

# The Critical Tradition in Islam

by

*Azhar Ibrahim Alvee*

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A critical tradition begins with the recognition and appreciation for the space of critical thinking. The latter means the ability to discern and avert the inconsistencies, illogical and dehumanizing ideas in our midst. The prime purpose of critical thinking is to improve the existential conditions of man, which revolves around his freedom, liberty, accountability, spirituality, affiliation to his community, cultural identity and most importantly, the manner in which he unfolds his human potentiality and strengths. Critical thinking gives life to the growth and development of ideas, it ensures the correction against falsehood; clarity over ambivalence; the unmasking of ideological distortions and the creative interpretations of what already exist or accepted. Most importantly it raises the unthought of as that we need to address and deliberate. The main constituents of critical thinking are: ( a ) creative attitude in thinking about human predicaments and ( b ) the persistency to questions established ideas which are deemed to limit the unfolding human potentialities and that affects his freedom. ( against human tyranny ). The importance of critical thinking in religious thought as a human endeavour, should be considered as both his/her rights and duties. The meaning of any living and substantive religious system can only exist if there is a constant rethinking and reinterpretation of the religious universals within a particular cultural context in a certain historical period.

It is important at this juncture to emphasize that a critical thinking in religious thought is taken in a broadest definition/scope. This means religious thought is not exclusively confined to ritualistic obligations, or concerning the intuitive feeling of spirituality. Certainly these two aspects are the integral part of one's religious feeling/thinking. Religious thought, entails all aspects of human life, be it concerning man's moral-ethics, socialization, education, socio-economic affairs, cultural and political affiliation and the like, apart from the human conviction of the efficacy and the ultimate union with the Divine mystery. What is essential in critical reading/thinking is the will to identify and denounce the folly of cultural essentialism, not a narcissistic proclamation of one's superior tradition over the other. The neglect to develop critical thinking or to defend its viability means allowing the stagnancy and the corruption of ideas. Only through critical thinking that reforms can be made possible, rethinking made valid and dissenting space acknowledged. Indeed, the contemporary discourse on Islam is greatly in need of this.

Generally a critical mind is able to recognize the importance of preventing intellectual corruption apart from the ability to affirm the strength and potential of human altruism. This means the ability to embark on a diagnostic analysis of the social conditions and the creative suggestions of solving human problems. Critical thinking is not necessarily anti-establishment in its posture. It is an intellectual and ethical honesty that make possible for man to have the courage to speak truth to power. A critical mind ideally knows no partisan, and no exception granted when it comes to examining a particular group's ideas. Without critical thinking dehumanization will inevitably resulted. A religious life without a

critical thinking is an imitative life and the surrender to potential/emergent despotism. The vitality of the religion therefore depends highly on the extent in which its adherents are committed towards critical thinking, unless one has already submitted to the idea of an 'authentic' fossilized religion.

The nurturing of a critical thinking is the outcome of various factors in society. Some factors are structural/institutions while others involve a real sense of human commitment and the will to think and criticize. No single factor is crucial than the rest, however. The prospects for developing a critical thinking will be enhanced if we also take serious attention to its impediments. First is **a developed sense of history**. A critical sense of history is a basic foundation for any reformulation of our thought. Being critical to our history does not mean its rejection or abandonment of it altogether. Critical historical reading combines a judicious selection of history and a rigour in correcting distortions, excesses and corruption of meaning as committed by historical actors/ groups. Without a critical mind, the reading of history remains superficial, awaiting to be exaggerated into historical romanticism and therefore ideological distortions. Affirming the cultivation of a sound historical thinking, Fazlur Rahman opines: "Muslim must decide what exactly is to be conserved, what is essential and relevant for the erection of an Islamic future, what is fundamentally Islamic and what is purely 'historical'" ( Rahman, *Islam*, 1979 ) "A simple return to past is of course, a return to graves...But the real problem of Muslim society is to assimilate, adapt, modify and reject the forces generated within its own fabric .... A simple return to the past is certainly no way to solve this problem--- unless we want to delude ourselves." ( Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History*, 1984 ). In short, appreciation of history must be done in a cautious and creative ways.

Second, is **the recognition and acceptance of the pluralistic traditions of Islam**. The thoroughness in appreciating the pluralistic intellectual traditions is crucial for the nurturing of a critical thinking in our religious thought. Generally, the recognition and appreciation of the pluralistic traditions of Islam that can be generally identified as ( a ) the *aqliyah* tradition ( the rationalist philosophy ); ( b ) the *naqliyah* ( the religious science by the orthodox savants ); ( c ) the *kbasyf* tradition ( the mystical/illuminative traditions ) and ( d ) *fiqh* ( the social ordering through legalism ). Put in another way, there are *Islams* – i.e. multiplicity of traditions that have throughout history, competing to define Islam. Apart from this the appreciation various theological schools ( Ashaarism, Muktaizilite, Ibadism etc ) and well as jurisprudential *mazhabs* and sufistic groups ( the ethical sufism versus the speculative variants ), including that of the Sunni-Shiite divide. A sense of objective and critical reading of history is therefore essential.

Third is **discerning appreciation of text and contexts**. As we know, a Textual based religious traditions like us opens up an array of textual interpretations and criticisms. In the classical past, the development of textual interpretations reached a fairly high standard, based on the attainment of human knowledge at that time. A critical thinking will see a religious text always in the contexts in which a particular idea is being revealed, narrated or documented. Ideas do not exist in vacuum, and this includes Revelation for it is also contextual – that is it addressed to the needs and challenges that the Beloved Prophet was encountering. Furthermore, the commentaries on the Text ( Qur'an ) is also seen as a product of the context, -- that is, how the interpreters mediated the Texts with the context of his time and the socio-cultural background of the interpreters themselves. To Muslims,

the Scripture is Divine for it is God's Word revealed to the Prophet. However, nowhere it could be asserted that its interpretations of the Texts are divine, protected by infallibility of the interpreters. All interpretations are human undertaking and must be subjected to human revaluations and reappraisals. A critical mind will be thorough in examining ( a ) how a text is being interpreted; ( b ) who interpreted it ; ( c ) when it was interpreted and ( d ) where it was interpreted. Other considerations are: ( e ) what methodological approaches used in the interpretation; ( f ) how different one particular interpretation from the rest ( be it over time or space ), etc.

Throughout our religious history a great many of learned man have studiously study the Text, much to the neglect of the *context*, that is, the reality outside a text, which are taking place. In this instance, one needs to remember how the Beloved Prophet exemplifies his wisdom on this matter. In explaining what shall befall Muslim to Zaid ibn Labeed, the Prophet said: "And that [misfortune] would take place when knowledge dissolves." Zaid responded: "How could knowledge dissolve while we study the Qur'an and teach it to our children and our children will teach it to their children." The Prophet quickly responded: "Woe unto you Ibn Labeed. I thought of you as one of the bright minds of Medina. Are not the Torah and the Bible in the hands of the Jews and the Christians, who are reading them but are not benefiting from their content?" The point that Prophet made, is not so much about the irrelevancy of the scriptures of the other religious communities, but the neglect of that community of believers to neglect the reality outside text. ( i.e. contexts ) In short, any society that hold on to text and words without looking at what the words refer to, will very soon faced with the challenge of an obsolete intellectual-ethical thinking.

Fourth is **the ethical concern in the deliberation of man's existential conditions.** A critical mind is reformistic in nature because it desires for the search of truth and the betterment of what already attained. An intellectual endeavour will only have substance if it is rooted to address the problems of man. In other words, such critical thinking does not operate as a form of academic vanity – claiming for a purely academic exploration --- but an intellectual commitment to address common human problems. Any intellectual project ( which requires a critical mind ) is devoid of any human use if it is nor rooted to answer the basic human moral-ethical inquiry. Critical thinking can only come into the forefront if there is not only a genuine consciousness to tackle the vital problems of the society but also a moral courage to resist any form of domination, prejudices, corruption, ambivalence and indifferences. All human ideas and versions of interpretations/formulations are fallible and must be subjected to scrutiny.

Fifth, **the existence of democratic attitude in recognizing and accepting diversity.** The democratic attitude of recognizing and accepting differences is a hallmark of a critical ethical-intellectual tradition. The diversity of human views and thinking, conditioned by historical necessity and cultural context is seen as a strength rather than weakness/limitation. As it is, Qur'anic injunction has made clear that diversity created for mankind in the hope of man's compete for the good of common humanity. Respect for differences does not prevent one from identifying common human experiences. A critical mind is foremost sharp to identify the absences ( or the underdeveloped ) of ideas within ones' own religious traditions, in comparison to what is available or articulated in other traditions. As such, the critical mind willing to learn from other religious traditions and incorporated them whenever necessary. Most importantly this democratic attitude entails the

**accountability to defend and/or deliberate on the positions that one has taken or dismissing it.** In our religious tradition, the wisdom of accountability of the authority is also expressed by Sayidina Ali as documented in *Nahj al-Balagha*, ( Sermon 216 ) which he is purported to say: “Do not treat me with tolerance and compromise, and do not think that I cannot take bitter truth. I do not expect you to hold me in high regard, because one who is not capable of taking bitter truth, has a much harder time in practicing truth. Hence do not refrain from speaking the truth and guiding me to justice, since I do not consider myself beyond reproach and error, unless God is my guide.” Herein lies the humility of an authority, its transparency in the name of truth, without fear or to be offended when they are being questioned or when their ideas are being scrutinized.

Furthermore, in the spirit of egalitarianism as pronounced by Sayidina Ali, a critical mind will oppose any form of distinctions based on status or creed. It rejects exclusivity, in the name of a common human dignity. In classical Islam the spirit of being sensitive and critical to prevailing or dominant ideas, is well documented. Dissenting views exists side by side with the dominant ones, often supported by princely powers. Nevertheless in the age of intellectual diversity and eclecticism, Muslim scholars are observed not only receptive of ideas amongst each other, but exhibited liberality and openness to accept foreign ideas. Indeed, this is one of the traits of a critical thinking, where it is open to accommodate and appropriate exogenous ideas as long as it is deemed as beneficial to the local context. However, this openness should not be read as a wholesale imitation, but a selective borrowing that leads to synthesis of thought.

Constraint of space would not allow us to discuss the condition for the Development of Critical Thinking in greater detail. Other points that need to be considered are: **( 1 ) the affirmation of a humanistic commitment** in appropriating the diagnostic social sciences. An exposure to diagnostic social sciences enables the critical mind to comprehend the problems at hand and to work out the possible solutions. Eg. In the case where religious elites are exposed to diagnostic social sciences, this will augur well for the religious community since its leadership able to address some of the pertinent challenges of the community, allowing for creative adjustment and accommodations. A discipline and rational critical mind will not easily swayed by clichés and myth-making. His intellectual conviction allows him to comprehend the issues objectively; bearing the responsibilities to solve it, emphatic to the situation and insightful in providing a way out. As Mannheim eloquently reminds “A diagnosis of the situation must precede any statement of new aims and proposed means.” ( *Freedom, Power, and Democratic Planning*, 1951 ) ; **( 2 ) The curiosity of the mind** – We refer this as the thirst to uncover intellectual insights of issues of intellectual and ethical significance. Example the meaning of certain terms, say, *ijtihad, ilm, adil*, etc. The will to understand means the resistant against accepting cliché which not only dulls the mind, but sways it towards intellectual indolence and tolerance for the corruption of meaning. However, this curiosity of the mind requires proper channeling and discipline. It cannot be associated with anarchic denouncement of all established ideas because a curiosity which is not based on intellectual soberness will in the end turn into nihilistic and/or fascistic tendencies. Herein lies the exposure to good readings and perspectives that are not made widely known amongst Muslim public. Such reading is a crucial step towards reflective thinking and being critical of one’s own situation. Unfortunately, in times of a rising tide of anti-intellectualism ( as exemplified in the era of the revivalist *dakwah* movement ) such readings remained at the periphery since pamphleteer Islam dominated the book market ;

**( 3 ) The acceptance of non-finality of ideas and the virtues of revisionism.** This means a constant and consistent rethinking of one's intellectual position. Rethinking is an adjustment and accommodation of the universal religious values, putting it in a particular context. This means each generation bears the responsibility to address its own problems and challenges, in contrast to the imitative attitude that sees the historical past as final, and that there is nothing more that man of contemporary times could decide or formulate.

Those who are strongly committed for critical thinking fear no harassment, intimidation and even being marginalized by the powers that be. Critical thinking also keeps in check of superstition excesses as well as uncritical reading of (religious) history. Most significantly, the critical mind is never arrogant in proclaiming to have access to absolute truth. The only truth that he is convinced is that man needs to strive to correct his own positions and views in the direction of a higher truth. To unfold human potential is without doubt a religious act. And such unfolding requires the blending of creative attitude and critical insights, coloured by a ethical-moral commitment to address common human predicament. For those who doubt and fear critical thinking, they had surrendered to passivity and ignorance. Even in the case where critical thinking induces doubt, it is still better that to fall in the abyss of ignorance. Indeed, Qur'anic admonitions of the need of man to reflect upon God' signs (*ayat*) on earth is an enjoinder towards critical thinking. Only the latter gives substance and meaning to a religious life that is committed to a fulfillment of a life of *saadah* ( or happiness ). The wisdom of our Beloved Prophet thus instructive: "The religion of man is his sense of understanding, and he who has no sense of understanding has no religion." To reiterate our point, critical thinking in religious thought is **both our duty and rights**; the neglect of the one of the two is the abandonment of our responsibility to take up the role of God's stewards on earth. Those who abandoned it must be made accountable. The responsibility of Muslims today is to provide the necessarily social and intellectual environment for critical thinking to grow. We should not, in any case allow anymore the laments of the futility to speak up, as Abu'l Ala' al-Ma'arri had pronounced a millennium ago: "My Lord is One, Unique. But He's ordered us to reflect on His Creation. Yet when we do we're dubbed as heretic. Save for natural rivalry, there would not be such books of disputation as the '*Umad* or *Mughni*."

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