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ISLAMIC PLURALISM AND THE MUSLIM VOICE: WESTERN ATTITUDES THAT DEFINE ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN THE WEST

Hayba Abouzeid*

Abstract: This article examines the parameters of what constitutes the Muslim voice in the West through analysis of Islamic pluralism and modernity. It uses the voices of Said Nursi and Fazlur Rahman to complement the perspectives of outsider voices, Bernard Lewis and John Esposito, who have impacted the attitudes behind the bias in the West towards Islamic identity and practice. Further, it highlights the examination of Islamic pluralism in the West alongside the consideration of Muslim spoken word artists who use their mediums to express the pain and struggles they have endured. This article bridges academic and societal attitudes towards understanding the perceptions of Islamic pluralism in the West.

Keywords: *Islam, Islamic pluralism, Western attitudes, Islamic identity, identity*

INTRODUCTION

The discussion of the sacred and secular has shaped the understanding of Islam throughout the academic and public spheres, which continue to influence the way Muslims and their religious practice are viewed. Varying opinions have arisen on the nature of this distinction, between those who claim it has led to a clash of civilisations and those who believe Islamic values are compatible with the liberal West. With respect to the contemporary understanding of Islam in the West, Bernard Lewis and John Esposito have contributed extensively to the study of Islam in the modern world. They play a significant role in the attitudes surrounding the expression of the Muslim voice and how that voice should express itself. As such, a distinctive feature of this article includes part of a spoken word poem written by a Muslim in the West. It reflects the struggle and emotion surrounding Muslim voices in the West. It highlights the depth in which topics, such as identity and religious freedom, are constant

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discussions among Muslims in Western society. Many outsider voices that have dictated a great deal of Western attitudes do not include discussions of the religious practices and identity of Muslims in Western countries within their analysis and presentation of Islam. This absence has created barriers against which many Muslim men and women have had to struggle throughout their lives. The spoken word poem illustrates the importance of reconciling a Western identity with a religious one to allow for social inclusion and communal growth. An inclusion that is required by the West and not often in terms of the individual's religious beliefs, heritage or culture. The significance of acknowledging the voices of Muslims – young and old – is to allow for a sense of safety and understanding when they engage in political, historical and religious discussion. Democracy allows for freedom, that of speech and representation. Yet, despite the academic world debunking misrepresentations of Islam, the wider community and sometimes official policies remain fixated on suppressing and controlling representations and discussions of Muslims. This form of segregation only increases the division between the Muslims being perceived as the 'other' and the West, which leads to frustration, fear and sometimes violence. The use of this poem is a way to acknowledge the reconciliation of an identity that is lost in limbo with the identity of the land Muslims in the West call home, a reconciliation on the terms of the individual and not that of the false narrative perpetuated in Western society.¹

'I'm not political' is probably the most political statement
 It tells me that you're so privileged that you don't need to worry about it,
 That you're okay making our struggles invisible,
 That you can live your life not worrying about the consequences of those in power.
 We don't have that luxury...
 The moment we ignore the politics is the moment they erase our voice,
 And for us, there's no coming back from that,
 We've seen them mock us in their parliament,
 We've seen people calling for our genocide,
 We've seen them close the borders,
 We've seen the children washed to the shore,
 We've seen scars on the wrists,
 We've seen the homes of our ancestors turn to rubble.
 So I'm not just about to chill out.²

This spoken word poem by Nour Abouzeid illustrates a deep sense of frustration that minority groups feel when their expression of pain is being censored by the society around them. The aftermath of the 11 September 2001 bombings, for example, is not often spoken about from the perspective of a Muslim who can share their pain without backlash from the wider community. Instead, the injustice of silencing the Muslim voice leads to a loss of who they are, as it is often overshadowed by media propaganda. The experiences and practices of Muslims who are genuinely part of society and their identity in the West becomes silenced and lost in translation. The psychological consequences of what has come after the war, whether it be the war in Iraq or Syria, or terror attacks in London, has resulted in a sense of grief that

¹ The complete spoken word poem is provided in the appendix.

² Nour Abouzeid, "I'm not Political," Spoken Work: Melbourne, 2017, <http://melbournespokenword.com/nour-abouzeid-talking-politics/>.

shrouds the identity of Muslims in the West. Despite this, it is only their anger and sadness around these situations that is highlighted in the media. As Abouzeid says in his poem:

Maybe I should stop screaming
Maybe you are the one being too political

Maybe you just need to chill out
But I won't, we won't
Our survival depends on this

His words leave a striking sense of the agony of the diaspora of Western Muslim youth. His tone is one of longing for a realisation of why and who they are, who he is. To say, "We've seen people calling for our genocide" is a declaration of the acknowledgement of not belonging, of being punished for an identity that has been deemed unacceptable. He further says that ignoring the politics leads to his voice and voices like his becoming invisible; in other words, being purposely ignored and forgotten. By alluding to being intentionally ignored and forgotten, and the importance of reclaiming his space, he ensures that his pain and the pain of his ancestors does not go unheard. Likewise, this article hopes to achieve integration of words and sentiments like those of Abouzeid into a theoretical academic analysis to be heard and considered, for, as he says, "No one should bear the pain in silence."

The way in which the practices and understandings of Muslims have been shaped by Western perceptions of Islam and pluralism today goes far beyond the common stereotypes that are often dealt with by Muslims. This is the case with how reformist positions like that of Said Nursi and Fazlur Rahman have been limited in their use and consideration among Western and Muslim communities alike. We are inherently familiar with the various outsider and insider perspectives that surround Islamic pluralism; we may have preferred to read Muslim scholars and Islamic contexts. Yet we have not sought to put forward the problematic platform that attempts to give a space for the Muslim voice, which controls parameters of the space that is being conditioned and censored by the same outsider perspectives that aim to define it. This article focuses on the "who" that has placed limitations on the Muslim voice and the consequences of this, specifically through the lens on Islamic pluralism and the struggles of Islamic identity. The division between what should be expressed publicly and practised privately is an ongoing debate in religion, especially in practice of Islamic tradition in a modern world.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Exploration of the Muslim voice in the West must be contextualised within the broader historical discourse surrounding Islam and its position in the world. Samuel Huntington's prominent contribution to this discussion is widely acknowledged. Through his work, Lewis and Esposito have emerged as key references, reflecting the core themes of Huntington's arguments. Huntington's seminal debate centres around the juxtaposition of two distinct worlds: the so-called "fundamentalist" Islamic world and the "compassionate" Christian

world.³ Central to Huntington's analysis is the examination of culture⁴ and its role in shaping identities. He delves into the complexities of religious practice and the problematic nature of loyalties associated with it. Huntington argues that political leaders often exploit and intensify appeals to ethnic and religious loyalties, leading to the strengthening of civilisation consciousness in relation to other identities:⁵ he elaborates that the predominance of violence within Islam gives rise to identity wars. Consequently, Huntington suggests, by removing the influence of these factors – nationalism and religion – from state affairs, the abuse of political power can be mitigated.

Lewis reaffirms the concern of religious identity; he stresses that the basic identity of Muslims turns to religion instead of to ethnic or geographical criteria.⁶ Huntington refers directly to Lewis' idea in his discussion, adding that religious resurgence is a reaction against secularism and moral revivalism, which is often responded to by violence. Edward Said emphasises the constraining effect of Lewis' arguments on the framework of Islamic understanding. He states that Lewis proclaims that Islam and Muslims do not develop; therefore, they must remain to be watched and questioned.⁷ Huntington introduces Esposito to the conversation alongside Lewis, particularly in the discussion of Islamic resurgence. He expresses the difference between resurgence and reform, which he argues is an evident concern for Western societies. Huntington focuses primarily on increasing religious adherence to Islamic practice and interpretation of law in different themes, such as prayers and modesty of women.⁸ This leads to a political religious authority that he parallels as being "Islamist."⁹ The main theme of his analysis is a heavy political manifestation of Islamic movements that might appear to want modernity but not Westernisation.¹⁰ Esposito's work deviates from this understanding of Islamic reform or resurgence. Unlike Huntington, he moves away from the overtly political Islam that is often brought to the forefront of Islamic discussion. The ideas that Huntington brings forth in his writing are an example of what Said calls Orientalism, seen here as clearly opposed to what is Christian, modern and civilised.¹¹ It is evident that Huntington's arguments surrounding Islam in the modern world are laced with notions of clash of civilisations rhetoric. As such, it is difficult to say that his writing sounds biased, though, given Huntington's reputation, that assumption is not wholly inaccurate. However, by employing Said's methodology, which emphasises examination of the imaginary boundaries we construct during discussions, it becomes evident that a distinct voice shapes the interpretation of any analysis. Said's concept of Orientalism sheds light on this phenomenon, defining it as "an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary

³ Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order* (London: Free Press, 2002), 210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 302.

⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 317.

⁸ Huntington, *Clash of Civilisations*, 110.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 39-40, 5.

that has given it a reality and presence in and for the West.”¹² According to Said, these two interconnected geographical entities, the East and West, mutually reinforce and mirror each other to some extent.¹³

Lewis’ and Huntington’s primary ideologies stem from their belief that Islam is inherently unchangeable. The frequent association of Islam with conflict and incompatibility to a changing world is evident within their work.¹⁴ Their negative view that Islam and Muslims do not know how to evolve creates essentialist parameters and cultivates the belief that understanding diversity or change within Islamic tradition and practice will not be constructive. An example of how this works can be found in Said’s *Orientalism*, which explains that these essentialist parameters introduce restrictions into the way Islam is conceptualised and becomes an embedded figurative space conceived as legitimate and rational. Said emphasises that such essentialism allows for the clearly defined ahistorical space of ours and theirs to emerge.¹⁵ The boundaries that we construct in our minds project a clear distinction between two worlds: one that we perceive as familiar and safe, the other as foreign and dangerous. As Said has argued, the term “Oriental” has also been used to classify a culture perceived as depraved.¹⁶ He further identifies the assumption made by the West in believing that the Orient was inferior. He sees the cultural characteristics in which Islam was defined in the 19th century as problematic. Ultimately, the understanding and perception of pluralism and culture, Islamic or otherwise, has been hampered by essentialist binaries that have polarised the world into distinct, ahistorical civilisations.

The belief that Islam cannot change or evolve significantly affects the way Islamic pluralism and culture are perceived. Through the lens of the Orient, Said highlights how the fundamental dichotomy of theirs and ours, and the fusion of Islamic characteristics and Islamic social activity, have led to an inability to see Islamic practice and tradition outside of politics, spiritual duty and law. Marshall G. S. Hodgson tackles the issue of terminology in Islamic understanding, proposing, like Huntington, terms such as Islamicate that express a productive relationship between culture and Islam, as opposed to Islam and violence. His method achieves separation of Islamic characteristics from political or social contexts. Ultimately, there exists a distinction between the religion and its message and the actions of the individuals who adhere to it; the latter is not a representation of Islam. He asserts this distinction by highlighting that terms like Islam and Islamic are associated with religion and historical social context.¹⁷ This is problematic, as aspects of historical Islamic empires are seen to collectively represent Islam, when in fact the culture has not been a Muslim culture – or a culture of Muslims. Therefore, Hodgson introduces the terms Islamicate and Islamdom¹⁸ to separate between Islamic culture, populations and law from the faith, thus allowing, deeper analysis of Islamic practice and

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶ Marshall Hodgson, *The Classical Age of Islam*, vol. 1 of *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilisation* (London: UCP, 1974), 57.

¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

¹⁸ For a deeper explanation of these terms, see Ibid., 3-70.

pluralism. Hodgson refers to a Muslim-dominated society as Islamdom, and cultures associated with Islam and Muslims as Islamicate. Rather than looking at Islamic history as oppressive and associated with conflict, we need to explore the evolution of Islamic understanding and tradition positively and progressively, in a modern context that allows for the understanding of pluralism within Islam and practiced by Muslims.

If we take a step back, we see that the notion of a clash of civilisations, which is continually debated in the modern world, where one world is better than the other, cannot be reduced to simply a matter of political gain and social misunderstandings.¹⁹ Hodgson's creation of the term Islamicate encompasses not simply the religion, but also the social and historical: "the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims, both among Muslims and non-Muslims."²⁰ He endeavours to distinguish between the faith as a religion and the practice of the faith that is influenced by several different factors and as a cultural phenomenon. Hodgson's attempts to define his terminology in the analysis of Islamic practice have also provided insight for other religions and nations. Carl W. Ernst, a contemporary scholar of Islam, underlines the notion that religion is primarily defined through membership of a "politically identifiable community."²¹ By implementing Hodgson's method of analysis, it can be observed that returning to a political community is not enough to understand a religious practice, culture and civilisation. A purely political analysis not only disrupts the historical narrative of the Islamic civilisation of the past, but more importantly limits the perceived practice of Muslims as being motivated by sinister intentions, opposed to social progress, having religious spirituality, and upholding an ethical and moral framework of social and religious reform. Hence, Huntington's clash of civilisations cannot be considered as a clash, but can be considered as an elaborate use of Western history to define what people in society should and should not say or do. Much of the analysis we see from various authors on the sacred and clash of civilisations is informed by a predominantly political narrative, which leads to how pluralism is perceived in society. As such, there is a dominant voice that governs Muslims and defines the purpose of the Islamic faith. Conversely, Esposito suggests that Islamic tradition and practice consist of multiple voices rather than a single uniform voice. Alongside Dalia Mogahed, Esposito brings forward what some Muslims really think in a book titled *Who Speaks for Islam?*²² The title raises an important current question and deviates from the common desire to free supposedly oppressed Muslims from the shackles of Islam. Rather

¹⁹ Tamim Ansary, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 353.

Ansary simplifies the way we look at the *Clash of Civilisations*, as a historical narrative to the friction created by "two mismatched world histories intersecting," he illustrates the clash with the use of imagery saying, "the proposition means we're different-so-we-must-fight-until- there's-only-one-of-us" (p. 353). Not only does he simplify the notion and defines it as being due to two large different worlds meeting, but it almost reads as though it has been used by modern scholars as an exaggeration of Islam in the modern world.

²⁰ Hodgson, *The Classical Age of Islam*, 59.

²¹ Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: UONC, 2003), 58.

²² John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallop Press, 2007).

than presenting Muslims as wanting to implement a politically motivated force of terror, we are given a glimpse into what Muslims think, providing a means for the many identities and voices of Islam to come to the surface. In essence, their work is a combination of defying the narrative that Huntington and Lewis create, taking Hodgson's motivation to define identity outside simple religious practice and providing an answer to the Orientalist in a language the West understands.²³ They outline a discussion that goes beyond a reading of Islam and what it means to Muslims, and provides insight into Muslims' hopes and dreams.²⁴ Automatically, the tone of the conversation shifts to become a more inclusive discussion that does not limit the religion or its followers and exposes Islamic pluralism within the fabric of Islamic traditions. Esposito and Mogahed make it clear that "religiously, culturally, economically, and politically, there are multiple images and realities of Islam and Muslims."²⁵ They proceed to highlight that all Muslims may or may not be conservative, fundamentalist, reformist and secular and consider the diversity of religious practice and pluralism within Islam. Hence, much of the negative attitude towards Islamic practice and tradition can effectively change with an acknowledgement of diversity and plurality within Islam and among Muslims.

Furthermore, a common element identified by scholars in Islam is not only the importance of faith to Muslims personally, but also as important for social progress. Unlike Lewis who observes faith as a religious identity governed by Islamic law (Sharia), Esposito recognises it also as a "spiritual map that offers a sense of meaning, guidance, purpose, and hope."²⁶ While Islam contains a source of legislation like that in the Bible, this does not inhibit Islamic practice from being an active part of a diverse community.²⁷ A similar examination of Islamic legislation can be seen by Said Nursi, who concludes in his analysis of the Qur'ān as the "element of truth" that:

Each age has characteristics peculiar to itself and therefore has its own needs and demands. Time adds to its own interpretation, and new events and developments cause many new meanings to be discovered. What now prevails is scientific public opinion.²⁸

Fazlur Rahman shares a similar methodology. In his preface to *Islamic Methodology in History*, he says "historical truth, like all truth, shall invigorate Islam for-as the Qur'ān tells us-God is in intimate touch with history."²⁹ Despite the time difference in their contributions to Islamic scholarship, Rahman and Nursi strongly highlight the fusion of law and society within Islam, each from their own perspective. At the same time, Nursi defines the misconduct of Qur'ānic law, such as through a Muslim extremist, as having "horribly wronged" the sacred

²³ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2016). This volume provides a thorough analysis of Islamic definitions and culture.

²⁴ Esposito and Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 6. This volume found that many respondents view Islamic legislation as similar to what is in the Bible, which is also seen as a source of legislation.

²⁸ Said Nursi, *The Reasonings: A Key to Understanding the Qur'an's Eloquence*, trans. Hakan Akarsu (Princeton, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2008), 21.

²⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Lahore: Central Institute of Islamic Research 1965), x.

source of “truth.”³⁰ As asserted above, a single monolithic structure of Islam does not exist, despite the negative claims often made about Muslims. A large body of literature postulates a clash of civilisations. Western Islamic literature can be divided into studies of the demarcation of Islamic practice and tradition as rigid and threatening to modern society, and those that emphasise a progressive and relevant holistic structure of morality and ethical social diversity. A discussion of both perspectives can help reconceptualise religion within popular understanding and academic literature. The dominant voices, Eastern and Western, that have authority over these ideas tend to describe a rigid foundation on which popular thought and modern religious identity has been created. Only by going beyond the most popular figures in this conversation can an active assessment of Islam in a Western modern society become possible. As stated by Nursi, each generation and population is governed by its own characteristics. It cannot be limited by engaging with the “systematic discipline”³¹ that has been enforced by the Western world in the study of Islamic practice and tradition. For example, Rahman aims in his work to combine historical scholarship with the goal of implementing Qur’ānic values within contemporary societies.³² He specifies in his discussion that his primary focus within Qur’ānic methodology is understanding its message, which “will enable those who have faith in it and want to live by its guidance...to do so coherently and meaningfully.”³³ Hence, it becomes essential to engage with these topics from a perspective that goes beyond the politicisation that scholars like Nursi and Rahman uphold as being relevant to our changing societies.

THEORISING MODERNITY

The question of modernity often surfaces when speaking about Muslims and their practice of Islam. Western modernity has regularly been seen as superior to the multiple ways of being modern around the world. The Australian spoken word artist Nour Abouzeid uses two aspects of this question. First, modernity has been seen through the lens of the West and the understanding of being Western. Second, there is a need to reclaim what modernity encompasses and what it includes. The understanding of Western modernity has often involved the perception of distinction between the sacred and secular,³⁴ a differentiation not present in Islamic traditions.³⁵ Perception of a distinction between the sacred and secular in Western historical and socio-political theory has shaped perception of Islamic practice and tradition. This results in the limited illustration and perception of modernity as being Western and not inclusive of religious plurality. Lewis has argued that the practice of Islam could not allow for democratic and modern values, while Esposito continues to engage with Islamic reform and

³⁰ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 20.

³¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

³² Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: CUP, 1982), 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ Markus Dressler, Armando Salvatore and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Islamicate Secularities,” *Historical Social Research* 44, no. 3 (169) (2019): 16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

the ongoing practice of Islam within modern communities. They both argue that the division of the sacred and secular is not compatible with the fundamental foundations of Islamic tradition, while Esposito extends his critique to the strong need of Islamic reform and what that looks like. Both mention that the fundamental divisions in Christianity that have allowed for a secular movement to develop are not found in Islam; therefore, it is easy to assume that secularism is not compatible with Islam. Esposito explores Islam in relation to secularism through its need to adapt, which he states it can. He and Lewis represent strong academic voices, who, though contrasting in various aspects of Islamic practice and tradition, also share this common theoretical assumption. Rodney Stark argues that “modernity is entirely the product of Western civilization.”³⁶ Although he does not argue that only the West is modern, he claims, with evident superiority, that modernity emerged in the West. He further identifies the term “modernity” as involving:

the fundamental store of scientific knowledge and procedures, powerful technologies, artistic achievements, political freedoms, economic arrangements, moral sensibilities, and improved standards of living that characterize Western nations and are now revolutionizing life in the rest of the world.³⁷

Stark suggests understanding the separation of the West and the other is not ethnocentric but addresses how our world has emerged in this way. This highlights how the understanding and practice of modernity can be changed to encompass religious practice that was once avoided in discussion of modern progress. Two claims are often made about modernity: one that it is a product of the West and second that modernity is something that is only Western. This narrative stems from the way in which the parameters that make something “Western” are highlighted by Lewis and Esposito. For many scholars like Stark the sacred-secular division in what they call “the West”³⁸ is the key to a larger division between the West versus the other, where the practice of modernity appears to be reserved to a Western audience.

The Islamic traditionalist scholar Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) highlights that, within Islamic practice, submission to the law of the land is a religious duty. The Qur’ān commands Muslims to remain faithful to not only God and Prophet Muhammad, but also the authority they live under, “O’ you who believe. Obey God, and obey His Messenger and those who are in authority over you.”³⁹ Though the verse requires people to obey the laws of the country you are in, it can be further supported by the saying of the Prophet, “One who obeys his authority, obeys me. One who disobeys his authority disobeys me.”⁴⁰ Ibn Kathir further emphasises the explanations of this verse with the title of “necessity of obeying the rulers in obedience to God.”⁴¹ Although Ibn Kathir was writing within a different world, his exegesis continues to allow Muslims to grasp classical Islamic ideas in ways that favour the practice of Islamic pluralism in current

³⁶ Rodney Stark, “Why Modernity Happened in the West: Giving Credit where Credit is Due,” *The Federalist*, March 31, 2014, <https://thefederalist.com/2014/03/31/why-modernity-happened-in-the-West/>.

³⁷ Stark, “Why Modernity Happened in the West: Giving Credit where Credit is Due.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Qur’ān 4:60.

⁴⁰ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, 33:1835, <https://sunnah.com/muslim>.

⁴¹ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, 2nd ed. (Lebanon: Maktab Dar-us-Salam, 2003), 495.

times. His method of exegesis grants easy access to Islamic scholarship in everyday Muslim households, which has led to myriad practices by Muslims. We can see this when he breaks up the explanation of the verse in three parts. The first is that of submission to God, in which any form of religious uncertainty should be solved by returning to the Qur'ān. The second he sees as submission to His messenger, where believers return to his exemplary tradition in their daily actions and concerns, and the third is adhering to the law of those who are in authority. Thus, any form of political authority, for the sake of social harmony and avoiding chaos, is to be obeyed.⁴² He argues that as long as obedience to authority does not go against the tenets of Islam then one must obey the law of the land.

Being in a secular society allows for the application of traditional exegesis in a modern context, where one can vocally oppose government actions and protest injustice, without losing touch of classical Islam. In a more modern context, Wael Hallaq explains, Islamic law is one of legal pluralism, not only because it acknowledges local custom but also because it offers an array of opinions on the same set of facts.⁴³ Hallaq emphasises how legal pluralism in Islamic law has been equipped with a great deal of flexibility and adaptability and has allowed the law to be subject to changes throughout centuries. This has led to the practice of the law being open to social and economic developments over time.⁴⁴ Thus, submission to Islamic law has not been without reason and social inspiration either in the past or within a modern context when it has become focused on notions of social and political justice. It is often assumed that Muslims are defined by religious loyalty and cannot easily reconcile their faith with a secular modern world. From a Western perspective, the division between the sacred and secular is seen as promoting religious freedom. This article addresses this rigid understanding by creating a conversation that requires fluidity of identity, particularly for Muslims who identify as Western or choose to identify as secular or modern.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON MODERNITY

Lewis perceives Islam as fundamentally rigid and resistant to progress,⁴⁵ while Esposito emphasises Islamic pietism and engagement with the modern world.⁴⁶ The comparative analysis explores how their contrasting perspectives might be balanced against internal Muslim understandings of Islamic identities in the 21st century. Ultimately, such expressions of how Muslim youth in the West feel towards topics like modernity and minority communities are essential to openly discuss and develop a voice alongside that of Western thinkers whose narrative of Islamic tradition and practice has influenced the perception of Islamic identity in the West.

⁴² Ibid., 497. Further explained in *ḥadīth sahih* mentioned in Ibn Kathir's *tafsir*, 496-497.

⁴³ Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: CUP, 2013), 59.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bernard Lewis, *What went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (London: Phoenix Paperback, 2002), 25.

⁴⁶ John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10-12.

Lewis' primary perception of Islam, according to Nezar Al-Sayyed and Manuel Castell,⁴⁷ is that of a strong and totalising political ideology, unlike that of John Esposito, who identifies Islam as involving personal pietism rather than activism.⁴⁸ In spite of this, both scholars have helped shape Western understandings of Islam as a religion, tradition and way of life. This is largely driven by Lewis' concern that the Middle East, once the core of civilisation, has now become the centre of backwardness, which he argues is primarily due to the involvement of Islam in Middle Eastern society.⁴⁹ By contrast, Esposito views Islam as a force of active pietism. He suggests that "contemporary revival" has its roots and origin within Islamic history. Esposito identifies events that led towards building progressive civilisations. He says, "in the late sixties and seventies in Egypt and Libya as well as Pakistan and Malaysia contributed to the experience of crisis and failure, as well as power and success."⁵⁰ These advances have seen the reassertion of Islam in public and private spheres.⁵¹ The perspective adopted by Esposito underlines the possibility for Islamic integration within the modern world through examination of the role of Islamic duty to radical groups and recognised Islamic countries. Ultimately, Esposito, unlike Lewis, suggests the problem lies not with Islam, but with certain groups and individuals who have abused the religion through ill practice.

In comparison, if we take Nursi's influence, for example, we find his work often part of many Western circles, slowly expanding outside Turkish narratives into pluralistic Muslim identities. As such, his work on Islamic philosophy has been actively used in countries all around the world, including America and Australia. He offers a perspective on Islam different to that of Lewis and Esposito, which allows for Muslims to bridge the spirituality of their faith with the nuances of its practice. Further, Nursi's scholarship is described as "richly infused with Sufi imagery, values and ideas, including most notably focus on the heart, the inward being, the seat of both wisdom and spirituality."⁵² Nursi's work is used as a primary reference when engaging in discussion with Lewis and Esposito, as his philosophy allows for active and pragmatic assessment of their arguments. The way Nursi approaches the study of the Qur'ān and Islamic practice allows for an assessment within social parameters, separating Qur'ānic meaning from interpretation. According to Nursi, "anything that is in a book of Qur'ānic interpretation is not necessarily included in the meaning of the Qur'ān, nor in the interpretation itself."⁵³ Hence, by using the terms Islamic tradition and practice, the article specifies a distinction between the observance of obligatory religious duties and the religious traditions that have become meaningful customs to connect one's lifestyle with one's faith. At the same time, Nursi's arguments for upholding Islamic practice and tradition provide a primary

⁴⁷ Nezar Al-Sayyad and Manuel Castells, *Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam* (Oxford: Lexington, 2002), 5.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *What went Wrong?*, 25.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁰ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Gregory Barton, "Preaching by Example and Learning for Life: Understanding the Gülen Hizmet in the Global Context of Religious Philanthropy and Civil Religion," in *International Conference Proceedings: Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gulen Movement*, ed. Ihsan Yilmaz et al. (UK: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, 2007), <https://research.monash.edu/en/publications/preaching-by-example-and-learning-for-life-understanding-the-gule>.

⁵³ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 25.

foundation for exercising reasonableness.⁵⁴ He makes it clear that a religious text can easily be misinterpreted, creating potential misunderstanding, so it is necessary to exercise reasonableness when preaching, practising and understanding a religion.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Rahman a reformer who, like Esposito, asserts that within Islamic practice are elements to ease the change and transformation with the rise of modernity. He has been described as a confessional⁵⁶ scholar whose major work, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, puts forward a new way of understanding the Qur'an, particularly within a modern context. He shares a similar perspective to that of Esposito, but with the classical Islamic knowledge and awareness of someone approaching Islamic practice and tradition from an inside perspective. He advocates a "holistic understanding of the Qur'an"⁵⁷ and argues that the major themes in Islam can accommodate a modern or reformed approach. Rahman states:

Fortunately, there are strong guiding lines for us in the early history of the Community when the Qur'anic teaching and the Prophetic *Sunnah* (the ideal legacy of the Prophetic activity) were creatively elaborated and interpreted to meet the new factors and impacts upon Muslim society into the 'living *Sunnah*' of the community.⁵⁸

Rahman's concept of the living *sunna* simplifies understanding of the various *ḥadīth* that surround the practice of Islam and actions of the Prophet. The living *sunna* is what the community puts into practice within the frame of the ideal *sunna*, being that which constitutes the words and actions of the Prophet. Rahman's analysis of the *ḥadīth* and his concept of *sunna* involves acknowledgement of a division within the sacred word and actions of the Prophet and a secular practice of a living *sunna* that largely involves independent judgement and considerations of context.⁵⁹ Throughout his discussion it becomes clear that he observes that the *sunna* can change with the conditions, as religious leaders and scholars in the past were able to identify the depth and worldly understanding of sacred scriptures.

Nursi and Rahman, who emerged at different times and in different contexts, have contributed significantly to the modern understanding of Islam. Nursi, who might seem like a distant voice of Oriental wisdom, has been influential in the 20th century, having witnessed, so to speak, the collapse of "a sacred world order" in the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of a more secular world order. While Lewis was starting his academic career in the 1930s, Nursi was then still engaging intellectually with his community and creating a legacy of influential scholarship. He was developing his ideas in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire, just as Lewis was emerging as a historian of Islam. Nursi, Rahman, Lewis and Esposito can be seen as a diversity of voices on Islamic practice and tradition, each bringing different perceptions and voices of what Islam is and the challenges that have been faced and continue to face Muslims

⁵⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Younus Mirza, "A Confessional Scholar: Fazlur Raman and the Origins of his 'Major Themes of the Qur'an,'" Maydan, August 19, 2019, <https://themaydan.com/2019/08/a-confessional-scholar-fazlur-rahman-and-the-origins-of-his-major-themes-of-the-quran/>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 177.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 27-31.

and the practice of pluralism around the world. Whereas today, Islamic sacred texts are disassociated from contributing to aspects of society due to the continuous debate on Islam's compatibility with modernity.

CONCLUSION

We know from ourselves and the life that we lead within our modern context that Islam can be secular without imposing a need to dissolve public religious practice. At the same time, Islamic pluralism does not mean adoption of a Western secular or Islamic/theocratic state; rather, it means that it can be the adoption of a modern state that emphasises the importance of Islamic values and pluralism within its current context without censorship or conditions. Nursi views the innate nature of Islam as being originally flexible or open to reform. He illustrates that, just as the seasons change, so do things in an individual's life – including the manner of their education and pedagogy.⁶⁰ As such, Nursi states that “anything that is in a book of Qur'ānic interpretation is not necessarily included in the meaning of the Qur'ān, nor in the interpretation itself.”⁶¹ The concept of the truth by Nursi has an element of pluralism within it; not only do we see plurality in Islam through, for example, the four jurisprudential schools of thought but as well as how pluralism is active within Islamic tradition. Nursi's illustration of the Qur'ān reflects the vastness of Allah's message, which highlights the potential of individual interpretation.

This action of interpretation is the Muslim voice and the significance we can see when we determine this voice is not only based on religious text but also context. This is further framed by Nursi's arguments for upholding Islamic practice and tradition, which provide a primary foundation for exercising reasonableness, using the terms Islamic tradition and Islamic practice within an active understanding of its application. That is, the clear distinction between the observance of religious duties and religious traditions have become meaningful customs to connect one's lifestyle with one's faith, community and identity.

The importance of recognising the impact of one's voice, in the expression of their identity and how it functions in actively participating in pluralism combines the academic and public social spheres. Scholars like Lewis are widely known in the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds, and his scholarship in historical and social-political disciplines is widely used. However, putting aside the academic realm of Lewis' extensive scholarly contributions, he remains a prominent figure, resented and admired in many Muslim households. Muslim migrant families know Lewis as an American spokesperson about the position of Islam in the West. Their children, who find themselves responding to his methodology of the limitations of Islamic practice at an early age, sometimes look to Edward Said's Orientalism in the hope of claiming their own voice. In practice, however, Australian, British and American Muslim youth struggle to find their identity within scholarly discourse about Islam's compatibility with the West.

⁶⁰ Hakan Çoruh, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his Understanding of Exegesis in his *Risale-i-Nur*” (PhD diss., Australian Catholic University, 2015), 133, <https://doi.org/10.4226/66/5a9cb66db0b76>.

⁶¹ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 25.

Lewis attributes this phenomenon to what he sees as an inherent clash of civilisations that occurs when attempting to reconcile one's faith and loyalty to one's nation. By contrast, Esposito has emerged as an academic and legitimate non-Muslim voice able to contribute to the struggle against Islamophobia. He has risen quickly to become part of the popular culture of Islamic discourse among many Muslims. The influence of Lewis and Esposito on the study of Islam is illustrated by their rise and position in popular culture within the Muslim community.

Therefore, it is often assumed that Muslims are defined by religious loyalty and cannot easily reconcile their faith within a secular modern world. The Muslim voice is pluralistic in nature. The Western perspective leads us to believe otherwise; the division between the sacred and secular believes it is promoting religious freedom, yet it is unexclusive of religious identity. The Western narrative highlights the limitations of the status of Islam in a Western context and its ability to be completely accepted within Western civilisation. Despite the rights and religious flexibility Islam confers on followers, many continue to explicitly associate Islam with being backward, volatile and rigid. It is not unknown that Lewis set the stage of this understanding; in many of his works, he states clearly that Islam is behind and its golden age cannot remerge without adopting what the West adopted and forced on civilisations.

When engaging with Lewis and Nursi in discussion over the matter of religious identity, the primary difference relates to loyalty. Nursi's arguments attempt to discuss this clash of identity by acknowledging that parts of Islamic practice need to evolve to cater for social, scientific and technological advancements. This highlights how Islam promotes the practice of the spiritual connection with God and civil duty to the betterment of society through upholding social justice. Likewise, Rahman is a strong advocate of the ethical values that Islam offers society. Aware of the changes that have taken place in the modern period, Nursi and Rahman, therefore, characterise the new age as defined by three new concepts: property, freedom and science.⁶² They both aim to modernise Islam by retaining the essentials and modifying the details, which involved pluralism on the outside and inside practice and tradition of Islam.

Despite the extensive scholarship committed to deepening awareness of Islamic values, Islam remains much debated and criticised in the 21st century. It is this criticism that I and many like me have personally faced, which has led me to evaluate why questions regarding Islamic practice, history and tradition have not changed or evolved within a modern context. It has become evident to me that the primary focus of many in society has revolved around the public practice of faith, traditionally viewed as oppressive and fixed within a Western understanding of modernity. The acceptability of religious pluralism within Islam remains a topic of active debate, though the vast majority of Islamic scholars and historical evidence reveal Islam's commitment to no coercion in religion, supporting pluralism in the context of relative toleration. This is perhaps an understandable reaction from a secular community that is often introduced to Islam through the media and experiences of fear generated by extremist

⁶² M. Sait Ozervarli, "The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought in the Modern Period: Nursi's Approach to Religious Discourse in a Changing Society," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010): 536.

propaganda. Yet, with the rise of digital platforms and online networks, the justification for consistently harbouring fear and alienating Muslims has become tiresome. It has been implied time and again that religious pluralism is limited, by remarking “the state was God’s state and, the army God’s army...the enemy was God’s enemy.”⁶³ Thus far, their portrayal of Islam and Muslims calls for a balanced assessment of tolerance within Islam, critical for understanding Islamic practice, tradition and the depths of pluralism. This leads to the awareness and need for the Muslim voice to rise organically without responding to the myriad ways in which it has been silenced.

⁶³ Aaron Tyler, *Islam, the West and Tolerance* (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 93.

APPENDIX 1

I'm not Political, Nour Abouzeid

I hate people who say,
 “I don’t like to talk about politics”, No one does love,

I don’t like to talk about teeth,
 But when there’s a gaping cavity in a wisdom tooth,
 I just can’t help it,
 No one should bear the pain on their own.

You know those people who say,
 “I don’t talk about politics”,
 or “I’m not a political person”,
 Yes the hell you are.

“I’m not political” is probably the most political statement,
 It tells me that you’re so privileged that you don’t need to worry about it,
 That you’re okay making our struggles invisible,
 That you can live your life not worrying about the consequences of those in power. We don’t
 have that luxury.

So you can tell me you’re tired of my whinging,
 That maybe I should stop screaming,
 Or maybe I should do less angry poems,
 Or that I’m always too political
 Or that maybe I just need to chill out,
 But I won’t.

We won’t.
 Our survival depends on it,
 We don’t have that choice,
 The moment we ignore the politics is the moment they erase our voice, And for us, there’s no
 coming back from that,
 We’ve seen them mock us in their parliament,
 We’ve seen people calling for our genocide,
 We’ve seen them close the borders,
 We’ve seen the children washed to the shore,
 We’ve seen scars on the wrists,
 We’ve seen the homes of our ancestors turn to rubble.
 So I’m not just about to chill out.

We don’t like to talk about politics either, But we have to,
 We have to scream it loud
 Pledge our allegiance to our people,

To justice – proud!
 It is the only way to stay on top of our resistance,
 And for now,
 It might be the only thing helping to maintain our existence. So next time someone tells you
 they’re not political,
 Punch them in the face and say,
 “I’m not violent”.

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