

 <p>ISSN NO. 2320-5407</p>	<p>Journal Homepage: -www.journalijar.com</p> <p>INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)</p> <p>Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/19328 DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/19328</p>	 <p>INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR) ISSN 2320-5407</p> <p>Journal Homepage: http://www.journalijar.com Journal DOI:10.21474/IJAR01</p>
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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abdelwahab Meddeb and Anour Majid: Revisiting The Muslim Heritage or Celebrating the Diversity of Islamic Tradition

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Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 18 June 2024

Final Accepted: 20 July 2024

Published: August 2024

Key words:-

Muslim Thought, Interfaith Dialogue, Modernity Stakes, Rigidity

Abstract

This paper is a celebration of the diversity of Muslim thought and tradition, an invitation to revisit the Islamic legacy and rethink mainstream Muslim scholarship in the light of the plurality, multivoicedness and richness of the Muslim faith. It is incidentally a questioning of the inability of contemporary Islam to establish interfaith dialogue with kin monotheist religions, as well as a deep interrogation of our understanding of the creed and our praxis as believers in the third millenium, compelled as we stand, to adhere to the global spirit and meet the high stakes of modernity. This conandrum interpellates the Muslim community to reconsider the rigidity nay sterility of today's Islam, championned by the growingly powerful fundamentalist movements thriving in' Dar Al Islam'.

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Introduction:-

Islam never had a Dante who summoned the intellectual audacity to make his writing address political events as they appeared in the reality of history. I dream of this genius that Islam did not create : he would have constituted the opposite of Ibn Taymiyya. (Meddeb, 95)

The biggest challenge facing Islam today is definitely the crisis of otherness, a crisis which seems to have reached a sorry state of affairs in the last few decades, as a 'sclerosised' discourse has managed to establish itself as the only viable and legitimate version of Islam, thus silencing the voices of dissent throughout the Muslim world. However, the advent of a generation of new thinkers endorsing an enlightened and progressive vantage point, and calling for a true reform of Islam marks a new wave in Islamic thought and interpellates Muslim societies not only to question the creed and its believers, but also to reread the Muslim tradition in the light of a pluralistic, multicultural and polycentric vision. This timely and rather bold enterprise does by no means inaugurate a new spirit in Muslim thought, but in fact attempts to reconnect Muslims to a history of theirs wherein controversy, intellectual diversity and intercultural dialogue were the features of the day. This 'Renaissance' has been championned by many a Muslim thinker, yet two voices stand as distinguished both in reach and impact. The late French-Tunisian scholar, writer, essayist, poet, philosopher and radio host Abdelwahab Meddeb, together with Anour Majid, the Moroccan thinker and novelist. Each from his own location, in his own field, have differently diagnosed the ills of the Muslim community, and have audaciously underscored the importance of reform, while establishing each on his own, an alternative thought. As a matter of course, both share a counter-discourse which finds in the history of Islam an answer to the present crisis, a

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free thinking. Islam 'needs heretics and dissenters' Majid contends, while Meddeb calls for 'un islam des lumières' as the antidote to all sorts of fanaticism. As Neo-Rushdians, Meddeb and Majid find in the Andalusian heritage an answer to the present monolithic and impoverished version of Islam, since it is during the 'Convivenzia' period when the three monotheist religions coexisted in perfect harmony, that Muslims learnt to negotiate their identity in a dialogical, transcultural encounter with Jews and Christians doing without 'le dogme manichéen du sceau de la révélation divine' Meddeb claims. This conversation with the dead, either Sufis or Zanadiqas is a quest to find 'the inoui', while it concomitantly shackles the very foundations of Islamic tradition mainly predicated on Sunni orthodoxy.

Materials and Methods:-

This paper proposes an intertextual reading of two prominent contemporary Arab Muslim thinkers, namely Tunisian philosopher and journalist Abdelwahab Meddeb, and Moroccan scholar Anouar Majid. By reviewing two of their most acclaimed works: *The Malady of Islam* (2002), and *A Call for Heresy Why Dissent is vital to Islam and America* (2007). This paper attempts to trace lines of continuity and discontinuity in both projects, while acknowledging the potential echoes in the two opuses.

Findings and Discussion:-

Abdelwahab Meddeb and 'The Malady of Islam':

The spectacular attack of September 11, which struck the heart of the United States, is a crime. A crime committed by Islamists. (Meddeb, 3)

One year after the 9/11 events in 2001, Abdelwahab Meddeb published a most controversial book bearing a much more controversial title, *La Maladie de L'islam* translated as *The Malady of Islam*, winning him the Prix Francois Mauriac. In the fashion of a physician, he embarks on a thorough examination of contemporary Islam, which apparently seems to be infected with a sickness that prevents it from embracing the richness of its own tradition and history. He thus contends that: 'if fanaticism was the sickness in Catholicism, if Nazism was the sickness in Germany, then surely fundamentalism is the sickness in Islam.' (Meddeb, 6). Meddeb denounces today's Islamic fundamentalism- bellicose by and large- which finds in the Coran only a summons to war. Thus, it is imperative that the Coranic text steers away from narrow and more often than not reductionist readings, while opening itself to what he calls 'the desire of the interpreter'. He further elaborately unearths the Muslim legacy dating back to the Medina of the Prophet in the seventh century, to ninth century Baghdad, to fourteenth century Damascus after the Crusades, and most importantly to eighteenth century Arabia and the emergence of Wahhabism. Throughout his erudite account, Meddeb demonstrates how the golden age of Islam witnessed the birth of a civilisation informed by pluralism, creativity, controversy, debate and free thinking, and how the forsaking of such ethics has left the Islamic world 'inconsolable in its destitution'. For this Voltairian Muslim, as he pleases to call himself, the antidote to the poison of religious extremism is definitely an enlightened Islam, 'un Islam des lumières' premised on polyphony and debate:

Rather than distinguishing a good Islam from a bad Islam, it would be better for Islam to open itself to debate and discussion, to rediscover the plurality of opinions, to set up a space for disagreement and difference, to accept that a neighbor has the freedom to think differently. Better for Islam if intellectual debate rediscovers its rights and adapts itself to the conditions polyphony offers. May the deviations multiply and unanimism cease; may the stable substance of the One disseminate itself in a shower of ungraspable atoms. (Meddeb, 7)

This shower or rather wish for dissemination and multiplicity is best embodied by the Sufi tradition epitomising 'the wonders of islam that should be shared in this time of despair.' Meddeb's life project to celebrate Sufism as a dynamic spiritual Muslim tradition with far-reaching mystical potentials is in essence a rehabilitation of an alternative, albeit long misunderstood thought that actually reflects the aesthetic dimensions of Islam par excellence. It is a practice of Islam not bound by doctrine, a unique quest for divine love far from interpretive rigidity and exegetical codification. Yet, before engaging with Sufism, Meddeb documents the centuries of great Arab Muslim genius, when cities like ninth century Baghdad under the reign of Abbassid Caliph Al Ma'mun used to be a beacon of knowledge, and a most flourishing workshop of literature, poetry and sciences. While halting at the phenomenal moments of creativity in the Arab Muslim civilisation, a civilisation which erected itself on platforms for debate and polemic, Meddeb traces the lineage of the first dissenting movements in the history of Islam namely 'The Mu'tazilites' who openly criticized Islamic dogmatism and explicitly resisted considering the Coranic text as uncreated or as God's earthly incarnation'. This rationalist sect managed to establish itself as the official state ideology' under the protection of Al Ma'mun, a

despot it is true, yet a ruler who 'played an important role in acclimatizing the Greek heritage in the Arab language', a caliph who 'so tradition tells us dreamed about Aristotle, who asked him to have his books translated into Arabic.....(.....) and encouraged the confrontation of ideas in the heart of the city by organizing debates between sectarians of diverse faiths and Muslim theologians of various schools of thought.' (Meddeb, 17/18). A visionary ruler whom we owe the flourishing of scientific forums, philosophical and poetic schools with vanguardist vocations in ninth century Baghdad, a century Meddeb finds analogous in many respects to eighteenth century European Enlightenment. A compelling resonance, indeed, is the one Meddeb establishes between French poet Mallarmé and Syrian one Abu Tamam, or Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Abu Nawas. Though belonging to disparate historical, socio-cultural and ethical backgrounds, these poets share unsuspected affinities, be it the degree of artistry, the rigor, the mastery of poetical forms or the vanguardist conceptions of the function of a poet.

Meddeb further excavates the legacy of Muslim Andalusian thinkers and particularly the medieval Cordoban philosopher Ibn Rushd, a luminary thinker who advocated reason to gain knowledge of God, and inference as a method to extract the unknown from the known. As a matter of fact, for this universal thinker, a cosmopolitan avant- la lettre 'the accumulation of knowledge is universal. Anyone can draw on it, whatever his ethnic, language or religious background.' It is, therefore foolish to waste time reinventing for oneself what has already been invented by others. Unsurprisingly, Ibn Rushd's better known in the west as Averroes's Decisive Treatise seems to have stood the test of time and its relevance to contemporary debates about alterity and gender equality is quite spectacular, a reason why Meddeb invests the Rushdian project with pedagogical values for Modern Muslims.

To understand how this Renaissance or 'adolescent awakening' - to borrow from Meddeb- was aborted and how Islam has sadly turned into a 'debilitated and anemic' religion, we need to go back to the tenth century and the reign of Al Muttawakil who promptly restored religious orthodoxy and bracketted off any attempts at 'ijtihād', deemed as repulsive novelty or 'bid'aa'. Thus, the emergence of Hanbalism as a doctrine championing literalism and conformity in the interpretation of Islam will be for the centuries to come the dominant spirit, and unmistakably marks the real birth of fundamentalism in Islam. This spirit, predicated on univocality felt the urgent need to : shred the divan of that most famous ninth century poet, the Baghdad libertine Abu Nawas. To hunt down the free thinkers of Islam.....(.....) to feed the flames of an auto da fe with the scattered pages of their works : those of Ibn al Muqaffa.....(.....) or those of the most impious character of Islam, Ibn Rawandi..... (Meddeb, 39)

An inquisition of sorts, whereby the forces of bigotry forcibly established an atmosphere of persecution and intolerance that was to lay the early foundations for today 's fundamentalist Islam. This legacy was to be carried out and inherited by Syrian thirteenth century scholar and theologian Ibn Taymiyya, a fervent disciple of Ibn Hanbal, who condemned philosophy and its contamination of religious discourse, dismissed the Sufis as heretics and repudiated polyphony in Muslim thought altogether. Unfortunately, the darkness of this chapter in the history of Islam is bound to thrive for many centuries later, only to generate the most fundamentalist Muslim movement, i.e Wahabbism. Erecting itself as a solid bastion of Muslim orthodoxy, Wahabbite doctrine founded by Abd al Wahhab in the deserts of Arabia, whose 'mediocrity and doctrinal illegitimacy have often been denounced'(Meddeb,56), marked a true and massive regression in Muslim thought, announcing a most unfortunate continuum, first with nineteenth century salafism then with twentieth century Muslim brotherhoods, both movements replicating and reactivating the similar radicalist ideology Wahabbism is premised on, yet strangely coinciding temporally with Eighteenth century Enlightenment in Europe. In a brilliant juxtaposition, Meddeb quotes French poet The Marquis de Sade, who lucidly and discernably condemns fanaticism around the world and in Arabia in particular :

In Arabia, new sectarians are emerging and want to purify the religion of Mahomet.(.....) As always, it is gods that are the cause of all ills. (Meddeb,54)

Meddeb and The Sufi Tradition :

The success of Islam was achieved in the Sufi corpus- which was denounced by Ibn Taymiyya- whereas the defeat of Islam occurred in the political sphere, exactly where the theologian had placed the privileged space of his faith. (Meddeb, 51)

The modern infatuation with Sufism originates in eighteenth century Orientalist scholarship with a plethora of influential scholars, yet it can be safely conjectured that it is Louis Massignon, a twentieth century Catholic scholar of Islam, whose deep interest in the Sufi tradition as a whole and in Al Hallaj in particular, who truly bears the merit of having introduced Sufi thinkers to the Western readership. In his *La Passion de Ibn Mansour Al Hallaj* (1975),

Massignon approaches the Sufi thinker as a Christ figure while examining the notion of martyrdom in his doctrine, and explicitly drawing parallels with the concept of Badaliya in arabic. Criticised by Edward Said in Orientalism for exoticising Sufism, Massignon arguably remains an authority in the field.

Far from this trendy fascination with a most complex spiritual legacy, and because any engagement with the Sufi tradition can by no means be undertaken without a firsthand understanding of the spiritual legacy of Ibn Arabi 'the Sheikh Al Akbar', Meddeb composed his chapbook and rather lengthy poem *Le Tombeau D' Ibn Arabi* in 1987 as a lyrical tribute to the great master of Sufis, wherein The writer of Torjomanou Alashwak, The Interpreter of Desires, born in Andalusian Murcia in the twelfth century and advocate of mystical divine love through the celebration of earthly one, is in constant dialogue with Dante, since according to Meddeb, both men discovered portals to the mystical divine through the celebration of earthly love.

For Ibn Arabi, the Sufi sublimation is effected through embracing God's oneness and a total communion with the Creator, for this latter is the only true object of love yet this love can materialize in more earthly ways. To reach this transcendence, the Sufi initiation is effected through different stages starting with yearning (ashawk), then searching (talab), knowledge (maarifa), contentment (rida), detachment (istighnae), and annihilation (fanae).

This interplay in Ibn Arabi's metaphysics is a constant criss-crossing between the visible and the invisible, transcendence and immanence, esoteric and exoteric i. e batin and zahir. As a matter of fact, his innovative vision of religion restores the textual openness of the Coranic text and actually returns it to its infinity, while being a far cry from the rhetoric of dogmatic orthodoxy which reduces religion to its codes and gauges believers by their degree of compliance to these very codes.

Anouar Majid and A Call For Heresy, Why Dissent Is Vital to Islam and America :

The Zanadiqa of Islam, as well as Islam's persecuted or neglected philosophers, are also Islam's only hope to break free, finally, from the tyranny of Sunni orthodoxy and carry on the work that had been cast in Islam's golden trash heap of history. (Anouar Majid, 221)

A continuity of perspective is articulated by another expatriate voice of dissent, Anouar Majid or the Moroccan Edward Said, who dares to challenge Arab and Muslim intellectuals to imagine a Postcapitalist Posteurocentric future, for a progressive multicultural dialogue. For him, the answer is not in renouncing tradition but rather the traditional understanding of tradition, for if 'modernity is used as a method to reactivate the slumbering genius of the Islamic past, to renew the Arab Muslim tradition (Turath), Muslims and Arabs may have a chance at entering the world stage and using their own modernities to engage the world's multiple modernities.' (Majid, 214). In truth, Majid calls for a revival of dynamic traditions such as Zandaqa, a tradition of heresy which flourished in the early centuries of Islam and emerged as a reprehensible crime punishable by death in the second century of Islam during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Abu Abdallah AlMahdi (775-785). The list of zanadiqas found in scholarly sources includes anyone who was : ' highly cultivated, cosmopolitan and charming companion (darif), any hedonistic, epicurean or heedless indulger in all sorts of rhetorical and material pleasures, anyone accused of being an adulterer, inveterate connoisseur of wine, an outlaw, any sinful person without proper religion (fassiq), an insolent debaucher who knew nothing about the Coran and didn't observe religious rituals, any disciple of Satan and Ibliss the patron saint of Zanadiqa, any master of the art of blasphemy, and any lover of music and dance (lahw wa tarab)' (Majid, 208). The dictionary of demonization of Zanadiqas by religious dogma is quite telling albeit eyebrow-raising, thus we find : jahil (ignoramus), safih (fool), laeen (cursed), khabith (wicked), majin (impudent). The list of Zanadiqas starts with Abu Nawass, the libertine of Baghdad and happy transgressor as Meddeb calls him, then the Sufi Al Hallaj, the skeptic Abul Alae AlMaari, the Aristotelian philosopher Ibn Rushd, Aljahid, Al Farabi, the theologian Ibn Rawandi, Alkindi, Al Sarakhsi, Abu Bakr Arrazi, the poets Ibn Hazm and Omar Al Khayyam, Ibn Al Mukafae, Bachar Ibn Bord, Al Warak to name but a few. In Kufa, Basra and Baghdad, these libertines or 'les malpensants' challenged the tyranny of the sacred through a constant questioning of the very foundations of Muslim doctrine. Yet, these demonized Muslim dissenters were not atheists in the strict modern sense as they did not necessarily negate God's existence, but rather questioned the conditions of revelation and prophecy, they are best described as free thinkers who advocated autonomous reflection on the major metaphysical and human issues.

While meticulously documenting the history of Zandaqa in Islam, Majid foregrounds interesting affinities with Christian heretics : ' who refused the single vision of an almighty God ruling despotically over his creation' (Majid, 212), and further traces similarities with the spirit of a long American tradition, ranging from Thomas Paine, Thomas

Jefferson, Emerson, or Thoreau. The collapse of this spirit both in the Muslim world and in America due to the tyranny of a fundamentalism of sorts is the true predicament to surmount.

Conclusion:-

Strikingly enough, it seems contemporary Muslims are in a state of oblivion of that distant yet luminous past tradition, unable as they are, to step out of the prison or the tyranny of the sacred to borrow from Majid, unable to think and believe freely when Islam itself stands as an eternal, unchanging, static religion whereas what we really need is a nuanced, dynamic and diverse faith. We cannot help joining our voices to Majid's in his bewildering and rhetorical questions :

Are Muslim intellectuals forever banned from examining their traditions (turath) critically, relying on a rigorous rational perusal of texts and cultures without conceding anything to revelation ? is modernity truly perhaps fatally incompatible with being Muslim ? can one be a Muslim without necessarily believing in the religious myths of creation or in its theology ? Can one, in short, be Muslim without believing in Islam or in prophecy, as Muslim heretics once did ? How should Muslims define and deal with modernity ?(.....) can one be Muslim without renouncing one's cultural singularity ? (Majid,80)

Majid comes to the conclusion that heresy or Zandaqa may well be the best multidimensional answer to those nagging and unresolved questions, and that this can only be achieved through rediscovering and recuperating the spirit of inquiry in its most radical form and 'ensuring a society that does not punish difference or proscribe intellectual pluralism.'(Majid,222)

Having said that, and If one cannot stop short of acknowledging that the Muslim faith is in dire need of reform due to a deep intrinsic crisis, stemming basically from an endemic 'panne d'altérité' to use Meddeb's words, there exist extrinsic factors that further complicate the dilemma of being a Muslim in today's world, for that both Meddeb and Majid do not fail to emphasize the pernicious effects of globalisation /Americanisation, being a major source of social distress and a crystalizer of the culture of despair , a culture that engenders terrorism and Islamic extremism and hence deepens the conflict between the Islamic world and the United States. Thus, It is equally the responsibility of the West to reexamine its policies towards the rest of the world and more pertinently the Muslim part of it, to rectify injustice and to restore global peace.

If charges of political correctness admittedly hold much validity, and are totally legitimate in the actual political and ideological global contexts , it is true that both Meddeb and Majid are championing an apolitical version of Islam, a transcendental faith infused with much mysticism and emancipatory free thinking. In the face of such sentiments, it seems difficult not to cast doubts on the eventual ideological and discursive compromises a diasporic thinker is compelled to make to secure a niche within the pervasively islamophobic Western metropolises. With overt intent or not, Muslim thinkers, particularly when settled in locations of power, have to grapple with the dilemma of complying to the dictates of the Western press and publishing houses , forging authorial agency and claiming a place under the sun, while on the other hand seeking intellectual integrity .

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