Chapter 7

Religious Praxis, Modernity and Non-modernity in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Introduction: Modernity and Non-modernity

In his ground breaking work, *We have never been modern*, Bruno Latour (1993) contends that Western (and, by extension, Westernised) belief in ‘modernity’ is actually a matter of faith despite its overt scientific premises. For him, the aura of being ‘modern’ cognitively and epistemologically involves a ‘doubly asymmetrical’ relationship.

Firstly, for Latour, modernity “designates a break in the regular passage of time, [and secondly], it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished” (Latour, 1993: 10). The rules of this antagonistic relationship are founded on two sets of entirely different kinds of practices which must remain distinct if they are to be efficacious. The first set, which he calls ‘translation’ or ‘mediation,’ routinely creates “mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of [non-human] nature and [human] culture” (Latour, 1993: 10). For Latour, this set is akin to monistic ‘networks’ where there are connections and linkages between different kinds of actors and actants.

By contrast, the second set, through the act of “‘purification’ […] creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other” (Latour, 1993: 10). Without the first set, the acts of purification would be pointless. Conversely, without the second set, the work of translation would be slowed down, limited or even ruled out. Epistemological risks are involved at giving equal recognition to these practices. As Latour phrases it:

As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridisation, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. At the same time, we stop having been modern, because we become retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending. Our past begins to change (Latour, 1993: 11).
Thus, to sustain a belief in ‘modernity,’ certain ‘constitutional guarantees’ (in short, ‘the Constitution’) need to be propagated and instituted. These guarantees posit not only an absolute dichotomy between Nature and Society but the notion that while the former is not a social construct, the imprints of human agency are commonsensically self-evident in the latter. To preempt the possibility of the formation of a perfect symmetry between the afore-said guarantees, Latour argues that another guarantee involving divinity has been put in place. Simply put, Nature is rid of any divine presence while Society is rid of any divine origin (Latour, 1993: 32–33).

Although Latour’s interventions have been largely directed at undermining contemporary epistemological boundaries between science, humanities and social sciences, his central claims are also pertinent to the study of religion and modernity as well. For instance, Randall Styers has argued that Western theories of magic and religion provide a particularly apt confirmation of Latour’s insights. In brief, these theories have portrayed “magic as blindly artificial, inserting human desire and machination futilely into the workings of natural causality in contrast with universalized and naturalized forms of religion and built on the modern differentiation of culture and nature” (Styers, 2004: 18). From this standpoint, practitioners of magic fail to recognise essential differences between the human and non-human, the psychic and the material, desire and reality. Magical thinking is thus seen as fundamentally non-modern in its refusal to acknowledge the firm and impervious boundary between Nature and Society.

Additionally, Styers contends that dominant theoretical models of religion have been reconfigured to be insulated from any sense of contamination by power in human relations. Religion is seen as “abstract, rarefied, other-worldly, and presents an idealised world of so-called faith communities—of worship, customs, beliefs, doctrines and rites entirely divorced from the realities of power in different societies” (Styers, 2004: 11). Instead of acknowledging the multiplicity of overlapping human logics, practices and social relations, what is offered is a narrow and rigidly demarcated contrast between the realms of magic and of religion. The latter is idealised and purified to be a private, intellectualised and spiritualised domain, and in this binary, magic effectively serves as a tool for the self-fashioning of modernity. In short, in modern modes of religion, rationality and social orders have been given a distinctive clarity in contrast to the magical foil (Styers, 2004: 224).

Be that as it may, Bruno Latour also notes that the imputed antinomy between Nature and Society has never been fully realised, more so in the present milieu with multifarious border-crossing scientific innovations and