Modern Western Thought and Islamic Reformism: Intellectual Challenges, Prior Discourse, and Future Prospects

Zia Ul Haq

Abstract: Muslims were introduced to modern Western philosophy during the time of Western colonization, when they were not emotionally or mentally ready to absorb it and were generally skeptical of anything Western. This has caused an intellectual crisis, and some Muslims saw new ideas from the West as a direct threat to Islamic identity. The point here is why Muslim societies have always been skeptical of modern Western philosophy, even though Western societies accepted all new ideas without any trouble, and it does not stop the West from moving forward as a civilization. This study uses a comparative analytical method to look at how modern Western philosophy is received in Islamic societies, what it has caused, and where it might go in the future. It focuses on the issue of faith and reason as a talking point to show how Western and Islamic ways of knowing are different. Finally, the study makes important suggestions about how to deal with the effects of modern Western philosophy on Islamic societies.

Keywords: modern western thought; Islamic societies; reason; faith; intellectual challenges

1. Introduction

The age-old question of how reason and belief should coexist is once again being discussed in various forms and at various levels in contemporary Muslim societies. However, there is hardly any discussion of how the East and the West have approached this issue historically. The introduction of Islamic culture to ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophies sparked many confusions. One of those confusions was the relationship between faith and reason. According to them, human mental speculation and intellectual reasoning can reveal the essences (al-zawat) of all existence (mawjudat) that are beyond the range of sense perception, as well as their reasons and causes. In other words, these philosophers thought that only human reason can be used to perceive, understand, and explain everything that exists. In some ways, they even think that the articles of faith themselves can be judged by the mind and are also part of intellectual perceptions. The same is true for figuring out what is true and what is false. In this case, the only way to tell what is true and what is false is to ask or do research (nazar) (Ahmad 2017). This dispute resurfaced during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth when Islamic societies came into contact with modern western thought. The intellectual challenges it produced in Islamic communities drew the attention of Islamic intellectuals, who sought a way ahead to resist the consequences of modern Western ideas on Islamic societies.

2. Thesis Statement

The examination of the reception and influence of contemporary Western philosophical concepts on Islamic communities during the period of Western imperialism is an area of critical scholarly attention, owing to its multifaceted intellectual ramifications. On one hand, the intellectually challenged and insufficiently equipped Muslim societies perceived these notions as a peril to their Islamic cultural heritage, whereas on the other, they were a wellspring of motivation and intellectual advancement for numerous Muslim reformers. This research endeavors to delve into the conflicting beliefs regarding faith and reason,
among other complex issues, that arose from the implantation of modern Western philosophy, and to formulate suggestions for managing the ramifications of Western philosophy on Islamic cultures. Through a meticulous assessment of the reception of modern Western philosophy among Muslim reformers, this study endeavors to address the fundamental inquiry of its impact on the comprehension of contemporary Western thought and to identify ameliorative measures that can be implemented to mitigate its impact on Islamic societies.

3. Research Methodology

This paper employs a descriptive–analytical method to look at how modern Western thought has been received in the Islamic world and how it has caused an intellectual crisis in Muslim societies. To demonstrate the theoretical underpinnings of this intellectual clash between the two civilizations, we have narrowed our focus to the question of faith and reason in the Eastern and Western thought pattern, despite the topic’s extremely diversified landscape, as the relationship between Islam and modernity is a complex and multifaceted issue, shaped by the historical, political, and cultural context in which it has developed (Masud 2009). In light of the previous research, the paper takes a critical look at how Islamic thinkers respond to Western ideas to come up with a new way of thinking about the debate and close the intellectual gap between the West and the Islamic world. This method is appropriate for examining the complex relationship between Western and Islamic thought and analyzing the impact of the intellectual crisis on Muslim societies. It offers a structured approach to focus on the theme of faith and reason.

4. Theoretical Framework

The intellectual confrontation between the West and Islamic worlds goes back to ancient time. It started when some of the first thinkers in the Islamic tradition, such as al-Fārābī (870–950 AD) and Avicenna (980–1037 AD), attempted to find a middle ground between the religious pronouncements and the philosophical conclusions they had learned and believed in from their Greek and Hellenistic masters (Walzer 1950, pp. 106–7). Avicenna completely agreed with the method of interpretation in which a religious text is redirected into a possible meaning that might fit with a philosophical argument. He used this method to explain the second-to-last chapter of the Holy Qur'ān. The Mu'tazilite theologians, who were the first to address this issue, took this viewpoint because they recognized that religious scriptures were not intended to correspond with those intellectual themes, and they saw reason as the first basic source of knowledge.

Within this context, Abu Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 AD) countered twenty philosophical issues, three of which became widely known: (a) that the universe has always existed; (b) that God knows the universals not the events (i.e., that God does not know the events in their renewal); and (c) that the souls will be gathered without the bodies on the day of resurrection. In his famous critique to his student Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi on the discrepancy between some religious texts and reasonable facts, also known as the “Tahafut al-Falasifa”, al-Ghazali refuted the approach of ta'wil (allegorical interpretations) (Marmura 1998, pp. 125–26).

During the colonial era, Muslims learned about new ideas from the West. Some Muslims thought it was important to learn from the West to make their own societies more open-minded and better. They thought that a critical selection of Western ideas could help them change their society and fight against ignorance, illiteracy, and a lack of scientific progress (Esposito and Voll 2003, p. 133).

In the post-independence era, Muslim communities have a more difficult response to Western thought and knowledge. Various Muslims scholars responded to modern Western thought with different approaches. It is true that we need to understand this trend and the ways in which Muslims have responded to modern Western thought (or to be more precise, modernities) to understand where Muslim societies are now and where they might go in the future. Yet this is a very diverse landscape, which makes it very hard to make a list of all the actors who have played important roles in the debate that has been going
on since the end of the 18th century (Paya 2018). Many scholars claim that Islam can cure all the ills that have befallen Muslim communities. According to the Kurzman (2002), the West is solely responsible for the dismal plight of Muslim communities (Kurzman 2002, pp. 22–23). However, there are many who think Muslims can only save themselves by adopting Western values and customs wholesale. Additionally, there is a wide range of explanations for the problem and suggestions for how to solve it that fall somewhere in between these two poles. All around the Muslim world, there are individuals and groups who are desperately trying to make sense of the situation and find ways to respond to it properly. Various kinds of explanations have been put forward by pundits and experts as well as ordinary folks to address this intellectual crisis. The reactions of Muslim intellectuals to Western ideas can be broadly classified into the following three different movements:

5. Exclusivist–Rejectionist Movement

The exclusivist movement is against any kind of Western knowledge, which is seen as not being Islamic, being off-track, and causing trouble. Metcalf (2002) believes that the exclusivist scholars developed an insular approach based on ancient Islamic literature and a complete refusal to engage with the contemporary West (Metcalf 2002, pp. 7–8). There are a lot of Muslims who agree with this exclusive way of thinking. These people are also called “traditionalists” because they strictly follow the traditional rituals. They follow a view of Islam that can be called “the belief system of the average Muslim”. This view is reflected in the teachings of official religious leaders such as imams, muftis, and mowlavis who follow a moral code and try to follow sharia to the letter (Masud 2009, p. 56). This approach, as its name suggests, is “radical” and rejects anything Western. Many exclusivists believe that Sharia law should be interpreted literally and claims that the Qur’ān and Sunn’ah include all of the information Muslims require. This group believes in revivalism as an attempt to transform Islam from within so that it may better face the challenges of the West. This is actually the fundamental movement and is considered to be a modern phenomenon that has arisen in response to the challenges posed by modernization and globalization.

According to Joseph, fundamentalism represents a rejection of the cultural and intellectual traditions of Islam, and a narrow and dogmatic interpretation of the religion that is out of step with its broader historical and cultural context (Nasr 2009). Some exclusivists are peaceful in the sense that they don’t do much more than peacefully express their opinions and avoid anything “Western” in their private lives or tiny communities. Other exclusivist groups are aggressive and militant in their opposition to “anything Western”. Between these two extremes, there are other types of exclusivists who are active in various ways but do not resort to violence to achieve their goals.

6. Inclusivist–Integrationist Movement

This group believes that as long as Western knowledge benefits Muslims, there is no reason to reject it. According to this approach, the modern West is a place of knowledge, progress, and wealth, and Muslims have to strive to be like it. The contemporary modernist approach is a method of removing Islamic norms and rituals that are incompatible with modern ideals and institutions (Saeed et al. 2021). Additionally, this a total embrace of Western-style modernity, and has been identified with the new and expanding elites educated in the West. These people thought that the way Islam was taught and used in their countries and practiced in the courts was a big reason for the Muslim’s civilizational decline. In contrast, the rejectionist response was represented by the uneducated masses and the clerical establishments. From their point of view, the main thing that led to the crisis was the loss of Islamic values and piety, as well as the failure to run society according to Islamic law (Kia 1995, pp. 422–48). The inclusivism reformers were motivated by a desire to rejuvenate and modernize Islamic thought, and to make it more relevant to the changing social, political, and cultural realities of the time (Hourani 1983).
7. Exclusivist–Inclusivist Movement

This movement appeared during a time of religious revival, when modernity (the Western framework of knowledge) was accepted, but only if it was first “Islamized” (Lapidus 1997, pp. 444–60). Inclusivist scholars have tried to find a middle ground between the above two extreme approaches. They have worked hard to prove that Islam does not stop scientific and other progress. They pushed for a kind of reform in Islam, such as bringing back the religion’s rationalist and scientific spirit and reinterpreting its basic beliefs in a way that fits better with Muslims’ lives and contemporary needs (Mohamed et al. 2019). Today, these different ways of thinking are a problem in many Muslim societies. Each one promotes its own ideals and models while putting down the other(s) (Ibrahim 2018, pp. 108–32).

8. Faith and Reason in the Western Modernism

Modernization theory is used to explain how societies become more modern. In the 1950s and 1960s, “classical” theories of modernization were based on the sociological work of Karl Marx (1818–1883 AD), Emile Durkheim (1858–1917 AD), and Max Weber (1864–1920 AD). The writings of Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1989 AD) also had a big impact on these theories (Janos 1986, pp. 99–101). The term “modernity” first originated around the end of the eighteenth century, when it was applied to the contemporary period in the West, with its overtones of advancement in all sectors, contradicting everything associated to the past (because the past embodies all that is old). The term “modernism” has been used to describe Western societies since the Renaissance era. It encompasses economic rationalization as well as rationality in social structure, and it was viewed as a coherent social movement that began with the end of the Christian Middle Ages and progressed to capitalist civilizations marked by renewal and modernization. These societies went through secularization, rationality, individualism, cultural differentiation, industrialization, and technological advancement. After being freed from the Church’s closed cocoon, the Western mind grew up and became independent through modernism. With the end of the scientific revolution, science obtained a new way to find out things and established a new view of the universe. McGrath (2020) asserts that after Newton, science became the primary way to comprehend the universe, leaving no room for spiritual beings (McGrath 2020, p. 200). The scientific mind was able to understand the hidden logic of nature and reach a level of dominance over its powers. One result of this was that religion was replaced by science as the first intellectual reference, and faith and reason were completely split. The move to secularization and the end of theology were indicators of the reality of a modern world in which belief in the existence of God no longer forms societies, and modernity’s believers began talking about the retreat of religions and the death of great utopias. After man is deified in place of the Creator God, religion is no longer a communal matter but a private one (Chaves 1994, pp. 749–74).

What Western philosophy has come to can be summed up in four conclusions that have been used for a long time and are still used in modern philosophies and ideologies, not just in Europe but all over the world. In fact, these assumptions are what Western philosophers have learned about religion. The first was “religion is the opium of the people” (Marx 1844, pp. 261–71) by Karl Marx (1818–1883 AD), and the second was “religion is the slave revolution” by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900 AD) (Nietzsche 2006, p. 56) The third was that “religion is a psychological desire” by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939 AD) (Freud 1961, p. 31), and the fourth is Bertrand Russell (1872–1970 AD), who saw that religion is “childish thinking” because it is based on fear, and so it is bad and grows in people who have not grown up yet (Russell and Blackburn 2020, p. 56). The first metaphor compares religion to a well-known drug. The second compares it to a revolution with all its meaning in political history from the desire for psychological and physical freedom. The third compares it to a simple expression of what is repressed in the human soul. The fourth refers that everything is related to the world of childhood, from not knowing enough to relying on others, and puts it on the neck of religion.
In addition, rationality becomes one of the philosophical bases of the modern Western thought. It means putting everything to the test of the mind, which is a careful search for causes and reasons (Gilje and Skirbekk 2017, pp. 7–8). According to this philosophy, nothing happens without a cause. Because of this, both spiritual reality and natural reality had to make sense. This philosophy got rid of everything that was not rational or not of a rational nature. So, in Western philosophy, reason has become the final judge of what is true, what is right, and what is good. At this point, it was important for Western philosophy to have a clear, rational language and vocabulary that could describe the real world, which can only be sensed, seen, and experienced according to this new epistemology. Therefore, in the new Western philosophical language, the concepts of revelation, paradise, human destiny, and all other religious words become meaningless, and reason became the focus of Western thought from a philosophical point of view and rationalism the only absolute value and the line between the world of ancient gods and the world of modern man. In this sense, Feenberg (2011) argues that the concept of rationality developed along with the concept of modernity. Rationality is the foundation of modernity, and the capacity to think and reason is the domain of modernity. People are only able to acquire new information and determine their place in the world with their minds. This was an unavoidable and essential component of contemporary Western philosophy, and there ought to be no other way to get to the bottom of things and to discover the truth (Feenberg 2011, pp. 865–73).

9. Reason in Islamic Epistemology

While modern Western thought considers the centrality of reason as a source of knowledge. Islam, in contrast, acknowledges a variety of knowledge sources, including revelation, sensory perception, history, reasoning, and intuition. Islam considers this an all-encompassing way to get to the origins of true knowledge, which is different from the flaws of approaches that are only based on reason or on the conscience and heart (Mohamed et al. 2019, pp. 2–3). From an Islamic point of view, reason is one of the tools of knowledge. It has its own limits, field, and scope where it can work, and within those limits, it can do a lot. Yet there are some areas that reason cannot storm, some places that it cannot get into, and some things that it cannot judge (Von Grunebaum 1962, pp. 1–17).

Keeping in mind these two different points of view, it is easy to guess how Western thought and Islam see the relationship between God, man, and nature.

God is not the most important thing in modern Western thought (Depoortere 2008, pp. 37–41). On the other hand, Islam has a lot to say about God and man, and Islamic philosophy seems to be mostly about God and man, while nature is relatively missing. In Islamic thought, nature acts as a bridge between God and man while the modern Western concept of God comes from the need to explain why the laws of science are the same as the laws of nature. In other words, the Islamic mind is told to think about nature and figure out who made it. This epistemological difference led to many other propositions regarding different issues of existence. For example, relying on their respective epistemology, Western philosophers believed that ethics should be based on knowledge, whereas Islamic scholars believed that knowledge should be based on ethics (Syed et al. 2020, pp. 287–320).

10. The Causes of the Intellectual Crisis

This brief analysis demonstrates the distinction between Islamic and Western epistemology. The Islamic and Western views seem to be on opposite sides about where knowledge comes from, what it is, and what it is for. On the one hand, the sources of knowledge in Western thought are limited to what is seen, felt, and experienced, while in Islam, it includes revelation and all other means of persuasion. On the other hand, we find that in the Islamic view, the idea of knowledge is to get closer to God and please Him, as well as to get the most out of nature. Yet in the West, it is seen as a way to take over and control nature. Because of the escalation of these epistemological conflicts, a new discussion over the relative merits of faith and reason has begun. According to Islamic thought, faith and reason are complementary knowledge sources rather than incompatible
opposites. Western thought, on the other hand, holds that faith is a fallacy and reason is the only true path to knowing (Sallah 2015, p. 11). In this regard, Kalin (2017) observes that, given the context of Western civilizations, these epistemological shifts are not surprising. However, these novel concepts almost shocked Muslim communities and were received with strong resistance throughout the Islamic world, resulting in a perplexing intellectual crisis (Kalin 2017, pp. 65–98).

In addition to the fundamental epistemological divide between the West and the Islamic world, the West’s aggressive military campaign against the Islamic world has played a significant role in hardening Muslim attitudes toward modern Western philosophy. All these ideas, after all, were considered alien concepts imposed upon the Muslim World from above by the dominant colonial European powers in the wake of the Ottoman Empire’s deconstruction. A recent study shows that the Muslim majority’s negative reaction to modern Western philosophy was quite a response to the West, since it was brought to Muslim countries during the time of colonial aggressions in the late 18th century. Muslims have been slow to adopt any Western ideas for these reasons. In addition, historical anecdotes indicate that, prior to the seventeenth century, at least some Muslims had begun to worry about the deterioration of Muslim societies. Muslims were forced to confront the unsettling reality that their civilization was deteriorating as compared to the West’s because of their interaction with modern philosophy (Amin 2000, pp. 155–75).

On this point, Kalin (2017) argues that “the secular models of modernization as imported phenomena have frequently not worked because they have not been established in Muslims’ own national and cultural traditions” (Kalin 2017, pp. 65–98). Aside from these epistemological and historical reasons, pre-conciliar theology is one of the reasons for this intellectual crisis and one of the reasons why the Islamic world has been slow to accept modernization (Lingier and Vandewiele 2021, p. 388).

It is evident from the above discussion that modern Western thought has caused significant intellectual turbulence in Islamic societies, and it is also clear that many intellectuals have attempted to make sense of this predicament and deal with it through various intellectual reform programs. As we said previously, modern Western thought was introduced to Muslim communities unexpectedly, and Muslims were not ready in a historical or psychological framework to embrace these concepts. As a result, Islamic societies’ resistance to Western thinking was very understandable (Moaddel and Talattof 2016, p. 33). Now, these old questions are being talked about again in different ways and at different levels in Muslim societies, but we do not see any serious talk about how the East and West have dealt with these questions in the past. Because of this, it is important to understand these issues in the context of the history of oriental and occidental thought patterns.

11. Discussion and Conclusions

What is the truth, and how do we know it? Philosophers, including many Muslims, have struggled for centuries with how they see reality. They have asked fundamental questions, such as, How do you know if your knowledge is correct and if your perceptions of reality are true? These questions are raised in the branches of philosophy known as epistemology and ontology. Both of these subfields have been extensively discussed by prominent philosophers throughout history, including al-Kindī (805–873 AD), al-Fārābī (870–950 AD), Ibn Sinā (980–1037 AD), Freud (1856–1939 AD), Russell (1872–1970 AD), Hume (1711–1776 AD), and Kant (1724–1804 AD), amongst others. In contrast to ontology, which analyzes problems about what constitutes reality and how one can understand existence, epistemology is concerned with fundamental questions regarding what constitutes genuine knowledge and how one might gain it. To put it another way, our answer to the question, “How can I know reality?” would be our epistemology, and our answer to the question, “What is reality?” would be our ontology (Goertz and Mahoney 2012, pp. 205–16). Indeed, Islamic answers to these fundamental questions differ from those of Western intellectuals.
These differences revolve around the question of how one should establish or acknowledge the very nature of existence itself. In the Islamic perspective, it makes sense to accept something unseen if doing so does not run counter to reason. According to this concept, a situation or order is accepted even if it has to do with the unseen world. In contrast, a widely held belief in the modern Western world is that the unseen realm is either an illusion or irrelevant to human cognition. This is the main topic of discussion which makes a genuine distinction between Eastern and Western perspectives regarding faith and reason.

Gilje and Skirbekk (2017) say that the current idea of reason is based on the effects of different historical causes on the human mind, as well as the purposeful assessment and use of those effects (Gilje and Skirbekk 2017, p. 33). One of the most important reasons is that Western societies have been very successful at getting rid of superstition and religious dogmatism in areas where reason and experience are important. The reformation movement helped push religious beliefs to the sidelines. Science, on the other hand, helped people understand the natural causes of events and phenomena and bring them into human knowledge. This has led to a more rational and empirical understanding of nature. Yet in Western thought, the idea of existence went beyond this. It also included the existence of the absolute unseen world and the fact that there is no way to connect with it (Sprintzen 2009, pp. 10–17). So, what were the reasons and causes for the West to have such a narrow view of what it means to be alive, and what intellectual steps did it take to get to this point? This is a very important topic that needs to take a close look at how reason has changed in Eastern and Western philosophies.

In Western thought, the modern concept of existence and the concept of reason that underlies it are seen as the result of a rational activity that took place over centuries in a certain historical setting. The main goal of this activity has been to come up with a new concept of man. The modern concept of existence has mostly been shaped by the limitations and needs of this new concept of man. As the concept of man has become more limited, so has the concept of existence. The western philosophers know very well and deeply that limiting existence to the visible world creates a crisis for human thought, because the most basic need of human thought is existence itself. In terms of having a purposeful meaning for existence, it is not possible to look for the meaning of life without including the unseen world in the concept of existence and thinking of the unseen and the visible as connected.

In Western thought, the answer to this very hard question is to come up with a new definition of human wisdom and say that all of previous human wisdom is false and based on superstition (Obinyan 2012, pp. 1–11). Man is one of the animals whose life has no meaning beyond meeting the instinctual needs of biological survival and taking control of nature. Yes, man became smart by accident. This gives him the ability to meet his instinctual needs in a better and more organized way than other animals. Ethics are only needed to regulate human contracts and affairs with each other. Furthermore, trying to figure out what life is all about is one of the biggest mistakes that the human mind has ever made. As an individual, man can still believe in this illusion if he wants to, but religious values should not have any effect on how human society is put together as a whole (Russell 2013, pp. 30–37).

Yet it’s important to note that unlike the Islamic world in Western societies, this “animalistic” view of man and the decision to leave religious values out of human life formation did not cause the kind of intellectual crisis, distraction, or divide that could stop the West’s civilizational journey. The reason for this, according to the Sahlin (2008), is because the collective consciousness of the West is fully aware of its history, its several stages of intellectual progress, and the intellectual possibilities and propositions that come along with each stage (Sahlin 2008, p. 7). On the other hand, bringing all these modern ideas to Muslim societies was not a question of religion and reason that we have to think about in our own cultural context. Instead, it was a way to change the way people think. It has happened in the form of a rule that is imposed on religious beliefs based on the idea. In other words, the question does not come to the Islamic collective consciousness as a
question. Instead, it comes with a predetermined answer and a demand that you accept that answer. All the previous assumptions and faith-based answers to this question no longer have any value in the eyes of modern knowledge and wisdom (Catto et al. 2017, p. 226).

Due to the absence of a context in Islamic intellectual history, when this position is presented in Islamic societies, the position of the modern concept of reason regarding the existential status of religious belief and the significance of religious values for human society is not present in its entirety. At the level of communal consciousness, it inevitably produces a profound existential anguish and a serious antagonistic division. This distinction leaves some possibility for discourse in the stage of secularism’s political idealization, but the following level is doctrinal secularism, which amounts to the demonization of religion per se and its place in human history.

The main tragedy in this position, from a human perspective, is that while sharing the same identity, history, and culture, the people on either side of the line turn into ferocious rivals, accusing one another of infidelity, treason, or simply being ignorant and backward. Traditional, culturally conscious people referred to people who adopted these concepts and changed their cultural identity as having committed “infidelity” and “treason.” The historical and cultural manifestations of this traditional idea are viewed with contempt and mockery by those with a modern concept of reason who have disassociated themselves from traditional cultural consciousness, and they try to convey this to others in order to counterbalance and to avoid the perception or accusation of cultural “treason” against them. A predatory mindset results from this type of thinking, in which each side views its primary objective as discrediting the other side and creating opportunities for itself (Watt 2013, pp. 89–95).

12. The Need for Reviewing Prior Discourse

With this in mind, the topic of faith and reason must be put within its proper historical and cultural context. On the one hand, we must have an in-depth understanding of the history of thought in Western societies and the historical causes that led to the formation of new concepts of man, reason, and existence, as well as the intellectual tools necessary to make them the only viable option for contemporary human consciousness. On the other hand, a sound understanding of this historical oppression, which has created a deep division in Eastern and especially Islamic societies at the level of consciousness and cultural identity, is our collective need, and it is the shared responsibility of both the East and West to find a constructive solution. The debate over faith and reason must be placed in a historical and cultural framework that includes issues with roots in Islamic theology. This facilitates the dialogue and makes it more acceptable to Muslims. In Islamic societies, individuals have already expressed their opinions and judgments on a variety of issues, and they will continue to do so in the future. However, the nature, conditions, and requirements of the dialogue between the two cultural positions are quite different, and at this level, there is a need to create an academic understanding of this debate in a cultural setting where the role and responsibility of intellectuals are very important (Smith and Smith 2007, pp. 21–22). The dialogue in this scenario could be based on issues such as the existence of God, as atheism is not a new concern for Muslim societies. It has always been a reasonable possibility in history and some people have been atheists at different times. In particular, the intellectual tradition of Muslims is familiar, with positions such as dualism and the denial of prophethood on rational grounds. The case of naturalists and the Pharaoh’s denial of God are presented in great depth in the holy Qur’an, and these topics have very deeper roots in the Islamic tradition (Ali 2006). Modern Western thought has done a lot of work to make it possible for people to think and feel in a way that is compatible with atheism. As a result, atheism has the same cultural power as the religions that came before it, whether they were polytheistic or monotheistic (Nasir 2022, pp. 1–12). From this point of view, the fact that different levels and types of atheism are becoming accepted in the thoughts and feelings of people in other parts of the world is neither surprising nor very strange or unexpected in terms of how history works. Muslims have been engaging in this argument
for centuries, and many encounters between Muslims and atheists are documented in Islamic religious texts, so it should not be too difficult for Muslim communities to accept the subject of God as a talking point for debate with the West. Otherwise, after it has been clear that Western civilizations have adopted modern Western thought in certain historical contexts, and that they did not find it hard to do so because it has deep roots in their philosophy, would it be reasonable to expect Islamic societies to accept this modern Western concept of faith and reason without any conditions and relate it to their history and culture? Or is it conceivable to persuade any Muslim to renounce his cultural identity by stating that his earlier ideas were the result of fear and immaturity, were founded on imaginations, and had no basis in the real world? Obviously, this is not a proper argument that can persuade any Muslim, because even in this case, the modern Western explanation of religion as starting from man’s fear is not a logical argument. It is, rather, a position resulting from an arrogant psychological posture (Kenny 2015, pp. 45–46). This is because this “argument” contributes nothing to the solution of the issue at hand. If the nonexistence of God has been demonstrated by any empirical or logical argument, then the preceding order can be imposed by justifying religion; yet the leading atheists (philosophers and scientists) concede that the actual claim is false. It is impossible to definitively deny the existence of God. In this instance, it is illogical to assert that humans formed religion by employing their imaginations out of fear. In the lack of a logical argument, this is only a “dictum” that imposes an assumption on the other side (Nasir 2022, pp. 1–12). In this case, a similar psychological order can be applied to modern atheism by changing the hypothetical position in the same way that atheists do. If existence is not disproven and the idea that God exists is accepted, it is easy to explain modern atheism from a psychological point of view by saying that people have too much “sense of knowledge arrogance”. When man saw a small example of the many unknown facts about the universe and learned how to solve some of life’s problems by discovering physical laws, he became like a heartless man because he thought he knew the ultimate truth about the universe and did not need to believe in God anymore (Nasir 2022, pp. 1–12).

The position that the Western tradition has reached about the relationship between faith and reason is a matter of context and does not apply to non-Western societies. If we look at the history of the idea of separating religion and the state, we find that it comes from the separation of the church and the state. This separation is the result of the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Modernity periods in Europe, all of which knew how to separate the temporal and the spiritual, or worldly life and religious life, because each had its own space. After the disintegration and collapse of the feudal production relations that supported the authority of the Church, as well as the violent struggle between the new nation-states and the Church, religious reform movements emerged and were supported by the new nation-states to overthrow the authority of the Church and the priesthood. This led to the overthrow of the feudal production relations that supported the authority of the Church. The Protestant movement, which exploded in central Europe and was led by Martin Luther 1483–1546, and the Puritan movement, which emerged in Britain, were at the forefront of those reformist religious movements. The Catholic Church was a state within a state that monopolized the religious meaning and punished anyone who disagreed with it. In addition to its monopoly on the moral meaning, the Catholic Church also monopolized the social, political, and cultural meanings. The Church had imposed its control and patriarchy on all people as a result of the high financial taxes and numerous duties as well as the innovations and corruptions it introduced into the original form of the Christian religion, such as indulgences and other practices. Along with a belief in the will of God, Martin Luther’s system of values was founded on self-control and self-discipline. This is because moral behavior should adhere to the purity of the soul in order for a person to approach God, and Luther’s system of values changed the course of European social, economic, and political history. Thus, the conflict with the Church resulted in a movement of liberation and emancipation from priestly authority and the ideas of the Church. It also resulted for the first time in history that religion was separated from the state, or what is known as
the concept of secularism in Europe (Ferrari 1988, p. 533). In the Islamic context, Muslim societies have never witnessed such animosity between mosque and state. As a result, Muslim societies’ experiences with religion are vastly different from those of Western civilizations. Yet even though modern Western thought is based on the history of a certain culture, it has a universal appeal. The point to talk about here is that if this position is not acceptable to Muslims on a cultural level, do they not also need to know how the position of the dominant civilization has changed over time and how it might be able to appeal to everyone? Does it matter if we understand these questions deeply from a cultural point of view or not? What other intellectual foundations have been laid for understanding the universe, life, and man by the thought that does not believe in the unseen world and then takes a position against it? What are modern thought’s problems with accepting a view of the universe that is based on the existence of the unseen world? What are its many complex criticisms of the religious view? How has modern thought changed the important moral and philosophical ideas that were formed in human history by the combination of religious belief and rational thought? How and in what ways does modern thought support this new view of life, either directly or indirectly?

At the moment, none of these questions are being given serious consideration in Muslim societies, and the majority of Muslim scholars are too preoccupied with pointing out its flaws, weaknesses, or internal contradictions in partial contexts without judging the intellectual, practical, or historical strength of modern thought. To put it another way, the contemporary concept of existence appeals to many people despite its flaws and contradictions, and its power and efficacy can be seen and felt in the world as it is today (Nasir 2022, pp. 1–12).

Apart from medieval European societies, where the Christian civilization created a religious society, we find almost all civilizations throughout history have accepted people and groups with different religious or nonreligious beliefs. Today, all nations accept this kind of modernization in their society. Yet these ideas cannot be spread at the cost of or by giving up the nation’s cultural identity (Stone 2002, pp. 121–31). Every civilization allows this change while keeping its political and ideological control, and every civilization can keep this expansion if it meets the same conditions. If the change threatens a cultural identity and sovereignty, it is no longer a good reason to do it, and it is almost impossible to keep doing it. To get this simple point, we can give the example of Western society today. The basic identity of Western civilization is the separation of religion and state and the limitation of religion to a certain area. All of its tolerance, diversity, neutrality, equality, freedom, etc., depend on the fact that the cultural identity is not challenged. People think it is a problem that Muslims live in Western societies because they could cause trouble for both the dominant religious identity and the secular cultural identity of the West. In a Pew survey about Islamophobia in the West from 2006, most people said they were worried about the spread of Islam in the West because they saw it as a threat to Western culture. (Wike and Grim 2010, pp. 4–25). The Western anti-migrant attitude is another example of Western concerns about Muslims, and according to a study, anti-migrant racism has increased in Europe at a faster rate over the last two decades, and Islamophobia has proven to be the highest, most acute, and widely spread form of racism, with most people in Europe viewing Muslim migrants as a future threat to Western cultural identity (Perocco 2018, pp. 25–40). Muslims are often used as scapegoats in Western societies when the economy or government is in trouble. Some people think that Islam and the estimated 20 million Muslims who live in the European Union are inherently dangerous to the European way of life, even in places where Muslims have lived for generations. The idea that there is an ongoing “Islamization” or invasion of Europe has been fed by the rise of xenophobic and populist parties across Europe (Afshar et al. 2005, pp. 262–83). In the Islamic context, the question that is up for debate is whether Muslim societies should not be able to keep their cultural identity and link it to their self-determination. If so, why not? If that is the case, what does it mean to talk about secularism in the Islamic world? Is this debate with us just a theoretical discussion? These are the basic questions that need
to be answered in the cultural and historical contexts. All intellectuals who want to build and keep Muslim societies stable, no matter what their intellectual and cultural leanings are, can address this question. The challenges that contemporary Western thought has posed for Muslim societies are significant enough to cause today’s Muslims to experience existential dread and an identity crisis. When it comes to religion and religious views and feelings, for instance, we have individuals who have no idea and have not been educated about what has been stable in the modern world in terms of religion. What are the historical origins, and how do they influence Muslim societies? Because Muslims communities are not introduced to the situation in its proper historical context, they consider any question about religion as an existential threat, necessitating a reaction at that level. On the other hand, there are many confused individuals who believe that religion is at the basis of all or most political, social, and moral issues, and that any constructive change is impossible unless religion is marginalized, as it is in most Western cultures. Because these people desire immediate change but do not seem to be able to get it in Muslim-dominated cultures, the most typical way these people react to religion is by mocking faiths and religious beliefs (Nasir 2022, pp. 1–12).

13. Recommendations

It is imperative to examine the topic of faith and reason and other controversial issues between the East and West within its proper historical and cultural milieu. To achieve this, it is crucial to engage in a thorough examination of the history of thought within Western societies and the factors that have led to the evolution of novel concepts of human nature, reason, and existence. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge the historical oppressions that have perpetuated the division between Western and Islamic societies at the level of cultural consciousness and identity.

The discourse on faith and reason can be contextualized within a historical and cultural framework that encompasses issues stemming from Islamic theology to foster the dialogue and make it more amenable to the Muslim population. This could be anchored in the issues that have intellectual space in the Islamic philosophical tradition such as the issue of the existence of God, as atheism has historically been a viable option in Islamic societies and has been a subject of philosophical inquiry for centuries.

It is noted that the Western thought has facilitated the embrace of atheism as a cultural force, which is on par with religion. However, it is unreasonable to expect Islamic societies to automatically adopt the Western perspective on faith and reason without taking into account their own cultural and historical background. In addition, the Western tradition’s understanding of the relationship between faith and reason is context-specific and may not be applicable to non-Western societies. For instance, the bifurcation of religion and the state, which emerged as a result of the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Modernity periods in Europe, may not be congruent with other cultural contexts. The relationship between faith and reason and similar philosophical disputes cannot be understood through a singular lens. A nuanced appreciation of the cultural and historical context and the role of intellectuals in the discourse is essential to comprehending the intricacies of the relationship. Future research should focus on the themes that are more agreed upon between the Eastern and Western philosophical traditions in order to promote a constructive dialogue and a deeper understanding of the complexities involved.

14. Conclusions

The exposure of the Muslim world to modern Western philosophical thought occurred during a juncture in which they were insufficiently intellectually or emotionally prepared to apprehend and assimilate these innovative ideas. This resulted in a remarkable degree of intellectual agitation and a diverse array of responses from Islamic intellectuals, ranging from exclusively repudiating these ideas to inclusively embracing them and everything in between. In contradistinction, the Western world was historically and psychologically primed for the assimilation of these philosophical concepts, thereby resulting in their com-
prehensive acceptance and facilitating their ongoing journey of cultural and intellectual development. However, the lack of preparation within Islamic societies has engendered an unpredictable reception to these novel philosophical notions. Consequently, it is imperative that the ongoing discourse within the Muslim world regarding modern Western philosophy be reexamined within the framework of a comprehensive and nuanced intellectual and historical context. This necessitates an appreciation of historical events and an acknowledgment, both intellectually and emotionally, that society and history may not align with preconceived expectations and that it is possible to incorporate novel philosophical concepts while still preserving one’s religious and cultural values. The daunting task that confronts Muslim intellectuals is to redirect the discourse towards themes that are endemic to the Muslim intellectual heritage, to educate the current generation, and to foster in them a psychological and intellectual acumen that enables them to navigate the complexities of an environment that may not be to their liking with a realistic and circumspect outlook.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**References**


Sallah, Asmahan. 2015. Islamic modernists and discourse on reason as a reconciliatory argument between Islam and the western enlightenment. International Journal of Islamic Thought 7: 11. [CrossRef]
Von Grunebaum, Gustave E. 1962. Concept and function of reason in Islamic ethics. Orisens 15: 1–17. [CrossRef]
Walzer, Richard. 1950. The rise of Islamic philosophy. Orisens 3: 1–19. [CrossRef]

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.