Modernities, Islam and Fundamentalisms

Modernity and religion

Traditions of social and political theory that have been framed through the terms of an Enlightenment vision of modernity often have difficulties in recognizing the significance of resurgent religious movements. We have seen a return to literal and fundamentalist movements within different religious traditions in both the West and the East. In each of the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, we have witnessed a fundamentalist turn that has been able to attract people across generations. We have also seen the appeal that religious traditions can have in the West as a response to the uncertainties of migrant experiences, especially for second-generation migrants.

Religious belief has often been regarded as ‘backward’ and thus as a regression that sometimes has to be explained in pathological terms. But if we are to take questions of belief seriously as they are imagined within diverse religious and spiritual traditions, we have to be prepared to rethink traditional boundaries between the secular and the religious that have shaped traditional disciplinary boundaries. This can involve questioning the terms of a secular modernity framed in Eurocentric terms that blocked the possibilities of dialogue across different civilisations and treated ‘others’ as if they could only make the transition from tradition to modernity through the external intervention of the European colonial powers. If we are to engage with the emergence of fundamentalist movements within the Islamic world, we need to recognize the disillusionments with traditions of secular nationalism and socialism within the Arab world in the 1970s and 1980s. We also need to recognize the resonance of a language of crusade that has for so long shaped the historical memory of relationships between the West and Islam.

The Bush administration in the USA and the Blair government in the UK both insisted that the ‘war on terror’ had nothing to do with Islam, which is a peace-loving religion. We were told that bin Laden was distorting the religious teachings of Islam for his own ‘evil purposes’ because he had
an irrational hatred of the USA. We were also told that there were ‘good’ Muslims, who interpreted Islam as a peace-loving and compassionate religion, and ‘bad’ Muslims, who identified themselves with bin Laden and his cause. It was only those who would distort Islam for their own ends who had become the enemies of the West. This goes along with the dualistic thinking that informed American responses to the attack on the World Trade Center. The ‘war against terrorism’ was presented as a struggle of the forces of good against the forces of evil. There could be no middle ground, no spaces for ambivalence and uncertainty.\(^2\)

An Enlightenment vision of modernity was established as a project of a secularized Christianity, even though it presented itself in secular terms. As it came to imagine itself in the eighteenth century, reason was to guide our lives and thus was often take the place of faith, which was to be regarded as ‘irrational’. Religion would gradually give way to science that would present its own conditional certainties. If science was built upon questioning accepted truths, its method gave a reliable means to discern the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’ beliefs. At the same time, science is identified with reason and progress, and is still taken to be a marker of the superior claims of the West in relation to Islam. This is because Islamic cultures are represented as not having had their own Reformation and thus lacking for not having produced the habits and apparatuses of self-criticism that have been developed in Western societies since the Reformation.\(^3\)

Many people have argued that the West has had a Reformation while the Muslim world has not. Some writers have drawn on R.H. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* to explain supposedly deep differences between these worlds. As Tawney explains: ‘Not the least fundamental of divisions among theories of society is between those which regard the world of human affairs as self-contained, and those which appeal to a supernatural criterion. Modern social theory, like modern political theory, developed only when society was given a naturalistic instead of religious explanation.’ But at the same time, we have to recognize the presence in supposedly secular societies of the appeals to Christian-inspired religious rhetorics that formed such a part of Bush and Blair’s presentation of the ‘war on terror’.\(^4\)

Bush talked consistently about the need to ‘smoke out the enemy’, partly as an admission that he did not know where the enemy was, since it could not be identified with a state. Very soon after the 9/11 attacks, it became clear that some of the perpetrators had lived legally in the USA for a while, even training as pilots in flying schools. This made it difficult to identify the ‘enemy’ as coming from ‘over there’ in a distant place, because it seemed as if they had been living with us here. So it was going to be difficult to discern who was a ‘good’ citizen and who was an ‘evil’ enemy. This helped to create an atmosphere of suspicion as Muslim Americans suddenly became suspect. The ‘terrorist’ was suddenly a ‘stranger’ in our midst that we could not distinguish from a friend. How could people tell the difference?\(^5\)