

Islam and the West: Theoretical Confusion

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The discussion about Islam and the West is not one that only emerged in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States, but is actually an old issue going back to the spread of Islam more than 14 centuries ago around the shores of the Mediterranean after the fall of the Roman Empire. Moreover, the conflict between the East and the West is older still; it goes back to the aggression between the Persians and the Romans; the conquests of Alexander the Great in the heart of Asia; the conflict throughout the Mediterranean between the European northern and African southern shores during the Classical Graeco-Roman era; the Christian–Islam period; and lastly the modern colonialism–liberation stage. This historical legacy and cultural accumulation have made the two shores of the Mediterranean akin to two combating knights with neither dominating the other throughout history, while a love–hate relationship and exchange of influences between the two shores—often referred to in current literature as “Islam and the West”. It is a civilization opposing a geographical area or more correctly two civilizations in opposition—Islamic and Western civilizations. It can also be called an opposition between two geographical areas – the West and the East – or Western and Eastern influences, or between departing and incoming influences. Therefore, dialogue between the North and South, the Arabs and the Europeans and all attempts at establishing Middle Eastern or Mediterranean civilizations have faltered, not only because of the “Zionist

Entity” – which can be seen as the West in the East – but also because of this long historical legacy. Perhaps attempts of the Afro-Arabian and Turkish states to join the European Union will have the same fate unless this old historical legacy accumulating in the subconscious, which surfaces every now and then as is the case now, is alleviated.

It is possible that the only period during which the North and South experienced any form of “Dialogue of Civilizations” was during the Andalusian period when Arabs and Berbers, Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in Granada, Seville, Cordoba and Toledo. The Andalusian model created a single human civilization in which various cultures combined and is referred to in Jewish history as the “golden age”. After the departure of the Arabs and Muslims from Andalusia, the West witnessed the Spanish inquisition persecuting intellectuals and scientists. The West’s renaissance began only after the translations of the Arab Islamic heritage in science, philosophy and architecture into Latin were completed in Toledo, Sicily and Byzantium and when Emperor Frederick II was speaking Arabic in his court and corresponding with Abdul Haq Ibn Saba’in.

The historical rooting of relations between Arab Islamic and Western civilizations is the burden preventing moves towards a new Andalusian model—the dialogue of cultures. The West is known for relativity in judgment of studies at home, but its judgment of non-Western civilizations abroad is absolute. At home, the West analyzes the history of its own civilization in the context of time and place but it studies other civilizations outside of any contextual framework. Moreover, the West avoids sweeping judgments of its own history and prefers analysis driven by objectivity and neutrality and yet it issues sweeping judgments on foreign matters, which exposes its bias and prejudice. The West’s duplicity of standards is not limited to political practices alone but also extends to its academic view of civilizations.

Many of the judgments made by the West on Islamic civilization are the result of conflicting powers between the colonial West and Islamic countries securing their independence. These judgments were reflected in traditional Orientalism and contemporary Western social sciences,

particularly cultural anthropology. The West generalized the history of Islamic civilization and its future from the perspective of current conflict of powers and marginalized any civilizing role for Islam but instead glorified the role of the West. Colonialism is not only military, political and economic, it is also cultural. After the Islamic countries gained their independence, the Western cultural invasion continued as evident through the number of admirers of the West, which led to nations splitting into two parts: one admiring the West and the other admiring the old heritage. In addition, national cultures were divided into two parts: one part advocating the new, and the other advocating the old; the former is represented by the elites and the latter represented by the general public. The extent of such differences in these opposing sides could even lead to domestic conflict as is the case now in Algeria.

It is unfair to make comparisons between the Islamic and Western civilizations from one fixed period of time, as each civilization has its own extensive history. Western civilization passed through three stages—Classical, medieval and modern. Islam did not exist in the Classical period so when it eventually emerged it benefited from the earlier Ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and their intellectual and philosophical heritage. In the Middle Ages a flourishing Islamic civilization emerged into its “golden age”, the age of Al Mutanabbi, Al Biruni, Al Tawhidi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Al Haitham. This era in Islamic civilization included the Mamlouk Turkish Ottoman period, also described as the second age of recording. During this period the West translated mathematical, natural and philosophical Islamic sciences from Arabic into Latin, which was the catalyst behind the European renaissance. Europe’s Middle Ages from the 7th century until the 14th century AD corresponds to our golden age during the first seven Hijri centuries chronicled by Ibn Khalun. Europe from the 15th century until the 21st century corresponds to our middle ages from the 8th Hijri century until the 14th Hijri century. Each civilization is now living through an historical moment that is markedly different from the past. The contemporary West began with religious reform in the 15th century, the Renaissance in the 16th century, the Age of Reason in the 17th century, the Enlightenment in the 18th century, science in the 19th century, crisis in the

20th century, and post-modernity in the 21st century. Our middle ages began during the Mamlouk Turkish Ottoman period—the era of annotations, abstracts and encyclopedias, and now ended since the dawn of the Arab renaissance and reform movements during the last century and from which national liberation movements emerged against European colonialism and the establishment of modern states afterwards.

The traditional stereotype inherited from the Turkish Malouk Ottoman age is the most prominent image held by the West of Islamic civilization. It is the image which Turkey gave to the West at the peak of its invasion into Eastern Europe right up to the gates of Vienna and is the image conveyed by traditional Orientalists in the 19th century. It is the image held of Islamic civilization after it had lost its diversity from the 6th century and the abolition of science by Al Ghazali in the 5th century. This spawned the ideology of submission to the Sultan in economics, belief and popular obedience, the revival of religious studies and legitimized seizing of power by force and not by pledge of allegiance. The West took an image of Islam which believes in miracles and not the laws of nature; magic and superstition and not reason and proof; and the rights of the ruler and the duties of the citizens and not the rights of citizens and duties of the ruler. The West only became aware of the Islam created by the Al Najiyah group (committed to Quran and Prophet practices) – the group of the Sultan – rather than the people’s culture which was marginalized and forgotten but recorded by its opponents. Therefore, contemporary intellectuals and researchers of heritage should highlight the aspects that have been excluded and marginalized such as the rationality of the Al Mu’tazelites (Islamic group favoring thinking over citation) and Ibn Rushd (great Islamic philosopher), the interests of *Hakimiyah* (Western political concept of ruling) and the jurisprudence of taking to task an unjust ruler. This is in addition to the pursuit of pure mathematical and natural sciences in addition to jurisprudence, and what contemporary researches call “enlightened Islam”.

After the stereotype held in the West of Arab Islamic civilization is corrected, then the image of the West itself can be corrected, and the myth of a universal civilization (culture) will be abolished. Western civilization

appears as an historical one that originated in a certain time and place and for certain peoples who had their roots in the Greek and Roman civilizations and in Jewish and Christian cultures. These two sources interacted with the European environment itself and its indigenous culture and pagan religions. The West has kept silent about its Eastern sources, suggesting that the “Greek” knowledge inherited by the Europeans was unique, despite the fact that Europe absorbed influences from all the civilizations in the ancient world and the middle ages, including China, India, Persia, Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. Islamic civilization became one of the components of Western civilization in the early stages of its modern development. The West also separated science from its history so that it remains a purely European creation and suggested that the West is characterized by reason and rationality, science and scientific knowledge, humanism and humanity. As a result, racism grew deeply in the European consciousness where racial theories emerged in the 19th century and the centrality of Europe in modern times. Europe in the West’s opinion is the center of the World, others are foreign; Europe is the “metropole” and others are commonwealth; Europe is the self and the others are the subject as is the case with Orientalism. This duplicity transforms into values and Europe became right and others are wrong, as is often the case with fundamentalist movements. Europe’s principles are maintained for itself and the reverse for others. Science, reason, humanism and progress are confined within European borders alone. However, these principles are shattered when exported and turn into the opposite including ignorance, superstition, violation of human rights and backwardness. This is the highest degree of racism.

This history of conflict and dialogue between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, and even after the “New World” across the Atlantic Ocean had joined in confronting the East, does not rule out the emergence of a dialogue in the near future—a “Dialogue of Cultures” instead of a “Clash of Civilizations”. Europe played the role of teacher two times: the first one during the period of Ancient Greece and the second during the modern era; the Arab Islamic civilization was the “student” in both cases. Modern Arab philosophers such as Al Tahtawi

and Kheireddin Al Tunisi are the new teachers and the Arab renaissance is their product. Islamic civilization played the role of teacher only once in Andalusia when translation from Arabic into Latin was accomplished and Europe in the Middle Ages was the student. A second occasion remains for the Islamic civilization to be the teacher and the West to be the student, and it might be the present moment. The national liberation movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America raised slogans of ideals such as freedom, independence, socialism and justice. These slogans proceeded with their call for peoples' rights rather than human rights; peoples' right rather than the individual's right in self-determination; and control of national raw materials rather than the individual's investments in such resources. They called for moving from a uni-polar, European-focused world to a multi-polar one encompassing Bandung, Delhi, Cairo, Algeria and Belgrade. Third world nations represent three quarters of all votes at the United Nations and in addition to China form four fifths of the world's population. The New World is represented by the United States, which sits on the world's uni-polar throne in the name of globalization and the market economy where the "world is one village", domination of the communications and information technology revolution, organization and management, military power and the "end of history" with the survival of capitalism after the fall of socialist systems.

The tyranny of unilateralism appeared at the Durban conference when the United States and Israel withdrew and refused to even apologize for "hunting" millions of Africans and dragging them in chains to the "New World" to work as slaves and rejecting the correlation of Zionism with racism in spite of all the practices of the Zionist entity against the Palestinian people. These practices include organized terrorism, assassination of Palestinian leaders and killing of women and children, destruction of homes, and razing of lands. The injustice, tyranny and aggression joined together and naturally resulted in the individual's terrorist response to the terror of nations. To use the terminology espoused in Latin America in the 1960s, the "individual's terror" is the "liberation terror" against the terrorism of nations—the omnipotent terror.

This historical approach to the tension between Western civilization in the north and Islamic civilization in the south of the Mediterranean highlights the misunderstanding which fails to differentiate between what is the essence of religion and what is a result of social and political circumstances. Such misunderstandings include:

1. Linking Islam with terrorism, violence and aggression; lack of respect for the other; division of the world into the house of peace and house of war; house of faith and house of unbelief; Islam and ignorance; God and the idol. The phenomenon of *jihad* is the primary form of aggression and martyrdom is one of its tools. In fact this is a distorted image since Islam is the religion of freedom from oppression and aggression by the declaration that “there is nothing but Allah”, which is a single and comprehensive principle under which all are equal against tyranny and oppression and the false values of this age, including force, wealth, prestige, fame, sex, luxury and nihilism. Violence is a type of legitimate resistance against occupation and oppression after all other means have failed. The house of Islam in today’s language means opposition to injustice. Jihad is to be used in defense and not for attack and constitutes resistance against aggression and expulsion from one’s homeland. Martyrdom is the preference of a decent life rather than one of humiliation and the eternal life over one of subservience. Every culture has its own martyrs of resistance against aggression and the national liberation movements are legitimate movements against occupation. Jihad is a Quranic word that means “readiness to deter the enemy”; readiness does not mean warfare but rather to deter the enemy and prevent oppression and aggression.
2. Linking Islam to physical harshness through the severity of Islamic law in punishment including killing, crucifixion, stoning, amputation of hands, lashing, alienation as well as other punishments for apostasy, theft, adultery and drinking alcohol. In fact this is a pure media creation to discredit the image of Islam as a religion and as a culture. The Islamic Sharia is indivisible and punishments cannot be

separated from duties and expiations. Punishments come at the end and not at the beginning and rights precede duties. A Muslim has the right to satisfaction, i.e. he has the right to satisfy his basic needs including food, water, housing, education, medical treatment, work and early marriage. In Islam there is no hand amputation for a thief who steals because of starvation or unemployment or if all society is made up of thieves. The objective behind punishment is not its implementation but rather to act as a deterrence. Punishments are halted if there is any doubt about the perpetrator's guilt and are meant to protect life under all laws. Penal law is part of common law.

3. Accusations of intolerance, refusal of dialogue and inflexibility of opinion are attitudes dictated by psychological, social and political circumstances in Arab Islamic societies, while difference in opinion is a legitimate right. There is no divine book that has offered dialogue with offenders like the Holy Quran, which engaged in dialogue with the devil, infidels, polytheists, hypocrites, Sabians and Pagans. This dialogue was based on the principles of debate, opinion and proof. Anything that has no evidence should be denied by Muslims. Difference is a norm of nature and life and we should find unity in diversity and diversity in unity.
4. The West considers Islamic culture as fundamentalist; i.e. rejection of the new, adherence to the old, refusal of modernity, obsession with religious practice, acceptance of violence domestically and internationally, and atonement of society. They quote the words of Ibn Khaldun, who stated of Arabs and Bedouins that if they occupy a nation it will soon be ruined. Bedouins are against civilization and are happier in a tent than in a palace, happier on a camel than in modern luxurious cars, happier on land more than on the sea or in the air. The Bedouin has no interest in statehood but prefers to uphold the values of his tribe. In reality, fundamentalism is a movement found in every culture and it has its advantages and disadvantages and does warn against the dangers of alienation, loss of identity, obsession with modernity and loss of origins and roots. Fundamentalism in the West

is also a rejection of modernity and promotes the values of the consumer society.

5. Islam is accused of being irrational and extreme leading to dependency, fatalism, passivity, weak pursuit of livelihood and corruption. Renan and Leon Jote accused all Semitic civilizations of being a combination of extremes, lacking consistency and reason and ignoring cause and effect. This is a false accusation made by certain religious movements and directed at Islam. There were the rationalist Al Mu'tazelites (Islamic group favoring thinking over citation), fideistic Ash'arites (Islamic group that calls for use of proof and evidence in argument) and rationalist Ibn Rushed (Islamic philosopher) opposite Ibn Sina Al Ishraqi (Sufi). Indeed, the leader of modern Salafism, Ibn Taymiyyah, proves the agreement of intellectualism and traditional Sunnah in his work *Prevention of Conflict Between Reason and Tradition*. When Biruni studied Indian civilization he assessed it using reason in his famous book *Tahqiq Ma lil Hind Min Maqoolah, Maqboolah Min Al Akl Aw Martholah*. The West has now lost its rationality and has inverted values as Paul Karl Feyerabned highlights in his books *Farewell to Reason* and *Against Method*.
6. Islam is said to be a religious civilization belonging to the time of the Jewish and Christian Middle Ages, while the West alone is the owner and founder of the scientific civilization. Religion, morality, mysticism and asceticism are Eastern made, while science, civilization and politics are Western made. The East is said to be the birthplace of magic, superstition, physiognomy, fortune-telling and astrology. Islam is the Thousand and One Nights, the Magic Carpet, Aladdin, the Magic Lamp and Nights of Scheherazade. All of this is an incorrect generalization; science grew in ancient Eastern civilizations including China, India, Persia and the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt. Medicine and porcelain flourished in China; mathematics and logic in India; political systems in Persia; and astronomy in Mesopotamia. Astronomy, mathematics, algebra, geometry, music, natural sciences, medicine, pharmacy, chemistry,

botany and zoology flourished in the Islamic civilization. Latin translations of these sciences were behind the renaissance of modern Western science. Revelation, reason and nature are one concept in the Islamic civilizational model. The manifestations of fortune-telling exist in every culture. The soothsayer was known in ancient Egypt, the fortune-teller in India and prophecy was practiced by the Romans such as Cicero and the priestess of the Temple of Delphi in Greece.

7. The West has promoted the concept of “Eastern Despotism” and put Islam within this concept. According to the West all Islamic regimes whether hereditary or military are despotic and Israel alone is a democratic oasis in the region like Iran under the Shah. The West considers any Western regime as democratic and any Middle Eastern regime as authoritarian. The ancient Middle East knew only one free power—God or the Sultan. Greece knew only one free class, the aristocracy, while the modern West considers every individual to be free as a natural birthright. The West sees that in Islam the obedience to the Sultan is part of obedience to God and that Shura is non-binding. In fact this judgment is against reality, history of civilization and Islam and there are many examples in Islam which prove that this judgment is wrong. For example, to say “There is no God but Allah” is a declaration of freedom. The Prophet says that the greatest degree of jihad is the right word in the face of an unjust ruler. Advice in Islam is an obligation and Shura is against despotic opinion. Obedience to the ruler is a duty on condition that he is obedient to God. If the ruler violates this condition, the ruled shall have the right to revolt against him after dialogue fails. Pledges of allegiance comes from the people, their scholars and experts who are aware of public interests. In Islam, Shura is not conditional on quantity and respect for the other’s opinion is given irrespective of majority or minority favor. Western civilization is built on the principle that the majority coerces the minority.
8. It is said that Islamic civilization has not absorbed the International Declaration of Human Rights, which has only been advanced twice by the West: once after the French Revolution and again after World War

II. It is also said that Islamic civilization only knows duties before rights as expressed by Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab in the *Book of Monotheism, the Right of God to the Slaves*. This is a false accusation and every civilization has its own interpretation. This is represented by Confucius in China, Buddha in India, Socrates in Greece, Christianity as a new interpretation of Judaism, and Islam in the theory of the ideal man and the commonalities between man and God such as knowledge, power, life, hearing, sight, speech and willpower. These are absolute in God and relative in man, metaphorical in God and a reality in man. Sufism describes the theories of the “Unity of Witness” (God’s oneness of perception) and “Unity of Existence” (God’s oneness of being). Sharia (Islamic law) defined human rights as expressed by Al Shatby as the protection of life, sanity, religion, honor and money. The Prophet says: “Whoever saved one human life is considered as if he saved all Mankind, and whoever kills one human life is considered as if he killed all Mankind”. What is meant here is the example of Mankind as being beyond the limits of tribes, peoples, races and ethnicities, and is an example of God on earth and not the man who exists only within the geographical boundaries of the West beyond which are only wilderness, tribes or primitive peoples used as subjects for anthropology museums. If the Arab Islamic civilization was built on the concept of duties without rights, the Western civilization was built on the concept of rights without duties.

9. It is said that the status of women in Islam is incompatible with the rights of women in the modern era. She is said to be the obedient wife, the fertile mother and the daughter who needs a guardian. No marriage for the Muslim girl takes place without her guardian’s consent and her inheritance and testimony are equal to half the inheritance and testimony of the male. According to the West a Muslim female cannot be a judge or head of state. Men are custodians of women who are covered and stay at home like “Taliban” women. According to the West, polygamy in Islam makes women as hostages in the house of the husband who has the absolute right of divorce. In fact this vision is nothing but a kind of theatrical image of popular life

that downplays the status of women in Islam and real life. Islamic Sharia appeared in an environment where women had no rights. A new-born girl used to be buried alive out of fear of disgrace. Islam returned rights to women. Before Islam women had no rights in inheritance or testimony, but Islam returned these rights gradually and decided half of the male's inheritance and testimony is equal for her. Islam gave women legal rights in maintaining her name and rights in commercial practices, education, work and participation in various social aspects of life. Islam has given women the right to choose her life partner and the right to seek divorce in the case of her marriage rights not being fulfilled or if she faces harm from her husband. As for the right of abortion, homosexuality and nudity, all of this is linked to Western civilization alone and not found in other civilizations with rights based on the right to life, natural sex and sanctity of the body.

10. It is said that Islam does not recognize citizenship and its ensuing rights and duties and that identity is Islamic rather than one based on nationality. Moreover, Islam consists of "Millah" (denominations) as witnessed in the Ottoman Empire and led to the massacres of the Armenians, the creation of a caste system, majority oppression over the minority and which often end up with sectarian wars as in the case of Lebanon and Sudan and the ongoing tension in Indonesia, Pakistan and Egypt. There is also the issue of "tribute", "Ahl Al Themmah" (non-Muslims living under the protection of Islam), paid by people of the book (Jews and Christians) in order to live in peace and security under Muslim rule, participation in defense expenditure and exemption from military service. Again this is another crude image of the makeup of Islamic society. Religious denominations in Islamic society are equal in rights and duties exactly like individual Muslims according to the stipulations of "Al Medniah Accord". Islamic society is diverse by nature and is governed by the law of justice. Certain practices and terms have disappeared with time such as "tribute", the "People of the Book" and "Ahl Al Themmah". Loyalty these days is to the homeland and rights and duties are for citizens. What happened

in the Ottoman Empire was the defense of the nation against the interests of conflicting powers in the name of religion.

11. Prejudice towards sects and denominations is also shown towards races, tribes and peoples by the West and termed ethnic minorities and defined by skin color. The white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant in the United States is at the top of society, while the African blacks, Spanish Chicano, colored Arabs and Asians are at the bottom. Such racism manifested in the Nazi ideology in Germany and fascism in Italy. The West has strived to prove the racism of Arabs throughout the ages and their role in the slave trade in Africa, including the rulers of Morocco such as Moulay Ismail and the rulers of Egypt such as Mohammad Ali. Indeed, this is a distorted view of history. Islam considered racism and tribalism as the heritage of Ignorance. To be Arab is not defined by a father and a mother but by tongue. Prophet Mohammad says, “No merit to the Arab or Ajami (non-Arab) except by piety”. The Prophet’s muezzin, Bilal, was Abyssinian; The Christian king of Abyssinia, Negus, was a champion of Islam and Muslims and the first Muslim Hijra went to Abyssinia during his tenure. When he died, the Prophet prayed for his soul as a brother of Muslims. All are descended from Adam who was created from dust. In Islam we are all slaves of God. Slavery was common among the Persians and Romans in the Ancient World and Islam tried to remove it from the minds of people. Islam prohibited slavery of those who knew how to read and write. Under Islam, the liberation of a slave is considered a penance for sins which is indicative that slavery is a major sin. While the slavery of individuals has been ended, the slavery of people and exploitation of small nations by major powers is still there. The American civil war between the north and south was ended in the late 19th century because of the slaves.
12. The Arab character in the Western mindset is portrayed as deceitful, hypocritical, conspires, shabby, treacherous, lazy, dependent, irresponsible, accepting of injustice, used to oppression and poverty, fatalistic, apathetic and makes do with little. He is known for lavishness and misery at the same time; lives in the past and re-enacts

it. Traditional images of Arabs by the West are intended to poke fun, something which the West repeats against others, particularly the Indians and Chinese. This is intended to make Europeans feel superior and are used as tools for self-defense; Jews have used this tool across history. In an enthusiastic self-defense, it can be said that Arabs have depicted themselves in poetry with praise and pride; an Arab is an adventurer, preferring the hereafter to the world today and death to a life of humiliation, generous with foreigners, and trustworthy, among other attributes.