

Islam, Modernity and a New Millennium: Themes from a Critical Rationalist Reading of Islam

Written by Professor Ali Paya

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Modernity is a complex and fluid ideology comprised of a set of philosophical, cultural, political, and sociological circumstances, and is a movement that touches the majority of Muslims in the present day. Often, it is thought that it is only Muslims that live in western states who are presented with these ideas, but with the rise of globalisation, technology, and the digital space – innovations fuelled themselves by modern forces – there are very few Muslims in any state or country that are unaffected by modernity and its products.

This leads to a well-known conundrum: how do members of the religion of Islam – a religion that was formalised many centuries ago – interact with “the new” and “the modern”? How does Islam shape the response of an individual who wishes to remain firmly attached to their beliefs as they know them, in the wake of contemporary issues not encountered by the exegetes of their Holy Book, the Qur’an (i.e. the Prophet and Imams), and thus not discussed by them? Should modern ideas be accepted, or are they fundamentally incompatible with God’s word? Is there a third (or fourth ...) option?

It is in this complex arena that emerges the work of Dr Ali Paya, a seasoned philosophical thinker, in a compilation of articles in the book, *Islam, Modernity and a New Millennium: Themes from a Critical Rationalist Reading of Islam*, published by Routledge in 2018, and is available in both hardback and paperback.

Dr Paya has many years of philosophical study, writing, and teaching to bring to the arena that is Islam vis-à-vis modernity. These experiences are, however, combined with a unique ideological worldview. Dr Ali

Paya – as is evidenced from the title of the book in question – takes a critical rationalist reading of Islam, and thus of modernity itself. This is a unique position for a Muslim philosophical thinker to take: the present author has not found other Shī‘ī thinkers to view the religion of Islam from a critical rationalist lens. Thus, Dr Paya appears to be unique in this regard, as he himself suggests in the book. In logical succession, this places Dr Paya’s position towards Islam and modernity as equally unique, and worthy of encountering and reflecting over.

What is it to view the world from a critical rationalist lens? It is to be a realist – one who believes in an accessible reality outside of oneself – and not a sceptic. However, it is to see all knowledge, beliefs, and ideas as no more than conjectural, capable of being infinitely critiqued and refined, in an attempt to get closer to reality. It is an attitude that promotes curiosity, dialogue, and constant refinement of one’s beliefs, but rejects certainty, dogma, and superiority of belief.

Equipped with the critical rationalist approach, Dr Paya turns towards some of the complex ideas that modernity has to offer, in search of possible solutions. How does one approach the Qur’an, if the best they can obtain is conjectural knowledge – as discussed in Chapter 2? What benefit can religion – which often asserts its own advantage with regards to knowledge of the cosmos – have to a critical rationalist thinker who is constantly refining his worldview, a question posed in Chapter 3? How can a Muslim wrestle with the ideas of modern thinkers who suggest that religion is fundamentally incompatible with science (Chapter 3)? Can knowledge be Islamised (Chapter 4)? Is the Tāfīkī position tenable (Chapter 7)? What fuels religion-based violence, and how can a critical rationalist lens provide a bulletproof shield (Chapter 9)?

As previously mentioned, critical rationalism is an attitude that promotes curiosity, dialogue, and constant refinement of one’s beliefs, but rejects certainty, dogma, and superiority of belief. This may surprise some readers: many may see this rejection of certainty to be at stark odds with the conviction and submission seen in dedicated Muslim

believers, and the exhortations of the Qur'an towards reaching certainty in their beliefs. Instead, Dr Paya reduces certainty to a psychological state of the individual, rather than an epistemic position that indicates that a belief corresponds to that external reality and truth.

However, it must be noted that from the critical rationalist lens, it is the belief or proposition that “can withstand serious criticism” (p. 200) that must be retained and nothing else. Thus, it is these “tests” of criticism that, if withstood successfully, increase the likelihood that a certain belief or proposition corresponds to external reality by refining it or increasing its validity, and bring that proposition closer to epistemic certainty (in other words, its truth-value).

It thus appears that Dr Paya rejects notions of epistemic certainty in favour of a worldview that ultimately strives to get closer to epistemic certainty, albeit recognising that the task may be arduous, and that there may be multiple levels in the process. The Qur'an recognises this same idea through its exhortation to different levels of certainty – *‘ilm al-yaqīn*, *‘ayn al-yaqīn*, and *ḥaqq al-yaqīn*, and recognises that few may be able to reach the higher levels.

This same idea can be used to discuss Dr Paya's rejection of justificationism. He describes that many philosophies are concerned with justifying, verifying, strengthening, validating, and defending propositions and standpoints. The critical rationalist rejects this entirely because each justification of a standpoint requires further justification (p. 18). However, one questions how the critical rationalist concludes that critical rationalism itself is a tenable position, if the possibility of justifying said position is rejected. Dr Paya makes suggestions that critical rationalism is acceptable because it may be rationally preferred (p. 18) to other ideologies, or that it can withstand substantial criticism (p. 200) – which appear to be justifications. Similarly, when discussing the role of religion and whether one can and should be religious, he also suggests that the critical rationalist may accept the conjecture of the existence of God because it gives them “a pragmatic edge against nihilism” (p. 57). These examples appear to be justifications of various

standpoints – a way of validating, strengthening, or defending these standpoints, even if they are only at the pragmatic level. Thus, it appears that in order to put forth a philosophical worldview, even critical rationalism, justification at some level is unavoidable.

This rejection of justificationism also contributes to Dr Paya's ideas on the sources of religious-based violence (Chapter 9); Dr Paya holds that the root of religious-based violence is the "bewitchment of justificationism" (p. 201), where individuals who feel justified in their doctrine will be ready to see others as inferior, leading to violence that they deem justified against the "other". As well as justification being unavoidable (as discussed in the previous paragraph), the other concern with the conclusion of this chapter is that it is a conclusion based on a few case studies of violent individuals, generalised to be the single cause for *all* religious violence. While it is probable that superiority of doctrine may contribute to many cases of violence, it must be questioned as to whether this is the largely single cause for *all* religious violence.

Having said this, Dr Paya's exhortations towards epistemic humility in light of the case studies discussed, and the importance of being willing to explore the existence of a spectrum of ideas in order to refine one's own standpoint and belief system (rather than holding arrogant superiority of one's standpoint), is an important conclusion that should equally be reflected on.

Perhaps one of the most formidable conjectures posed by Dr Paya in this book is the reassessing of the status of *fiqh* – jurisprudential law – in Shī'ī Islam (Chapter 5), where Dr Paya recapitulates the *faqīh* (jurist) as an engineer: skilful and adept in engineering solutions for puzzles posed by the practical lives of Muslims, but playing an entirely different role than the pure scientist or thinker who exists to further the knowledge of the human race. While this conception is stylistically portrayed and is not a unique idea in literature, it is also interspersed with unfavourable implications. For example, the reflection that engineers' implementations of technological laws to find solutions are informed by their own personal social, economic, and cultural considerations (p. 91)

is then also directed at the *fuqahā'* (jurists), who – while living in specific socioeconomic conditions – aim to find solutions for the betterment of Muslims globally, and that duty involves looking outward at the condition of Muslims globally, rather than looking inward at their own circumstances and what might fit those circumstances best. Further, Dr Paya constructs a distinction between “normal” jurists and “founding” jurists, admiring the latter for their innovation in finding solutions for issues that have no precedence (p. 94). In doing so, “normal” jurists – of which he mentions form the majority of jurists today – are seen to “simply” use, or at best gradually improve, existing solutions (i.e. laws of previous jurists) for known problems.

While innovation has its place in some areas of *fiqh*, particularly contemporary issues, considering it as the gold standard for approaching all legal issues in Islam overlooks a thousand years of jurisprudential tradition, in which the conclusions of great scholars and jurists (many of whom were also theologians, philosophers, and “thinkers”) bear significant weight in assessing the evidence for a particular legal edict. Disagreeing with them for the sake of innovation, particularly when the evidence suggests otherwise, would be disadvantageous to the Muslim community.

While this book touches upon contemporary ideas well known to many Muslims in the modern context, it is not for the faint-hearted; it is an extensively detailed philosophical paradigm that needs careful consideration. Complex epistemological and philosophical issues are discussed, and for those unfamiliar with deep-rooted and passionate debates on the nature of justification in epistemology, or ideas of epistemic certainty, correspondence and nominalism/realism may feel themselves to be wading through philosophical jargon with little practical relevance.

However, this is not the case: the reader must accept the need for a rudimentary understanding and interest in these theoretical issues in order to appreciate their relevance in the recapitulation of modern ideas in the practical realm. Further, while Dr Paya thoughtfully

characterises Muslim responses to modernity beyond the often-seen (and oversimplified) triad of “Accept”, “Reject”, and “Fuse” in the introduction of this book, detailing nine categories of responses with reference to archetypes for each, he spends considerably less time explicating what modernity *is* than what it *isn't*.

While his explanation that modernity is too complex a movement to define monolithically does not go unappreciated, for the philosophically unexperienced reader, there is not enough of a discussion on the tenets of modernity to feel that they have come to grips with the acute dilemma of a Muslim in the modern world. Thus, the reader is left not quite having grasped the enormity of the presence of modernity in their lives, and, depending on their level of understanding, may need preliminary reading into modernity and its products to fully appreciate the arguments made in this book.

The most interesting aspect of this work is that Dr Paya, having meticulously explicated his critical rationalist approach to religion and modernity, ultimately leaves his own work up for critique and refinement – living true to the critical rationalist creed. His reluctance to suggest the intellectual superiority of his own reading of Islam leaves it to the reader to assess the tenability of his position, and in this way holds his own work up to the rigorous standards of critical rationalism, allowing it to be critiqued.

This equally allows the reader to see his work as an effort towards the growth of knowledge, and a stepping stone for the reader to reach their own intellectual heights by critical assessment of these very ideas. It is a book that, through its writing, exhibits the merits of critical rationalism that Dr Paya advocates for: intellectually honest dialogue in the search of truth, a desire to contribute to the flourishing of knowledge, and an aspect of epistemic humility.