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Islam and the West: The Necessity of Dialogue

Contemporary world is experiencing a very critical and chaotic situation. Muslim societies everywhere are caught in a pincer movement: They are being squeezed, on the one hand, by forces of modernity and postmodernism, new philosophies and ideologies, and on the other hand by an emergent fundamentalism and extremism that often takes a militant form.

By the end of the cold war and extinguishing the fire of sharp ideological conflicts, we are told to face tensions along civilizational/cultural lines. Islam and the West, given their centuries old competition and confrontation, and the presence of a militant anti-Westernism among some radical Islamic groups and new Western hegemony and colonial tendency are cast as the most likely candidates to clash. September 11 and ensuing developments have contributed to the expectation of conflict between Islam and the West. Yet the politics of confrontation is likely to give rise to "securitization" of civil domain both in the West and the Islamic countries threatening cultural freedom, free thinking, academic activities, tolerance and diversity. An expectation for clash of civilization builds a particular mindset that eliminates elements of toleration, cooperation and dialogue between the two. In an age of globalization it is impossible to draw lines among civilizations and cultures. They are bound to co-exist contributing to interdependence of faiths and civilization breakdown of which may result in a total destruction of "global civilization". Thus it is a must to study the relationship between Islam and the West from a historical, political, sociological and philosophical point of views, and debate the myths of conflict and enmity. This paper aims at presenting the debate so that a sober understanding of the relationship between Islam and the West could be developed in a way to foster civilizational/cultural dialogue among the peoples

of Europe, Eastern and Western, countries, Muslim societies and followers of all religions in the world. The key to achieve this goal is dialogue, a constructive, exhaustive and continuous dialogue among civilizations and their real representatives, intellectuals and scholars. Therefore, we should try to grasp the true meaning of civilization and dialogue in order to judge about the dialogue between Islam and the West and realize its necessity and urgency.

What is a Civilization?

Civilization has a variety of meanings. The term comes from the Latin *civis*, meaning "citizen" or "townsman".

1. In a technical sense, a civilization is a complex society in which many of the people live in cities and get their food from agriculture, as distinguished from band and tribal societies in which people live in small settlements or nomadic groups and make their subsistence by foraging, hunting, or working small horticultural gardens. When used in this sense, civilization is an exclusive term, applied to some human groups and not others.
2. Another use of civilization includes some other element and characteristics of the word, implying that a complex society is naturally superior to less complex societies. This point of view is associated with racism and imperialism; powerful societies have often believed it was their right to "civilize", or culturally dominate, weaker ones ("barbarians"). This paper will mainly treat civilization in the first narrow sense. In the technical sense, a civilization is a complex society. It is distinguished from simpler societies but is not considered superior to them. Everyone lives in a society and a culture, but not everyone lives in a civilization. In general, civilizations share the following traits: Intensive agricultural techniques, such as the use of animal power, crop rotation, and irrigation. This enables farmers to produce a surplus of food that will not be needed for their own subsistence. A significant portion of the population that does not devote most of its time to producing food. They can go into other occupations and trade for the food they need. This is called "specialization of labor". It is possible because of the food surplus described above. The gathering of these non-food producers into permanent settlement, called cities. A social hierarchy. This can be chiefdom, in which the chieftain of one noble family or clan rules the people or a state society, in which the ruling class is supported by a government or bureaucracy. Political power is concentrated in the cities.

Civilization as a cultural identity

"Civilization" can also describe the culture of a complex society, not just the society itself. Every society, civilization or not, has a specific set of ideas and customs, and a certain set of items and arts, that make it unique. Civilizations have even more intricate cultures, including literature, professional art, architecture, organized religion, and complex customs associated with the elite. The intricate culture associated with civilization has a tendency to spread to and influence other cultures, sometimes assimilating them into the civilization (a classic example being Chinese civilization and its influence on Korea, Japan, Tibet and so forth). So many civilizations are actually large cultural spheres containing many nations and regions. The civilization in which someone lives is that person's broadest cultural identity so, members of different nations, descent and ancestry are distinguished through their cultural identity. Historians like Oswald Spengler have treated civilizations as single units. He says that a civilization's coherence is based around a single primary cultural symbol. Civilizations experience cycles of birth, life, decline and death, often supplanted by a new civilization with a potent new culture, formed around a compelling new cultural symbol.

This "Unified Culture" concept of civilization also influenced the theories of famous historian Arnold J. Toynbee in the mid-twentieth century. He believes that civilizations generally declined and fell, because of moral or religious decline, rather than economic or environmental causes. Samuel P. Huntington similarly defines a civilization as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species." Yet there are other conceptions of civilization which go beyond the goal of this paper. We only mention here that many theorists argue that the entire world has already become integrated into a single "World Systems", a process known as "globalization".

Different civilizations and societies all over the globe are economically, politically, and even culturally interdependent in many ways. There are many debates about the beginning of this integration and its canonical element, but nobody can doubt that this process has occurred today. Specially with regard to information revolution and the emergence of "informational Society".

Here we remind once again the main question of this paper:

"Why is dialogue among civilizations necessary?"

To answer this question, first we should try to know what is meant by "dialogue".

What is Dialogue?

The word "dialogue" has become fashionable during the past twenty years and can mean anything from a superficial conversation to a sustained encounter with, and determined effort to understand, another point of view in this paper we are focusing on "civilizational dialogue" that is dialogue between representatives and members of two different civilizations. One might use "civil dialogue" or "cultural dialogue" but the longer expression is preferable because it makes clear that we are confining our attention to the encounter with "other" civilizational and cultural expressions. We are therefore excluding from our reflections, for the time being at any rate, the other form of civic dialogue called "dialogue among civilizations". This term refers to encounters between citizens and members of different civilizational tradition, not only the members of the same civilizational background. So, there are different forms of dialogue. The topic of this paper is somewhat distinct from the common term we just mentioned above. Our topic here includes both "dialogue of religions" and "dialogue of civilizations", because, West is not a religion, but a geographical region, while Islam is obviously a religion not the name for special land or country.

So, we should discuss interreligious dialogue as well. There are different levels of interreligious and civilizational dialogue as well. Eric Sharpe distinguishes four levels:

- Firstly, he describes discursive dialogue or "debate"- an intellectual inquiry which presupposes participants who are well informed on the philosophical and/or theological issues in the two traditions.
- Secondly, human dialogue assumes (a la Martin Buber) that is possible for individuals to meet purely and simply as human beings, that is to transcend their respective traditions and the beliefs that separate them.
- Thirdly, in Sharpe's schema, secular dialogue stresses that people of different creeds may cooperate in programs of joint action (for example, development or human rights) without discussing their beliefs even when these beliefs are relevant to their participation in the projects.
- Finally, sharp distinguishes spiritual dialogue. Here, there is little or no debate or discussion, instead, the emphasis is on prayer and meditation which often take place in groups in ashrams and meditation centers. Although all of these activities are conducive to good religious and cultural relationships, I think that it is misleading to use the expression interreligious dialogue or dialogue among civilizations for encounters where no conversation takes place or where the cultural and intellectual

dimensions are deliberately avoided.

Today, there are many well-known theologians, philosophers of religion, phenomenologists of religion who have discussed and written widely about the essence of dialogue, its kinds, rules, importance and consequences. But this paper cannot cover all those issues and views. I just wanted to point to some of contemporary perspectives about dialogue in general (civilizational, religious, or cultural), with emphasis on "the new science of religion" and "modern theology". To the above mentioned views, I would like to add two aphorisms which capture the mental attitude which I think is essential for engaging in dialogue with other religions and cultures. "Nothing human is foreign to me (Attributed to Lucretius) means that if a particular action is performed by a human being I, as a human being, ought to be able to make some sense of it. The second maxim comes from Spinoza who said "I have always labored carefully when faced with human actions, not to mock, not to lament, not to condemn, but to understand". Now after all these explanations we can discuss about Islam and the West very clearly. First of all, I believe that Islam as a religion and culture is not the enemy of the West. American media has often tended to portray the Islamic world (and various groups within it) solely through the prism of extremism and terrorism so often, indeed, that some of those who attempt to debunk the notion of an "Islamic threat" inadvertently perpetuate the simplistic "good (or secular, moderate, pro-western) Muslims"/"bad (or militant) Muslim" dichotomy. Instead of taking seriously the criticisms of Western attitudes toward the Middle East by Muslim scholars and intellectuals, many Western writers prefer to depict Muslims as backward, incapable of change, whose culture is the embodiment of all that Western progress has left behind. Even the government of many Muslim countries play into this dichotomy, particularly when soliciting economic or military support from the United States. The dichotomy fails to do justice to the complex reality of Islamic society and undermines American interests in the Middle East and the Islamic world.

The shared cultural roots joining Islam with the West are forgotten far too often. Although recently voiced opinions regarding a "clash of civilizations" posit that Islam falls outside the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic cultural continuum. The reverse is in fact the case. Classical Islamic civilization was constructed out of Muslim, Biblical and Hellenic cultures, but cast a wider net by integrating Persian, central Asia, as well as Indian component within its cultural synthesis. Historically, Islam is the true bridge between the West and East.

The West is not the enemy of Islam. While the West may suffer from a sense of cultural triumphalism it is a civilization whose hard-own achievements are not compatible with Muslims values but which can broadly support and strengthen the Islamic community. The Western regard for individualism and political freedom, and its commitment to political accountability and democratic pluralism characterize some of the best of what the West offers the world. Muslims must not be so insecure as to believe that they can only reflect or reject the West. Muslim élites who adopt Western culture wholesale, without a critical or discerning eye, have only perpetuated a fear of an inappropriate and monolithic cultural onslaught among religious Muslims. Moving beyond reactionary attitudes and positions requires that both the West and Islam know one another. The US and European countries should effort to create a horizon of tolerance and optimism about Muslims among their nations. Yet the xenophobia directed against Muslims is embedded in a larger pattern of willed cultural ignorance compounded by chronic fear-mongering through the media. Ironically, Islam itself provides useful insights on overcoming self-negating and exclusionary outlooks through its focus on and regard for unity within cultural diversity.

While the west may not have understood Islam, Muslims have also faded to grasp the strengths or the spirit of the West. Where is the Muslim "Lawrence of Arabia" who seek to discover and know the Western Christian or secular humanistic worldview? Why has there been so little research among Muslim scholars on the scientific, technological and informational civilization of the West? Much may be gained in insight from the historical experiences of Western, Christian, Hellenic culture for Muslims at this time of profound and vast oppression, injustice and occupation. Most important for both communities at this time is the need for active engagement to move beyond reactionary impulses triggered by symbols. Persisting at the level is to endure a psychopathic condition, relying on symbols to generate meaning, divorced from the sources or context that originality inspired their meaning. The terrorists who struck at the World Trade Center similarly confused form for substance: the United States is not a series of buildings that can be brought down, these are only external forms that do not necessarily damage the spirit that built them. Active engagement through sustained and constructive dialogue, with complete observance of the rules we mentioned before, can help us to discover the common humanity concealed by form and obscured by fear, pessimism and insecurity. The West need not to recoil from Islamic symbols as they do not represent anti-western, anti-secular, "irrational extremism". The West is secure enough to uncover the extent to which a deeper conflicts have been clothed in religious rhetoric, in order to

defuse the mobilization potential of manipulated imagery and address the material, root causes of conflict.

Instead, the US and Europe can improve their image among Muslims and pursue policies more compatible with their long-term interests by demonstrating that it is interested in entering into dialogue with Islam, and that it does not view Islam as a "threat".

Genuine curiosity about the Western experience and reflection on the sources of Western strength would allow Muslims to draw on the best of what the West has to offer without forfeiting the true meaning or spirit of their beliefs. There is a great need in the Muslim world to deliberately integrate the person, the citizen and the Muslim. This involves a search for truth within Islamic traditions and contexts that begins at the level of the individual. Western civilization has emerged with a close linking of personal behavior with citizenship and social values, while Muslims today are on the threshold of discovering the responsibilities and deeper meaning of Muslim citizenship.

Concluding Remarks

Retreating from the challenges of active engagement only serves to strengthen the position of fundamentalists of both communities. Retreat is one of two faces of fundamentalism, which is a pathology of culture that arises when a group takes a subset of basic tenets of a tradition, and either under pressure of insecurity (as in the case of today's Muslims), or in the pursuit of hegemony or total security (in the case of the West), uses them either to seal off others, or to maintain dominance. A retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group, be it Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu, is not only a denial of the rich diversity of the modern cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations. Historically, both the West and Islam have relied overmuch on the self-evident testimonies of their beliefs and accomplishments over genuine interpersonal or inter-civilizational dialogue and bridge-building. A new and mutually rewarding relationship has the potential to emerge between Islam and the West, where accumulated wisdom and insights must be shared to avoid stagnation and for progress to be achieved. Such a relationship would be premised not on ideas of cultural superiority, but on mutual respect and openness to cultural diversity. Muslims and Westerners can learn from each other and cooperate in the pursuit of humane values. The West and Islam are not destined to meet as rivals. The West can give Islam the best that it has in exchange for the

best of Islam.

Cooperation is the necessity imposing itself upon all governments and countries today. For having a continuous and constructive cooperation in different areas of social life and international relations, a sustained dialogue and good understanding is needed. Therefore the dialogue of civilizations is the very main solution to end all conflicts and start collaboration.

Islam and the West have no other way except the way of dialogue to know each other and cooperate for solving their shared problems, otherwise there will be war, enmity, misunderstanding, violence, prejudice and different kinds of terrorism. To avoid all these disasters the both should welcome dialogue and obey the rules of the Game.

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