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Abstract

Extract:

Today's tensions should lead to tomorrow's aspirations. What we need now is a culture of peace that would help broaden cross-cultural understanding between Islam and the West. With proper knowledge of the culture of the Arab and Muslim worlds, this understanding would help foster tolerance and resolve conflict. We need to sustain a diversity of cultures, not a diversity of imagined clashes and conflicts.

Keywords

Muslim, Arab, Islamic, Western culture, globalisation

Viewpoint: -

Islamic Culture and Globalisation

*by Sharif M. Shuja**

The spread of Islam has had an impact on the globalisation of culture. Islam has spread not only as a religion but has helped also to give birth to languages which are today spoken by many more non-Muslims than Muslims. Kiswahili in Africa is today the most important indigenous language to have emerged out of Africa - but its origins lie in the interaction between Islam and African culture. Islam and the Arabic language have bequeathed the Arabic alphabet for languages like Farsi, Urdu, Old Hausa and others. The Arabs have given the world the so-called Arabic numerals through which the twentieth century has computerised the human experience. Today the Quran is the most widely read book in its original language in human history. Muslims are expected to read the Quran in its original Arabic and not a translation that may change the intended meaning. The Christian Bible is the most widely read book in translation.

As the 21st century begins, almost one out of every five human beings is a Muslim. In the course of the 21st century a quarter of the human race will probably be Muslim. The new demographic presence of Islam within the Western world is indicative that Islamisation is now a major globalising force.

In the second half of the twentieth century both Muslim migration to the West and conversions to Islam within the West are consolidating a new human Islamic presence. In Europe as a whole, there are now 20 million Muslims, eight million of whom are in Western Europe. These figures exclude the Muslims of the Republic of Turkey, who number some 50 million. There are new mosques from Munich to Marseilles.

Also as a manifestation of the demographic Islamisation of the Western world, there are now over a thousand mosques and Islamic centres in the U.S. alone. And the country has professional associations for Muslim engineers, Muslim social scientists and Muslim educators. There are some six million American Muslims - and the number is rising impressively.

Currently Islam is the fastest growing religion in Central Asia. After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., all five states of Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan - made an official place for Islam as the dominant religion. In France, Islam is becoming the second most important religion numerically after Catholicism. In Britain some Muslims have been experimenting with an Islamic parliament of their own, and others are demanding state subsidies for Muslim denominational schools. In Germany it has been belatedly realised that the importation of Turkish workers in the 1970s was also an invitation to the muezzin and the minaret to establish themselves in German cities. Australia has discovered that it is a neighbour to

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the largest Muslim country in the world in terms of population (Indonesia). There are new mosques, Islamic schools and Quranic centres from Brisbane to Perth.

Westernisation, on the hand, is also a major globalising force. In the first half of this century, the West had colonised more than two-thirds of the Muslim world, from Africa to Asia. The first half of the twentieth century also witnessed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the complete de-Islamisation of the European state-system. The aftermath included the abolition of the caliphate as the symbolic centre of Islamic authority. The *ummah* (Islamic community) became more fragmented than ever and became even more receptive to Western cultural penetration. Other forces which facilitated the cultural Westernisation of the Muslim world included the replacement of Islamic and Quranic schools with Western style schools; the increasing use of European languages in major Muslim countries; and the impact of the Western media upon the distribution of news, information and entertainment. In other words, the West has in turn spread not only its technology and market ideology, but also its languages (especially English, French and Spanish), its educational systems, consumer culture, including the dress code for men world-wide, and its mass media. The net result has indeed been a form of globalisation of aspects of Western culture. But at what cost?

In almost every liberal country in the West, crime is escalating, violence sometimes quadrupling, street mugging is on the rise, and the culture of the fortress city is developing. Suicide is now the second leading cause of death among American adolescents, the causes including the decay of family values and a more general national malaise. By comparison, suicide is a rare form of violence in the Muslim world.

One of the remarkable things about the twentieth century is that it has combined the cultural Westernisation of the Muslim world, on the one hand, and the more recent demographic Islamisation of the Western world, on the other. The foundations for the cultural Westernisation of the Muslim world were laid mainly in the first half of the twentieth century. The foundations for the demographic Islamisation of the Western world are being laid in the second half of the twentieth century. The cultural Westernisation of Muslims contributed to the brain drain of Muslim professionals and experts from their homes in Muslim countries to jobs and educational institutions in North America and Europe. It is in this sense that the cultural Westernisation of the Muslim world in the first half of the century was part of the preparation for the demographic Islamisation of the West in the last fifty years.

There are scholars and policy makers in the West who are concerned with recent Islamic revivalism and face tensions about how Islam is to be treated in Western textbooks and media, especially as Islam becomes a more integral part of Western society. In the Muslim world, education has become substantially westernised. Is it now the turn of education in the West to become partly Islamised? Can the Western world enter the positive sphere of globalisation, and draw on the traditional wisdom of cultures such as Islam which point towards a more integrated society with drastically decreased levels of crime and violence?

The rise of Islamic movements in different parts of the world, aimed at resisting Western domination and control over Muslim territories and resources, Muslim cultures and communities, has provoked a new wave of aggressive emotions against the religion and its practitioners. That it is resistance to Western domination and control - and not some threat to the West as such - which is taking place within the Muslim world is a reality that

is concealed from the general public. What Islamic movements are opposed to is the annexation and occupation of their lands as in the case of Palestine and Lebanon, the usurpation of their rights over their own natural resources as in the case of the Gulf Sheikhdoms, and the denigration of their religion as often happens in the Western media, sometimes abetted by local elites and writers. Islamic groups and some individuals see their struggle as part of the still unfulfilled quest for self-determination and for genuine sovereignty. Such Muslim resistance is portrayed as an 'Islamic threat' by some Western academics, including Samuel P. Huntington. Conflict between Western and Islamic civilisations, Huntington in this article "The Clash of Civilisations"¹ points out, 'has been going on for 1300 years. The Gulf War is only the most recent important example.' His argument has been the centre of controversy for the last six years.

At the turn of the Western millennium, it is crucial to consider whether Islam is a monolithic force; whether the clash between Islam and the West is inevitable; and whether the so-called Islamic civilisation poses a credible threat to the West.

Huntington depicts the Islamic countries as part of a wider pan-Islamic movement, united in their hostility to the West and the United States. So convinced is Huntington of the 'kin-country' syndrome that even the Gulf War of 1990 becomes clear evidence of the brewing clash between Islam and the West.

The depiction of Islam and the Islamic countries as a monolithic entity may reflect the errors of the orientalist mind-set, which refuses to understand the diversity within Islam for the convenience of a simple explanation. The assumed identity, through segregation and confinement of the Islamic civilisation, is a product of the Western imagination and sustains a deep phobia because the simple explanation, ironically, renders Islam both 'unknown' and mysterious.

It is orientalist scholarship that has invested Islam both with internal unity and an external political ambition. Orientalists have reconstructed Islam as a political religion despite the fact that there is little in original Islamic sources on how to form states or run governments. It also produced a particular reading of the 'orient' that was at odds with reality. Edward Said, in his article "Orientalism Reconsidered"² argued that 'designations like Islam and the Arabs . . . represented interests, claims, projects, ambitions, and rhetorics that were not only in violent disagreement, but were in a situation of open warfare.' These divisions, however, were quickly glossed over and the myth that the Islamic countries possessed a fundamental unity of purposes that transcended national boundaries became the accepted consensus. The myth has, so far, refused to adapt itself to reason.

If the notion of a political and monolithic Islam should be taken with some scepticism, it is still true that a fundamentalist movement has emerged with the specific political task of reforming Muslim societies. This, however, is essentially a reaction to westernisation, though not modernisation, and constitutes an attempt to check a perceived social drift and weakening of morals. In the West, modernisation is synonymous with westernisation, but Muslim 'fundamentalists' clearly dissociate the two. This discordant understanding of modernisation has given Western analysts the impression that a rejection of westernisation is the equivalent of a battle-cry against the West.

¹ *Foreign Affairs*, 72 no. 3, Summer 1993.

² *Cultural Critique*, Fall 1985.

It should also be mentioned that the fundamentalist movement, most active in the Shi'ite countries of Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, is also diverse and a minority movement in most Islamic countries. Even assuming Islamic fundamentalism would spread significantly, it is not inevitable that it will inexorably lead to a clash with the West. After all, the West, and particularly the United States, has maintained a very special relationship with Saudi Arabia, one of the most fundamentalist of Arab States.

Therefore, even if we grant that Islam forms a united movement in comparison to western culture, it is not certain whether the Islamic civilisations will constitute a true adversary to the West. However, it would be helpful if commentators in the West recognized that the pursuit of modernisation need not be accompanied by westernisation, and that a rejection of westernisation is not an inevitable call to do battle with the West.

It is helpful here to recognise that Islamic revivalism is in many ways the successor to failed nationalist programs and offers an Islamic alternative or solution, a third way distinct from capitalism and communism. Islamists argue that Islam is not just a collection of beliefs and ritual actions, but rather a comprehensive ideology embracing public as well as personal life. It is important to understand that Islamic activism in some countries is a cause of concern but not for alarm. It is not a challenge to any civilisation. Like radicals throughout history, Islamic radicals become moderate once accommodated and incorporated into the socio-political mainstream. If they do not, they perish or become sociologically irrelevant cults. Therefore, extremism can best be reduced through gradual democratisation, a process and a system of governance which the West is not encouraging in the Muslim world, and particularly not in the Middle East.

One also needs to be clear about the teachings of Islam. Some analysts in the West take the view that the rapidly growing Muslim population in Europe and the United States, and Islamic revivalism generally, are potential threats to Western culture. The study of Islam demonstrates that it is not a violent doctrine. Islam, like other world religions, is a faith of peace and social justice. In fact, Islam is as universalist as Christianity, and offers a generous consolation when it comes to finding purpose and guiding the soul in a confusing world. It does not turn to fundamentalist militancy, because it has always been a tolerant religion and dislikes extremism and killing. Islam does not encourage terrorism and threatening behaviour. These violent concepts do not originate in Islam as a faith. Those groups who practice terror under the flag of Islam are a small minority, rejected by the great majority of Muslims. In relation to aggressive attitudes, the key message to Western scholars is to oppose extremist Muslims but not blame all Islam.

Today's tensions should lead to tomorrow's aspirations. What we need now is a culture of peace that would help broaden cross-cultural understanding between Islam and the West. With proper knowledge of the culture of the Arab and Muslim worlds, this understanding would help foster tolerance and resolve conflict. We need to sustain a diversity of cultures, not a diversity of imagined clashes and conflicts.