Modernity, race and religion

Nasar Meer

Introduction

This chapter will consider the relationship between race and modernity, and examine how the historical status of Islam and Muslims can cast light on this. The discussion begins with what is sometimes characterised as the standard account of how modernity generated categories of race, before challenging this reading with an argument about the racialisation of Islam and Muslim minorities in Europe. In this first section the argument traces the rise of modernity interalia the emergence of race, following which this reading is historicised in section two by taking into consideration pre-modern articulations of race. In section three, the racio-religious character of modernity is drawn out to illustrate the continuity between pre-modern and modern racialisation of religion. The conclusion then returns us to the objective of the prevailing discussion, which is not to refute the standard account, but instead to invite readers to think more critically, and indeed historically, about the form and content of religion in processes of race making.

When is modernity, and how is it related to race?

‘Modernity’, the great Frankfurt School author Theodore Adorno once argued, ‘is a qualitative, not a chronological, category’ (1978: 218). That is to say, modernity is a process of experience as much as it is a period of time. In this chapter what is meant by modernity relies on both a temporal frame as well as an experiential one, and dates from the historical period from the late fifteenth century in Europe that was bolstered by the Renaissance and European Enlightenment. These grand historical terms fold together a series of both processes and temporal developments, summarised by Giddens (Giddens, 1998: 94) as, firstly, ‘a certain set of attitudes towards the world, the idea of the world as open to transformation, by human intervention’, secondly, ‘a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy’, and thirdly ‘a range of political institutions, including the nation-state and mass democracy’.

Modernity therefore needs to be understood as both experiences and events, which might be brought together and described through a ‘periodised’ account. For example, Berman (1982) distinguished between ‘early modernity’, roughly from the late fifteenth century when Columbus landed in the Americas and the Catholic Reconquista re-captured the Muslim Iberian Peninsula, up to the French Revolution. Then, ‘Classical modernity’
(1789–1900) and the long nineteenth century which saw the birth of industrial capitalism in Europe and the colonial adventure and imperial systems of wealth and labour extraction from the Global South. Lastly, ‘late modernity’ (1900 onward) which comes to name bulk of the twentieth century and probably beyond. The colonial feature of modernity, however, is something often overlooked yet is central to the story of race, and is one reason for the term ‘colonial modern’, which signals the desire for ‘a reconstructed understanding modernity inclusive of its colonial histories and their consequences’ (Bhambra, 2015: 13).

Perhaps the most conventional reading of race in this characterisation is to make it the explanandum and modernity the explanans. To frame it in these terms borrows from Hempel and Oppenheim (1948: 152) who wanted to use these terms to understand events ‘by virtue of the realization of certain specified antecedent conditions’. In this respect, the explanandum (‘what is the contemporary provenance of race?’) meets the response of the explanans (‘the activity of modernity’). Take, for example, Quijano (2000: 534) for whom the idea of race ‘does not have a known history before the colonization of America’, since ‘the racial axis has a colonial origin and character’ (Quijano, 2000: 533). Elsewhere Feagin (2014: 8) argues that ‘European colonialism and imperialism … reached much of the globe and created a global racial order, which has had severe consequences for the world’s peoples for centuries’ (my emphasis). Or the argument proposed by Bonilla-Silva (2015) that racial theory should have been ‘rooted in the experiences of the first peoples who experienced racialisation [by which is meant colonisation] … We would be in a better explanatory position today to understand not only race in the world system, but even developments in the United States and Europe, if we were to go back and … begin at the beginning’. For Mignolo (2010: 24) too, ‘the racial classificatory logic’ is anchored in a colonial ‘historical foundation [that] can be traced back to the end of the fifteenth century in Spain’, and that ‘Racism, as we sense it today, was the result of … conceptual inventions of imperial knowledge’ (Mignolo, 2009: 19).

What these readings share in common is not only that coloniality is the crucible of race, but also that the race concept is most substantively forged in modernity, or in Gilroy’s (2004: 56) terms: ‘modernity transformed the ways “race” was understood and acted upon’. One possible example of the difference strands being brought together, though not necessarily in a linear sequence, is Goldberg’s (2006: 331) study ‘mapping the racial contours of contemporary European self-conception, historically understood’. In this he traces ‘the European imaginary of the European, the Black, the Jew, and the Muslim’ (Goldberg, 2006: 331) to argue that while ‘the relational frame for linking as thought race in the European context has usually been ordered in dualistic terms … there is a third major artery’ (Goldberg, 2006: 362). This comprises ‘The Muslim’ (Goldberg, 2006: 344), which, in Bleich’s (2006: 17) terms, ‘has all the earmarks of classic racialization’, namely ‘the classification of such a group as inherently dangerous and inferior’ (Bleich, 2006: 17). As with the thrust of my argument, what these examples make manifest are the compositions contained in working references to racial and religious antipathy, but also that modern biological racism has some roots in pre-modern religious antipathy. There are a number of literatures which might develop this point. Paul Gilroy is an interesting example as there are several places in his repertoire where this might be taken up. Perhaps strangely, his majestic Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993) does not make this an explicit focus, concentrating specifically on the ways in which ‘the social and political subordination of blacks and other non-European peoples does not generally feature in debates about … modernity’. That book then is one – very compelling – corrective to the oversight. It is instead elsewhere in Between Camps (2004) where Gilroy’s fullest elaboration of the points raised above arguably come through. This includes his reading that: ‘Although it is
not acknowledged as often as it should be, the close connection between “race” and modernity can be viewed with a special clarity if we allow our understanding of modernity to travel, to move with the workings of the great imperial systems’ (2004: 58). So there is what we can call an elective affinity between empire, race and modernity. Incidentally, this trafficking of the race concept across modernity and colonialism was a tendency shared by Foucault (1978: 149), especially his reading of how the race concept came to take a distinctly ‘modern’ form somewhat later, ‘in the second half of the nineteenth century’ when race ‘took shape at this point (racism in its modern, “biologizing” statist form)’.

What came before the ‘new’?

One response to these characterisations of the relationship between modernity and race is not to deny that modernity has a particular formulation of race, but simply to suggest this is a formulation that is underwritten and made possible by pre-modern characteristics that are pulled through, and that without these the modernist conception of race cannot hold. As Bethencourt (2015: 3) has argued, ‘[n]otions of blood and descent already played a central role in medieval forms of collective identification, while the modern ethnic and racial divide was largely inspired by traditional religious antagonism’.

It would be intellectually fruitful in this respect to register how modernity therefore offers ‘one of many reorganisations and re-articulations of the meaning of race that have occurred throughout the centuries’ (Winant, 2001: 21). There are two parts to this recognition. One is to note that race bears pre-modern antecedents. The other is to grasp how these have retained a currency despite modernity. Beginning with the former issue, what might these antecedents resemble? Christian symbolism, for example, long portrayed ‘white’ as synonymous with purity, which in turn was contrasted with ‘black’ impurity, in a way that suggests it is insufficient to accept the prevailing view that while the precise content to race was at best ambiguous, it was certainly distinct to how it later became known. By the time the Atlantic slave trade was well under way, Christian theologians would seek religious justification for hierarchies between whiteness and blackness, that mapped onto these colonised populations. As Garner (2011: 13) summarises, this they did so by among other things pointing to the story of Canaan (Son of Ham) in the Book of Genesis (9:18–27), which told of a punishment to Canaan of servitude and blackness. There are multiple examples to sustain this view and both Hund (2006) and Isaac (2004) dwell on this at some length (though they disagree on the geographical provenance of race).

If one shares the view that modernist formulations of race are in part assembled from pre-modern components, ‘the neatness of the present periodization will have to be given up’, and as ‘a corollary, the case for making race a subject of inquiry across various disciplines would be greatly strengthened and made more urgent’ (Mills, 2011: 61). Perhaps the broader issue compels us to register that there is a longstanding methodological (and indeed philosophical) question as to whether ‘the possession of a concept can predate the possession of a corresponding word’ (Thomas, 2010: 1739). Without seeking to resolve this, if one is persuaded that language is both constitutive and reflective, we can see evidence of racialisation prior to the creation of racial categories through plantation slavery and Enlightenment informed colonial encounters from the sixteenth century.

Indeed, when Islam is first encountered in Europe, ‘the Prophet Mohammed (with his Jewish parents and Nestorian/heretical teacher)’ is embodied as a dark–skinned, satanic menace (Matar, 2009: 217). The race concept then has long been saturated with cultural portrayals of religious minorities too, further challenging the Atlantocentric view of the race
concept, in so far as European religious minorities too were endowed with characteristics that offered ‘reassurance that their difference could be easily identified by Christians’ (Thomas, 2010: 1747).

There is an analogous point that could be made about the ways other imperial configurations of ideas of insider and outsider required race to become a modern activity. The very idea of citizenship, for example, has contained, since it earliest formulations, a dialectical tension between notions of inclusion and exclusion, for the citizenship of certain types of people implies the non-citizenship of others. This is to say that citizenship is a relational idea that is identified in as much by what it is not as by that which it is. As Bethencourt (2015: 13) has argued:

The discussion of lineage and autochthony developed by the Athenians, who held that they had always occupied the same land and were of pure ancestry, was projected by the Greeks and Romans onto other peoples, shaping their attitudes. The idea of descent became crucial in two ways: as a link between blood and soil, which reinforced the perception of an identity based appearance, language, and custom in the creation of an essential definition of peoples (gentes); and as a guarantee of the reproduction among a people of characteristics shaped by their original environment.

Here, however, there is a further contention, that in addition to the argument that who is in and who is not racialised needs to factor in a prior notion of race that is re-assembled in modernity, it is the very idea of modernity is itself that is reliant not only colonialism but within that a racialisation of religion.

A christian modernity?

‘Islam has forever vanished from the stage of history at large, and has retreated into Oriental pose and repose’. So declared the ‘great sorcerer’ (Voegelin, 1972) better known to us as Georg W. F. Hegel, in his Philosophy of History (written between 1830 and 1831). Since all ideas are forged in social and political contexts, it is useful to understand that this philosopher’s claim was made against the presence (and anticipated decline) of the Ottoman Empire, perhaps Europe’s perennial ‘other’ which at one time spanned from Southeast Europe, Western Asia, the Caucasus, and from the North to the Horn of Africa. There are several ways in which Hegel’s claim is helpful to our discussion of race and modernity.

The first thing to register is how for Hegel, as for many European observers, Islam was often synonymous with the Ottoman Empire. We find this conflation throughout the European Enlightenment, not least in the works of in the works of other seminal German thinkers including Leibniz, Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schlegel and of course Marx (Almond, 2011). In this respect at least, our foremost philosopher of ‘spirit’ very much understood Islam in geopolitical rather than theological terms. The second observation is that Hegel’s prediction of decline was not an act of great clairvoyance. After six centuries of Ottoman ascendancy, internal nationalist movements, as well as British and Russian imperial ambitions, were taking their toll.¹ The Ottoman Empire nonetheless continued to head an Islamic Caliphate which reached well inside the European landmass of the day, and even further within the contemporary boundaries of the European Union. It is striking, therefore, that in the writings of Hegel, as noted by Turner (2013: 132), it was Europe alone that remained ‘the telos of history’, where civilisation ‘is finally realised’.

372
As we learn below, to what extent this confidence flowed from a certain idea of modernity, and to what extent it reflected a reading of Islam is difficult to separate. But it is striking that the idea of Islam in the West ‘occupied the peculiar place of historical opposition to both European Christianity and modernity’ (Almond, 2008: 153). If we fast forward to the end of the twentieth century we easily find continuities in the way these two tendencies are run together. Perhaps the most well-known is Samuel Huntington’s (1996) thesis on a clash of civilisations. This is a much less opaque discussion about world history and consciousness, for it succinctly posits that ‘the West was West long before it was Modern’ (ibid. 69), specifically in so far as ‘Western Christianity … is historically the single most important characteristic of Western civilisation’ (ibid. 70). Taken together, these sets of observations provide a useful illustration because they drive home the importance with which our concepts of Islam and Modernity have very much relied upon underlying frames of geopolitical decline and European advance, and in which Christianity is a prevailing reference point.\footnote{This rather simple observation is worth holding on to, for the relationship between Islam and modernity has generated a rich but complex literature. While competing accounts sometimes appear incommensurable, there is at least some convergence on the view that Islam and modernity reflect an unsettled encounter. For some this is self-evident because the relationship rests on contested foundational questions, not least: whose modernity and which Islam? For others it is a less a theoretical and more a historical issue, in so far as there has been a process underway in which Islam has proved slow in ‘catching up’.

It is striking that much of the framing scholarship on the relationship between Islam and modernity arrives quite late in prevailing accounts of modernity itself, and specifically commences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries onwards with the institutionalisation of the academic study of Islam in Europe’s universities. In addition to the Germanic scholarship listed above, one might think of the parameters developed in works such as Ernest Renan’s (1862) De la part des peuples semitiques dans l’histoire de la civilisation and Max Weber’s (1920) Gesammelte Aufsatze sur Religionssozologie\textemdash which continue to cast an illustrative (though often indirect) shadow over subsequent inquiry. One might further say that a prevailing theme of this this work is that the formative periods of Islam locate it ‘in a mould from which it cannot escape’ (Zubaida, 1995: 153). If this is true of the analysis of Islam’s relationship to modernity however, it is also true of the relationship of this work to itself. Hence it is no accident that the argument of Bernard Lewis (1988), penned from a North American context, would be familiar to Renan writing over a century before:

\begin{quote}
The Distinction between Church and State, so deeply rooted in Christianity, did not exist in Islam, and in classical Arabic and other languages drawing their intellectual and political vocabulary from classical Arabic, there are no pairs of words reflecting the distinction between spiritual and temporal, the lay and the ecclesiastic, the religious and the secular.
\end{quote}

\textit{(quoted in Filali-Ansar, 1999: 126)}

So the drivers of modernity therefore are more constrained in Islamic traditions, it is claimed, than in Christian ones. Perhaps the fullest scholarly elaboration of this view is Ernest Gellner’s (1983) work contrasting the political economy (as well as morals and social organisation) of Western societies with – in the title of his book – \textit{Muslim Society} (in the singular).\footnote{In a number of respects Gellner relied on the framing of Renan and Weber to propose that when it comes to discerning what kinds of authority are sovereign, there is a common (secularism resistant) pattern of social organisation across different Muslim}
societies. This he said was borne of Islam’s over-reliance on scripture, in contrast to Christianity’s dualism (between church and state). This kind of intellectual inheritance displays some important tendencies. The first sees the relationship between Islam and Modernity as an unlikely one. Or, more precisely, that the differentiation of state and religious power that facilitated European Modernity could not easily be replicated in Islamic polities where a certain doctrinal rigidity limits space for critical innovation. ‘Islam was never really a religion of salvation’ wrote Max Weber (1965: 28), but much more ‘a warrior religion’ to be contrasted to the inner-worldly rationality of Calvinism and Protestantism more broadly. Some of this is a reflection of first principles, in Weber’s (1965: 75) account, because the basis of membership ‘contented itself with confessions of loyalty to god and to the prophet, together with a few practical and ritual primary commandments’.

Weber is not here selected at random. While it is important not to overstate any one author’s contribution, according to Salvatore, 1999: 11), ‘Weberian theory … provides a basic repertoire for the formation of the toolkit for the categories we still use for making sense of the relationship between Islam and Modernity’. What to my mind is especially striking is how little in what Weber offers do we find sociological or political or economic analyses. Perhaps most obviously he overlooks the early forces of mercantile capitalism in Muslim societies. For as Turner, 2013: 31) describes, there is indeed evidence for this, especially in how early modern Muslim societies were ‘primarily urban, commercial and literate’. Here continues:

Mecca was strategically placed on the trade routes between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean; Muhammed’s own tribe, the Quraysh, had achieved a dominant political position based on their commercial strength in the region. [...] The Qu’ran itself is steeped in a commercial terminology. There has been continuous conflict in Islam between the dominant urban piety and the values of the desert, but this conflict was also economic. [...] Islam was thus as much a triumph of town over desert as Arab over Persian and Christian.

If one tendency has been to view the relationship between Islam and Modernity as an unlikely one, another – perhaps already apparent – is to locate Islam on the same historical trajectory forged both implicitly and explicitly by Christianity. Starting in pre-history, yet carrying its mark through Antiquity via the Middle Ages, to the Wars of Religion and Reformation, what Jaspers (1953) called the ‘Axial Age’ (from the initial establishments of settled communities and spread of literacy) is the implicit course for transformations in European social and political life, and the latter processes are precisely what are deemed lacking in Islam’s encounter with modernity. While Islam is not excluded from the story of the socio-cultural formations that the axial age seeks to capture, it is not clear if Islam is an add-on or is capable of charting its own course.4 The prevailing judgement is that while the ‘the European pattern … fosters eventual secularization, accompanying the processes of modernisation and modernity, the Muslim case is just the opposite: not only resistant to secularization, but pursuing its modernity through religion’ (Zubaida, 1995: 156). Both of these tendencies encourage what might be called the deficit model in conceptualising the relationship between Islam and modernity, perhaps most affectively put in Bernard Lewis’s (2002) book – focusing exclusively on the Middle East as a short hand for the entire Muslim story – What Went Wrong?

In this respect these authors promulgate a view that Muslim innovation falls outside of the framing of modernity is that a particular conception of what is modern is the standard.
As John Gray (2000) identified in his seminal public lecture on ‘Three Mistakes about Modernity’, this model of modernity assumes convergence and seeks out symmetry. As he describes, since the earliest articulations in European social and political theory, there have been an assumption of:

A universal convergence in all modern societies on a particular worldview essentially embodying a universal civilisation grounded on secular rationalist values and norms. The Positivists believed that as societies came to be more dependent on society and technology they would become more alike in giving up their religious and traditional differences.

A rather definite illustration of this is found in Gellner (1983: 4) where he understands that Islam ‘was the partial victim, not the progenitor, of the modern world’. Such a statement overlooks the possibilities of ‘many modernities’ and leaves even less space to grasp the ‘ways in which science and technology can be absorbed into different cultures’, maintains Gray (2000):

As societies become more modern and as they, therefore, become more similar in some respects, so at the very same time they are likely to and have become more different in other respects. (ibid.)

Perhaps the main reason for the oversight is that Islam’s relationship to modernity has come to serve as a methodological tool, in being contrasted with notions of Western conceptions of human progress. The narrative arc of Western modernity has come to predict that any given society’s norms and values would move away from the types of traditional rationality exemplified in Muslim polities. As Turner (2013: 126) puts it, ‘the Oriental divide was an important precondition for the decisive definition of politics as a division between friend and foe in European reactionary modernism’.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has argued that the relationship between race and modernity is best understood by grasping the racialisation of religion before, during and since modernity. What this means is that the category of race was not only co-constituted with religion, but pre-constituted with religion. The resurrection of this genealogically therefore profoundly implicates the formation of race in the racialisation of religious subjects. To this end the discussion began with what is sometimes characterised as the standard account of how modernity generated categories of race, which the chapter challenged by examining the historical status of Islam and Muslims in European racial thought. In the opening sections the argument was presented that in actual fact the rise of modernity curates a particular category of race that relies itself on the prior racialisation of religious subjects. This argument is then drawn out at length through a historicised reading which does not seek to refute the standard account, but instead to invite readers to think more critically, and indeed historically, about the form and content of religion in processes of race making. The final substantive section makes this argument with the example of Islam in Europe. If nothing else, it shows us the continuity between pre-modern and modern racialisation of religion. The implications of this argument are not hermetically sealed to a discussion of race, but as the chapter shows, is in fact linked to the constitution of modernity too.
Notes

1 During the period Hegel was writing plans were underway for an ultimately unsuccessful Ottoman Tanzimât (or reorganisation) (Gelvin, 2008). Marshall-Hodgson (1974: 134) begins his story of decline sooner and broadens it out from that of the Ottoman Empire. ‘In the general history of pre-Modern civilisations, a single century is a very brief period. In the fifty some generations of Muslim history, three or four hardly suffice to indicate any long term trend. Yet the depression of Islamicate social and cultural life in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries does stand out it retrospect. [...] With the nineteenth century came utter collapse of the strong Muslim posture in the world: that nothing was done in the eighteenth century to forestall this smacks of inexplicable weakness or folly’.

2 The complicating factor is that this also has a racial logic to it (Meer, 2013). The historical literature on whiteness provides an understanding of the ways in which ‘the history of whiteness is one of transitions and changes’ (Bonnett, 2008: 18), as well as the ways in which this history also serves as ‘a geography’ of the West (ibid.). While ‘white’ and ‘Western’ are often conflated in contemporary discussion, according to Bonnet the idea that the ‘West’ has a coherent unity, something resembling an ‘ethno-cultural repertoire’ of whiteness, is a relatively novel conception that owes much (though not necessarily in a straightforward manner) to late nineteenth-century writers who anxiously debated the ‘decline’ of white dominance (ibid. 23). Amongst others, Bonnett (2008) identifies Benjamin Kidd’s Social Evolution (1894) and Principles of Western Civilisation (1902), each of which prefigure the current theories of Eutahia and European decline discussed elsewhere (see Meer, 2014).

3 A title that would perhaps face Mohammed Arkoun’s (1989) question: ‘Who would dare to describe all European societies under the heading ‘Christianity and its Civilisation’ or ‘The Civilisation of Classical Christianity’.

4 At an elementary level, measuring Islam by a Christian tape was very much found in the ‘analogue’ tendency to assume that ‘Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity, hence the “Mohammedanism”’ (Said, 1978: 60).

References