Islamic Responses to Modernity:
Ayman al-Zawahiri and Farid Esack

Helena Kaler

Abstract

By examining the ideas of modernity and their manifestations in the ideas of Ayman al-Zawahiri and Farid Esack, this essay argues that both thinkers are deeply affected by the West's Enlightenment ideas and differ mostly in their applications. The first part examines the idea of modernity itself, tracing its forms in the thought of Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Schmitt, Adorno, and Horkheimer, among others. The second part traces the relationship of al-Zawahiri and Esack to the ideas of modernity, defined here as subjectivity, political agency, social fragmentation, and the rise of the nation-state. In contrast to the assertion made by some that Islamist thinkers were only affected by technological, rather than ideological, modernity, it seems that both al-Zawahiri and Esack are, ideologically, children of their time.

Introduction

In his influential work *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, political scientist Marshall Berman characterizes modernity in the following way:

> To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern experiences and environments cut across all boundaries … in this sense, modernity can be said

Helena Kaler is a Ph.D. student in the Department of History at George Washington University, Washington, DC, where she works on nationalism, religion, and identity politics in the modern Middle East under the direction of Dina Rizk Khoury. Her dissertation focuses on the culture of Shi`ah nationalism in Iraq and Lebanon during the Mandate era and will examine the interaction between elite and popular nationalisms through the intersection of postcolonial and network theories.

to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.[1]

Indeed, although the full consequences of modernity were (and are) difficult enough to comprehend and process in western societies, their effect has been especially devastating in non-western ones, where the modern clashed with the traditional in ways that often produced cataclysmic consequences. In Islamic societies, especially those of the Middle East, the changes of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were particularly disquieting, as the processes of urbanization, industrialization, and legislative reforms collided with Islamic norms in the colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician who founded Islamic Jihad and is widely believed to be Osama bin Laden's second-in-command in al-Qaeda, is the product of the dislocations of modernity in the Egyptian context. Thus, his turn to Islamic militancy can easily be viewed as the desire to return to a premodern past. However, I will argue in this essay that his to modernity, as presented in his writings, are profoundly modern in terms of their attitudes to subjectivity, fragmentation, and political legitimacy.

In an interesting contrast, the writings of Farid Esack, a South African Muslim prominent in the anti-Apartheid movement, show different responses to modernity, but are, nevertheless, thoroughly modern. In fact, although al-Zawahiri is an Islamist (namely, a member of a formal or informal Islamic revivalist movement, characterized by the attempt to implement Islamic values in all spheres of life) and Esack is a reformist Muslim, the two exhibit a similar awareness of modernity and its attendant problems. Yet they differ in their fundamental responses to the modern, their framing of the problems associated with modernity, and their proposed solutions.

In his work, *Defenders of God*, Bruce Lawrence distinguishes between modernity and modernism, arguing that while religious fundamentalists around the world have embraced the technological and bureaucratic products of the modern age, they vehemently oppose the "ideological variables" of modernity and "posit a constant tension…between modernization and modernism."[2] In this paper, I would like to suggest that this is not the case and that, in fact, contemporary Islamic fundamentalists such as al-Zawahiri implicitly accept certain cultural components of modernity – termed "modernism" by Lawrence – especially as they pertain to ideas of political power and organization.[3] Further, Lawrence notes that the origins of the fundamentalist project "are inseparable from the specter of its declared enemy: the Enlightenment," with which it is in a constant unacknowledged dialogue

and tension.[4] This tension between the ideas of modernity and the goals of fundamentalist Islam can be seen clearly in the writing of al-Zawahiri and seem to constitute one of its chief distinguishing characteristics. Thus, while the political goals of Esack and al-Zawahiri diverge widely, the terms in which they couch their ideologies and the ideas that underlie them belong to the intellectual framework of the modern.

I

Modernity

Two of the earliest articulators of the modern condition's meaning and implications were Karl Marx (1818-83) and Friedrich Engels (1820-95), whose writings "celebrated the destruction of what they deemed to be the prejudices and superstitions of the premodern era," while recognizing the disorienting instability of life created by these processes. Their tract, *The Communist Manifesto*, clearly articulates these paradoxical feelings:

> Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.[5]

In this and other works, Marx combines a sobering realization of the contemporary terrible state of working-class conditions with the excitement of creating new kind of human history based not on "ancient prejudices and opinions," but rather on a scientific understanding of human progress and a realization of the human potential for real egalitarianism and social justice. For Marx, "because humans owe their existence to themselves alone, through their labor, they are, or rather should be, masters of themselves and their conditions – a position of subjectivity."[6]

A different conception of subjectivity was put forth by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who writes in his 1887 work *The Genealogy of Morals*, that "the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom … in short, the man who has his own independent, protracted will and the right to make promises.'"[7] For Nietzsche, the individual and his or her "will to power" expressed the high-

est stage of human evolution: "All events in the organic world are a subdu-
ing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a
fresh interpretation, an adaptation, through which any previous 'meaning'
and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated."[8] Thus, like
Marx, Nietzsche expresses the subjectivity of (some) humans and their
capacity to take charge of their lives. However, unlike Marx, he rejects the
Enlightenment idea that science and reason could be the basis for modernity
and progress, arguing that only a Dionysian surrender to art and ecstatic
experience could lead to full liberation.[9]

Less optimistic views than those of Marx and Nietzsche on the human
potential for subjectivity were articulated by other twentieth-century
thinkers, including sociologist Max Weber (1881-1961) and political philo-
sopher Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). In his 1904 book *The Protestant Ethic and
the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber characterizes "the tremendous cosmos of the
modern economic order" as an "iron cage," in which "material goods have
gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men
as at no previous period in history." This tightly bureaucratized order "deter-
mine[s] the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism … with
irresistible force" and produces "specialists without spirit, sensualists with-
out heart."[10] For Weber, the new religion of capitalistic materialism was inca-
pable of producing subjectivity, since modern humans have no choice but to
be ruled by the bureaucratic order within which humanity exists. Weber's
vision is that of "a rootless world without any meaning," one that holds that
modernity "is an endless search for meaning by its very nature."[11]

In his 1932 essay *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt concurs with
Weber's characterization of modernity and extends that definition to the
political arena. Most importantly, Schmitt denies the possibility of an indi-
vidual having any type of political subjectivity, for "in one way or another
[the definition of] 'political' is generally juxtaposed to 'state' or at least is
brought into relation with it …"; further, in a modern state, "everything is at
least potentially political, and in referring to the state it is no longer possible
to assert for it a specifically political nature."[12] For him, political power,
especially the regulation of violence, resides in the institutions of the mod-
ern state described by Weber, the invisible centralized power of which
envelops all of human existence and impedes all potential for subjectivity. In
fact, "in the wake of the rise of fascism, the Holocaust, Stalinism, and other
episodes of twentieth-century history, we can see that totalitarian possibili-
ties are contained within the institutional parameters of modernity, rather
than being foreclosed by them."[13]

A similar sense of suffocation and entrapment is expressed by philosophers Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903-69) in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which contains a scathing critique of the dual nature of modernity – simultaneously characterized by freedom and stultification. Although "the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty … the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant."[14] The authors go on to question how it can be that human beings have achieved so much in technology, medicine, science, and other fields, and yet social injustice, war, and genocide, as well as a deadening consumer culture, continue to exist.

In answer, they propose a hypothesis: "Reason has become irrational."[15] Horkheimer and Adorno contend that the rationality of the Enlightenment has become a myth in its own right, exactly like the myths it purports to supplant. Thus, "myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."[16] According to them, modern capitalist society is engaged in a pattern of domination: the domination of nature by human beings, of nature within human beings, and of some human beings by others.[17] This system of domination is driven by fear of the human and the non-human unknown – the "Other": "Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown. That determines the course of demythologization. ... Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical."[18] In this new "fearless" world, everything, including culture, has become fetishized as a commodity. Hence:

> … culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system.[19]

Instead of providing an avenue for independent thought (and, consequently, dissent from the dominant system), culture now perpetuates the system by providing it with a language of domination and propaganda tools for disseminating that language. Consequently, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the Enlightenment is inherently totalitarian because it loses its own reflexiveness as it perpetuates the myth of its own complete rationality.[20]

In addition to subjectivity, another important characteristic of the modern is its fragmented nature and instability. In his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, geographer David Harvey writes that "most 'modern' writers have recognized that the only secure thing about modernity is its insecurity, its penchant even, for 'totalizing chaos.'" This instability reveals itself in modernity's problematic relationship with the past, since "the transitoriness of things makes it difficult to preserve any sense of historical continuity."[21]

Like Marx and Nietzsche writing a century earlier, Harvey believes that the present can be created only by destroying the past and then creating a present that utilizes elements of the past to construct a better reality in the contemporary world. Thus, "the image of 'creative destruction' is very important to understanding modernity precisely because it derived from the particular dilemmas that faced the implementation of the modernist project."[22] This destruction of a holistic universe in the modern era shatters the conception of human beings and societies as total entities, and instead inaugurates an era "characterized by a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself."[23] According to Harvey, living through such a time of insecurity and fragmentation induces a "desire for stable values" and "leads to a heightened emphasis upon the authority of basic institutions – the family, religion, the state."[24]

However, another response is possible to the dissonance of the modern. In his *Modernity at Large*, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai argues that fragmentation can be liberating, for since people's awareness of the potential social, economic, and political identities is so much larger in the modern era than ever before, they can construct their various selves with a full awareness of their roles in society and with an eye to their particular needs. In his view, "the complexity of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture, and politics."

He proposes a framework for analyzing these disjunctures that characterizes them as *-scapes*, that is, as "perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors." The *-scapes* included by Appadurai in his model are *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*. It is at the intersection point of these five shifting landscapes that a person or a society can locate itself "authentically" and find a way to evolve.[25]

Finally, in his seminal essay *The Consequences of Modernity*, sociologist Anthony Giddens posits that modernity is inherently multifaceted and primarily characterized by the separation of time and space (time-space distanciation), the development of disembedding mechanisms, and the reflexive appropriation of knowledge.[26] According to him, humanity is living through a period of radicalized "high modernity," in which the features of modernity listed above are intensified and their effects are felt more strongly all over the world. The concept of disembedding and its polar opposite, reembedding, are particularly relevant to modernity as applied to Islamic societies in the twentieth century. By disembedding, Giddens means "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space."[27] Conversely, reembedding is "the reappropriation

or recasting of disembedded social relations so as to pin them down (however partially or transitorily) to local conditions of time and place."[28]

In sum, the main features of modernity, as defined by some prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers, include: (1) subjectivity and political/social agency, (2) fragmentation and disembeddedness of social institutions, and (3) the vesting of power and political legitimacy in the nation-state. The following section explores these themes as they appear in the works of al Zawahiri and Esack.

<center>II</center>

In her *Enemy in the Mirror*, Roxanne Euben discusses how "the post-Enlightenment, rationalist methods scholars used to study politics actually produce an image of Islamic fundamentalism, while concealing such 'mechanisms of production' within claims of rationalist objectivity."[29] She goes on to note, however, that examining an Islamist perspective on political theory "illuminates the extent to which modern ideas…are experienced and redefined in other cultures," allowing for a greater understanding of the ways in which cultural translation can function to create an enhanced understanding of what constitutes the "modern."[30]

I would like to suggest here that the case of Esack and al-Zawahiri illustrates the extent to which the terminology and assumptions of the modern constitute the parameters of political discourse in the Muslim world. Against Lawrence's assertion of the Islamic fundamentalists' essential rejection of ideological modernity, the argument here suggests that this is not the case. Thus, the difference in their attitude to the relationship between Islam and modernity is, in fact, their different *responses* to the above-mentioned aspects of the modern rather than constituting an argument about the value of the ideas that form the core of modernity.

Subjectivity and Political/Social Agency

Subjectivity can be defined as "the property characterizing the autonomous, self-willing, self-conscious, and self-defining agent."[31] Clearly, reflexivity and individual agency – concepts developed in the Enlightenment context of the West – are privileged in this definition and are, in fact, central to it. Yet in the Islamic context, the subjectivity of the individual was in direct competition with the principle of God's direct sovereignty over the world.

To get around this problem, some thinkers, most notably the ideologues of the Iranian revolution (viz., Ayatollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Taleghani, and

Ali Shariati) worked through "mediated subjectivity," that is, "human subjec-
tivity projected onto the attributes of monotheistic deity – attributes such as
omnipotence, omniscience, and volition – and then partially reappropriated
by humans. In this scheme, human subjectivity is contingent on God's sub-
jectivity."[32] This view is implicit in al-Zawahiri's *Knights under the Prophet's
Banner*, for: "God willed that those events [persecution of the Muslim
Brotherhood in the 1960s under Nasser's regime] were the spark that ignited
the jihad movement in Egypt against the government," while simultaneously
advocating human being's [or man's (*sic*)]" ability to influence the course of
his existence. In this worldview, God is the ultimate authority and jihadists
are "the intermediaries between the Creator and mankind (*sic*)."[33]

The subjectivity advocated by al-Zawahiri is an active, not a contempla-
tive, one; a subjectivity of awareness followed by action, in which anyone
who does not act decisively to defend Islam is not fulfilling his duty to God.
Throughout *Knights*, there is an almost overwhelming emphasis on the
importance of Muslims developing and acting upon a jihadist awareness –
thus, his assertion that "with the emergence of this new batch of Islamists …
a new awareness is increasingly developing among the sons of Islam, who
are eager to uphold it; namely, there is no solution without jihad."[34] For sim-
ilar reasons, he celebrates the mujahidin experience in Afghanistan as instru-
mental in raising awareness of jihad's value in battling the external enemy
and in forging a loyalty that transcended the Afghan war of the 1980s. He
praises the Arab Afghans as a people who have returned to serve God:

> … they possess a quality that their enemies cannot hope to acquire. They
> are the people who most eloquently bear witness to their God's power, Who
> has given them strength drawn from His own strength, until they have
> turned from a scattered few who possess little and know little, into a power
> that is feared and that threatens the stability of the new world order.[35]

This passage clearly shows al-Zawahiri's use of mediated subjectivity.
Whereas before they were given God's strength the Arab Afghans were weak
and ignorant, now they have become a power with which to be reckoned.

Another locus of al-Zawahiri's subjectivity is his stress on the impor-
tance of military strategy and practical military resistance against Islam's
domestic and external enemies. He critiques the failed uprising in Asyut
(Egypt) after Sadat's 1981 assassination, writing that it "was doomed to fail.
It was an 'emotional' uprising that was poorly planned … [it] was based on
an unrealistic plan to seize Asyut and then advance northward toward Cairo,
disregarding any figures about the enemy's strength."[36]

In contrast, he presents the ideas of Isam al-Qamari, a tank commander in the Egyptian army who was part of al-Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad cell in 1981.[37] He writes admiringly of al-Qamari's hardheaded, practical plans for achieving the organization's goals, which included weapons training, active recruitment techniques, and other military tactics. Further, he notes that al-Qamari criticized the Islamists from a purely practical – not spiritual – standpoint: their members "are not trained and lack combat experience," are too "preoccupied by the police," and had failed "to examine the military situation from an analytical and practical perspective based on data."[38]

Al-Zawahiri here presents the reader with a contrast between the "emotional," ill-conceived, and failed 1981 Asyut uprising and al-Qamari's rational plans for an Islamist military operation. Clearly, he locates subjectivity as a quality of rationality rather than of emotion – a very modern conception, as described by Weber, Horkheimer, and Adorno.

In his *On Being a Muslim*, Esack also advocates an individual subjectivity characterized by reflexivity and followed up by action. However, his focus is not a jihad against an infidel Egyptian government or an Israeli-American conspiracy, but rather a battle against one's animal instincts as well as against injustice as defined in universal terms. Esack characterizes radical Islam as a path "committed to social justice, to individual liberty and the quest for the Tanscendent who is beyond all institutional religious and dogmatic constructions; an Islam that challenges us to examine our faith in personally and socially relevant terms."[39]

Thus, for Esack just as for al-Zawahri, there is no difference between personal religion and social activism – the two are both facets of the belief in a transcendent, unified God. However, Esack is an advocate of changing oneself to be a better person in conformance with the spirit, rather than the letter, of Islamic law. In this vein, he advocates a constant reflexivity and self-renewal, writing that "the very idea of self-renewal, *islah*, implies the freedom to choose to renew one's life."[40] Further, and equally significant,

> … is the idea that the socio-economic system wherein we find ourselves – irredeemably capitalist, racist and patriarchal – does what it does but I am responsible for my reaction; I can decide to be a victim of this system or a part of a comprehensive struggle for freedom and justice; if the economic system causes a recession then I do have a choice: to organize or starve.[41]

In this worldview, change begins in a person's internal life, who then becomes empowered and works to improve society. Although both men advocate the cultivation of reflexive subjectivity and personal empowerment, Esack's motivation is to show that each person has choices in life even when

he or she thinks there are none – he notes that "the great tragedy of our lives is often our inability to see that we can actually remould them."[42] In contrast, for al-Zawahiri, subjectivity has only one purpose and one possible choice: waging a battle for Islam and the establishment of an Islamic state.

Esack also emphasizes the practical manifestations of subjectivity over the spiritual. Although he is a strong advocate of spiritual self-renewal, he clearly believes that a person's actions and choices ultimately determine his or her course in life: "Our choices are indicators of who we really are, of our values and unfulfilled aspirations."[43] Esack is particularly critical of "Readers Digest Islam," which he defines as "a kind of Islam that sits comfortably with everyone who does not want to disturb the peace – even if the peace hides the demons of racism, sexism and economic exploitation."[44]

In a stinging censure of quietist piety, Esack equates a purely private expression of religion with perpetuating an unjust system. For him, "however valuable personal virtue may be, it is often an extension of [the] entire system of exploitation and evil. Personal morality or faith within the framework of those systems or without challenging them and their advocates is really of little consequence."[45] Like al-Zawahiri, who is a product of his Egyptian context, Esack is clearly and quite consciously influenced by his South African environment and his work as an anti-Apartheid activist.

Thus, Esack's Islam, like al-Zawahiri's, is not a safe cocoon that insulates one from the vagaries of life. Quite the opposite: It is a tool for battling injustice and evil in the world and a goad for change. While neither man would probably recognize the other as having the same opinion on anything, the difference between them is not one of attitudes to subjectivity, for both are firm advocates of cultivating it; rather, it is one of the end goals they wish to achieve once the Muslims' awareness has been raised. Esack universalizes Islam's ethics until they cannot be confined to any particular religion and wants to use them to fight injustice and inequality wherever they may be found, while al-Zawahiri is firmly rooted in the specifics of Islamic law and a desire to reestablish the caliphate.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation of identity and discourse is endemic to modernity. In a specifically Islamic context, as Eickleman notes, what is distinctive about the modern era

> … is that discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involve people on
> a mass scale. They also necessarily involve an awareness of other Muslim
> and non-Muslim traditions. Mass education and mass communication in

the modern world facilitate an awareness of the new and unconventional. In changing the style and scale of possible discourse, these tools reconfigure the nature of religious thought and action, create new forms of public space, and encourage debate over meaning.[46]

The term *possible* is particularly important to the implications of the above passage, since widening the boundaries of the imaginary is an important part of the modern condition, in which "more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before."[47] However, while the fragmentation of social identity and of one's conception of what is possible in life is usually perceived as liberating in the West, it often has the opposite effect in Islamic societies, where greater value is given to the concepts of the cohesion and unity of both self and society.

One of the reasons for a negative attitude to fragmentation is the Islamic concept of *tawhid*, the idea that everything is united in being an aspect of the Divine, as a social and political ideal. Hence, in a *tawhidi* society, there would be no separate political, cultural, or economic spheres of life; instead, all of them would be part of a whole organism and united through their adherence to the Shari`ah. However, while Esack embraces fragmentation as central to the process of understanding and living with the "Other" and simultaneously affirms his belief in the unity of all through God, al-Zawahiri rejects fragmentation as divisive and calls for unity in the ummah (the world community of Muslims) in order to better wage battle against the infidel, both western and non-western.

Al-Zawahiri's opposition to the fragmentation characteristic of modern life comes through clearly in his *Knights*. As the foundation of his thought, he affirms God's integrity and authority, writing of Sayyid Qutb that his "call for loyalty to God's oneness and to acknowledge God's sole authority and sovereignty was the spark that ignited the Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam at home and abroad."[48] As the call for loyalty in the above passage indicates, al-Zawahiri feels that the idea of God's unity needs to be defended, perhaps from the onslaught of modernity.

Other passages extol the virtue of political unity among Muslims in the Middle East. In an interesting analysis, al-Zawahiri contends that the United States is assisting the Russian Federation in its war against Chechnya to prevent the formation of a "*mujahid* Islamic belt to the South of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan … the belt will be linked to the south with Iran and Turkey that are sympathetic to the Muslims of Central Asia." In this sense, unity is not just a spiritual concept for al-Zawahiri, but rather a political one as well that can be exploited for military gain. Further, he

explains that "the liberation of the Muslim Caucasus will lead to the frag-
mentation of the Russian Federation" that "will topple a basic ally of the
United States in its battle against the Islamic jihadist reawakening."[49]

In a similarly politically astute passage, he avers that the creation of Israel
was vital to western interests because it "separates Egypt and Syria, the two
major regions that for several years served as a wall of steadfastness against
the Crusades."[50] For al-Zawahiri, then, the spiritual concept of *tawhid* is
directly linked with its political counterpart, thus providing a useful rationale
for continuing jihad against both western and domestic governments.

Esack also recognizes the fragmented nature of identity in the modern
context, acknowledging that "we all comprise multiple identities, depending
on where we come from, what we believe in, where we are and whom we are
interacting with." Although identity may seem fixed, he insists that "we and
the way in which we view ourselves are really ever changing."[51] For him,
unity is an illusory concept that hides other desires, such as a yearning for
power or a desire for control over the self or others. While he admits that "few
aspirations seem to be as sacred to Muslims as the quest for unity," he con-
tends that such a goal, as it is now conceptualized (both by thinkers like al-
Zawahiri and more mainstream Islamic intellectuals) is unachievable.[52]

Instead, he argues that real unity is based on pluralism, in both a reli-
gious and political sense – a pluralism "based upon a refusal to engage in the
blanket rubbishing of those with whom we disagree"[53] and a true engage-
ment with the spiritual "Other," whether Christian, Jewish, or something
else altogether.[54] In fact, in a controversial move for a self-labeled Islamic
intellectual, he acknowledges in his *On Being a Muslim* the spiritual and
intellectual influence of Brother Norman Wray, a Catholic monk stationed
in Karachi. For Esack, just as for the prominent Iranian thinker Abdolkarim
Soroush, "a proper understanding of Islam enjoins dialogue, a willingness to
understand the opinions of others, adaptation and civility."[55]

Although Esack is skeptical of the role that Islamic traditions have been
made to play by contemporary Islamists (e.g., as substitutions for legal
reform or as buttresses for racist and sexist social systems), he does not dis-
count their power and usefulness in society. He sees the importance of
Islamic rituals in their ability to "bind [Muslims] to historical traditions and
to the community," connecting people across the globe who live vastly dif-
ferent lives. In this, he echoes Benedict Andersen, who saw a similar uniting
role for print capitalism in European and colonial societies in their national-
ist period.[56] Further, Esack considers prayer essential, since it "is truly an
institution of *tauhid*, the oneness of Allah, reflecting it and directed towards
it."[57] Accordingly, he does not so much seek to alter Islamic traditions as to

reintegrate them in a different way into the lives of Muslims as, for example, rituals that connect Muslim individuals to the larger community of Muslims (ummah) as well as a source of inspiration for social action, rather than as a literal source of emulation. In a different way than al-Zawahiri, then, he seeks to create unity among Muslims, a unity based on pluralism and inclusion, rather than on the Manichean worldview articulated by al-Zawahiri.

Power and Legitimacy

Questions of power and legitimacy occupy a central place in the lexicon of problems and uncertainties that abound in the modern Middle East. In that context, issues of secularism and the role that religion should play in the public sphere have been particularly problematic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A related issue concerns the source of legitimacy of Middle Eastern governments: Are they to draw their legitimacy from direct reference to Islamic tradition or base it upon the democratic institutions established by their regimes? In one view, articulated by many scholars of both modernity and of the Middle East, "modern is modern, in a sense, to the degree that it is secular."[58] However, according to John Esposito, "the contemporary Islamic revival has challenged many of the presuppositions of Western liberal secularism and development theory that modernization means the inexorable or progressive secularization and Westernization of society."[59] He argues that far from needing to establish western traditions of democratic rule, Muslims are, in fact, developing their own indigenous forms of political participation "appropriate to Islamic values and realities."[60]

Against the background of this widespread debate regarding the form of government appropriate to Islamic nations and their sources of legitimacy, al-Zawahiri and Esack represent two opposite poles of opinion. While neither one questions the need to vest legitimacy within the boundaries of a nation-state, al-Zawahiri rejects all forms of democracy and constitutionalism and advocates establishing an Islamic state. Esack, on the other hand, sees democracy as the only possible legitimate form of government in the current era. Interestingly, both advocate their respective positions by referring to the principle of "justice," which they derive from the Qur'an and other Islamic traditional sources.

In *Knights*, al-Zawahiri makes explicit references to the Islamic fundamentalist movement's goal as he sees it, namely, "to topple the government and establish an Islamic state."[61] Specifically, he stresses that the Islamist movement must control a physical piece of territory in the Middle East, ostensibly, to establish a truly Islamic nation-state: "The jihad movement

must adopt its plan on the basis of controlling a piece of land in the heart of the Islamic world on which it could establish and protect the state of Islam and launch its battle to restore the rational caliphate based on the traditions of the Prophet."[62] Further, he contends that all non-Islamic Middle Eastern governments are illegitimate and that "the idea of … submission to the secular constitution imposed by referendums and the recognition of the legitimacy of the government had become worn-out ideas in the minds of Islamists."[63] Finally, al-Zawahiri refers to the need to create a public sphere and for the larger Muslim community's participation in the project of nation-building, stating that "the jihad movement must be in the middle, or ahead of, the nation. It must be extremely careful not to get isolated from its nation or engage the government in the battle of the elite against authority."[64]

Although al-Zawahiri may proclaim his desire to establish a political community exactly like the one headed by Prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia, the above passages show that his conception of power arrangements and notions of political legitimacy are strikingly modern. First, although he writes that "it is the hope of the Muslim nation to restore its fallen caliphate and regain its lost glory," his understanding of what constitutes "the caliphate" bears an uncanny resemblance to the modern nation-state, for it is firmly rooted within geographical boundaries and defined by an ethnic-religious nationalism. Second, the fact that he needs to refer to the current Egyptian government's illegitimacy means that some people still consider it legitimate. Here, al-Zawahiri implies that the Islamic government established by fundamentalists will have a better source of legitimacy than the current Middle Eastern governments.

Finally, his calls for popular participation in government and for the creation of a public sphere are the direct result of the penetration of western Enlightenment ideas concerning government legitimation through public participation. Although al-Zawahiri scorns western democracy, viewing it as corrupt and anti-Islamic, he clearly advocates some form of popular participation in government processes and a type of governmental accountability that, in today's world, is found only in democracies.[65] Thus, although his rhetoric may sound as if it advocates a return to pre-modernity, a closer analysis reveals that his concepts of power and legitimacy are firmly rooted in liberal modernity. In fact, he explicitly rejects authoritarianism and strongly criticizes its application by secular governments in the Middle East.[66]

Like al-Zawahiri, Esack views Islam as inherently political, writing that "if there is one major world religion that is unambiguously identified as having a political agenda, then it is Islam." However, for him, all religions and, in fact, all human relationships are political, because "if politics is really

about access to and exercise of power, then there is precious little in human relationships void of politics."[67] After establishing the political nature of all human interactions, he goes on to advocate for a social activism based on the universal values of justice and equality. Unlike al-Zawahiri, Esack rejects the need for a Muslim political party (let alone an Islamic state):

> Muslim parties are really a negative response to social insecurity and fear of the unknown … The idea is to retreat into the comfort of well-worn clichés about Islam having all the solutions and the Qur'an being our only constitution. This position shows no understanding of the complexities of the problems facing our country [South Africa], nor any appreciation of how Islam translates into tangible and practical policies for governing a modern state.[68]

For Esack, establishing an Islamic state and installing the Shari`ah as the law of the land are not the goals; rather, they are the means that will "lead to the emergence of a social system based on Allah's will. This means that the laws of Islam must never be distorted to destroy the morality of Islam."[69] In his view, the main tenet of such a social system will clearly be equal justice for all, Muslim and non-Muslim, male and female, under the law.[70] Finally, unlike al-Zawahiri, Esack advocates the creation of western-style constitutional democracies everywhere, arguing for the enshrinement of universal values in the constitution, which he defines as "a contract between a state and its citizens, and among all the citizens of the state."[71] For him, a government is legitimate to the extent that it upholds the rights and freedoms granted to its citizens in a publicly ratified constitution and to the degree to which it allows and encourages public participation in governance.

As can be clearly seen from the above comparison, al-Zawahiri and Esack have similar assumptions about the form of a modern government and its sources of legitimacy (some form of popular representation). The differences between them clearly lie in the degree to which they believe that specific religious injunctions would be formally enshrined as law. Al-Zawahiri advocates the establishment of an Islamic state based on the literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition (Sunnah). Although his state has a modern form, its content would, to the extent possible, be Islamic – that is, a top-down, legal Islamization of all facets of society that would compel all who live within its borders to live under Islamic law as interpreted by al-Zawahiri and other fundamentalists. In contrast, Esack argues that Islamic texts and traditions should be mined for their universal moral values and that the rest should be discarded as inapplicable to governing a modern state. He

further avers that since Islamic morality is "intrinsically related to a comprehensive Islamic moral-ethical worldview," it is unreasonable and unjust to demand that others adhere to it.[72]

Conclusion

In "Framing Processes and Social Movements," sociologists Robert Benford and David Snow discuss how social movement ideologies (frames) are constructed and used to articulate a particular movement's positions, diagnose existing problems, and motivate the movement's participants to action: "Collective action frames are constructed in part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition, … make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change." These core framing tasks are termed *diagnostic framing*, *prognostic framing*, and *motivational framing*.[73]

Al-Zawahiri's and Esack's responses to modernity can be usefully analyzed in terms of the above model. As can be seen from the above comparison, both men share a diagnostic frame regarding the ills of modern Islamic societies and point to a pervasive apathy in regards to political and social action, fragmentation of and collapse of community, and a lack of political legitimacy of extant Middle Eastern governments.

However, in an interesting twist, although their diagnostic frames seem to have many points of intersection, their prognostic and motivational frames seem not to exist on the same grid at all. While al-Zawahiri's prognosis is the Islamic fundamentalist movement's victory over both western and domestic secular enemies, as well as the eventual establishment of a truly Islamic state in the Middle East, Esack awaits the normalization of western secular social standards among Muslims and their full application in the political and social milieux of Islamic states. Thus, al-Zawahiri's motivational repertoire is heavily imbued with references to the martyrdom of Islamists at the hands of secular regimes and the injustices inflicted on Islamic nations by western imperial ones, while Esack uses references to the universal values of Islam to motivate his audience. Interestingly, however, it is Esack's text that quotes heavily from the Qur'an and the Hadith, while al-Zawahiri's contains not a single Qur'anic quotation. That fact, in addition to the many others presented in this essay, should go far to dispel the notion of the anti-modern nature of Islamic fundamentalist movements.

Endnotes

1. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 15.
2. Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God* (New York: Harpers and Row, 1989), 2.
3. Ibid., 7. Lawrence notes that "in promoting individual autonomy and *de facto* relativism, the modernist paradigm claims to be universal." While Islamists reject relativism, they clearly, it seems to me, accept individual autonomy by channeling it through such concepts as ijtihad and re-establishing the khalifah.
4. Ibid., 8. He finds other cultural similarities between Islamists and modernists as well, for example, a propensity to privilege the future over the present and the past (p. 25), a tendency toward a universalizing discourse (pp. 27, 40-41), and an acceptance of the political framework of the nation-state (p. 227).
5. Robert Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). The "Manifesto "of the Communist Party was first published in London in 1848.
6. Farzin Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut: Iran's Intellectual Encounter with Modernity* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 228.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufman, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1967), 59; italics in the original.
8. Ibid., 77; italics in the original.
9. Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut,* 231; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 7. Interestingly, Appadurai concurs with Nietzsche, writing that "there is growing evidence that consumption of mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in short, agency." Appadurai here emphasizes the role of aesthetics as imagination, which, "in its collective forms … creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule," as well as, presumably, of revolutions.
10. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 1992), 123-24.
11. Ali Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 129.
12. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, tr. George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 20, 22.
13. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 8.
14. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 3.
15. Lambert Zuidervaart, "Theodor Adorno," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2003 ed., ed. Edward N. Zalta. Online at http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2003/entries/adorno/).
16. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic,* xviii.
17. Zuidervaart, "Theodor Adorno."

18. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic,* 16.
19. Ibid., 120.
20. Ibid., 6.
21. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 11.
22. Ibid., 16.
23. Ibid., 12.
24. Ibid., 171.
25. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large,* 33.
26. Giddens, *Consequences of Modernity,* 53.
27. Ibid., 21.
28. Ibid., 79.
29. Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 11.
30. Ibid., 23.
31. Vahdat, *God and Juggernaut,* xiii-xiv.
32. Ibid., 134.
33. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "Parts one through eleven of serialized excerpts from Egyptian Al-Jihad organization leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's book *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner.* Online at www.fas.org/irp/world/para/ayman_bk.html, 15. By using *mankind* instead of a more gender-neutral term, I am emphasize that this document was written, in my view, only for men, since a discussion of women and their potential role in jihad are absent from the text.
34. Ibid., 73.
35. Ibid., 5-6. The Arab Afghans were young men from all over the Islamic world but mostly from the Middle East who came to Afghanistan in the 1980s to participate in the jihad against the Russians. Despite Zawahiri's assertions to the contrary, the US government funded many of these mujahidin groups, including some led by Osama bin Laden.
36. Ibid., 20.
37. Lawrence Wright, "The Man Behind Bin Laden: How an Egyptian Doctor Became a Master of Terror," *The New Yorker,* 16 September, 2002, Part IV.
38. Al-Zawahiri, *Knights*, 28.
39. Esack, *On Being a Muslim,* 2.
40. Ibid., 39.
41. Ibid., 42.
42. Ibid., 48.
43. Ibid., 77.
44. Ibid., 93.
45. Ibid., 94.
46. Dale Eickelman, "Who Speaks for Islam? Inside the Islamic Reformation," in *An Islamic Reformation?*, eds. Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), 19.
47. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large,* 53.

48. Al-Zawahiri, *Knights*, 15. Sayyid Qutb, the major and best-known ideologue of Hasan al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood, a society founded in 1928 that was a cornerstone of the twentieth-century Islamic revival in the Middle East, wrote the widely influential *Ma`alim fi al-Tariq* (Signposts on the Road). In it, he argued that social systems were either *nizam islami* (truly Islamic) or *nizam jahili* (pre-Islamic ignorance and barbarism). One of his greatest innovations was to apply *jahiliyah*, used in the Qur'an for pre-Islamic Arabia, to modern Middle Eastern society. This which paved the way for a line of thought in which forcible physical reconquest became permissible. He also provided an ideological framework in which Muslim fundamentalists could use Islamic principles, rather than such western categories as capitalism, socialism, and democracy, to analyze society and fight an unjust government. He was executed by the Nasser regime in 1966, but his work remains extraordinarily popular.

49. Ibid., 44.

50. Ibid., 62.

51. Esack, *On Being a Muslim*, 137.

52. Ibid., 143.

53. Ibid., 147.

54. Ibid., 33.

55. Eickelman, "Who Speaks for Islam?" 22.

56. Esack, *On Being a Muslim,* 25.

57. Ibid., 27.

58. Johnathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4, (October 2003): 1066.

59. John Esposito, "Islam and Civil Society," in *Modernizing Islam*, eds. John Esposito and Francois Burgat. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 98.

60. Ibid., 99.

61. Al-Zawahiri, *Knights*, 46.

62. Ibid., 76.

63. Ibid., 20.

64. Ibid., 74.

65. Ibid., 69.

66. Ibid., 20.

67. Esack, 87.

68. Ibid., 165-66.

69. Ibid., 104.

70. Ibid., 168.

71. Ibid., 169.

72. Ibid., 166.

73. R. Benford and D. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *American Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 615.