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Islam and the West: Issues of Diversity

A Contemporary Perspective

by Muhammad Rizwan

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Introduction

The cultural relations of the 21st century nations is as much about building the future on a specific set of core values as it is about understanding the past and present of people. However, it is urged that, in the West, something from the past of cultural relations is clouding the vision of the future: this is the twin influence of "modernity" and "multiculturalism." It is examined that how a monocular view of progress derived from western modernity is tangled up with a multiculturalism obsessed with difference for its own sake. It is intended to go beyond this impasse and find in other cultures and vocabularies for mutual understanding.

One of the central obstacles of the communication of cultures on their own terms is a one-sided notion of progress. Even the elites of non-western nations, influenced by the arguments of western civilization, have themselves come to believe in the marginal backwardness of their traditions. However, traditions itself can be seen as something which will take their societies forward, with their identity and core values intact, to a future beyond modernity. Similarly, the influential and, in its origins, especially the U.S., model of multiculturalism attempts to marginalize diverse histories.

It manufactures identity in the form of different ethnicities, with the ultimate aim of social homogenization. Yet identity for all people everywhere is not formed in a vacuum but within a cultural realm that comes with values, a history, and specific contradictions and complexities. It is the genuine difference, which allows us to learn from each other.

Two alternatives can be proposed to the concepts of modernism and multiculturalism: trans-modernism and mutually assured diversity.

Trans-modernism takes a perspective beyond the geographical and intellectual matrix of the enlightenment. In its generous view of cultural co-existence, it can see tradition as dynamic, amenable, capable of changing and eager to change. The changes in Islam, in many countries, particularly since 9/11, provide, a good and overlooked example.

Mutually assured diversity is a non-competitive conversation whose protagonists recognize a central factor in human development: that it is the transmission of identity across change which is the cultural reflex par excellence, because, identity is the attribute of belonging that grows from knowing oneself, so that one has the ability to know others and learn about things.

From this alternative vantage-point, the East or Muslim world can modernize the West. To a secularized society such as Britain, with its disintegration of family structures, a phenomenon such as the arranged marriage, which has been transplanted to a new environment, can be seen to provide many social solutions. In addition, Canada, with its multicultural declaration and its Arbitration Act of 1991, allowing religious groups to resolve civil family disputes, now has, since 2003, an Islamic institute for civil justice.

The emergence of unfriendly images in the world media has become one of the most serious phenomena in contemporary relationships between the western and Islamic worlds. Employing a "Jihadist" discourse and suicide attacks to fight the "Holy War," such violent images of the Islamic world were often broadcast in various forms throughout the West. During this flow of negative images of Islam, there were parallel negative images of the West flowing throughout the Islamic world as well. These images were often contradictory, as if each side represented themselves as victims of the other's aggression.

Could the images of violence that frequently make the headlines in the worldwide media, particularly since the end of the Cold War, be regarded as a form of dialogue between Islam and the West, supplied for an audience of millions throughout the world?

Although the western image of the Islamic world is rather homogeneous, in fact it is very diverse. It consists mainly of territories that extend from the North Africa's Atlantic coast to Southeast Asia. As one of the most culturally and ethnically heterogeneous civilizations in the world, it includes over 25 countries, inhabited by over a billion people, with diverse economic, social, and political systems. Islam is the world's second largest religion; and also the world's fastest growing. With only about 20 percent of the world's Muslims now living in the Islamic world, there are some 6 to 8 million in the United States, and many others throughout other parts of the world, including Europe, Russia, and Latin America. Nevertheless, this vast group of people is often represented in the western originating worldwide media, by images of a small minority of radical extremist groups within Muslim societies.

Conversely, a similar phenomenon is occurring within the Islamic world. The West, which covers the societies of Europe and their (genealogical, colonial and philosophical) descendants, with preeminence given to the role of the United States, is frequently represented as one homogeneous group with only one culture. The huge diversity of the West, the plethora of divergent views, and the mix of different ethnicities is often overlooked. Instead, a global hegemonic image is displayed as the result of international politics in Islamic countries. International events, therefore, have a significant role in shaping the image of the West in Islamic countries as well as the Islamic image in Western ones.

Media has a major role in determining an image, both locally and internationally. In line with the Gramscian (and neo-Gramscian) theoretical approach, the conception of "hegemony" and John Hartley's theories on media, "popular reality" and "popular culture," the recent condition of image building between the Islamic and Western worlds could be seen as a product of struggle between interest groups in a specific historical period.

To some extent, the communication of ideas determines what is the "popular reality." In this way, a "ruling order" forms and maintains hegemony in civil society. By creating cultural and political consensus via the media, the ruling order exercises its hegemony over the other social groups. Contact between various cultures and social groups from abroad has become a basic feature of contemporary society.

There are indeed differences between the Islamic and Western worlds. However, if we are to live in a world of peace and harmony, these differences must be understood and discussed. Further, it is necessary to analyze the actors that are contributing (either purposefully or accidentally) to

the emphasis on the differences, and perhaps discover ways to shift the focus to the similarities between the apparently divergent ideologies.

Relations based on a genuine recognition of differences means grasping that the future is not the realm of a single civilization or worldview but a domain of multiple potentials. People from the western and Islamic worlds must wake up to the fact that there is more than one way of being human. As Professor Abdul Aziz Said has said, "The way we deal with others is really a reflection of the way we deal with ourselves."

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