

The Crisis of Reason and Arab Intellectual Underdevelopment from the Perspective of Fuad Zackaria

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ABSTRACT

According to Fuad Zackaria, the crisis of Arab Reason and its intellectual underdevelopment lies in the Arabs' ahistoricist view of the past. This view manifests itself in many forms, foremost amongst which are the prevalence of the religious mentality and the absence of the critical rationalist attitude, both of which are intimately tied to absolutism in the Arab world, as well as to the wide cultural gap separating us from our past. The ahistoricist attitude, which has utilized reason's self-critique to dismantle the independence of Arab Reason, has prevented Arab Reason from crossing over to modernist rationalism, which is based on the thinking cogito and on creativity and intellectual independence from doctrinal commands, be they religious, political or ideological. On this basis, Arab reason must, if it is to transcend its crisis, seriously engage itself in modernism-- its humanism, secularism and rationalism, which are the grounds of real democracy.

Keywords: intellectual underdevelopment, crisis.

Introduction

Contemporary Arab society is a very heterogeneous society, which is, nevertheless, characterized by a form of stagnation and frozen development. Culturally speaking, it is a chaos of views and intellectual currents. These currents, generally speaking, appeal to Islam, but interpret it in various ways, even though each tries to identify its interpretation as the only true interpretation of Islam. According to Fuad Zackaria, this observation could be a suitable starting point to understand Arab underdevelopment, despite all the talk about Islamic awakening and revivalism.

This chaos and exclusivity have arisen ever since the Arab world came in direct contact with the West and interacted with it extensively. The importance of Fuad Zackaria emanates from his deep theoretical cultural concern with this issue, and from his attempt to analyze the various Arab discourses, that deal with contemporary issues and the challenges posed by Western culture. Zackaria attempted to delve into the structural heart of these discourses.

Fuad Zackaria tended to focus in his many books on the idea of progress and on the problem of underdevelopment in contemporary Arab culture. In particular, he tried to delve into the causes for this underdevelopment. He located the problem in contemporary attitudes towards the Arabic Islamic heritage, which have hampered progress in the Arab world. This unique relationship between the present and the past and our various attitudes towards the heritage have landed Arab Reason into a quagmire and an intellectual chaos.

The Concept of Reason

According to Fuad Zackaria, the concept of Reason can be understood via its opposite in three senses. The first sense is the opposition between Reason and emotion or passion. The second is the opposition between Reason and power or authority. Power has many forms-- the family, society, the tribe and the state. However, the most intense and strongest form of power is revelation, which is the essential opposition to Reason, since it is armed with divine authority, which overwhelms Reason, its logical mechanisms and its powers of knowledge production. It tends to replace them with alternative mental pictures, that emphasize taboos and anti-taboos, rather than right and wrong, certainties and absolute

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truths, rather than questioning and exploration, and a closed space constructed on strict absolute bases, rather than an open space of discovery, change and probabilities. The third sense

is the opposition between Reason and myth, which, at one time in the past, was the only alternative to Reason, and, which, in modern times, has been opposed to Reason and deemed the symbolic expression of instinctual forces repressed by Reason and alienated by it from modern man (اراء، زكريا، 1975، 13-16).

Thus, Zackaria concludes that "Reason is a human power opposed to emotion and passion and to authority in all its forms, and which aims at eradicating all vestiges of mythical thought". (6، زكريا، 1975، اراء). However, this purely theoretical determination of the concept of Reason remains defective as long as it neglects the practical side of Reason-- i.e., the ethical and social side. With these two sides-- the theoretical and the practical-- the concept of Reason assumes its full comprehensive form in opposition to emotion, authority and myth.

This three-sided opposition can ultimately be collapsed to the fundamental opposition between Reason and myth. Myth is closely related to emotion, and mythological cognition is, in the first place, an emotional cognition. Also, myth cannot be separated from authority-- the authority of the tribe, religious conviction and the authority of absolute certainty. It is intimately related to ideology.

Having realized the importance of myth as an essential determinant of the crisis of Reason in modern Arab societies, he emphasized that the most dangerous political myths are the most widespread. These widespread political myths reflect the defective status of Arab political consciousness, and clearly reveal the ordinary citizen's "forgetfulness" of the simplest democratic principles. Two of these myths are: the myth of the unaware ruler, or the ruler, who is merciful and works for the good of his people, but who is surrounded with unworthy people; (2) the myth of the all-knowing, all-powerful, absolute ruler, who does not deign to delegate responsibilities (اراء، زكريا، 1987، 94-97). These views, which are prevalent in authoritarian regimes, are indeed myths--mere illusions, that distort people's perception of the nature of political authority and its relationships to the ruled and to its assistants. (2)

Fuad Zackaria's rationalist trend reveals itself conspicuously in his critical attitude towards the Arabic Islamic heritage-- towards both the defenders and opponents of the heritage. This attitude will be elaborated later on in this paper. Zackaria argues that the true and genuine revival of the heritage consists in transcending it and treating it as a launching pad and starting point. On the other hand, the retrogressive revival actually means its negation and its treatment as a finished product in which treasures are buried, that nobody could make use of (اراء، زكريا، 1987، 52-53).

One of the prominent features of the hegemony of mythical thought in our societies is to ground its values and epistemological system away from Reason. One of the dire consequences of that is the enormous decline of the value of science and scientific research to its lowest levels. This has been fostered by the typical political authority in the Arab world by imposing a traditionalist philosophy on our educational systems. According to Zackaria, in light of the despotic absolutist nature of Arab regimes, which leads it to reject all opposition, it has been only natural for them not to tolerate any democratic values in society. This in turn has led to the prevalence of despotic values and attitudes that do not allow an education based on free rational debates and discussions and critical thinking. Learning by rote from almost God-given textbooks is an inevitable manifestation of this inability to practice democracy, a total subservience to authority and an irrational fear of freedom and, therefore, of responsibility.

According to Zackaria, one of the manifestations of the liquidation of Reason and the triumph of mythical thought is the brain drain in the Arab world. The marginalization and crisis of Reason in the Arab world manifest themselves as the deliberate suppression of Reason and the curtailment of intellectual freedom. There are social forces that follow a policy of curtailing Reason, or even liquidating it altogether, in the name of a religious authority that supposedly knows everything, or a political authority that supposedly knows how to manage people and their lives, and thinks for them. After a while, people become accustomed to this state of affairs (اراء، زكريا، 1975، 20).

Arab Intellectual Underdevelopment

According to Zackaria, underdevelopment means the lagging behind the vital forces of the age, after having been in the forefront in bygone ages. An underdeveloped society is one that developed at one time in step with the vital forces

of the age, but that has presently lagged behind them for various historic reasons. Zackaria distinguishes between backwardness and underdevelopment. The former is the state of a society that has never been at the forefront of progress, whereas the latter is the present state of regress, after having been at the forefront of progress.

Thus, underdevelopment is intimately related to time and the relationship between past and present. The Arab world presents us with a prime example of underdevelopment, as it seems to contain all the determinants of underdevelopment, as it is specified by Fuad Zackaria. For, it was once the seat of an advanced civilization, which has however waned and declined, leaving behind a society fixed to past glories and bygone days (2008محسن، فكرة).

Zackaria noticed the linguistic connection in Arabic between the word, "ancestor", and the word, "underdevelopment". The underdeveloped always look back to their ancestors for guidance and emulation. That is why Zackaria believes that the proper analysis of Arab intellectual underdevelopment must proceed from the relationship between the past and the present in "Arab Reason". Zackaria believes that there is a unique relationship between the past and present in modern Arab culture and intellectual life. It is unique in that the past is not subsumed by the present as an integral part of it, but assumes the form of an independent force, side by side with the present, and as a rival to the present, that tries to assert its rights independently of the present and in opposition to it, and to replace it if possible. This ahistoricist view reveals itself via the following.

The Ahistoricist View of the Past

According to Zackaria, contemporary Islamic interpreters of religion tend to believe that the main reason for Arab underdevelopment is our lack of commitment to the heritage, and the remoteness of our present from this heritage. Thus, "real progress" consists in returning to the heritage in one form or the other. They actually believe that the present salvation and progress in the Arab world reside in reviving the past in present daily life in all its details. Zackaria critiques this religious way of viewing the present in relationship to the past, which is unique to modern Arab culture vis-a-vis all other contemporary cultures. This type of religious thought is rooted in formalist, narrow, irrational and conservative interpretations of religion, and is an expression of total intellectual and social defeat, rather than being a recipe for salvation and the overcoming of this state of utter defeat. It is utterly averse to rationalism, democracy and critical thinking, which are necessary conditions of progress and emancipation (1985 زكريا، فلسفة، 85). One of the basic premises of this brand of religious thought is the peculiar idea that we can find all past, present and future knowledge in certain elements of the heritage. According to Zackaria, this is a mere irrational theological dogmatic attitude belied by the claim itself, Zackaria critiques the claim that certain Quranic verses contain references to modern scientific discoveries, by posing the question, why it is that we have not yet encountered any case of arriving at a modern scientific discovery purely by studying the relevant Quranic verses prior to the actual scientific process of discovery. Zackaria avers that all knowledge is the result of human endeavor, and it can never be deduced from Quranic verses prior to the actual discovery (1987 زكريا، الصحوة، 44).

This attitude towards the heritage is ahistoricist to the core. It tends to separate the heritage from its historical conditions of existence and meaning. It absolutizes certain elements of the heritage, so that one fails to see the life that animates it, and ultimately treats it as a dead, lifeless, corpse. The historical and concrete human dimensions of it are obliterated, leaving an empty lifeless shell instead. (1985 زكريا، فلسفة، 59). Zackaria considers this ahistoricist and irrational view of the heritage to be responsible to a great extent for the state of underdevelopment and intellectual confusion that prevails today, both amongst the supporters and opponents of the heritage.

This ahistoricist view of the heritage refuses to understand our age from the perspective of its own logic, but, rather, tries in vain to understand it in terms of a past logic that belongs firmly to a bygone age. It refuses to acknowledge the historical context of this heritage, thus depriving it of its inner historical meaning and distancing it from modern social sciences. This reveals itself in the types of problems tackled by modern Arab culture. The latter tends to focus on remote metaphysical and medieval problems that have nothing to do with real contemporary problems and real comprehensive contemporary human problems. This is, of course, rooted in the underdeveloped infrastructure of Arab societies, which tends to foster mythical, acausal, theological and emotional explanations of events and phenomena (1989 زكيغور، الفلسفة، 40).

). This also tends to expand the space of taboos and sanctity to engulf all aspects of life to the extent that it stifles completely all initiative and freedom of thought and action. (2). Needless to say that modern Arab mythical thought is rooted in the tribal pre-modern traditional structure of modern Arab society, which emphasizes the tribe or clan at the expense of the individual, and emotion and desire at the expense of Reason and systematic action. Such societies are conservative, passive and stagnant and are opposed to the very notion of history and historical development (زكريا، اراء ، 1975 ، 15-16).

The Ahistoricist View of the Present

In this context, Fuad Zackaria discusses the attitude of modern Arab modernists, who tend to reject the Arab heritage altogether, since they consider it a totally irrational heritage full of superstition and mythical nonsense, utterly devoid of genuine rationalism. Zackaria agrees with their premises, but disagrees with their conclusions that the Arab heritage was hopelessly irrational in its entirety. He argues that the European heritage was as irrational and superstitious, if not more so. Yet that did not prevent Europe from transcending it towards real progress and from leading the modern age towards progress. Zacharia quotes Bachelard, who informs us that error always precedes correct assertions, and the latter come about as a result of a process of correcting a series of errors, and of overcoming obstacles on the path leading to knowledge. Science is not a pile of truths arrived at smoothly, one following the other. Rather, it is a series of errors that are constantly overcome. In view of that, myths and superstitions could be viewed as necessary stages in the development of human thought. What is important is to transcend this stage to higher, more productive stages. Thus, if viewed historically, irrationalism and superstition are not necessarily impediments of progress. It all depends on further progress and on the process of transcending this stage (زكريا، الصحوة ، 1987 ، 39).

Zackaria draws our attention to the qualitative difference between the Arab intellectuals' relationship to their heritage and the Western intellectuals' relationship to their heritage. You seldom find a Western intellectual, who mounts a passionate criticism against classical Greek philosophy or Roman ethical theories. In modern Western culture, there is a clear line of demarcation between the distant past and the present. Neither is judged with the norms of the other. In short, the prevalence of the historicist view in Western intellectual life prevents them from treating the heritage as a living present.

Cultural Discontinuity

By cultural discontinuity, Zackaria means that the historical line joining our cultural present to our cultural past has suffered a discontinuity. Zackaria considers this discontinuity an important factor in fostering our ahistoricist view of both the past and the present. The golden age of Arabic culture was reached in medieval times. The Arabs reached unmatched summits of civilization, within the context and limitations of medieval culture, in all fields of cultural creativity-- science, art, philosophy, literature, jurisprudence, theology, architecture, technology and the humanities. The Arabic speaking world was truly considered the centre of world culture at the time. However, this upsurge was soon to decline and recede to almost nothing. Arabic Reason was almost totally liquidated, and cultural stagnation and decline was soon to sweep any remnants of cultural creativity before it in the Arab cultural scene. This state of decline has persisted up to the present time. Modern Arab culture is so anachronistic as not to warrant the epithet of a real cultural heritage. Its dynamic of development is so erratic, circular and uneven that the gap between it and modern development is widening at an alarming rate (زكريا، اراء ، 1975 ، 40).

Modern Arab culture seems to be suspended in a limbo lying between two vibrant traditions-- the glorious past long transcended by living history and modern Western traditions that are leading the way and bypassing Arab culture.

In view of this analysis, Zackaria concludes that the value of the glorious past resides in the effort to transcend it under the pressure of modern progress. This would ensure cultural continuity and a genuine revival of the past heritage. The only way to revive the heritage is to transcend it and use it as a launching pad to further progress in light of modernity. On the other hand, revival through regress is a sure way to stifle the heritage and eradicate its vitality. This type of revival treats the heritage as a buried treasure that has to be preserved without the prospect of renewal, not realizing that this attitude would turn the heritage into an anachronistic exchangeable currency that can benefit nobody (زكريا، التفكير ، 1988 ، 163).

The multifaceted crisis of Arab Reason has deepened the state of Arab underdevelopment. This deepening has found its clear expression in traditional forces and religious fundamentalism, which have not only impeded any form of progress, but reversed the direction of development-- from the present to the past and from maturity to adolescence. Thus, many contemporary Arabs have lost their sense of the present, modernity and progress.

Today, Arab culture confronts simultaneously three almost totally different Reasons-- namely, traditional Reason, Modernistic Reason, and post-modern Reason. Each of these Reasons has its own logic, structures, perspectives, values, tastes and criteria. These Reasons co-exist side by side in modern Arab culture. This has created a state of utter confusion in modern Arab thinking and a loss of self identity. This state of utter loss and confusion has deepened with the advent of religious fundamentalist hegemony in Arab societies. The tacit objective alliance between religious fundamentalism and post-modern currents has led to an irrational wave that has deepened modern Arab distrust, and even hatred, of Reason and modern rationalism. A wave of attacks on modern rationalism and calls for its rejection have swept the area (1913 المصباحي، جدلية، (354).

The Absence of Rationalism and Democracy

Fuad Zackaria tends to emphasize the organic relationship between the ahistoricist sanctifying view of the heritage and political and religious despotism. The marginalization of Reason, critical thought and free discussion and the belief in absolute authority are a common denominator between religious extremism and political despotism. Each reinforces the other. Needless to say, what Zackaria calls rational democracy cannot survive for long in such an atmosphere.

Zackaria draws our attention to the dire state of illiteracy in the Arab world. He avers that no serious effort in the 20th century has been made in any Arab country to eradicate it, despite all the so-called revolutions and reformist movements the modern Arab world has passed through. Together with the cultural irrationalism, absolutism, ignorance, terrorism, the many military and political defeats suffered by Arab countries, and the failure in solving urgent economic problems, this has led to the collapse of Reason and the stifling of culture and innovation and to stagnation on all levels of life.

Zackaria also draws our attention to the fact that the openness of Arab economies onto the global market since the 1970's has actually led to some form of cultural protectionism or self closure epitomized by the strengthening of religious fundamentalism and exclusiveness. This in turn has led to a sanctification of political despotism. In fact, the same logic of absolutism and exclusivity that pervades religious despotism also pervades political despotism, which tends to monopolize political power and excludes all opponents, stigmatizing them with treason and other negative epithets (زكريا، (1985 الفلسفة، (57).

In essence, what Zackaria advocates is the integrity and independence of Reason and the freedom of thought and expression. One of the principal conditions of this state of freedom is the prevalence of the historicist view of the heritage, which understands the heritage in terms of its age and avoids burning stages and treating cultural events in isolation from their historical context. That is why Zackaria finds himself opposed to those who tend to reject the heritage altogether and who single out certain negative features of the heritage as totally responsible for current Arab underdevelopment. It is not the function of the heritage to solve the problems of the present, in view of the qualitative difference between the past and the present. The heritage is intrinsically incapable of solving current Arab problems. We have to displace the traditional problem of faith and the sacred text to the domain of the Kantian practical Reason, a displacement that aims at constructing an enlightenment that separates philosophy from theology, and that emphasizes the utter degradation of the persistence of the marginalization of Reason in the Arab world today (1997 كائط، ماهو عصر، (243). One should avoid treating the critique of the heritage as the exclusive or principal approach to the problem of underdevelopment in the Arab world. (2) The essential point in this regard is to dare to think freely and follow the path of Reason.

Secularism is a Social Necessity

This analysis and presentation of Zackaria's thought leads us inevitably to his treatment of the problem of Islam and secularism. which is a particularly pressing problem in the contemporary Arab world.

As we have mentioned, Zackaria advocated the transcendence of the heritage. This historicist view of the past and present was most conspicuously embodied in his attitude towards secularism. To him, the only way to overcome underdevelopment in the Arab world is the way of secularism, which was the way followed by modern Europe towards progress. European progress would not have been possible had it not been for the secular movement, which has emancipated Europe from the tutelage of antiquity and religious institutions, and enabled it to confront concrete reality with Reason and experiment, instead of relying on ancient texts and their interpretations and looking for contrived ways to select cases that could be fitted into past frames (زكريا، الصحوة، (71، 1987).

Some tend to consider secularism a product of European cultural specificity. In particular, they refer to Christ's famous saying: "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's". This saying, which has nothing like it in Islam, has helped in the success of secularism in modern European culture, in the separation of religion and state, and in creating a secular system that has safeguarded the freedom of conscience and religion. However, Zackaria notes that, despite this saying by Jesus, religion and state were intimately connected in Europe during the middle ages. The situation then was very similar to the situation in the Arab world today. Yet, Europe has succeeded in transcending this state of underdevelopment, whilst the Arab world is still immersed in it. Thus, secularism is not peculiar to Europe. It is a universal task for all societies. Without it, there is no progress. It is not an imported cultural product, but, rather, a condition of productive free thought, that is self-relying, rather than constrained by external powers (زكريا، الصحوة، (73، 1987).

Thus, if Arab religious thought insists on regarding religious texts applicable in every place and time, unconditionally and without limits, it is bound to ignore real conditions and real concrete problems. This insistence is epitomized in the notion that Islam is simultaneously a religion and a concrete worldly guide and doctrine. This dictum has actually become a hallmark of all Islamic fundamentalist groups since the 1970's. By worldly guide, these groups mean that Islam is some sort of constitution in all walks of life, including political action, social organization, economic structure and policies, legal affairs, cultural affairs and personal affairs. The sacred text becomes the sole source of organization and rules in all these domains. Zackaria sees that the ultimate focal point of this conception of Islam vis-a-vis the contemporary world is the idea of divine governance. According to Zackaria, what these gentlemen seem to forget in upholding these ideas is man himself and his necessary role in interpreting the sacred text and translating its norms to practice. Man necessarily humanizes every item he touches, including the divine text and revelation. The latter become human the moment they are interpreted and practiced by men and women in society. This means that they are subject to change by virtue of their humanization. Accordingly, pluralism is the natural state of affairs in dealing with the sacred text. There cannot be a single absolute Logos instructing humans on how to conduct their lives. The interpretation of the text reflects the socio-cultural status of the interpreter (زكريا، الصحوة، (30، 1987). There are conservative interpretations that emphasize and justify private property and class divisions, and there are others that emphasize equality and justice. Despots interpret the sacred text to give credence to the values of blind obedience and submission, whereas liberals interpret it to emphasize tolerance and freedom (زكريا، الصحوة، (33، 1987). Thus, religious fundamentalist thought finds it hard to explain this marked pluralism in fundamentalist conceptions and applications of divine law and Shari'a. It is obvious that sacred texts cannot rule societies directly, but via human beings, who are subject to change and historical vicissitudes. Religious fundamentalism is subject to all the defects and shortcomings it ascribes to secularism. Thus, the latter is a necessity, whether we like it or not, even in radical fundamentalist societies (زكريا، كم عمر، (84، 1983).

Accordingly, Zackaria deems secularism a necessary basis for genuine democracy, which is necessarily built on the human, rather than, the divine condition. Religious fundamentalist thought reviles man and considers him too inept and incompetent to conduct his own affairs.

Conclusion

Zackaria addresses in his philosophical writings the problem of cultural underdevelopment in the Arab world. He contends that one of the principal reasons for this underdevelopment is the ahistoricist view of the Arabic Islamic heritage

and the Arabs' inability to effect an epistemological break with this heritage. To overcome this dilemma, modern Arabs should learn to innovate, rather than to conform and imitate. They should learn how to be independent of both the traditionalists and the modernists. They should dare to think for themselves. Zackaria points out that the only track for innovation is modernist rationalism, which is based on the thinking cogito. This cogito is characterized by its high degree of independence from religious, ideological and political commands and pressures. It is a thinking subject that has succeeded in effecting an epistemological break with pre-modernist social and cultural formations, particularly with mythical and animist views of nature and society.

Zackaria emphasizes the necessary link between modernism and individual, civil and political freedom, particularly with the democratic enterprise, which is a new way for managing the state and society on the basis of participation by all citizens in the public sphere, free association of free citizens, rationalist dialogue and common interests. Zackaria believes that the only route for Arab progress and the overcoming of underdevelopment is the path of comprehensive modernism based on humanism and rationalism. This coincides with the path of achieving full democracy and secularism. Thus, cultural historicism, humanism, rationalism, democracy and secularism constitute the essence of modernism, which the Arab world is called upon to achieve if it is to overcome its cultural dilemmas and obstacles.

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أزمة العقل والتخلف الفكري العربي من منظور فؤاد زكريا

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ملخص

تكمن أزمة العقل العربي وتخلفه الفكري، لدى فؤاد زكريا بالنظرة اللاتاريخية إلى الماضي التي تتجلى بعدد من المظاهر، أهمها: هيمنة الرؤية الدينية وغياب النزعة العقلانية النقدية بتأثير السلطة المطلقة في الوطن العربي، وكذلك بالانقطاع الحضاري بيننا وبين ماضيينا. هذه الأزمة للعقل العربي، المتجلية في المظاهر السابقة، زادت من صعوبة تخطي حالة التخلف الفكري العربي. فالنظرة اللاتاريخية التي اتخذت من نقد العقل لذاته ذريعة للإجهاد على استقلال الذات العربي، حالت دون عبور هذه الذات نحو العقلانية الحدائثية القائمة على "الأنا أفكر" وعلى الإبداع والاستقلال الفكري بعيداً عن الإملاءات العقائدية، سواء أكانت دينية أم سياسية. وعلى هذا الأساس فإن العقل العربي، كي يتجاوز أزمته، عليه الانخراط في فضاء الحدائث القائم على أساس من الأنسية والعقلانية والعلمانية باعتبارها الأرضية اللازمة لقيام الديمقراطية.

الكلمات الدالة: التخلف الفكري، أزمة.

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