

POSTMODERNISM AND RELIGION: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES IN ISLAMIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

Postmodernism evolved in the latter half of the twentieth century as a philosophical and cultural response to the shortcomings of modernity. Whereas modernism emphasized progress, rationality, and absolute truth, postmodern thought challenged their major claim of objectivity and brought a narrative of subjectivity, pluralism, and relativism. Postmodernism, by its defining features posts serious challenges to religions like Islam that are founded on the narratives of absolute truth. Its critical approach questions the authenticity of holy revelations, Islamic theology and religious traditions. It's concepts like deconstructions and relativism questions the authority of Quran. But on the other hand, it also creates larger space for Islam to re-enter into public debate and interreligious dialogue as postmodernism has concepts like pluralism. It may create new avenues to help various religions appreciate one another and contribute to development of teachings that are contextual to them.

This paper examines both the narratives of postmodernism, besides acting as a disruptive force for Islam, it also brings the reinvention of its approaches in the modern world. By looking at threats and the opportunities, this study explores this productive but complex relationship of Islam and Postmodernism thoughts.

Introduction

Postmodernism, a late twentieth-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, pluralism and relativism. With its inherent distrust towards the concept of modern reasoning, progress and absolute truth postmodern philosophy disagreed with modernist meta-narratives.

Postmodernist thinkers questioned the idea of objective reality, absolute truth, certain knowledge, and universal moral values. Reality, knowledge, and value are constructed by discourses, hence they can vary with them. What this implies technically is that when you examine the discourse of modern science out of its own standards of evidence, it is not any more or less credible as regards to the truth than any other worldview (Duignan, 2025). Postmodernists

sometimes characterize the evidential standards of science, including the use of reason and logic, as "Enlightenment rationality" (Duignan, 2025).

On the basis of the assumptions of the postmodernists, the reality, knowledge, value are relative to the discourse, then on the same basis there is no more necessity or value of the traditional Enlightenment discourses than the other opinions. (Duignan, 2025). Now this really leads to the question of how they even got them established in the first place. Assuming that a discourse can never be really judged by whether it results in objective truth, how come that these institutionalized discourses became a mainstream view of the modern world? What were the reasons that people adapted or came up with these as compared to other ones?

Part of the postmodern answer is that the prevailing discourses in any society reflect the interests and values, broadly speaking, of dominant or elite groups. Postmodernists disagree about the nature of this connection, whereas some apparently endorse the dictum of the German philosopher and economist “Karl_Marx” that “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class,” others are more circumspect. Having explored the historical works of Michel Foucault, I realize that many postmodern theorists claim that whatever we believe to be knowledge during a particular period of time is influenced by power in complex and unseen ways.

This intellectual transformation has had massive ripple effects for religion, which has always claimed that it possesses absolute truth. Islam which sees itself to be the ultimate and final revelation of God could not afford to overlook the challenge of postmodernity. Postmodernism is fighting with established norms, the permanence of intelligence, and the viability of grand narratives, all that is fundamental in religious faith. However, coexistent with those issues, there come opportunities with this new mind; it disrupts the self-confidence of secular modernity, it promotes multiple interpretations and allows religions to collectively engage in fruitful dialogue across traditions.

This paper presents that postmodern philosophy is not only a menace to religion in general and Islam in particular but also provides constructive engagement. Upon a thorough critique of skepticism and pluralism in postmodernism, it will reveal that Islam can address the issue without losing its central principles, particularly when it comes to dealing with modern intellectual tendencies.

Literature Review

This conversation between postmodernism philosophy and religion has produced a plethora of scholarly responses. “Jean-François Lyotard (1979) offered the most famous characterization of postmodernism as a disbelief in meta-narratives. By this, Lyotard refers to a distrust of grand, universal accounts whether those of “Enlightenment rationality”, Marxism, or

religious doctrines.” This attitude questions the legitimacy of claims to absolute truth, which has direct implications for religion. Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstruction further deepened the postmodern critique. In *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida argued that meanings within texts are unstable, endlessly deferred, and never final. This perspective has had profound consequences for the interpretation of sacred texts such as the Bible or the Qur’an. For some scholars, deconstruction allows a more dynamic engagement with scripture, enabling multiple readings (Caputo, 1997).

Others, however, argue that it destabilizes the authority of revelation itself (Milbank, 1990). Michel Foucault’s (1977) work on power and knowledge also intersects with religion. According to Foucault, truth is not discovered but produced through discourses that reinforce power structures. Religious institutions, therefore, are not neutral custodians of truth but participants in power relations. This insight has encouraged sociological analyses of religion, examining how religious authorities maintain discipline, moral norms, and identity (Asad, 1993). Christian thinkers have responded in different ways. Merold Westphal (1999) interprets postmodernism as a helpful corrective, arguing that it humbles religion from making idolatrous claims of possessing God entirely. John Milbank (1990), however, warns that theology should not surrender to postmodern relativism but must reassert Christianity’s own narrative of truth. This shows the diversity within religious responses to postmodern thought.

Within Islamic scholarship, the engagement has been more cautious but no less significant. Ziauddin Sardar (1998) critiques Western postmodernism for being an extension of cultural imperialism. He contends that while it claims pluralism, it often marginalizes non-Western worldviews. Nevertheless, he sees potential in postmodernism’s critique of modernity, as it creates space for Islamic epistemology. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2001), however, views both modernism and postmodernism as destructive force to sacred knowledge, urging Muslims to revive traditional metaphysical frameworks. Akbar

Ahmed (2002) acknowledges the realities of postmodern societies, where Muslims must navigate pluralism, identity crises, and globalization. These debates reveal that Islamic scholarship is divided between resistance and constructive engagement with postmodernism. The literature overall suggests that postmodernism creates a paradox for religion: it undermines universal truth claims while at the same time allowing space for reinterpretation, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue. The gap in existing research lies in finding a balanced approach that acknowledges these challenges while exploring the possibilities—especially within an Islamic context where the Qur'an asserts itself as final truth.

Methodology of the Study

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology, focusing on a critical analysis of existing literature on postmodernism, religion, and Islamic thought. The study draws on secondary sources including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly essays from sociology, philosophy, and religious studies.

The methodological framework includes:

- Textual and Discourse Analysis: Examining key writings of postmodern theorists (e.g., Giddens, Bauman, Heelas, Lyon, Lyotard, Foucault) alongside Islamic scholarship to trace how religious narratives are challenged or reinterpreted in postmodern contexts.

- Comparative Analysis: Contrasting Western postmodern theories of religion with Islamic perspectives to highlight convergences, tensions, and unique challenges.

- Contextual Interpretation: Considering the socio-political and cultural contexts in which Islamic societies encounter postmodern values such as pluralism, relativism, and secularization

This approach allows for a critical and nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between postmodernity and religion, particularly in the Islamic context, without reducing complex debates to overly simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity.

Postmodern Philosophy: An Overview

Postmodern philosophical ideas grew in the mid-to-late twentieth century as a reaction to the failures of modernity. Modernism emphasized rationality, progress, science, and universal truth. Yet, the horrors of two world wars, the disillusionment with industrialization, and the collapse of ideological projects like colonialism and Marxism weakened confidence in modernist ideals (Harvey, 1989). In this context, postmodernism emerged as a skeptical response. Lyotard's (1979) definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives" captures its core feature: suspicion toward any claim that offers a universal explanation of history, knowledge, or morality. Instead of unity, postmodernism emphasizes fragmentation, diversity, and localized truths. Relativism is another key principle of postmodern thought. Truth, according to postmodernists, is not objective or absolute but socially constructed. Derrida's (1976) deconstruction shows that texts are never stable and meaning cannot be pinned down once and for all. This undermines not only religious claims to divine truth but also scientific and philosophical claims to certainty. Foucault's (1977) idea of knowledge being intertwined with power challenges the notion of truth as neutral. In his view, every truth claim is embedded in structures of authority, discipline, and control. For religions, this raises critical questions: is religious truth an eternal reality, or is it shaped and maintained by institutional power? Postmodernism also destabilizes identity. Instead of fixed categories such as "truth," "reason," or "religion," it emphasizes multiplicity and fluidity (Bauman, 1992). This has led to the celebration of marginalized voices—minorities, women, colonized peoples—challenging dominant narratives, including those of mainstream religion. For religion, the implications are complex. On the one hand, relativism and skepticism can erode the foundations of faith. On the other hand, postmodern pluralism encourages religions to engage in dialogue, reinterpretation, and coexistence. In the Islamic context, this means rethinking the role of Qur'anic hermeneutics,

interfaith engagement, and the balance between certainty of revelation and openness to diversity.

Relationship between Postmodernity and Religion

The relationship between postmodernity and religion has been a central theme in sociological debates, with different theorists offering diverse perspectives on how religion adapts, transforms, or declines in a postmodern society.

Theories of Postmodernity and Religion

The following insights from key thinkers illustrate this complex interaction:

1. Anthony Giddens: Reflexivity and Tradition

Giddens emphasizes the reflexive nature of modernity, where traditions including religious beliefs are continually questioned, reinterpreted, and chosen rather than simply inherited. In a postmodern context, religion is no longer taken for granted; individuals consciously decide whether to participate in religious practices. This creates both a decline in unquestioned religious authority and the possibility of new, individualized spiritual expressions.

2. Zygmunt Bauman: Liquid Modernity and Religious Fluidity

Bauman's notion of liquid modernity highlights the instability and constant change in

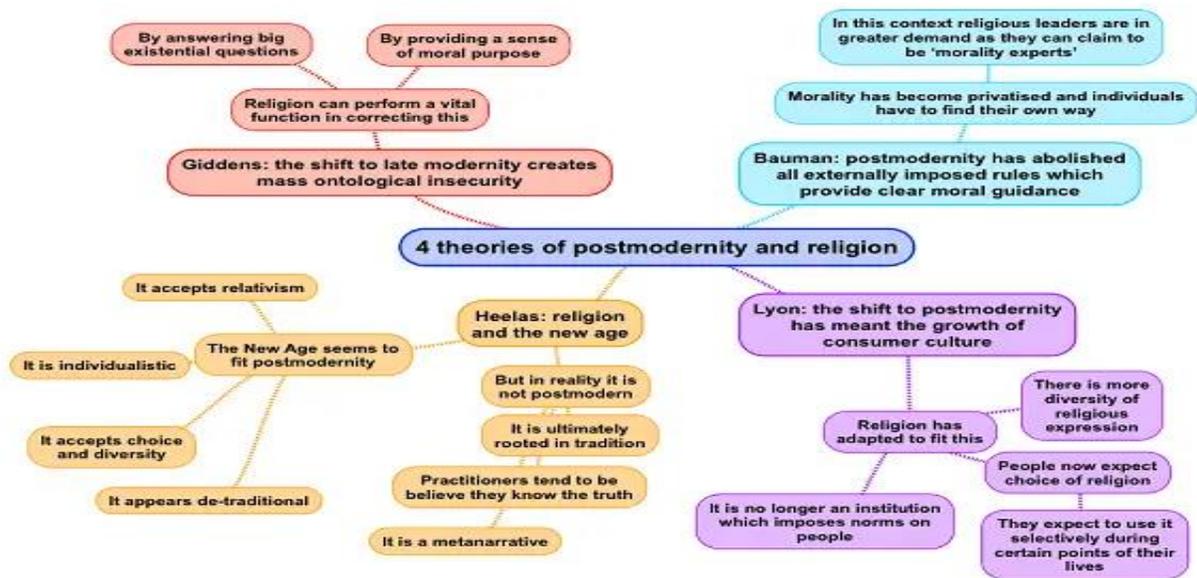
contemporary life. Applied to religion, this suggests that faith becomes fluid, flexible, and subject to personal choice. Individuals are not a part of any rigid institutionalized systems, they can embrace a "pick and mix" spirituality, which is an expression of the postmodern consumerist culture.

3. Paul Heelas : The Rise of Subjective Spiritualities

Heelas has point of view that in the postmodern societies, traditionally structured religion loses its control, abandoning to a subjective turn. Individuals are becoming increasingly focused on inner, personal well-being, experience and self-spirituality. This is apparent in the New Age movements, meditation, or holistic lifestyles, that are less collective in their worship, and more individual meaning.

4. David Lyon: Religion in the Postmodern Marketplace

Lyon also explained the relationship of religion and postmodernity in terms of globalization and consumer culture. He says that religion has not faded away but has been transformed into a spiritual marketplace, where people choose religious and spiritual products, which are appropriate to them. Technologies, media, and international networks facilitate the transmission of various religious ideas, which makes it pluralistic and open religious atmosphere.



(Thompsan, 2018)

Religion and Postmodernism: A Global Dialogue

Religion has a multidimensional relationship with postmodernism. On a global scale, postmodernism revisits universal assertion of all religions through highlighting relativism and pluralism. An example is Christianity which has experienced internal arguments regarding the way it should retaliate against postmodern criticisms. Some theologians believe that postmodernism is essentially the lamenting of the authority of scripture and tradition, whereas others observe that it represents an opportunity to be humble and to enter into new dialogue (Westphal, 1999).

However, with Judaism, postmodern hermeneutics have led to new avenues of reading sacred texts, which have become more open. Similarly, the culture of multiplicity and non-absolutism characteristic of Hinduism or Buddhism reflects postmodern pluralism. By the same time, relativism has brought about a frightening aspect in the religious societies, where truths that are held in a strong manner reduce to a mere opinion.

The concept of postmodern has transformed the way elements of faith communicate across the globe. Diversity and appreciation of alternate religions and perceptions have promoted a blend

between faiths in new forms. Nevertheless, there is no sunshine in that pluralism. The religious communities can be under pressure to water down their uniqueness once they consider the claims of truth to be equally valid. Therefore, religion and postmodernism global discourse could either enrich or burden our world.

Islam in the Postmodern Age: Challenges

For Islam, the postmodernism poses unique and exclusive challenges. Central to Islamic faith is the conviction that the Quran was the culmination of the revelation of God, a revelation that is absolute and universal. However, postmodernism doubts the absolute truth, preferring the alternative. relativism and plurality. This brings a conflict between certainty of revelation and the doubt of postmodern thought.

Authority of holy books is one of the difficulties. Postmodern hermeneutics often emphasize the instability of meaning, suggesting that no interpretation can claim finality. Applied to the Qur'an and Hadith, this raises questions about the authority of classical tafsir traditions. While Muslim scholars have always recognized multiple interpretations, postmodern relativism can appear to undermine the very idea of divine truth (Nasr, 2001).

Another challenge lies in ethics and morality. Postmodern societies tend to emphasize individual autonomy and moral relativism. For Islam, which grounds ethics in divine command, this relativism creates tension. Issues such as gender relations, family values, and public morality often place Muslims in conflict with dominant postmodern norms (Sardar, 1998). Identity is another area of concern. Postmodernism celebrates hybrid and fluid identities, while Islam emphasizes the unity of the Ummah. For Muslims living in pluralist societies, navigating between a stable religious identity and the fluidity of postmodern identity politics is an ongoing challenge (Ahmed, 2002).

Islam and Postmodernism: opportunities for Constructive Engagement (Pluralism, interfaith, Hermeneutics)

While postmodernism poses serious challenges to Islam, it also opens up important possibilities for constructive engagement. One such possibility lies in hermeneutics. Postmodernism’s rejection of

fixed meanings can encourage Muslims to revisit the Qur’an and Sunnah with fresh eyes, exploring diverse interpretations while remaining rooted in revelation. This does not mean surrendering to relativism but acknowledging the richness of interpretive traditions (ijtihad). Another opportunity is interfaith dialogue. Postmodern pluralism values diversity and coexistence, providing a framework for Muslims to engage with other faiths on equal footing. This can strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation in multicultural societies (Esack, 1997).

Moreover, postmodern critiques of modernity resonate with Islamic critiques of secularism, materialism, and consumerism. Postmodern suspicion of grand narratives can be employed by Muslims to challenge Western domination of knowledge and to assert the validity of Islamic epistemology (Sardar, 1998). In this way, postmodernism can serve as a tool for resisting cultural imperialism and affirming the dignity of Islamic perspectives in global debates.

Comparative Table: Modernism, Postmodernism, and Islam

Dimension	Modernism	Postmodernism	Islamic Perspective
View of Truth	Objective, universal, rational	Relative, plural, socially constructed	Absolute (from revelation), yet open to interpretation (ijtihad)
Authority	Science, reason, human progress	Suspicion of all authority	Divine revelation (Qur’an, Sunnah) with interpretive traditions
View of History	Linear progress, development	Fragmented, no grand narrative	Teleological: guided by divine purpose
Textual Meaning	Fixed, discoverable	Fluid, multiple, deconstructed	Divine message eternal, but interpretations (tafsir) can vary
Identity	Stable categories (nation, reason)	Fluid, hybrid, plural	Unified in Ummah, but diverse in culture and thought
Religion’s Role	Often marginalized in public life	One narrative among many	Central truth, yet engaging with plural societies

Relativism vs certitude of Faith

In spite of its possibilities, postmodernism is a menace to Islam as well. In my opinion, the greatest point of concern is relativism, it may

render faith less confident. When the truth of everybody is regarded, equally valid, the truth of Islam may be only one of various possibilities. That

is somehow subverting the fact that the Quran is the last and universal revelation (Nasr, 2001).

Meanwhile, excessive rigidity towards postmodernism may cause the Muslims to turn away, and they may fail to have any real conversation. Our problem is how we can maintain our religious conviction, and at the same time, be open to pluralism. The Islamic groups and intellectuals should devise strategies to guard universal truths and at the same time appreciate the contemporary reality.

The best example is the case of human rights in Muslim nations. Postmodern relativism allows the culture to determine the meaning of rights, yet the Islamic thought demands the divine. In order to enter this debate, it is essential to adhere to the revelation and in addition, reformulate it to address the current issues in a creative manner (An-Na'im, 1990).

Conclusion

The interaction between postmodernism and religion, especially Islam, reveals both great conceptual challenges as well as dynamic prospects of change. Postmodernism questions the foundation of epistemology that forms the foundation of the authority of religious doctrine directly; by deconstructing the grand narratives that supported modernity and destabilizing claims of universal truth. Within the Islamic context, this critique does not exist as merely abstract theory, but in concrete ways as academics, civil societies and institutional forces grapple with the powers of relativism, pluralism and the relentless pressures of an ever-globalizing world.

Yet, within this disruption lies an opportunity. Postmodern critique provides us a room to reconsider, to contextualize, and to initiate new discussions within religious doctrines. Rather than regard postmodernism as a dumpster, I do believe that Islamic scholars can regard it as a place of constructive dialogue. In doing so, Islam will be in a position to respond relativistically without necessarily trying to defend itself and it also can enhance intellectual life in an atmosphere of humbleness, inclusiveness and renewed belief in those eternal features in revelation.

Suggestions for Islamic Scholars:

❖ Strengthen Epistemological Foundations

The academics must critically excavate the epistemological foundations of Islam and isolate the fixed foundational values of the religion against more adaptable interpretations of Islamic scriptures, such as *ijtihad*. This shields the essence of the message, but remains flexible in multifarious hence pluralistic environments.

❖ Develop a Hermeneutics of Dialogue.

Diversity and pluralism is what postmodernism is, and in our case, interfaith and intercultural dialogue, should be viewed not as a potential threat, but an opportunity to gain greater understanding of each other. Positive engagement would enable us to demonstrate both the universal ethics of Islam (justice, compassion, dignity) without being judgemental to differences.

❖ Address the risks of Relativism.

Diversity can be valued but we must be careful not to slip into the extreme relativism where truth is nothing but opinion. A middle way solution implies acceptance of the revealed truths of Islam and also admitting the possibility of several different points of view being valid concerning human experience and social ethics.

❖ Engage Contemporary Intellectual Discourses

Receive Modernist Discourses of the intellect. I do not think that scholars are supposed to confine themselves to the old paradigms. Islamic scholarship can even answered the challenge of intellectuality today by leaping into philosophy, sociology, and cultural theory, and in doing so the Islamic scholarship can bridge the gap between tradition and modern relevance.

❖ cultivate Practical Application

Postmodernism is not only an academic issue. It requires us to discuss its impact on Islamic education, leadership in the community, moral choices and discourse. In this way (Duignan, 2025), the Muslim societies do not simply leave to the mindless acceptance of relativistic standards.

Conclusively, the interaction between postmodernism and Islam is not a thumbs up or thumbs down interaction. It is an active environment, which is both risky and opportunity-filled. When the scholars are intellectually open, critical and willing to a dialogue approach, postmodern challenges can be used in revival paths. Islamic scholarship may provide strength to the Muslim societies besides playing a positive role in the world discourse on truth, diversity and human flourishing, by being well balanced between not letting the modernity derail her and still remain entrenched in the revelation.

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