th- and 20th-century Muslim modernist thinkers such as Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Sir Ahmad Khan (d.1898), Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida (d.1935), although they are still considered to have several shortcomings. However, Moosa believes that important differences between these two generations are related to how each views the nature of reason, truth, modernity, attitudes towards modern episteme, and their respective methodologies in interpreting normative texts and ideologies.

Therefore, progressive Muslim thought embodies a weak version of postmodernism, whereas Islamic Modernism has many assumptions underlying the Age of Enlightenment and its positivist tradition. On the nature of modernity, Moosa sees that while Islamic modernist thought in the 19th and 20th centuries and its contemporary proponents are considered uncritical natural allies of modernity, progressive Muslim scholars are far more critical of it, in part because the last type of modernity inherited is very different from that encountered by the former. Another significant difference between modernist Islam and progressive Muslim thought can be found in their respective approaches to modern epistemes. In this context, Moosa considers Muslim thinkers of modernism have not applied critical tendencies in modern knowledge as developed in the humanities in the attempt to interpret scripture, history and society, understanding of law, and theology. In other words, according to Moosa, they refuse to subordinate the entire corpus of Islamic learning history to a critical view of the episteme-making process of modernity. For Moosa, they still felt that pre-modern Muslim epistemology rooted in dialectical theology (*'ilm al-kalam*) and legal theory (*ushul al-fiqh*) was quite compatible with modern epistemology.

Moosa also criticized Islamic modernism for its eclectic approach to applying scientific advances to modernity, particularly the reluctance and fear to apply knowledge related to the study of religion itself because it was seen as ultimately undermining or undermining the knowledge on which the traditional Islamic canon is based. Therefore, one important difference between progressive Muslim thought and Islamic modernism (and dogmatic traditionalism) is its readiness to critically and systematically incorporate insights from modern episteme and apply them to all aspects of Islamic religious tradition (Duderija, 2011).

Moosa describes his approach to Islamic tradition as also a critical traditionalism. For Moosa, this approach is distinguished by his insistence on engaging with tradition critically, to "constantly

investigate and interrogate" productively and constructively" (Moosa, 2007, p. 118). In this context, Moosa (2007) states that a progressive intellectual posture involves critically interrogating the bases of tradition, namely text, practice, and history, by asking questions about inherited knowledge of tradition. Elsewhere Moosa (2007, 241) describes critical traditionalist scholars as those who "lean towards this ethical orientation", those who "view" the juridical tradition as work-in-progress", those who "call for criticism" of past [Muslim] thinkers", and those who "historize and adopt contemporary knowledge and experience as part of the tradition". Critical traditionalists are those who "engage in new ethics and laws" interpretations of traditions embodied by dialogical engagement between the traditional Islamic religious sciences and the modern social sciences and humanities. According to Moosa, what distinguishes the progressive Muslim approach to tradition from other versions "is its concern for the coexistence of Muslims and the transcendent and historical dimensions of religious tradition". As a "critical" adjective in "critical traditionalism", Moosa put forward the view that contemporary Muslims need to engage in poiesis, i.e., the attempt of critical, creative thinking to engage with tradition.

Moosa gives several arguments for why Al-Ghazali is relevant to contemporary Muslim thought in general and progressive Islamic thought in particular. For example, in a subsection entitled 'Ghazali as an Exemplar for Critical Traditionalism', Moosa (Moosa, 2005) writes: Ghazali's contemporary relevance to Muslim thought lies precisely in his critical engagement with tradition, but more specifically in the way in which he modifies, adapts, recalibrates, transforms, and adds to intellectual traditions. Unlike many of his contemporaries who either uncritically romanticized the tradition or, in apocalyptic seizures, took refuge in it, he took critical thinking seriously. It is essential for him, as it is for us, to engage critically with canonical tradition, a process that must culminate in radical questioning and defamiliarization of canonical tradition.

Muslim religious traditions are seen as operating at the human epistemological level, able to accommodate a number of competing interpretations that are all considered constitutive but not necessarily hermeneutically valid (Duderija, 2011). Thus, critical-progressive Muslim thought avoids what it considers to be the essentialist and reductionist fallacies that stand out in apologetic and puritanical forms of the Muslim tradition. Serious engagement with the inherited Muslim tradition with a willingness to highlight it critically is one of the important features of critical-progressive Muslim scholarly thought.

On the one hand, critical-progressive Muslims challenge Orientalist and colonialist discourses that seek to justify Western domination over Muslim societies by portraying Islam as timeless, undemocratic, highly authoritarian, misogynistic, and incapable of internal critical thinking. On the other hand, they also struggle with real problems in many Muslim countries historically, such as discriminatory interpretations of gender relations, lack of genuine legal and political reforms, and lack of basic religious freedom for all. This context demands that progressive Muslim scholars defend the Muslim tradition from secular hegemonic discourse while maintaining an attitude of internal criticism to achieve the political goal of a more just, free, and egalitarian society.

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that progressive Muslim thinkers' inclusive view of diverse civilizations and epistemologies is consciously followed or balanced with a critical attitude. Although they actively explore or learn from Western and other traditions, at the same time, they reject imperialistic tendencies in the production of knowledge. In other words, progressive Muslim thinkers consciously seek balance within a continuum. With this, they believe in the need to learn not only from classical and modern Islamic traditions but also from other civilizational and religious traditions, especially critical and liberating ones, daring to speak the truth before power and resist knowledge colonialism.

Maintaining a balance of the continuum between tradition and modernity is of particular concern to progressive Muslim thinkers. They interact a lot with tradition and modernity, but at the same time, are critical of both. For them, Muslims must remain deeply rooted in tradition intellectually and culturally and, at the same time, must also dare to dive into the modern world and benefit from the intellectual and cultural resources it offers. At the same time, Muslims must also remain vigilant and critical of what Omid Safi calls "the arrogance of modernity", a view that regards the West and its culture as the inevitability of the end of history, or the final stage in which humanity reaches the limits of its social, economic and cultural development (Safi, 2003, p. 4).

Therefore, moderation pursued by progressive Muslim thinkers can be defined as maintaining a balance between two extreme poles on a continuum, two of which are particularly relevant to the issues discussed here. First, the continuum of practice knowledge (*'ilm-'amal*). Progressive Muslims do not accept the dichotomy between intellectual work and activism. Their activities are not purely academic, and they remain involved with social justice issues in the field. In other words, they maintain a balance between science and praxis. Second, the tradition-modernity continuum. Progressive Muslims remain rooted in tradition intellectually and culturally while remaining engaged with the modern world and benefiting from the intellectual and cultural resources that modernity offers (Alatas, 2019, pp. 100-101).

The main orientation of progressive Muslim thinkers is thus to embrace and learn Western knowledge but remain vigilant to avoid imitative and uncritical attitudes (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 11). For them, the burgeoning Islamic world is required to engage more creatively and critically with the West, always focusing on how and to what extent they should learn from the West, and how Muslims can also contribute to humanity today as they have done before. Moreover, as long as Muslims fear that Western ideas will weaken them, there will never be a proactive attitude in the face of Western ideas. Therefore, to quote Mahdi (1988, pp. 72-73), "Those who believe that Islam is still a living force will not be afraid of an open encounter with modern Western culture".

Thus, for progressive Muslim thinkers, the main challenge today for Muslims is no longer choosing between Western and Islamic knowledge. Muslims, like all other believers, today need to ensure that education can build a strong critical and creative attitude, always at the forefront of combining endogenous knowledge and exogenous knowledge according to their contextual needs while striving to contribute knowledge to the larger humanitarian community (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 14). Ultimately, Muslims, like other communities, need to be inspired by the advancement of science and knowledge, which is emerging worldwide, not only from the West. Local and regional intellectual and educational heritage should be considered alongside the heritage of Western traditions to reduce intellectual attachment and dependence. As Farid Alatas rightly points out, just as scholars in Euro-America never ignored ancient Greco-Roman thought, so Muslims must master and cherish their own intellectual heritage, along with the heritage of world civilizations.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Contemporary Islamic thought must continue to develop and strengthen an open, inclusive and fluid view of epistemology, which departs from the realization that the treasures of science and world civilization today are the contributions of all human civilizations. As mentioned earlier, Islamic civilization historically and over a long period has shown a very strong cosmopolitanism character through the process of mutual absorption with other civilizations, ranging from the remnants of ancient Greek civilization in the form of Hellenism to the civilization of the Indian subcontinent and the civilization of the archipelago. What needs to be reiterated is that Islam's open, tolerant, moderate, and respectful nature is the main characteristic of the strong cosmopolitan nature of Islamic civilization. With all these characteristics and tendencies, the cosmopolitanism of Islamic civilization is widely recognized to have contributed significantly to

fostering enlightenment both in the Islamic world and in the West. On this basis, epistemological openness and fluidity, accompanied by a willingness to dialogue critically with various traditions of thought, should be considered as a more solid epistemological basis for the development and reconstruction of scholarship today, not in an attempt to demonstrate the exclusivity or superiority of Islamic civilization, but to revitalize its cosmopolitan character as a reflection of its great universal and inclusive mission as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*.

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