Ideologies in the Middle East: Is It Conservatism, Modernism, or Liberalism

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Abstract

There is a great confusion on whether countries of the Middle East are considered conservative, moderate, or liberal countries. The first assumption that other countries, such as Europe and the United States, have is that Middle Eastern countries are conservative. This assumption is made because most of the Middle Eastern countries follow the Islamic principles and guidelines. The ignorance of the principles of Islam and the misunderstanding of Muslims' beliefs among the American and European general public lead to the misinterpretation of the ideologies that exist in the Middle East countries. The surprise is that there are three ideologies that exist and work together in the Middle East because there is a necessity of each one of them. This paper will discuss: (1) the differences between these ideologies in the purpose of education. (2) The impact of these ideologies in the education system in the Middle East. (3) The combination of all three ideologies in the contemporary Muslim life. A balance between the three ideologies in Islam will be seen.

Keywords: Middle East, Islam, Ideologies, Muslims, Education

1. Difference between the Ideologies

Each ideology has a definition, principles, and views on all aspects of life (politically, socially, economically, and educationally). The first ideology is conservatism, which means to keep and transmit the traditions from one generation to the next. Conservatives believe that institutions such as state, school, church, and family have a primary role and function in society (Gutek, p. 197). Their role is to transmit the cultural heritage including skills, values and knowledge through generations. The second ideology is modernism, which means to cut all relations to the past and be capable to change and adjust with the time. Modernists believe humans should adjust to the new innovations in all fields of life and be able to handle the new trends (Farag, 2011). "Modernists generally believe in a stable, inherent self that can be objectively known" (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 2011). The third ideology is liberalism, which promotes the freedoms of human beings and loosens the moral codes. Liberalists believe that individuals should enjoy the freedoms that are guaranteed under constitutional protection. The core values of liberalism are based on progress as well as the willingness to experiment and change (Gutek, p. 194).

Each ideology has an educational purpose that corresponds to its beliefs and principles. According to conservatism, education is society's way of transmitting the cultural heritage. The school's primary role is to provide students with academic education. Conservatives believe that curriculum should emphasize on the core values and cultural heritage. In modernism, the main purpose of education is to help students to discover their identities, learn, and apply objective knowledge. Modernists believe that one of the teachers' responsibilities is to teach students universal values. In addition, students from diverse cultures should be trained in sharing language and communication before teachers transmit knowledge to them (Xenos Christian Fellowship, 2011). While conservatives emphasize on cultural heritage in education, modernists emphasize on the universal values in education, and liberals believe that the main purpose of education is to encourage students to look forward and develop plans to achieve the desired results.

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The schools' role is to adapt social and economic changes and should be flexible and responsive to these changes. Liberalism emphasizes on the school's function as a multifunctional agency as well as the academic function (Gutek, p. 188).

2. Impact of Ideologies in the Education System in the Middle East

The public education systems in the Middle East include religious education. In many Islamic countries, the education system was limited to Quranic schools known as Kuttab. The primary purpose of the Kuttab was to teach the principles of Islam as revealed in the Quran. Memorization of the Quran and religious obligations, such as fasting and prayer, were the core purpose of the curriculum of the Kuttab. Religious instructions and family values were also part of the curriculum (Cook, 2011). The early history of Islam focused on the parents and society's role in raising children according to correct principles. "Abdul Tibawi wrote in 1972, the mind of the child was believed to be 'like a white clean paper, once anything is written on it, right or wrong, it will be difficult to erase it or superimpose new writing upon it'" (Cook, 2011). The purpose of Islamic education in the early history of Islam resembles the purpose of education in conservatism where it emphasizes on the core values, cultural heritage, as well as parents and society's responsibilities in transmitting the cultural heritage from generation to generation (Gutek, p. 206).

Muslims main resources of education, Quran and Sunnah (the teachings of Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him), do not only focus on the principles of Islam, but also urge Muslims to study and explore the universe. The Quran states, "We (Allah) will show you (mankind) Our signs/patterns in the horizons/universe and in yourselves until you are convinced that the revelation is the truth" (Quran, 41:53). The words of God have encouraged Muslims to study and search different fields such as astronomy, mathematics, science, chemistry, and other sciences (Islam Tomorrow, 2011). Muslim scholars' interest in exploring and searching urges them to study the ancient civilization from Greece and Rome to China and India. Muslim scholars and scientists began to add their own discoveries and inventions, and then transmitted the new knowledge to Europe (Islam Tomorrow, 2011). Muslim scholars became well known in the West. For example, Al-Razi, known in the West as Rhazes, was one of the famous physicians in the middle ages. Al-Khawarizmi was the first Muslim mathematician who invented the subject of Al-Jaber. Al-Ghazali, the philosopher, influenced Jewish and Christian Scholasticism and his arguments have been adopted by St. Thomas Aquinas (Said, 2001). Islam started to spread outside of the Middle East and into the rest of the continents. This led Muslims to gain the necessity to adapt to their communities.

Islam encourages Muslims to explore and develop new ideas so that they are able to adjust with the modernity of the world's changes. The education system in the Middle East has changed to include knowledge of international as well as local news. For instance, when it comes to teaching geography to their students, they present geographical information about the Arab countries as well as the rest of the world. History is also taught on a wider level. Students learn the history of their own country as well as the rest of the world. The Ministry of Education added more subjects in the curriculum to enhance and increase the students' knowledge. At the elementary level, the main subjects that are taught are reading and writing the Arabic language, mathematics, Quran, Islamic studies, English, physical education, art, and music. At the intermediate level, more classes are added such as science, geography, and history. At the secondary level, the curriculum is divided into two sections according to the students' interests. Students going into the literature field will take classes from the subjects of: Arabic language, Quran, Islamic studies, Arab and World geography, Arab history, psychology, philosophy, and French language. Students going into the science field will take classes from the subjects of: biology, physics, chemistry, geometry, subjects of the Quran, Islamic studies, and Arabic language. At the university level, several departments are established to prepare students for the work field. Different majors are offered such as Arts, Commerce, Economics, Political Science, Engineering and Petroleum, Law, Islamic Law (Sharia) and Islamic Studies, Medicine, Allied Health and Nursing, Science, Education (Graduate Studies), and Women's Studies.

The educational system in the Middle East has proved to be moving forward with modern changes occurring all over the world. Muslim parents are using the new knowledge they have gained from these modern theories of education and child upbringing to enhance their family structure. Children growing up in these families have gained the opportunity to express themselves freely and have a hand in molding their own futures.

3. Contemporary Muslim Life and Ideologies

A combination of conservatism, modernism, and liberalism ideologies exist in the lives of Muslims. Conservatism to Muslims is reflected in the word "Islam" which means to surrender or submit to God. For Muslims, conservatism means to live according to the commandments of God and follow the Sunnah. According to Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, "Disregarding commandments of the Quran and teachings of the Prophet takes one out of Islam" (Ali, 2003). Moreover, conservatism means to follow and practice the Islamic rules that emphasizes on the parents' role in raising their children on family values and morals. Muslims believe that having good morals refer to upholding the values of honesty, respectfulness, obeying parents, taking care of the elderly, helping the poor, and modesty.

Some Muslim groups interpret the Quranic rules literally and excessively and call themselves conservatives. "Real Islam is the middle path not at the extremes" (Ali, 2011). Allah (God) said that He has created the Muslim nation to be moderate. Modernism is the general policy of Islam. Allah said in the Quran, "Thus we have appointed you a middle nation, that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you" (Quran, 2:143). God advises Muslims to be moderate in all aspects of life, neither to be extreme nor to be liberal. Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Qatar-based Egyptian Sunni cleric who is also a popular preacher on the Al Jazeera channel, uses the term "Wassatiya" to define this way of life (Brown, 2005). The Islamic principles remain the same in modern times as in ancient times. They are believed to be applicable for every time and every place. The Islamic principles are based on the core of human nature as Allah has created it and on the social interactions that He sees fair and just (Hameed, 2003).

Muslims in this modern world face several experiences and challenges in their daily lives. Muslims put effort in adjusting to modernism while remaining within the Islamic rules. Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, has taught Muslims the right method of how to adjust with the new innovations without deviating from the fundamental beliefs of Islam by making Ijtihad (the process of making judgment based on the Quran and Sunnah, to find answers to new situations and differing circumstances) (Hameed, 2003). Ijtihad is decided by a group of Muslim scholars who are capable in finding solutions to issues related to modernity's challenges. Some Islamic countries refuse modernity and fight it because they think that it will cause them to deviate from faith. These countries interpret Islam in a way that differs from the true teaching of the Quran and hadith (the sayings of Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him) to justify their actions (Hathout, 1995). As a result, some Westerners accuse Islam of being not only conservative, but also extremist. What was seen in Afghanistan concerning the prevention of women to go to school and learn under the ruling of the Taliban was not part of Islam's teachings or guidelines. It was the government's law. In Islam, learning is not only a right but a duty on both genders. The Prophet explained that, "seeking knowledge is mandatory on a Muslim male and female". This saying of the Prophet is confirmed by the Qur'an, which says that Allah endows a higher status on those who are knowledgeable. Women have the right to learn and choose their career.

Other Islamic countries reject modernity because it is against their traditions and cultures. This can be seen when Prince Faisal bin Abdullah bin Muhammad, a senior official in the kingdom's external intelligence service, said that women not being allowed to drive in his country had nothing to do with the religion of Islam. He went on to explain that this law was just a traditional or cultural decision the government had made (Henderson, 2005). Saudi women are also not allowed to go anywhere without a man accompanying her. The Quran declared that men and women are equal in the eyes of God; man and woman were created to be equal parts of a pair (Quran, 51:49).

On the other hand, there are some Islamic countries that welcome everything that comes from the West without differentiating what is recommended and acceptable by the fundamental laws of Islam and what is not. They believe that following the steps of the West lead to liberalism. On the contrary, sometimes, following the route of the West and accepting their new innovations without research leads to losing their identity. However, in the field of politics, most Muslim countries have selected to be democratic republics. These countries proved to the world that choosing this path does not conflict with the Islamic values, instead it "proved to be in full harmony with the Islamic values searching for more freedoms and self-representation for its citizens" (Farag, 2011).

4. Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide the reader with a brief idea about: (1) the importance of conservatism, modernism, and liberalism in any community. (2) The existence and impact of the three ideologies in the education systems in the Middle East. (3) The combination of all these ideologies in the contemporary Muslim life.

While modernism helps to develop and advance society, liberalism helps to socialize it, and conservatism helps to adjust between both ideologies. Traditions are a key factor that aid in keeping a balance between the advances of technology while holding on to what is essential for a society to thrive. Islam successfully embraces the three ideologies by keeping up with the changes in the world while keeping Islamic values and principles intact.

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