

Exploring the Intricate Dynamics between Tradition, Modernity and the Muslim Epistemology

Seminar Report

The Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, hosted a seminar to deliberate on the thought-provoking subject of ‘Tradition, Modernity, and the Muslim Epistemology’ on August 1, 2023.



Prof. Dr. Mustafeez Alvi, Prof. Dr. Anis Ahmad and Prof. Dr. Muhiyyuddin Hashmi

This intellectually enriching seminar was organized for the nuanced exploration of the intricate dynamics between tradition, modernity, and Muslim epistemology. The event aimed to unravel the complexities inherent in the interplay of these elements, offering a platform for scholars, thinkers, and enthusiasts to engage in a meaningful discourse on the evolving landscape of cultural and intellectual paradigms.

The event boasted a distinguished panel of speakers, with Prof. Dr. Ali Abbasi, President of Al-Mustafa University, Qom, Iran, as the keynote speaker. Prof. Dr. Mustafeez Ahmad Alvi, Head of the Department of Islamic Thought and Culture, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), not only assumed the role of a session moderator but also contributed his valuable insights as a discussant. Additionally, the seminar benefited from the perspectives of Prof. Dr. Muhiyyuddin Hashmi, Dean, Faculty of Arabic and Islamic Learning, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), who joined as a discussant. The seminar was

chaired by Prof. Dr. Anis Ahmad, Vice-Chancellor, Riphah International University (RIU), who deliberated a nuanced exploration of the complex dynamics between tradition, modernity, and Muslim epistemology.

Prof. Dr. Ali Abbasi delivered an enlightening discourse on the multifaceted aspects of modernity, precisely exploring its origins, impact, and repercussions across diverse domains. He highlighted that the term “modernity” itself, coined by John ‘Jack’ Russell in the 18th century, marked the onset of a process that has been unfolding over an extended period. Opinions among scholars regarding the inception of modern human life spanned a wide spectrum, ranging from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Prominent theorists Anthony Giddens and Max Weber provide distinct definitions of modernity, with Giddens portraying it as a new social lifestyle originating in 17th-century Europe and Weber emphasizing the dominance of instrumental rationality leading to the erosion of tradition. This convergence

of categories defines the new Western civilization, challenging traditional norms and beliefs. Modern history, encapsulating epistemology, religion, philosophy, art, and literature, is shaped by the gradual and natural transformation of societies under the philosophy of modernization.

Prof. Abbasi underscored the gradual transformation of societies under the philosophy of modernization, which is evident in the Western manifestation of modernity through the Renaissance, religious reforms, and the Industrial Revolution. The weakening control of churches paved the way for the rise of humanism, individualism, secularism, and the separation of religion and politics. He emphasized the significant influence of empiricism, as seen in logical positivism, rejecting non-experimental factors for scientific knowledge. He highlighted that economic individualism, a fruit of modernity, gave rise to utilitarianism and the dominance of capitalism, overshadowing other values. Integrating rationality with empiricism, philosopher Immanuel Kant critiqued supernatural phenomena cognition and emphasized tangible elements.

Prof. Abbasi underscored the global impact of modernity on Muslim legal training, political changes, and the rise of republics or democracies, sparking questions about the genuine existence of democracy as governments exploit media for personal interests. The dominant interpretation of modernity, featuring humanism, individualism, empiricism, secularism, liberalism, and capitalism, was explored in detail. Tradition, viewed as a set of expired beliefs, values, and norms, faced scrutiny from revivalism, which considered it delusional.

Prof. Abbasi observed the nuanced navigation of the Muslim community between traditionalists, modernists, and supporters of modernization, acknowledging the evolving nature of concepts and innovations. He noted that science had become a mythical notion, with scientific findings shaping judgments even on primordial concepts. While acknowledging positive outcomes such as scientific and technological developments, welfare, health, and economic growth, Prof. Abbasi urged consideration of negative consequences, such as ethical relativism leading to the collapse of family systems and over 60 percent of childbirths out of wedlock.

He emphasized the civilization's quest for global dominance, defining and imposing its values on human rights, family, religion, freedom, and ethics, which had led to chaos witnessed in phenomena like colonialism and wars. Prof. Abbasi highlighted the

coexistence of modernity with traditional beliefs, values, and norms in Islamic and Muslim societies. Despite its spread over the centuries, he noted individuals dedicated to confronting modernity, striving to revive the Islamic civilization by integrating positive aspects of other civilizations while preserving core values and ideologies.

Forming the Islamic civilization, Prof. Abbasi asserted, necessitated a spiritual and theological approach rooted in religious and divine sources, calling for collaboration among scientific and academic centers to achieve this goal. Finally, he thanked the professors, scholars, and attendees for their attention and welcomed collaboration with the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad.

Prof. Dr. Muhiyyuddin Hashmi engaged the seminar participants in a comprehensive discussion, shedding light on the critical intersection of tradition and modernity. He underscored the rarity of this discourse in local universities, contrasting it with the mandatory status it holds in Western academic settings. He emphasized the epistemological nature of the tradition and modernity debate, asserting its close ties to the field of epistemology. He posited that a profound understanding of this subject requires an academic background to transcend superficial interpretations. Drawing on Islamic theory, he expounded on the two primary sources of knowledge – revelation and the universe. The ancient attribute of revelation, termed *qadim*, contrasts with the modern origin of the universe, referred to as *jadid*.



So it can be said that the guidance can be taken from the *qadim* to understand and apply to the *jadid*. In Islamic jurisprudence, the rule to combine *maskut* with *mantuq* is applied to interpret the upcoming or new issues about which there is no guidance and are related to *ijtihad*. They should be addressed by extracting solutions from the obvious commands given by Almighty Allah.

Delving into the categorization of texts as *qat'i* or *zanni*, he illuminated their unchangeable and speculative natures, respectively, applying the principles of evolution and *ijtihad* accordingly. The verse of the Holy Qur'an below is helpful in understanding the difference between these two.

كَلِمَةٌ طَيِّبَةٌ كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

In this verse, Almighty Allah has given the example of Kalima Tayyaba with the tree of Tayyaba, which has an unchangeable and fixed origin, but its branches are spread out towards the sky. So it can be said that the origin (اصل) of Islam is proven, and its branches (فروع) can be acted upon through *ijtihad*.

Prof. Hashmi also introduced the dichotomy of religious epistemology and secular epistemology, distinguishing their sources and characteristics. In Secular Epistemology, the universe is the only source of knowledge. Its origin and quality are modern, religious texts are not preserved in it, and there is no tradition of *ijtihad* in it.

Reflecting on the development of Western theory, he highlighted the ideological basis behind materialism and modernism and contrasted it with the enduring institution of *ijtihad* in Islamic thought. He said that during the developments in the Western theory of knowledge, their antiquity was the biggest obstacle to their progress. On the contrary, the antiquity of the Muslims never hampered. This is the ideological basis behind materialism and modernism in the West. The institution of *ijtihad* has always existed in Islamic thought. *Ijtihad* is a process to solve the problems of the current era, which are not present in the holy text. Although the subject of *ijtihad* is 'modern', it is not disconnected from tradition.

If the purpose of sending the prophets and messengers is analyzed, one can comprehend that the messenger was one who brought the new Shari'ah and the prophet did not bring the new Shari'ah but mainly came to address the new issues in the light of existing Shari'ah. After the prophets, this duty of *ijtihad* is assigned to the scholars, and the criteria of scholarship are comprehensively discussed in Muslim epistemology. So, the institution of *ijtihad* was launched with the end of prophethood. Now, it is the responsibility of scholars and *mujtahidin* to address it till the Day of Judgement. In other words, *Khatm-e-Nabuwwat* and *ijtihad* are inseparable. To understand the principle of *Khatm-e-Nabuwwat*, it is necessary to keep the institution of *ijtihad* active as it was in its early stages.

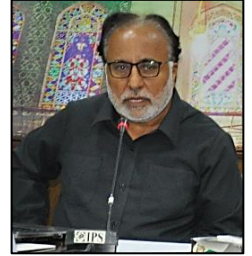
In Islamic thought, the Qur'an and Sunnah are the two institutions that deal with the challenges of renewal. The tragedy of Muslim thought today is that the people who are at the forefront of defending tradition are those who themselves are unaware of their tradition, either at all or not at all. Otherwise, the in-built system of Shari'ah to deal with renewal is itself a part of tradition, and nothing contrary to tradition comes out of it. Today, the deficiency of *ijtihad* is the main reason of the decline of Muslim Ummah, as only

ijtihad can bring a new thought to understand and critically analyze these isms. It should be remembered that *ijtihad* does not only address jurisprudential issues but can contrive all intellectual, educational, legal and social issues.

Finally, Prof. Hashmi introduced the two types of *ijtihad* – *ijtihad* by analogy (اجتہاد بالقیاس) and *ijtihad* by purpose – advocating for the implementation of *Ijtihad bil-Maqasid* (اجتہاد بالمقاصد) in contemporary times, drawing inspiration from the historical practices of Caliph Umar and early *mujtahids*. He cautioned that failure to activate the tradition of *ijtihad* and renewal may lead to the intellectual decline of Shari'ah, mysticism, and civilization, echoing the sentiments of Iqbal's profound verses.

تہن، تصوف، شریعت، کلام
بتانِ عجم کے پجاری تمام

Prof. Dr. Mustafeez Alvi, explaining the discourse on tradition and modernity, highlighted a practical challenge observed in society, emphasizing the existence of a conflict between these two aspects. According to him, people with the modernity approach consider traditionalism as inferior, and they move forward with a sense of their superiority. On the other hand, the traditionalists consider tradition sufficient and express admiration for it. It is far from reality because social change is a perpetual process in society. Both tradition and modernity are necessary for social change because social change can be meaningful, and social evolution can be continued only in this way. The stanza below expresses this adequately.



درکار تحفظ ہے پر سانس بھی لینا ہے
دیوار بناؤ تو دیوار میں در رکھنا

At times, the tradition of embedding doors within walls is taken to extremes in the second approach. Those embracing modernity may find themselves consumed by a fervor for all things fresh and new, as highlighted by the poet.

تازہ ہوا کے شوق میں اے ساکنانِ شہر
اتنے نہ در بناؤ کہ دیوار گر پڑے

Prof. Alvi stated that ending the conflict between *qadim* and *jadid* or benefiting from both is possible

through epistemological and intellectual solutions that establish standards for good and evil or rejection and acceptance. Allama Iqbal has accurately elaborated on this aspect:

زمانہ ایک، حیات ایک، کائنات بھی ایک
دلیل کم نظری قصہ قدیم و جدید

In his enlightening discourse, Prof. Dr. Anis Ahmad delved into the profound realm of epistemology, emphasizing its crucial role in the development and planning of societies. He rejected the complexity of technical terms, advocating for the use of intellectual terminologies borrowed from French, German, and English societies to simplify discussions.



He explored the essence of the theory of knowledge, elucidating its origin and functions. He emphasized the simplicity of the Islamic theory of knowledge, asserting that it unequivocally posits the real source of knowledge to be transcendent, comprehensive, and applicable. Prof. Ahmad critically scrutinized concepts grounded in rationalism, materialism, and relativism, challenging their claims to transcendence and universal applicability. He underscored the distinction between Western and Islamic philosophy, highlighting that, in Islamic classification, epistemology forms the basis of philosophy, rendering philosophy meaningless without anchoring it in the concept of knowledge.

Prof. Ahmad also elaborated on the historical study of civilization, culture, and values over the past two centuries in various languages, emphasizing the impact of colonizers like the British, French, Dutch, and Spanish on sociological constructs.

He drew attention to the perception of tradition as rooted in specific national or cultural contexts and critiqued the obsolete nature of values derived from colonial traditions. Proposing the need for new values falling into metaphysical, material, or functional categories, Prof. Ahmad navigated the intricate intersection of tradition, philosophy, and knowledge within the contexts of Western and Islamic perspectives.

All these three values were social constructs that belong to something temporal and spatial. The philosophies of Ibn Tufail, Ibn Sina, and even Ghazali are also irrelevant nowadays. Their revival through their philosophies will not make any difference as they

were for a specific moment. They were based on certain concepts, and without exploring those concepts, the *ilm-un-nafe* (fruitful knowledge) cannot be extracted. Islamic epistemology means *ilm-un-nafe*, and this *nafa* is defined not by its material benefits but its holistic, functional, as well as ideological validity.

So, Islamic epistemology is not Ghazalian or Ibn Mascavé because it should have a transcendent basis, and none of them fulfills the criteria except the Qur'an and Sunnah. Sunnah is not mere tradition as defined in its English translation, but it is a form of revelation and transcendent, not temporal. With the transcendent value, the Qur'an and Sunnah, a new breed of knowledge has to come out which will not be just like a revival of Umayyads, Abbasids, Fatimids, Mamluks, Mughals and Ottomans in nature because all of them were localized cultures and cannot claim to have transcendent Islamic modality. Therefore, Islamic epistemology is essentially a matter of its actual source and application.

In the illuminating discourse, Prof. Ahmad addressed the crucial aspect of applying comprehensive knowledge to tackle contemporary challenges. He explained the global context, noting that both the East and the West grapple with intricate problems. He shed light on a pertinent issue, pointing out that individuals in the East who identify as orientalist or non-occidental often fail to recognize their own Westernization. He emphasized the pervasive influence of Western thinking, language, and vision across various languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Malay, Urdu, and others.

Prof. Ahmad highlighted the pitfalls of a polarized mindset, asserting that attempts at change are often limited to innovative thinking within the framework of *ijtihad*, which he likened to a patchwork approach. Rather than merely grafting, trimming, and mending previous knowledge, he advocated for developing a new knowledge base founded on the Qur'an, Sunnah, and a profound understanding of modern realities encompassing individualism, narcissism, and materialism. Prof. Ahmad underscored the need for this new set of knowledge to transcend religious boundaries, recognizing the pervasive influence of these three aspects on every facet of human existence.

He emphasized the imperative of critically examining the forces that govern the minds of Muslims. He urged for the formulation of new, comprehensive, transcendent, and applicable standards that transcend hypothetical discussions. Prof. Ahmad observed a tendency of people to engage in speculative conversations while neglecting the importance of

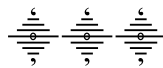
intellectual debate. As an illustrative example, he highlighted a hypothetical scenario discussing the fate of a child who was born and died, questioning whether the child should go to Jannah or Jahanum. He critically assessed the academic dialogue between Ghazali and Ibn Rushd concerning their fundamental approaches to philosophy and the truth it holds. However, he contended that such discussions fail to address current problems as they are not pertinent to the issues of the day. He further called for a shift towards more practical and relevant intellectual discourse in navigating the complexities that shape Muslim perspectives.

In conclusion, Prof. Ahmad underscored that the discourse on epistemology extends beyond mere revival or patchwork. He emphasized that true knowledge can only emerge when Muslim scholars fully internalize the two primary sources, the Qur'an and Sunnah, integrating them into their very essence – blood, breath, thought, and vision. This profound internalization, he argued, enables Muslims to scrutinize ground realities and formulate solutions accordingly.

Prof. Ahmad envisioned the outcome as a transformative process, yielding not only new sociology and psychology but also reshaping mathematics and physics. He rejected the notion of dualism, asserting that Tawhīd, denoting a singular personality without division, should be the foundation. Lamenting the current absence of such a unifying perspective, he contended that knowledge must align with Tawhīd, and the emergence of a Tawhīdi

paradigm holds the promise of providing solutions to contemporary challenges. Prof. Ahmad expressed his optimism, characterizing this paradigm shift as a surge and movement that would usher in a new approach to life, development, social sciences, and applied sciences.

The seminar emerged as a remarkable intellectual endeavor. Prof. Dr. Ali Abbasi, as the keynote speaker, provided a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of modernity, tracing its historical roots, impact, and implications across diverse realms. The ensuing discussions led by Prof. Dr. Mustafeez Ahmad Alvi and Prof. Dr. Muhiyyuddin Hashmi enriched the seminar by delving into the intricate intersections of tradition and modernity from both practical and epistemological perspectives. The discourse navigated through the nuances of Islamic jurisprudence, the division of religious epistemology and secular epistemology, and the imperative role of *ijtihad* in addressing contemporary challenges. Prof. Dr. Anis Ahmad's insightful reflections on epistemology illuminated the path ahead, emphasizing the critical need for a new knowledge base rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, transcending regional and cultural boundaries. His call for a Tawhīdi paradigm marks a paradigm shift towards a holistic, transformative approach that aligns knowledge with Tawhīd, promising solutions to contemporary challenges across various disciplines. The seminar stands as a demonstrator to the intellectual discourse to seeking solutions within the framework of Islamic principles.





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