Proposal For Workshop at ECPR Conference, Intercollege, April 25-30 2006

Political Islam or Islamic politics: An insight into theory and praxis of Islamic discourse

Man lies at the root of all investigation into the world. Super-structures failing to heed to this essential infra-structural maxim, will inevitably lack the foundations of a solid descriptive analysis of man's behaviour or a prescriptive discourse. God as the ultimate focal point of most religions, bears an uncompromising importance in the understanding of man's teleology. Islam is no exception to this. It claims to understand man and have the right responses to his/her needs and demands. Just as the Western political philosophy has theorised on man and his actions, Islam has equally set forth guidelines that in the final analysis can be shaped into what may be referred to as theory.

Ever since the emergence of the 'clash of civilisations' theory by Samuel Huntington, new attention and sensitivity has been given to what for many years has been referred to as 'Islamic fundamentalism'. Though political in nature (particularly fuelled by the Arab-Israeli conflict), the phenomenon of Islamic fundamentalism borrows heavily from deep-rooted principles of Islamic doctrine and Shariah (Islamic law). The concept of martyrdom, for instance, has been of particular significance in this regard as has the precept of jihad. However, all these concepts stem from a fundamental belief in a special relationship that man has, and is duty-bound to accept and develop (according to some interpretation) with God. So this relationship has to be clarified and different definitions given. Parameters have to be set and new unconservative reinterpretation of the text heard. This would the task of an epistemological approach. Papers treating areas such as these, as the interface between Islamic theology and politics and political action would be acceptable.

One's understanding of man's nature automatically defines his/her outlook in the world. If political or social in nature, as stated by Aristotle, then his/her glory can come within and with the society. A communitarianism of sort that defies atomism and defines individualism in the context and with the aid of polis. Accordingly Islam's view of human nature can also be a starting point for understanding the political discourse of man by
the one who programmed him/her. It is allegedly a view from within. Greed, ambition, jealousy, arrogance are certainly some of the qualities of man according to Islam; but as against those there are positive traits in man that can be exploited towards building a just, secure and prosperous society. How important is communitarianism in Islam and what relation does the individual have with the society, what are the essential rights and duties of man in Islam can be some of the questions here. Papers dealing with the political theory of Islam would be welcome.

There is also the contentious question of Shariah (Islamic law). Even though there is no universal agreement on a specific definition of the term, it is nevertheless used in the West mainly to denote the legal aspects (do's and dont's) of the faith. It therefore relies heavily on jurisprudence and on theologians who claim a sort of monopoly on understanding the word of God. The point here is that if the word of God is sacred (a statement all believers readily attest to) can the same be said about human interpretation of that word? Human interpretation changes with time as man is essentially a historical creature, sometimes negating previous interpretations. So whereas the infallible eternal absolute God is holy and His word sacred (He is Omnipotent and Omniscient), we fallible mortal relative humans who do not have those qualities and are not therefore worthy of such acclamation, cannot and should not claim a Godly throne for our non-Godly acts and opinions. The essential point of the legal philosophy in Islam is that human interpretations of God's word are not the same as God's word. This is a very important issue in Muslim societies and new liberal thinkers like Abdolkarim Soroush\textsuperscript{3} or Ahmed An-Naim\textsuperscript{4} have raised it repeatedly. Western academics like Elizabeth Meyer\textsuperscript{5} have also written on the subject. Papers concerned with Islamic legal theory in its political context, particularly in relation to modernisation, would be welcome.

The question of Islam and nationalism is one which has not received due attention. Whereas in the West nationalism charted a course which was in opposition to institutionalised religion – the French Revolution was for instance essentially an anti-religious revolution – in the Islamic world (The Greek Orthodox have also had a similar experience) religion has been in close contact and cooperation with nationalist
movements. As from the latter stages of the Nineteenth Century right to the present day Islamic leaders like Afghani,\(^6\) Abdu\(^7\) and Ayatollah Khomeini\(^8\) were as much part of the nationalist picture of their respective countries as they were of the religious groupings (Afghani, however, did preach pan-Islamic ideas). Even though it may be claimed that religion, to them, was always the ultimate goal, Islam has not had an anti-nationalist agenda nor has nationalism in the East has fostered an anti-Islamic thesis. This diversity of discourse in the East and the West between religion and nationalism has made it more difficult to bring modernity in its entirety in the Islamic world – even those that are secular. Turkey, for example, has had to deal with a very strong religious movement which has persistently defied government closures of its offices by reappearing under a different banner. Papers explaining this tension would be a valuable contribution to the discourse.

How does violence fare in Islam? This is most pertinent since the 11\(^{th}\) September and the claim by some\(^9\) that violence can be conducted if and when it is deemed necessary to advance the greater goals of Islam. There are, however, indisputable Verses in the Quran that directly forbid man from committing any violence against the innocent. There is here what I call the question of means and end argument: Is Islam for man or man for Islam? This most interesting question brings into focus and discussion an array of input from all other sub-disciplines like jurisprudence, epistemology and exegesis. Contributions explaining this debate would be most acceptable.

Gnosticism, otherwise known as mysticism, is usually left for the few who have the scarce ability to ascend to the lofty heights of spirit; almost cut-off and isolated, gnostics are not utilised as a means of understanding the Islamic text or offering serious new challenges to basic fundamentals of institutionalised religion and political philosophy. The essential definition of man and how his/her qualities can mutate or evolve can have a resounding impact on political philosophy of man. One case that may illustrate the point is Rumi (the great Persian mystic of 13th century).\(^{10}\) His recent popularity in the West as the best mystic poet ever should not close our eyes to the finer points of human nature and political philosophy embodied in his mystic projections. This is en
eye opener on how mysticism can make up for the short-comings of conventional political philosophy.

All in all, a comparative study of Islam and Political philosophy can help us understand how theory differs from practice and how the machiavellian traits of politics cast their shadow on the interpretation of the text. Contributions will be thought in the field of epistemology, political, sociological, historical and legal philosophy and mysticism. All contributors will be requested to give a comparative analysis of their subject matter. Sources utilised will include Karen Armstrong, Mohammad Arkoun, Edward Said, Abdolkarim Soroush, Elizabeth Meyer, Katrina Dalacoura, Chandra Mozaffar, Ali Shari’ati, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and others.

In the contemporary world, from Indonesia to Saudi Arabia, from Palestine to the Netherlands, the issue of Islam and its consequences has a dominant place in world news. The workshop is an attempt to elucidate some of the essential aspects of what is a complex religious, political and social phenomenon. Given the contemporary relevance of the topic, should there be sufficient coherence in the contributions, publication will be sought.

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Notes

2 Two proponents of this kind of interpretation, amongst others, are Sultan Hussain Tabanded, who was an Iranian Shi’a and Adu’l A’la Mawdudi, a Sunni from Pakistan.
6 Seyed Jamal-eddin, otherwise known as Afghani, was in fact an Iranian who traveled widely throughout the Islamic world and beyond and preached a pan-Islamic anti-colonialist movement.
Sheikh Mohammad Abdu, a student of Seyed Jamal, was an Egyptian who followed his mentor’s path and promoted religious ideas for the liberation of Islamic countries.

Seyed Ruhollah Khomeini, was a senior Iranian cleric, and the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution. He was a fundamentalist in that he believed man’s duties to God precede and prevail over the rights given to him by God.

Clearest example nowadays is the leader of Al-Qaide, Osama bin Laden.

Jala-eddin Mohammad Rumi, known in his native Iran as Molavi, lived in 13th century AD. Thought by some as the greatest mystic ever, he produced two books of poetry in Persian. His book has at times been dubbed as the Persian Quran.

British writer, who has written extensively on Islam and is praised by many as a bridge between the three Abrahamic Traditions.

Algerian thinker and former Sorbonne professor, Dr Arkoun is widely regarded as a leading Muslim intellectual of our world.

Former Columbia University professor who was regarded as one of the outstanding post-structuralists of our age. His Orientalism in particular received much acclaim.

Iranian intellectual dubbed as the Martin Luther of Islam. He has produced many volumes but perhaps most notably his book on The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Shari’a has made him an accomplished and renowned scholar.

Ann Mayer, is Associate Professor of Legal Studies at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Also see note 5 above.

Katrina Dalacoura teaches at the London School of Economics and has written on Islam, Liberalism and Human Rights.

Chandra Mozaffar is a leading Malaysian academic and human rights activist. He has written extensively including Muslims, Dialogue, Terror and Human Rights and the New World Order.

The intellectual father of Iranian revolution, whose teachings and writings resonated beyond the borders of Iran. His long and inspiring lectures, novel interpretations and exceptional writing skills produced many enemies for him amongst the clerical and intellectual ranks.

Seyed Hussein Nasr is a professor at George Washington University. He is regarded as a traditionalist in Islamic philosophy and differs from people like Soroush and Naim in their outlook.