

## Eastern Religions – Reforms and Renovations (part 1)

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*ABSTRACT: The author attempts to speak of the different ideological movements in Eastern religions. He then focuses on the two most popular tendencies: conservatism and modernism. He concludes in this first part of the paper that the reform process of Eastern religions had to overcome contradictions expressed in the separation between the subjective and the objective, to “draw believers near” to saints and to “liberate” man, to develop individual initiatives in man adapted to the market economy relations of the present times.*

### 1. Conservatism Tendencies and Modernism in Eastern Religions

When analyzing religious concepts, researchers often have been divided into two opposite tendencies: traditionalism or modernism. We think that the concept of traditionalism here does not exactly reflect the conservatism essence of an ideological tendency in Eastern religions, the conservatism one. Another classification proves more rational, that of Russian researchers on religion like M. T. Stepanians. She divided religion into two main ideological tendencies: the orthodox tendency, the restoration tendency, or in other words the modernism and reform tendencies<sup>1</sup>. In this article, we temporarily make use of two concepts: the conservative tendency and modernism to speak of two ideological movements in Eastern religions.

Those followed the conservatism tendency often relied upon religious dogmas to defend the necessity of safeguarding the actual social state, to preserve the political-economic-social system dating back as far as the Middle Ages. To oppose political social changes, they made use of the most conservative concepts as a weapon and strove to interpret religious dogmas into the interpretation of the Middle Ages.

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An example of the conservatism tendency is in Islam. Those who followed a certain Islamic sect asserted that ideas on social progress were unfamiliar and contrary to Islamic principles. They resorted to the Koran to assert that Muhammed was "the messenger of Allah and the greatest prophet"<sup>2</sup> (33:40), therefore all his predications were perfect and ultimate, one did not need to supplement anything all the more so to change anything. According to Islamism, Muhammed had once said: "My relations with a long line of prophets can be explained through a fable about a palace: the palace has been built in the best manner. Everything there is complete. It lacks only one brick. I have filled the gap and thus the building has been achieved."<sup>3</sup> In Islamic conceptions this sacred teaching was the last one and the most perfect among the messages from the saints. Therefore we could not and must not change it. It was exactly like one did not have to perfect the order and social laws established by Islam. Conservatists in Islam thought that it was a thorough and ideal order and law. They accepted in an absolute manner the transcendental finalist principle that human fate and human actions had been pre-arranged by the will of divinities. Any social progress was only "a process to realize a ready saint aim."

Conservatists in Buddhism and Hinduism also had a similar negative attitude toward deep social changes. According to them any creature in this life followed the transmigration of the soul, the never-ending chain of cause and effect. A new karma of a person depended on his behavior and individual conduct in the previous karma. Society and mankind did not develop in the form of a raising spiral but of a cyclic circle in which the new cycle began from a very remote past.

This traditional interpretation was quite opposite to individual efforts to reach "salvation" for oneself, which be it not Nirvana, would at least be "a pure heaven" in one's following life.

The fact that conservatists in religions did not accept any deep social changes and moreover did not accept any new interpretation of religious dogmas explained why they were in opposition to scientific knowledge, philosophy - considered as sins born from freedom of thought and thus unforgivable.

Opposite to the conservatists tendency was modernism. But modernism is a very large concept. Therefore here we have to define it as a kind of religious consciousness tending to restrict the sphere of influence of religions by ascribing to it actions done by the individual conscience.

Those who followed modernism resorted to the same dogmas as conservatists but interpreted them in a different manner to draw out opposite conclusions to those of the conservatists. This was the religious conscience of the bourgeoisie among Eastern intelligentsia educated in Western countries. Starting from the concept holding to the idea that Eastern religions did not want changes, even were in opposition to changes in religious dogmas and in a socio-economical aspect, modernists thought that one had to reject religion together with the mechanism for regulating social relations and to become equipped with Western values able to ensure progress and prosperity. If it was not simply reduced to a "Christianization" of Eastern religions, modernism here was synonymous with secularism aiming at separating the church from the state, at developing secular education, and grasping scientific knowledge. In the first step of the movement for national liberation, modernism was to a notable degree synonymous of the enlightenment movement - a popular trend with the participation of the movement for religious reform.

According to many researchers of Eastern culture, the difference in Eastern and Western cultures lays in the fact that in the West some centuries separated. The period of Religious Reform from that of Enlightenment (The Religious Reform Period began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Period of Enlightenment began at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), but in the Eastern, on account of different historical conditions, ideas of enlightenment often interlocked or combined with ideas on religious reform. Roi Rammodan (1774-1833) and Said Ahmad Han (1817-1898) were at the same time representatives of Enlightenment and Reform of Hinduism and Islam. Both were nationalist religious representatives. They interpreted the religious dogmas of Hinduism and Islam in the spirit of their times and found that the most important requirement to restore Hinduism and Islam was to grasp modern scientific knowledge. But in their religious activities, through their system of conceptions they acted as religious reformers.

As we have said above, modernism was a kind of religious conscience of compradore bourgeoisie and intelligentsia of Western education. In the first stage it bore an active impetus but it gradually became the ideology of cosmopolitanism, blindly imitating Western ways of life (in its most pragmatic aspects), while wholly neglecting the national tradition.

The social basis of modernism was very restricted in emerging countries. Their "imitation of the West", led to the building of a "dependent capitalist society", modernists became more and more impotent in solving urgent the socio-political and

politico-ideological problems of Eastern society. But in definite socio-historical conditions, this tendency proved advantageous. Japan and Turkey were concrete examples.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the monarchical regimes in both these countries was closely tied to religion. Japan followed Shintoism and Buddhism. Turkey followed Islam. The secular power was identical to the religious power. Power was concentrated in the hands of a unique person (the Emperor in Japan, the Sultan-khalif in Turkey). In this situation, the bourgeoisie and opposition forces had regrouped their forces to oppose the medieval legal system and the conservative religious ideology of the governing circle holding the control of the priesthood and the ideology of modern secularism.

In general, new ideas expressed through concepts and terms borrowed from the West could not garner the large support of the masses. But ideas on religious reform proved more effective, and had a greater pull in attracting the masses.

## **2. Religious Reforms and the Renovation Needs of Religions**

Eastern religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam have evolved through thousands of years. In the past they had endured changes and effects of these changes. But before the integration of Eastern societies into the world, the infrastructure of traditional society was basically unchanged, and the spiritual structure had not changed greatly. Only when the traditional way of life began to break down, capitalist relations appeared and developed. They led to urgent requirement to revise all dogmas, and to practice them in accordance with new principles and concepts, i.e. the need to reform religions.

Religious reform was a concrete type of the reform movement on general. It had relations with the process of "religion embourgeoisement". The reform process of Eastern religions also had features reminiscent of the movement to reform Christianity. However these features were not quite similar. Conservatists in religions always opposed reform movements, they negated any change in their religion. They always held that dogmas in their religion were pervasive, were the eternal truth. The famous Iranian philosopher S.H. Nasr asserted that the Islamic civilization did not have "the tendency to change and accommodate," its symbol was not "a flowing river but the block form of the Kasha sanctuary, the symbolic stability of the eternal and immutability of Islamism." Then he drew out the conclusion that

phenomena like "The Renaissance, Reform or the Anti-reform Movement had never been acknowledged in the Islamic world."<sup>4</sup>

Western scientists thought that religious reform was a special phenomenon of Europe in relation to Christianity. They held that Eastern religions were a backward, underdeveloped phenomena of Eastern people.

Max Weber most clearly presented this concept. The German sociologist asserted that all popular religions in Asia such as Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Jainism and so on... did not have a motive or an orientation to model the world in a rational, moral manner which adapted to sacred Commandments. They are different from Protestantism in the fact that "they accepted this world as something ready-made since time immemorial, i.e. the best world among worlds, and this idea was the main obstacle to the development of capitalism in the East, "a product imported from the West." According to H. Smith, the West had full confidence that in the days to come this world could be reformed and saved, but the East asserted that we had no hope and this world could not be saved. With the same spirit, S.L. Gluck asserted: "what had occurred in the industrial revolution in the West, will not occur in the East - this thesis is of a persuasive character. According to this thesis, the West is turned to the outside and the East is turned to the inside."<sup>5</sup> The American scientist stressed that the West focused on the world of experiences, while the East focused on the unreality, the unimportance of this world. The West symbolized effort, conquest and appropriation; the East symbolized emancipation, lack of activity and obedience.

For our own part, we think that conservatism existed in every ideology, religion. irrespective of the West or the East. However the degrees varied in each religion. In Eastern history, many political oppositions have occurred under a religious cover. V. I. Lenin remarked that "this is a common phenomenon of all nations in any given stage of their development."<sup>6</sup>

In social life, when traditional moral principles began to lose their force, or were not adapted to the new tendencies arising from development or even proved contradictory to them, then there would appear the need to revise these principles and the need of renovation, reform would take place.

In Western scientific publications, the term *reformation* is used in its broad and strict meanings. In its broad meaning, *reformation* means a process of change, of deep transformation to ameliorate the political, social or religious life. In its strict meaning *Reformation* (with a capital R) means the Religious Reform movement

evolving in Europe since the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the split in the Christian Church and the formation of the Protestant Church: The term *reformation* used here is used in its broad meaning. It is the religious reform - a long process beginning from heresies in the Middle Ages against the rule of the feudal regime sanctioned by the Christian Church then continued to the 17<sup>th</sup> century to carry out the "embourgeoisement" of Christian dogmas. This was a complex process, especially toward the 16<sup>th</sup> century; it was not by chance that this century was called the "century of reforms" (reform here was used in the plural) and not the "Century of the Reform".

For religions in the East, in the 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there appeared changes and these changes in many cases had similar features with those of Christianity in Europe. But according to us, these changes should be understood as change in processes, and the term process should be understood in its broad meaning.

Many researchers in the Eastern part of Russia and in the West too considered present processes of change in Eastern religions as reform processes: When appraising the changes occurring in the Islamic world, M. Idbal - the Arabian philosopher wrote: "now we are witnessing a period similar to the period of the Protestant revolution in Europe." In his works, he made use of the term "Arabian Protestantism" when speaking that the Rabist movement "is in no way different from the Persic reaction of the Arabian Protestantism."<sup>7</sup>

When carrying out an epistemological study of the Religious Reform, Hegel said that it was stimulated by the split of the objective and subjective. The recognition of the sacred from the outside in its relation to believers gave birth to the necessity of a connecting link - the middleman. "In this sense, in the existing reality, the unity between man and sacredness was negated, and thus man was negated, because man himself was recognized as unable to apprehend the sacredness, he was only able to come near it." The Church, acting in the role of mediator between man and the sacredness, held that actions from the outside like attending the ceremonies of saint, fulfilling oaths, pilgrimages, etc... would help people avoid the punishment of the saints. Moreover, these actions from the outside could be entrusted to others, "the surplus of good actions was attributed to saints and thus man would find salvation."<sup>8</sup>

The Religious Reform aimed at overcoming this contradiction of Christianity at liberating man from the mediation of the Church, from being dominated by the priests. M. Luther (1483-1546) rejected the theory on God's assignment and replaced it with a liberating faith, at the same time, he "wiped out the outside religious feeling by transforming the religious feeling into the inner *essence of man*."<sup>9</sup>

The reform of Christianity could not wipe out the split between the subjective and the objective because it did not touch upon its root - the alienation in the real existence, born from the division of labor and private property, it could not annihilate religious alienation. The Reform of Christianity could also not create conditions for an adaptation of Christianity to new relations. Its essence consisted in, as Engels said, the "first endeavor, though still unclear and limited, was to oppose the New Middle Ages - which brought out a new social change by transforming serfs into "free" laborers."<sup>10</sup>

The reform process of Eastern religions had to overcome contradictions expressed in the separation between the subjective and the objective, to "draw believers near" to saints and to "liberate" man, to develop individual initiatives in man adapted to the market economy relations of the present times.

*(to be continued)*

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