

Modernity, Civilization and the Return to History

Anthony F. Shaker

VERNON SERIES IN PHILOSOPHY

“Anthony Shaker has written an extraordinary rich book exploring modernity, tradition and civilization. Drawing on the learned tradition of Islamdom as well as the work of Qunavi, but also many others, Shaker identifies the pitfalls of thinking about tradition and modernity in isomorphic terms. There is more to Islam than merely text. He draws our attention to personhood, history and the project of civility and shows a hopeful path forward. This is compulsory reading for anyone who agonizes about the world we are living in and seeks inspiration from the past that can be usefully used in the present.”

**Ebrahim Moosa, Professor of Islamic Studies
Keough School of Global Affairs, University of Notre Dame**

“This fascinating book adopts a radically interdisciplinary approach in order to sort out modernity by questioning that which we call philosophy. As Shaker’s interdisciplinary method takes hold, the content is enriched beyond that outlined in the introductory passages...delighted by the wealth of insights and connections unraveled by the author.”

**Mohammad Azadpur, Professor of Philosophy
San Francisco State University**

Summary

The modern concept and study of civilization have their roots, not in western Europe, but in the spirit of scientific investigation associated with a self-conscious Islamicate civilization. What we call modernity cannot be fathomed without this historical connection. We owe every major branch of science known today to the broad tradition of systematic inquiry that belongs to a “region of being”—as Heidegger would say—whose theoretical, practical and institutional dimensions the philosophy of that civilization played an unprecedented role in creating.

This book focuses primarily on the philosophical underpinnings of questions relating to civilization, personhood and identity. Contemporary society and thinking in western Europe introduced new elements to these questions that have altered how collective and personal identities are conceived and experienced. In the age of “globalization,” expressions of identity (individual, social and cultural) survive precariously outside their

former boundaries, just when humanity faces perhaps its greatest challenges—environmental degradation, policy inertia, interstate bellicosity, and a growing culture of tribalism. Yet, the world has been globalized for at least a millennium, a fact dimmed by the threadbare but still widespread belief that modernity is a product of something called the West.

One is thus justified in asking, as many people do today, if humanity has not lost its initiative. This is more a philosophical than an empirical question. There can be no initiative without the human agency that flows from identity and personhood—i.e., the way we, the acting subject, live and deliberate about our affairs. Given the heavy scrutiny under which the modern concept of identity has come, Dr. Shaker has dug deeper, bringing to bear a wealth of original sources from both German thought and Hikmah (Islamicate philosophy), the latter based on material previously unavailable to scholars. Posing the age-old question of identity anew in the light of these two traditions, whose special historical roles are assured, may help clear the confusion surrounding modernity and, hopefully, our place in human civilization.

About the author

Anthony F. Shaker is a philosopher, scholar of Islamic thought/civilization, and analyst of social theory. He has authored numerous articles and books, including the only complete study of Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī’s thought (d. 1274 CE) and two translated volumes of Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ al-‘ulūm*. He also served as an elected member of the executive council of the Canadian parliament’s official opposition, helping formulate policy and conferring with various political leaders. He is currently exploring the idea of productive dialogue within the framework of civilization, not only as a channel of passive exchange across cultures. He obtained his doctorate from McGill University and currently lives with his wife in Quebec, Canada.

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