



THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM WITH
MODERNITY: A STUDY OF THE THOUGHT OF
SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

BY

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ABSTRACT

The issue of the compatibility of Islam with modernity continues to be a recurring phenomenon, especially in this present time where the world has become a global village and where cultures and civilizations are constantly interacting and edging out one another. In the Muslim world, the issue centres on how to relate and interact with Western modernity considering the sharp differences between the two civilizations. While some Muslims hold that there cannot be a meeting point between them, others argued that Muslims should embrace Modernity based on certain variables, the lack of which, they believe, is responsible for the backwardness and underdevelopment of the Muslim world.

In the light of this debate, this thesis examines, analytically and critically, the issue of the compatibility of Islam with modernity as propounded by some modernist Muslim scholars through the views of one of the leading Islamic scholar and philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who himself is a product of the modern Western education system and has spent the larger part of his life in the West, in order to see whether this idea of compatibility is sound Islamically and in line with the Islamic way of life and worldview.

Using the historical approach and analytical and critical methods this thesis examines this theory of the compatibility of Islam with modernity by first tracing the genesis and growth of modernity and also exploring its central themes. Second, it discusses the compatibility position by highlighting their (advocates of this theory) submissions on the issue before going to analyse the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr as it concerns what he calls Sacred Traditions (which includes Islam and other religions before it) and modernity. Finally, the thesis made a comparative analyses of these two views based on the Islamic worldview, the present realities in the Muslim and modern Western World, and also based on the works of Muslim and modern Western scholars and, thus, came to the conclusion that the theory of the compatibility of Islam with modernity is an unworkable theory which leads not to the betterment of Islam nor Muslims but to the distortion of the Islamic faith and the creation of more problems in the Muslim societies. Therefore, the thesis emphasizes the utilization of Islamization, in the comprehensive sense, in establishing a working relationship with modernity while advocating that Muslims should not be afraid to differ with modernity as there is no harm in being different since differences should be celebrated and not anathematized. However, in being different the thesis advocates for a violent free dispassionate approach and emphasizes the intensification of intellectual evolution and *da'wah* in helping the modern world and humanity at large, which is currently in turmoil as a result of modernity, in returning to the fold of religion – precisely the Islamic religion which has a comprehensive answer, system and logical approach to all human affairs since Islam is divinely ordained and comprehensively defined as “a total way of life”.

خلاصة البحث

إنّ قضية التوافق بين الإسلام والحداثة مازالت تعدّ ظاهرة متكررة. إذ أصبح العالم أشبه ما يكون بقرية واحدة، حيث تتلاقح الثقافات والحضارات، كما تتنافس فيما بينها على الدوام، وترتكز قضية ذلك التوافق في العالم الإسلامي على كيفية التواصل والتلاقح مع الحداثة الغربية، نظراً للفوارق البارزة بين الحضارتين، ويرى بعض المسلمين أنّه لا توجد نقاط للتلاقي بينهما، في حين يصرّ البعض الآخر على ضرورة أن يحتضن المسلمون الحداثة وفقاً لبعض العوامل المحدّدة، ويعتقدون أن القصور في ذلك، هو السبب وراء تراجع العالم الإسلامي وتخلّفه. وبناء على هذا الجدل القائم يحاول البحث أن يدرس دراسة تحليلية نقدية لقضية توافق الإسلام والحداثة، كما طرحه بعض العلماء المسلمين المحدثين، وتحديدًا من خلال آراء العالم والفيلسوف الكبير السيد حسين نصر. وقد بدأ البحث بتتبّع بداية تطور الحداثة، واستكشاف موضوعاتها الرئيسية، بالاعتماد على المنهج التاريخي والتحليلي، وقد ناقش البحث قضية توافق الإسلام والحداثة، والآراء حولها، قبل الخوض في تحليل فكرة السيد حسين نصر عن التقاليد المقدّسة (التي تضمّ ما لدى الإسلام والديانات الأخرى قبلها) وعن الحداثة، وأخيرًا ناقش هاتين الفكرتين بالاعتماد على نظرة الإسلام للحياة، والواقع المعاصر للعالم الإسلامي، وواقع العالم الغربي الحديث، وبالاعتماد على الأعمال العلمية لدى العلماء المسلمين والعلماء الغربيين، واستخلص البحث إلى أن نظرية توافق الإسلام والحداثة ليست نظرية قابلة للتطبيق، فلا تستطيع أن تُطوّر الإسلام والمسلمين، بل العكس، بإمكانها تشويه العقيدة الإسلامية وجلب المزيد من المشاكل في المجتمعات الإسلامية، لذا يؤكّد البحث على ضرورة استخدام مصطلح الأسلمة بمعناه الشامل، في تأسيس علاقة عملية مع الحداثة، بجانب تشجيع المسلمين على عدم الخوف من اختلافهم من الحداثة، فلا ضرر في الاختلاف، بل ينبغي أن يُحتفى بهذا الاختلاف والتميز، ولا يُلام عليه. ومن أجل إبراز هذا التميّز يؤكّد البحث على ضرورة الابتعاد عن العنف، وضرورة استخدام أسلوب التعامل النزيه، ويؤكّد على ضرورة تكثيف جانب التطوير العلمي، الجانب الدعوي لإنقاذ العالم والبشرية أجمعين، التي تُعاني حاليًا من الفوضى الناتج من الحداثة، فالحاجة ماسة إلى العودة إلى الدين الإسلامي الذي لديه الأجوبة الشاملة، والأنظمة القويمة، والمناهج المنطقية السليمة لكافة الشؤون البشرية، فالإسلام منهج كامل للحياة.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degree at IIUM or other institutions.

Musa Yusuf Owoyemi

Signature.....

Date

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**THE COMPATIBILITY OF ISLAM WITH MODERNITY: A STUDY OF
THE THOUGHT OF SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR**

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This thesis is dedicated to all the orphans of the world like me who through difficulties and hardships are trying to make their lives better despite all the odds against them – natural and man-made – and to all those who are stretching out a hand of help to the orphans in one way or another. Likewise to my beloved brother Yusuf Abiodun Owoyemi who passed away on the 5th of March 2011 just as I was about to submit this thesis for senate approval.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. INTRODUCTION

While the modern Western world has moved from modernity to what its intellectuals call post-modernity, the Muslim world continues to grapple with the issues of modernity while treating post-modernity as an extension of modernity and even more dangerous than modernity itself.¹ The reason for this, according to El-Effendi, lies in the fact that “unlike the Western and early industrializing countries, which faced the challenges of modernity as an internal *evolution* within those societies – albeit, one that had not been devoid of conflict and tensions – the Muslims faced modernity as an *external* challenge.”² Also important, he says, is that “part of the problem Muslims have in dealing with modernity is the fact that ‘the very term “modernity” has been given a significance both normative and distortive by the myth of progress which has crucially shaped Western thought since the Enlightenment.’”³ In other words, to be modern is to be ‘progressive’, ‘civilized’ and ‘developed’ while the opposite is

¹ See Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, “The dance of the pen, the play of the sign: a study in the relationship between modernity, immanence and deconstruction” *The American journal of Islamic social science*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1 – 12. Also see his, “Of Darwinian mice and pavlovian dogs: a critique of western modernity” in *Rethinking Islam and modernity: essays in honour of Fathi Osman*, edited by Abdelwahab El-Effendi, (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), 1 – 8. For further reading on Postmodernity see Jean Francois Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) & David Lyon, *Postmodernity*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999) and David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*, (Cambridge, MA & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997).

² Abdelwahab El-Effendi (ed.), *Rethinking Islam and modernity: essay in honour of Fathi Osman*, (Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), xii.

³ *Ibid.*, x. The Enlightenment Thought, says David Harvey, “embraced the idea of progress, and actively sought that break with history and tradition which modernity espouses. It was, above all, a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organisation in order to liberate human beings from their chains.” Quoted from David Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity*, (Cambridge MA & Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 12 – 13. Concerning this Thought that shaped the Enlightenment, according to Robert E. Lerner, Standish Meacham and Edward Mcnall Burns, it mostly “stemmed from three basic premises: (1) the entire

‘backwardness’, ‘uncivilized’ and ‘undeveloped’. This point is properly put into perspective by Berger when he says, “[modernity is] understood as intrinsically superior to whatever preceded it – the opposite of being modern is being backward, and it is difficult to entertain the notion that backwardness may have something to say for itself.”⁴ Going further, Berger identifies five aspects of the fundamental nature of modernity and their explanation is as follows.

The first is ‘alienation’ or ‘abstraction’ which is “inherent in its underlying processes, such as the capitalist market, the bureaucratic state, urbanization and technologization. It is also present at the level of consciousness in the fragmentation and quantification of knowledge.”⁵ Thus this nature destroys community and solidarity both of which are important in Islam and humanity in general as they both give meaning to human life. The second nature of modernity is ‘futurity’ which, according to Berger, is “where the future becomes the primary orientation of imagination and activity [and] allied with this is the subjection of life to the tyranny of the clock and planning.”⁶

universe is fully intelligible and governed by natural rather than supernatural forces; (2) rigorous application of “scientific method” can answer fundamental questions in all areas of inquiry; and (3) the human race can be educated to achieve nearly infinite improvement.” Quoted from Robert E. Lerner, Standish Meacham and Edward Mcnall Burns, *Western civilizations: their history and their culture*, (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 13th edn., 1998), 640. Likewise, Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary and Patricia O’Brien, describe the Enlightenment as been “less a set of ideas than it was a set of attitudes. At its core was criticism, a questioning of traditional institutions, customs, and morals.” Quoted from Mark Kishlansky, Patrick Geary and Patricia O’Brien, *Civilization in the west*, (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 4th edn., 2001), 652. However, concerning the Enlightenment itself, Maryanne Cline Horowitz says, it is “a historical period extending from the late seventeenth century ... to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The Enlightenment was a social philosophy with common basic conceptions about humanity and society and a common methodological approach involving the search for laws that govern nature and society and commonly held values directed toward social reform.” Quoted from Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ed., *New dictionary of the history of ideas*, vol. 2, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 673.

⁴ Peter L. Berger, *Facing up to modernity: excursions in society, politics and religion*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 101.

⁵ Abdelwahab El-Effendi, xi.

⁶ Ibid.

The third is “individuation and the separation of the individuals from collective entities. Paradoxically, modernization tends to destroy community and solidarity, while at the same time enhancing the individual’s need to belong.”⁷

The fourth “is liberation of the individual and the multiplication of options. In traditional societies the community for the most part took from the individual the burden of choice by prescribing set paths of action. However, the weakening of tradition in all aspects of life meant that the individual is now ‘condemned to choose’, with all the anguish and responsibility this tends to cause.”⁸

The last and fifth “problematic dimension of modernity is secularization⁹, which may not mean the disappearance of religious beliefs and practices, but certainly the ‘weakening of the plausibility of religious perceptions of reality among a large number of people’.”¹

Added to these ‘problematic dimensions’ of modernity is the view that “modernity is primarily a challenge.”¹ That is the challenge of rediscovering new norms as “pre-given models and norms are disintegrating.”¹ In other words, modernity is “essentially characterized by the notion of individual freedoms... of self-determination – no norm is recognized whose point one cannot see for oneself.”¹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In its actual conception, secularization, according to Harvey Cox, means “the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one.” Quoted from Harvey Cox, *The secular city: secularization and urbanization in theological perspective*, (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company), 15. Likewise, Maryanne Cline Horowitz says, secularization is understood to mean “increasing state control of spheres formerly controlled by religious institutions and the expansion and freedom from religious control of nonreligious institutions, both state and private, and comprising education, social welfare, law, publication and the media, and forums for the expression of belief and action.” Quoted from Maryanne Cline Horowitz, ed., *New dictionary of the history of ideas*, Vol. 5, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2005), 2194. Also see Kocku von Stuckrad, ed., *The brill dictionary of religion*, Vol. iv, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2007), 2194.

¹ Peter L. Berger, *Facing up to modernity*, xi – xii.

¹ Jurgen Habermas, *Autonomy and solidarity*, (London: Verso, 1992), 225.

¹ Ibid., 226.

¹ Ibid., 227.

Thus, all these characteristics of modernity explained the problem that Muslims have with it and shaped their different responses to it. This is the focus of this research work: that is, a critical analysis of the compatibility of Islam with modernity from the point of view of one of the contemporary Islamic scholar and philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

However, the first response of the Muslims to modernity is known as modernist (*adāthiyyu*) or reformist's (*Muslih*) response. For quite some time, based on the progress that modernity has brought to the West in terms of what Al-Qarḍāwī referred to as the 'body' of civilization, "such as buildings, factories, machines and all that is related to the various and luxurious pleasures of worldly life",¹ some Muslim scholars, have been advocating for a kind of conciliation between Islam and modernity.¹ These scholars – generally referred to as modernist and sometimes also as reformist¹ - believe that there is and should be some kind of compatibility between Islam and modernity – at least, based on the variables identified by Al-Qarḍāwī as the body of civilization – so that Islam 'may have something to say for itself' in a world that is now described as modern. They hold that Islam and modernity are compatible,

¹ Yūsūf Al-Qarḍāwī, *Islam the future civilization*, translated from Arabic by El-Falah Foundation, (Cairo: El-Falah Foundation, 1998), 3.

¹ For further exposition of this assertion, see Mansoor Moaddel & Kamran Talattof (eds.), *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam: a reader*, (New York, U.S: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 1 – 4.

¹ The terms or terminologies of reference and the classification of the Muslims' responses to modernity vary. While some scholars may be grouped as modernist in a place, another view may present them as reformist, liberalists or progressives. So also while others may be categorized as revivalists by some people, others may see them as traditionalist or even more as fundamentalists etc. See introductions to Safi M., *Progressive Muslims: on justice, gender and pluralism*, (Oxford England: Oneworld Publications, 2003); Kurzman C., *Liberal Islam: a source book*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mansoor Moaddel & Kamran Talattof (eds.), *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam: a reader*, (New York, U.S: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). However, one can identify four main attitudes to the issue of modernity. One attitude, secularism, welcomes wholesale, the total change of the Muslim society to that of the pattern of the modern Western world. Second, another called modernist or reformist sees some kind of compatibility based on certain variables and a new interpretation of the Qur'ān. The third kind, revivalist or fundamentalist belief in the reawakening of the Islamic religion and the reorientation of the people not the religion itself which, to them, is in no way compatible with modernity. The fourth and last, called traditionalist, abhors any kind of change or reform, believing that the Islamic religion is complete and perfect and should therefore be left as it is. See Cheryl Benard, *Civil democratic Islam: partners, resources and strategies*, (Santa Monica, U.S.: Rand Corporation, 2003).

based on these variables, and asked the Muslims to embrace it – at least, its science, technology and knowledge – as a way out of their backwardness and underdevelopment. Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi explains the task of this position while advocating for it as, “separating Islam from the traditionalist thesis, separating modernization from the acculturation syndrome [that is the cultural dimension of modernity], and establishing a synthesis which is both Islamic and modern.”¹

While espousing the virtue of the modern Western nation in comparison with the Orient and calling for a reform of the Islamic religion and nations in particular, Muhammad ‘Abduh says:

It observes all of the Oriental and Western nations and finds that the former are subject nations while the latter are independent nations. It finds the orient nations as having no ambition, little hope of life and as willing to accept inferiority, while the Western nations have the highest and noblest objectives. It finds that the Orient nations are lazy, accustomed to quietness and rest, and that their souls are imbued with despair and boredom. These nations are actually sleeping and are not willing to wake up. The Western nations are full of life will and endurance, accustomed to effort and hardships, with hope and ambition, and smiling at life while life smiles at them.¹ 8

On the social institutions and concepts of modernity such as democracy, socialism, freedom etc, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha says;

We must now elevate legislation by evolving and basing it on the original Qur’anic verses. In this way we shall welcome the age of socialism and democracy and open the way to absolute individual freedom through worship and humane dealing with other people.¹

¹ Al-Sadiq Al-Mahdi, “Islam⁷ – society and change” in *Voices of resurgent Islam*, edited by John L. Esposito, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 236 – 239.

¹ Muhammad ‘Abdul, “The necessity of religious reform” in *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam: a reader*, edited by Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, (New York, U.S: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 49.

¹ Mahmoud Mohamed Taha,⁹“The second message of Islam” in *Liberal Islam: a source book*, edited by Charles Kurzman, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 283.

Asserting the above statement further by comparing *shura* and democracy,

Sadek J. Sulaiman says;

I do not see *shura* as rejecting or incompatible with the basic elements of a democratic system... the more any system constitutionally, institutionally and practically fulfills the principles of *shura* – or for that matter, the democratic principle – the more Islamic that system becomes.²

The second response, which started “*pari passu* with the decline of liberal-nationalism between 1930s and 1950s (depending on the country)”², was referred to as Revivalism or Renewalism (*Tajdīd*) until recently when its organized movements came to be tagged as Fundamentalism in the West. It is further divided into *scriptural fundamentalist* and *radical fundamentalist*.² The scholars in this category hold that modernity cannot be ‘superior’ in anyway to Islam and the Islamic heritage. Thus, Muslims cannot afford to adopt and adapt the ‘progress’, ‘civilization’ and ‘development’ of modernity, as this will eventually lead to the implant of what Al-Qarḍāwī calls the ‘soul’ of civilization such as its “set of ideologies, concepts, moral values, manners and traditions that are embodied in the behavior of individuals, groups and their interrelations”² – all of which, they believe, conflict with that of Islam. Abdelwahab says concerning this:

Consider the car for instance; when a driver turns the ignition key, he, more often than not, thinks that he is handling a simple machine that transports him from one place to another, which of course is a fallacy. Driving the car is an act rooted in a whole worldview that manifests

² Sadek J. Sulaiman, “Democracy and Shura”, in *Liberal Islam: a source book*, edited by Charles Kurzman, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 98.

² Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, 2.

² This response is what is also commonly called political Islam now. The general belief is that this response seeks to take over political power, either by peaceful or violence means, and to Islamized every state and social institutions. While the scriptural fundamentalist, according to Benard, “are grounded in theology and have some roots in religious establishment”, the radical fundamentalists “are much less concern with literal substance of Islam and are eclectic and autodidactic in their knowledge of Islam”. Quoted from Cheryl Benard, *Civil democratic Islam: partners, resources and strategies*, (Santa Monica, U.S.: Rand Corporation, 2003), 4.

² Al-Qarḍāwī, 3.

itself in a specific life-style;”² “the cultural dimension of these commodities, which seem perfectly innocuous, absolutely *halāl*, and entirely unblemished from the purely religious point of view, is an organic part of a world-view that conflicts with the Islamic world-view and Islamic certainties.”²

To the scholars who espouse this position, if Muslims are not advancing today, it is not because Islam is regressive but rather, it is the case that Muslims have abandoned Islam and what they need to do is to return to it or revive it and practice it as it was practiced before by their predecessors which led to their glorious civilization and reign in the world.² Thus, they reject the very idea of the compatibility of Islam with modernity in all ramifications! Putting this argument into perspective, Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdūdī says;

One fails to understand how on earth it becomes possible to effect a compromise of any sort between two social systems having principles diametrically opposed in concept and spirit. Indeed, no social system worth its name can tolerate such a compromise. To view it as practicable is to betray one’s bankruptcy of reason, and to show willingness for its acceptance is to reflect a serious lack of one’s courage of conviction.²

And on science which is seen as a positive force in modernity and on which basis compatibility is advocated for, Ali Shari’ati says:

Science was freed from subservience to religion only to become subservient to power and at the disposal of the powerful. It was transformed into short-sighted, rigid scientism, which killed the Messiah and become another lackey to Caesar. The machine that was to have been humanity’s tool for ruling nature and escaping enslavement to work was transformed into a mechanism that itself enslave man.²

² Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, “Features of the new Islamic discourse” *Encounters*, vol. 3, no. 1, (1997): 57 – 58.

² *Ibid.*, 58.

² See Sayyid Qutub, *Milestones*, (Lahore: Kazi Publications, n.d.).

² Sayyid Abul A’la Mawdūdī, *A short history of the revivalist movement in Islam*, translated from Urdu by Al-Ash’ari (Petaling Jaya: The Other Press, 1999), 15 – 16.

² Ali Shari’ati, “Critical attitude toward the West and the idea of Western decadence” in *Modernist and fundamentalist debates in Islam: a reader*, edited by Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, (New York, U.S.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 319.

Commenting further on the claim that modernity is meant to create a paradise for man through its different concepts of freedom, liberalism, democracy etc., he says, people should look at the gatekeeper of this paradise which is capitalism. But, he points out, it is a capitalism armed with science and technology all of which is like a magician bewitching humanity into captivity amidst the massive pitiless wheels of mechanism and techno-bureaucracies. As for modern man, he says, he is nothing but an economic animal whose duty is to graze in this modern paradise as the philosophy of consume, consume, consume has made him forget his comprehensive self. As for the watch words of the modern world that is Liberalism, Democracy, Life, Morals, the goal of Life, the Philosophy of Life etc. they all mean respectively: apathy, to elect those who have already chosen one's lot for one, material existence, opportunism and egoism, consumption, and satiation of the natural appetites. While the ultimate aim of life is leisure and enjoyment, faith and Love, the meaning of existence and the meaning of man are all none issue and, in fact, he says, they have all been forgotten!²

However, this is not to say that this group of Muslims do not recognize the usefulness of science and knowledge, rather, they believe that science and technology as understood and used by modernity is wrong and its direction should be changed in accordance with faith or religion.³

The third kind of response is the secularist (*'ilmāniyyu*) Muslims' response. That is, those who argued that Muslims should go along with the modern concept of separation of religion and state. As in the West, they hold that religion should be a private affair and should not be in the public sphere. Some of them believe, as the secularist in the modern Western world do, that religion has outlived its usefulness in

² Ibid, 319 – 320.

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³ See Sayyid Qutub, *Milestones*, (Lahore: Kazi Publications, n.d.). Also see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The need for a sacred science*, (New York, U.S.: State University of New York Press, 1993).

the public sphere and the continuous retention of it in the public sphere hinders the progress of the Muslim societies. One of them says, “[t]here is no second civilization; civilization means European civilization.”³ Thus, Muslims must accept it wholesale in order to be civilized since it is the only civilization in the present time in which humanity as a whole can live.

The traditionalist (*Taqlīdiyyu*) response comes as the fourth and last response of the Muslims to modernity. This response abhors modernity and anything that has to do with drastic change. It holds that the Islamic religion is complete and perfect and that the very notion of immediate and unrestrained change coupled with the discarding of the past embedded in modernity will bring about nothing but corruption to the religion.

Those who think of reforming or modernizing Islam are misguided, and their efforts are bound to fail..... Why should it be modernized, when it is already perfect and pure, universal and for all time?³

2

However, this group, according to Cheryl Benard, is not monolithic and can be further divided into two, *Conservative Traditionalists* and *Reformist Traditionalists*. The first seeks “to preserve orthodox norms and values and conservative behavior to the fullest extent possible. The temptations and the pace of modern life are seen as posing a major threat to this. Their posture is one of resistance to change.”³ But, they tend “to be adaptive to [their] environment [and] are likely to accept practices that are prevalent in such societies...”³

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³ Quoted in Mohamed Arkdun, *Rethinking Islam*, translated by Robert D. Lee (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), 25.

³ Quoted in Bassam Tibi, *Islam and the cultural accommodation of social change*, (Boulder Colo.: Westview, 1990), 73.

³ Cheryl Benard, *Civil democratic Islam: partners, resources and strategies*, (Santa Monica, U.S.: Rand Corporation, 2003), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 5.

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The second holds that “to remain viable and attractive throughout the ages, Islam has to be prepared to make some concessions in the literal application of orthodoxy. They are prepared to discuss reforms and reinterpretations. Their posture is one of cautious adaptation to change, being flexible on the letter of the law to conserve the spirit of the law.”³ 5

These four trends, briefly discussed above, are the major responses of the Muslims to modernity and they mark the different approaches of the Muslim scholars to the issue of the compatibility of Islam with modernity. But, one thing that needed to be pointed out here is that this classification or categorisation of the Muslim responses to modernity is itself a modern western scholars’ classification fostered on the Muslims and which have become widely accepted even among the Muslim scholars.³

In the light of the above, the issues which this thesis will explore are: what are the conditions or factors that led to the emergence of modernity? What are the fundamental issues which have been addressed by modernity? How does the modernist or reformist Muslims define and see modernity and the issues of modernity? How does Seyyed Hossein Nasr sees modernity and the issues of modernity? Which division and/or sub-division does the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr falls into in these four categories and which of the views of these four categories his thought properly represents? Will he accept these categorisations and the sense in which these categories are understood? Will he reject or accept the modernist compatibility of Islam with modernity based on certain variables and on the basis of which they call for reform? And what will be his suggestion(s) in answering and

³ Ibid.

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³ It is important to note that⁶when Muslims address issues and there are varying opinions, this does not always lead to classification as seen in the modern world. Rather, Muslims have always considered differences of opinion a matter of blessing for the *ummah* and not a source of division as fostered on them by modern western scholars.

tackling the challenges of modernity? How plausible, and most importantly, workable is his solution(s)? Furthermore, how well have the modernist reform or idea of compatibility helped the Muslim societies and is there a paradigm(s) that shows and attests to the success or failure of this reform? In the midst of all these responses, what is the present condition of Muslims vis-à-vis modernity and what will be the way forward for them? Should Muslims adopt, adapt and copy wholesale the variables of modernity identified by the Muslim modernist for them to develop or they should find another means of development? Is Western civilization – which epitomises modernity – the only civilization today? What is the condition of humanity today vis-à-vis modernity? Does modernity have anything positive to give to humanity or not? Finally, what is the response of Seyyed Hossein Nasr to all these?

All these questions and many others that will come up in the course of this research work will be what this thesis will try to find answers to through the study and critical analysis of the compatibility position through the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

1.2. THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In the light of the explanation above, the problem that this thesis seeks to solve is to explore and examine the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr on the issue of the compatibility of Islam with modernity as advocated for by the modernist or reformist Muslims. Since Nasr is an acclaimed Muslim philosopher, it is most appropriate to probe into how he philosophizes on such a volatile issue in the Muslim societies. The question that will be put to his thought is, on what basis will he accept or reject the idea of the compatibility of Islam with modernity and, most importantly, what will lead to the restoration of the lost glory of the Muslims and lead to their playing their

role of the best of people (*khayr Ummah*) and which will lead to the development of their societies and the upliftment of humanity generally?

1.3. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Humanity today is in a crisis as a result of what modernity, which is shaping the life of many in all parts of the globe, has wrought in human societies. The Muslims, being part of this humanity, face a dilemma on how to move their society forward. They are torn between sticking to their own concept of civilization embedded in their heritage, which has been stagnant for some time now, or adopting and imitating the modern Western civilization (which is the champion of modernity) as proposed to them by some Muslim scholars (modernists or reformists) who believe that Islam and modernity are compatible based on certain variables identified above. In the light of this, the main objectives of this research work are:

1. To examine this idea of compatibility in the light of the thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr.
2. To see if this idea of compatibility is intellectually sound and if it can be followed by Muslims as suggested.
3. To investigate how the Muslims can develop their societies through the findings of this thesis on this issue.
4. To identify if there can possibly be any kind of relationship between Islam and modernity.

1.4. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research work is important because the Muslims, in particular, are seeing serious challenges as a result of the many crises that are going on within and between different societies on one hand and the human environment on the other – all due to modernity and modernization of the dominant modern Western civilization. Where do the Muslims stand today on these crises? Should the Muslims adopt, adapt and imitate modern Western civilization as advocated for them by some of their scholars or they should critically examine themselves, this idea of compatibility and find a way out of their present stagnation based on their own religion, worldview and philosophy?

Thus, the significance of this research lies in the fact that it seeks to open a serious and critical discussion by first examining the origin and concept of modernity, exploring the compatibility position and, second, analysing Nasr's position on the issue of compatibility.

1.5. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the light of this, the questions that this thesis seeks to find answers to are:

1. Does Nasr believe there is really a meeting point between Islam and modernity as some scholars have asserted?
2. On what basis does Nasr reject or accept the idea of compatibility and is it genuine?
3. To what extent is the idea of compatibility workable in the Muslim societies?
4. How can the Muslims effectively tackle the challenges of modernity and which of these four views will be the most effective?