

Book Review

The Unravelling of Intelligibility: Elements of Modernity [Volume One: “The Civilization of Liberal, Universal Modernity, Neutral & Scientific”] by Hasan Spiker (New Andalus Press, 168 pages, 2024)¹

Hasan Spiker is a contemporary philosopher and comparative scholar specializing in Islamic, Greek, and modern thought. He pursued his MPhil in philosophy at the University of Cambridge, focusing on the works of Plotinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Kant, and Hegel. Complementing his Western studies, Spiker immersed himself in Islamic sciences in the Middle East, concentrating on the school of Ibn ‘Arabī and late kalām theology. Among his notable publications are *Things as They Are: Nafs al-Amr and the Metaphysical Foundations of Objective Truth* (2021), which examines traditional Islamic correspondence theories of truth and their relevance to contemporary metaphysical debates. In 2022, he authored *The Metacritique of Kant and the Possibility of Metaphysics*, offering a critical analysis of Immanuel Kant’s philosophy and its implications for metaphysical inquiry. His 2023 work, *Hierarchy & Freedom: An*

¹ Book available at <https://www.amazon.com.au/dp/1068583509/>

Examination of Some Classical Metaphysical and Post-Enlightenment Accounts of Human Autonomy, explores the interplay between metaphysical hierarchies and concepts of human freedom. Currently, Spiker is engaged in doctoral research at the University of Cambridge, continuing his exploration of the intersections between Islamic and Western philosophical traditions. His scholarly contributions offer valuable insights into the metaphysical and epistemological challenges of modernity, making him a significant figure in contemporary philosophical discourse.

Spiker's new and upcoming series, *The Unravelling of Intelligibility: Elements of Modernity*, promises to be a masterful critique of the intellectual shifts that have fractured the coherence of Western thought. The five historical bifurcations framework of this series was announced earlier this year². His articulations (recently discussed by himself on a podcast³) examine the processes that led to the fragmentation of knowledge, morality, and metaphysics in modernity. These divisions not only hold historical significance but can also provide valuable guidance for Islamic revivalist movements seeking to navigate the

² <https://x.com/RealHasanSpiker/status/1775762035931742652>

³ <https://thinkingmuslim.com/podcast/hasan-spiker-can-muslims-resist-modernity>

challenges of secular modernity while preserving the integrity of traditional Islamic thought. There is a lot worth discussing in the book, but here I limit my review to commenting on the bifurcations framework and then attempting to extract lessons for contemporary Islamic Revivalist movements.

1. Law and Spirit: As per Spiker, the first bifurcation originates in the development of Pauline Christianity, which redefined the relationship between divine law and spiritual practice. St. Paul (originally a Greek speaking Jew from Pharisee tradition) after conversion emphasized salvation through faith in Christ⁴ rather than strict adherence to the Mosaic Law (of Judaism). This shift was effected in order to appeal to a Gentile (i.e. non-Jew) audience but it effectively severed the connection between external legal obligations and internal spiritual life. Over centuries, this distinction laid the groundwork for the secularization of law in the West, as legal systems gradually detached from their religious roots. The Islamic tradition, in contrast, integrates law (شريعة) and spirituality (طريقة), emphasizing their mutual reinforcement. The *shariah* is seen as a practical manifestation of divine will, aimed at nurturing both personal and societal piety. Islamic revivalist movements should reaffirm the holistic

⁴ 'Christ' is a distortion of the concept of Messiah (مسيح)

nature of *shariah* by presenting it not merely as a set of legal rules but as a spiritual framework that elevates individual and collective morality. The movements must resist the compartmentalization of religion into “private” spirituality and secular governance. They should demonstrate that Islamic law is a means to cultivate a moral/spiritual and just society.

2. Spiritual Power and Temporal Power: In the early Middle Ages, the division between spiritual power (the Church) and temporal power (the State) took root in the West. The Investiture Controversy of the 11th century epitomized this struggle, as the Papacy and European monarchs vied for authority. This bifurcation institutionalized the separation of sacred and secular spheres, culminating in the modern secular state where religion is relegated to private life. Unlike Western Christianity, Islamic civilization traditionally maintained a unified vision of governance. The Caliphate system embodied a model where temporal authority was rooted in spiritual legitimacy, reflecting the indivisibility of religion and state (since Islam is a *deen* and not simply a ‘religion’). Islamic revivalists can learn from this bifurcation by striving to argue for reconnection of governance with ethical and spiritual principles. While modern contexts may require innovative models, the movements can begin by focusing on promoting justice, transparency,

and public welfare as expressions of Islamic values in governance. But this should not become an end in itself (as perhaps can be argued in the case of the Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan), rather the movements need to work towards creating alternative social structures of power that should be controlled by mukhlis-e-deen. Since outright rejection of modern state structures may not be an option in many scenarios, Muslim minority groups may continue to work as per their locally acceptable strategies.

3. Faith and Reason: The harmony between faith and reason in the Christian West began to fracture during the Scholastic era. Thinkers like Thomas Aquinas attempted to synthesize Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology, but later, the Enlightenment dismantled this unity. Rationalism emerged as a dominant paradigm, dismissing revelation and faith as incompatible with human intellect/understanding. This led to a secular epistemology where reason alone was deemed sufficient for understanding reality. Islamic thought, exemplified by figures like Imam Al-Ghazali (RA) and Imam Ibn Taymiyya (RA), maintained a balance between intellect (*'aql*, عقل) and revelation (*naql*, نقل). This equilibrium allowed Islamic civilization to produce significant advancements in various disciplines, while remaining rooted in spiritual truths. Islamic revivalist movements should

differentiate between 'aql (عقل) in Islamic tradition and Reason (of Enlightenment Rationality). Then emphasize the compatibility of 'aqaliyat (عقلیت) with revelation (wahi, وحی). By fostering intellectual engagement with contemporary challenges, they can counter the narratives that portray Islam as irrational or anti-knowledge. Encouraging educational initiatives that augment traditional Islamic education with critical study of western disciplines can help Muslims navigate the intellectual challenges of modernity without compromising their faith.

4. The Natural World and the Knowing Subject: The Cartesian revolution of the 17th century introduced a stark separation between the natural world (corresponding to 'objective reality') and the knowing subject (the locus of human perception or 'subjectivity'). René Descartes' dualism emphasized a mechanistic view of nature, reducing it to a collection of objects to be manipulated. This bifurcation led to the dominance of empirical science and a materialistic worldview that disregarded the sacred dimensions of nature. In Islamic thought, the natural world is seen as a manifestation of divine creativity, imbued with signs (*ayat*) pointing to the Creator. The Qur'an repeatedly invites reflection on nature as a spiritual and intellectual exercise, fostering a deep connection between mankind and the cosmos. Islamic revivalist

movements should rekindle the Qur'anic vision of nature as sacred and interconnected. By promoting ecological stewardship and sustainable practices, they can address modern environmental crises while aligning with Islamic principles. This approach can also serve as a bridge to engage with broader societal concerns, showcasing Islam's relevance and leadership in addressing global challenges.

5. Morality and Ontology: The final bifurcation, emerging in the modern era, involves the separation of morality from ontology (the nature of being). Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant developed ethical systems grounded in 'human autonomy' rather than divine or metaphysical principles. This shift led to moral relativism, where ethics became subjective and disconnected from universal truths. Islamic tradition grounds morality in the nature of being, emphasizing the relationship between ethical conduct and ultimate reality (*haqq*). Actions are not merely judged by their outcomes but by their alignment with divine purpose. Islamic revivalist movements can counter moral relativism by articulating a universal, ontologically rooted ethical framework (i.e. Islam). This involves presenting Islamic (revelation based) ethics as timeless principles that transcend cultural and historical contingencies. Movements can also engage in interfaith and

philosophical dialogues to address contemporary moral dilemmas, offering Islam as a source of clarity in a morally fragmented world.

Spiker's bifurcation framework, as summarized and commented on above, offers a penetrating analysis of the philosophical undercurrents that define modernity. By systematically examining each bifurcation, he demonstrates how these divisions have contributed to the fragmentation of thought and the loss of intelligibility in Western intellectual traditions. His critique invites readers to reconsider the metaphysical assumptions underpinning contemporary society and to seek a more integrated and holistic approach to knowledge.

Strengths of the book include depth of analysis, interdisciplinary approach and relevance to contemporary concerns. Spiker provides a detailed and nuanced examination of the historical and philosophical developments behind each bifurcation. He draws lavishly upon theology, philosophy, and history - the book bridges multiple disciplines to offer a probing critique of modernity. His insights resonate with contemporary concerns about the erosion of meaning, the challenges of moral relativism, and the alienation inherent in modern life.

While Spiker's critique is compelling, an overall appreciation of the socio-political hegemony of the

capitalist order within which all such debates operate would lift the level of this critique from mere 'probing the surface' to a comprehensive framework. Furthermore, the book could benefit from some more detailed discussion of potential solutions or pathways for addressing the fragmentation of modern thought. Also deserving of a fair warning is that readers unfamiliar with philosophical terminology may find some sections dense and challenging.

Overall, *The Unravelling of Intelligibility* is both a critique of modernity and a call for a return to integrative thought. By exploring the historical roots of these bifurcations, Spiker illuminates the intellectual trajectory that led to the fragmentation of Western civilization. For Islamic revivalist movements, his analysis offers practical guidance: reasserting the unity of law and spirituality, reconnecting governance with ethics, harmonizing faith with reason, restoring the sacred view of nature, and grounding morality in universal truths. Through these lessons, movements can address the challenges of modernity while preserving the coherence and richness of Islamic tradition. Spiker's work is an essential resource for anyone seeking to understand the philosophical underpinnings of modernity and envision a more integrated future. For scholars, students, and anyone interested in philosophy, metaphysics, or the

intersection of tradition and modernity, this book is an essential read. On a personal note, I welcome this effort and look forward to reading further volumes in this series. For further details and purchase, the book can be accessed at major online retailers.
