

Islam and the West: Prospects of Mutual Understanding

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Abstract

Islam is a primordial religion revealed from God for the good of mankind and the West stands for an ideology and civilization representing the values of humanism, reason and progress. Although the West tends more towards secularization yet religious consciousness and its ethic is not being discarded from it. Islam aims at both the spiritual and the secular development of society and the West through its scientific knowledge and the cultural ethic is also concerned with the same issues of society. In forming the better and peaceful world where the relations between the two communities become more cordial rather than of hate, prejudice and hostility, the commonalities of the civilizations are to be sought out. This paper examines such common points of the two civilizations to explore the prospects of their mutual understanding.

Introduction

Islam is the primordial religion from God, revealed to various prophets for the good of mankind. Its final revelation and perfect came through Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) during the 7th century. The West represents the Europe and US in its thought, religion and civilization. It has a rich religious heritage of Abrahimic faith traditions. Judaism and Christianity flourish here. Nevertheless, the present form of this civilization is dominated by rationalism and materialism. With some exceptions the Muslim encounter with the West has been generally cordial and peaceful at the cultural level. It

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is because Islam is distinguished by its broader world-view that regulates life in its diverse domains by understanding one's own self vis-à-vis the other men with their ideological and cultural associations and environments. However, the Western civilization in its modern form is reshaping itself somewhat irreligious, anti-Muslim, and hegemonic manner. This has posed many challenges before the mankind in general and the Muslim *Ummah* in particular. The biggest of them is that the Western civilization, according to its advocates, is the sole reality and its expansion is considered necessary as against Islam that is dangerous and a great hurdle in the way after the collapse of the Communist power.¹ This view has created a wrong image about Islam and the Muslims. On the other hand, Islam propounds realities of both the spiritual and the secular life of man and accommodates the realities, facts, developments of other cultures and communities in way of understanding their common good and rationale. This is an attitude of dialogue and understanding rather than that of clash and confrontation. To overcome the challenge by exploring the prospects of their mutual understanding is the dire need of the present times. This paper is a humble attempt towards this direction. Its focus is on finding out the common points of the two civilizations to highlight their significance and relevance in remaking a better world.

Sharing the Common Points

(a) Religious consciousness.

At the outset it can be said that the Western civilization is not completely irreligious. Religion is recognized by it, though in a marginal way. It is regarded as a private affair and has little to do with the public life. The basis of most, if not all, Western government is in the Bible. Religious symbolism, holidays, and preserving a religious way of life is still the main focus of people of the West, especially with the rise of the conservative movement. The communities of various Faiths Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism etc. sustain in this set up because of this very attitude. The followers of these faiths flourish and contribute well to both their communities and nations. This is related to the recognition of the spiritual self of man and its impressions are touched upon by their modern psychologists

like Kierkegaard, William James and Carl Jung. So religiosity is present in the Western civilization cannot be characterized essentially irreligious or anti-religious. It is this religious legacy that Islam shares with the West. It becomes more viable when the West propounds that their faith or faiths are based on the revealed Scriptures. Islam recognises to the Judeo-Christian religious traditions as the earlier versions of divine revelation and characterizes itself as the final and the perfect revelation message:

Step by step has He bestowed upon thee from on high this divine writ, setting forth the truth which confirms whatever there still remains (of earlier revelations): for it is He who has bestowed from on high the Torah and the Gospel aforetime, as a guidance unto mankind, and it is He who has bestowed (upon man) the standard by which discern the true from the false.²

Ralph Braibanti, a reputed political scientist of USA who had worked extensively in the Muslim countries, highlights the prospective nature of this commonality in the following words:

Hence Islam as the final stage in the evolution of Abrahamic monotheism embraces the truth of its two predecessors, rejects the untrue and finalizes prophethood with Muhammad (Seal of the Prophet). On the one hand this perspective makes it appear impossible to have any meaningful interreligious dialogue. On the other hand the commonalities, if divorced from intervening political issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian controversy, have led to cooperation. The spirit of interreligious cooperation may also be compromised by the competition for conversions. Islam and Christianity are alone among world religions in their dynamic impulse for the universalisation of their religious domain. This has been a source of conflict through the centuries. Neither religion has renounced its evangelical claims. Even while showing greater mutual respect, each has strengthened its missionary efforts. Both *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio* make clear that the Church must continue "to struggle for the world's soul" and that enculturation which is designed to adapt to indigenous cultures

and religions must not detract from the centrality of the "new evangelization". The global spread of Islam, a consequence both of birthrate and missionary zeal continues at a remarkable rate.³

(b) Human Values

Humanism marks the other main feature of the Western civilization. Man is full of potentialities and can develop his thought and the world happily as per his creative thinking and this is termed humanism of the West. The individual good and prosperity is measured through man's own tools intellect and experience. ⁴There is little interference of Divine in it. Islam, no doubt recognizes the potentiality and creativity of man but at the same time it integrates human knowledge with Divine knowledge which is the guiding source and substance for the former. This co-relation can be termed as that of the physical and the metaphysical, the secular and the spiritual and the terrestrial and the transcendental. This is also true of Judaism and Christianity. All knowledge emanates from God. He is the ultimate formation of knowledge.

It is evident that in its evolution of humanism an ample number of human values and norms have been formed by the West. Their final culmination is seen in the UN declaration of Human Rights Charter of 1948. Making the dignity, respect and freedom of man central in its objectives it declares a good number of rights for him to make his life secure and good ⁵. It is in this context of the Western humanism that the status of man and his role in Islam can be understood. In Islam, man is *khalifah* (deputy) of God on the earth who has to represent God in his actions and deeds. It characterizes the supremacy of man over other creatures of the universe and his power of understanding and implementation of Divine Will proper and genuine order of the world. The more one understands his own proper status as a human being the better deputy of God (*khilafah*) on the earth his role and service will be. There are least chances of jeopardizing the rights of other human beings. The Qur'an refers to this truth as following:

Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth and has lavished upon His

blessings, both outward and inward.⁶

It is God Who made you His vicegerents on earth...⁷

Islam enjoins five basic human values described as protection of life, faith, property, reason and progeny. Each human being has to observe them strictly. No society, according to Islam, will be described as humane without its adherence to these five values. Humanity sustains by them and can be lead to its ideals of peace, justice and prosperity.

(c) Scientific Research

In the scientific method of research much weight is given, in the West, to reason and empirical method to discover the truth. They play a dominant role in fashioning the society. By these tools, objects of Nature are investigated and their use and utility is determined. Modern science and technology which has revolutionized man's life tremendously are the products of this method of inquiry and induction. Islam had a major role to play in the transfer of knowledge. In this domain there is much compatibility between the Western scientific knowledge and of Islam. In the first place the learning of philosophical and scientific knowledge passed to the West through Muslims by the former's learning at the colleges of Cordova, Toledo and Granada. These were considered colleges by modern standards and attracted students from various quarters of the world. There was teaching in the disciplines of medicine, theology, jurisprudence, mathematics and philosophy by the gifted lecturers. The graduates of these colleges later on taught in the universities of Europe like Oxford, Cambridge and the other centers of learning in France and Italy during the 11th and the 12th centuries. Even new scholasticism developed by St. Thomas Aquinas and others is, according to A.N. Whitehead, indebted to this influence of the Muslim learning.⁸ Similarly those who are the founders of the modern scientific method like Roger Bacon, St. Thomas and Kepler have a good influence of the medieval Muslim intellectual tradition through the works of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd and others.⁹ Interestingly Allama Iqbal, the distinguished scholar of Islamic thought, terms the Western scientific research as the continuity of Islam. He writes:

There was a time when European thought received inspiration from the world of Islam. The most remarkable phenomenon of modern history, however, is the enormous rapidity with which the world of Islam is spiritually moving towards the West. There is nothing wrong in this movement, for European culture, on its intellectual side, is only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam. Our only fear is that the dazzling exterior of European culture may arrest our movement and we may fail to reach the true inwardness of that culture. During all the centuries of our intellectual stupor Europe has been seriously thinking on the great problems in which the philosophers and scientists of Islam were so keenly interested.¹⁰

Scientific discovery and exploration is inherent in the teachings of Islam. The holy Qur'an repeatedly persuades man to look into the objects of Nature and derive lessons from them by discovering their laws, function and use:

Assuredly in the creation of the Heavens and of the earth; and in the alternation of night and day; and in the ships which pass through the sea with what is useful to man; and in the rain which God sendeth down from Heaven, giving life to the earth, after its death and scattering over it all kinds of cattle; and in the change of the winds, and in the clouds that are made to do service between the Heavens and the earth-are signs for those who understand.¹¹

And it is He Who hath ordained for you that ye may be guided thereby in the darkness of the land and of the sea! Clear have We made Our signs to men of knowledge. And it is He Who hath created you of one breath, and hath provided you an abode and resting place (in the womb). Clear we made Our signs for men of insight! And it is He Who sendeth down rain from Heaven: and We bring forth by it the buds of all the plants and from them bring We forth the green foliage and the close-growing green, and palm trees with sheaths of clustering dates, and gardens of grapes, and the olive, and the pomegranate, like and unlike. Look you on their

fruits when they ripen. Truly herein are signs unto people who believe.¹²

The Hadith of the Prophet (SAAS) illustrates this quest for the perfect and total knowledge of the things as:

God! grant me knowledge of the ultimate nature of things.¹³

To understand the nature and reality of things is not a superficial affair but a special wish and prayer of the Prophet (SAAS). To attain this, a serious pursuit of observation and investigation is necessary. This is the factor of change in an individual being, society, nation and civilization. The Qur'an refers to this fact as following;

Verily God will not change the condition of men till they change what is in themselves.¹⁴

This amplifies the basic truth of the rise and fall of civilizations as well. So long the Muslims possessed the inward push to reflect and understand things they developed advanced and rich civilization and when they ignored this important pursuit they lost it to others i.e the West. It is in this context that Iqbal mentions that 'the world of Islam is moving spiritually towards the West'. The inward movement that is the spirit of the Western scientific developments as well as those of the Muslims when properly retained and promoted by the latter too may lead the whole world towards the desirable goals of intellectual and scientific progress.

(d) Democratic Spirit

The emphasis on democratic spirit in the society is a special concern of Europeans nations. It advocates respect of people's opinion and decisions. People are the source of law and power in its system. Their elected members represent the general population. Islam enjoins principles of democracy as against a dictatorship, monarchy and totalitarianism. However, democracy here is realized with reference to the prescriptions of God. The basic socio-political principles are given by God and interpretation and application of them in the new situations is made by the people. It is not the rigid prerogative of any single person or any particular group. Even an ordinary member of the community has a say in the process of devising policies of the state. Both the

Qur'an and the Sunnah guide about the practice of consultation (*Shura*) in the socio-political affairs of state:

.....and whose rule in all matters of common concern is consultation among themselves.¹⁵

People's opinion or consultation devises the policies of administration as well as the resolution of the variety of issues facing the society. Commonality is found in the systems that allows the right of dissent and pluralism. In the Islamic system the Divine law (Shari'ah) limits the democratic process from its becoming absolutist while in that of the West constitutionalism restricts it from becoming self-destructive and turning into a tyranny of the majority.

Not only the pious caliphs left the precedence of consultation democratic ways but the Prophet (SAAS) himself resorted to this practice in formulating administrative and war strategies. The very mechanism of *ijma* 'in Islam characterizes the Islamic concept of democracy that safeguards common interest and welfare of all subjects.¹⁶

(e) Social Harmony and Prosperity

It is also a good concern of the Western civilization that there should be social harmony among the individuals and in this direction values of equality, fraternity and tolerance are propounded with full enthusiasm. Measures are also taken to explore more and more avenues and resources for economic development and prosperity. In fact most of the energies of the Western man are devoted to the economic sector through industrialization and globalization. The objective of both is to ensure social stability and economic development which, of course, the West has attained in a good deal as compared to other Eastern or the Muslim nations. All this became possible due to the formers advancement in science and technology.

Islam is never against development and prosperity. It aims at the growth of both human resources and natural resources to promote socio-economic stability. The resources are treated as *amanah* (trust) from God and the active and just use of them is encouraged. It is a moderate kind of attitude towards life and avoids extremism and social crisis. Islam enjoins equality, love,

brotherhood and unity of mankind. Everybody here enjoys equal opportunities and privileges and rights and there is no place of discrimination on the basis of race, colour and language, *Adl* (justice) and *ahsan* (kindness) is the motto of Islamic social structure and it runs counter to the wrong exploitation and deprivation of human rights. The Holy Qur'an refers to this principle of Islam as following:

Behold, God enjoins justice, and the doing of good, and generosity towards (ones) fellow-men, and He forbids all that is shameful and all that runs counter to reason (wrong) as well envy (and) He exhorts you (repeatedly) so that you might bear (all this) in mind.¹⁷

The Farewell Address' of the Prophet (SAAS) on the occasion of the last pilgrimage amplifies the social equality and justice of Islam unequivocally.

All of you descend from Adam and Adam was made of clay. There is no superiority of an Arab to a non Arab nor has a non-Arab any superiority to an Arab, likewise a white man is in no way superior to a blackman nor is the Blackman superior to a white man except the superiority gained by virtue of God (*taqwa*).¹⁸

Islam, thus, appreciates the overall development and progress for the better and prosperous living without jeopardizing the others' genuine interests and needs. By kindness, mutual understanding, love, co-operation and unity in diversity it fosters the harmonious and prosperous social order. There is no extremism of capitalist exploitation or Marxisian suppression of emotional and spiritual urges of man at the cast of economic equality.

(f) Globalization at Some Levels

Globalization now a universal trend of the West which has recently emerged 'partly in response to the ideological lacuna left by the collapse of international bipolarity and partly in reaction to realization that globalization is inexorable.'¹⁹ It involves global flow of economy, socio-cultural developments, satellite information system and other environmental and political developments. Its motive is to have free flow of business, cultural

ideas, cosmopolitan life styles, technologies, sports etc. without putting the hurdles of national borders. As such this cult of the West operates at various levels and all these levels do not manifest negative aspects. It promotes liberalism in economy, consumerism, economic disparities and pop culture and Islam refutes such kind of globalization. Free trade exchange of ideas and technology at the international level are recognized in Islam. The culture of consumerism and media exploitation, bringing negative influences is discouraged in Islamic societies. However, the other aspects of it like expansion of trade and foreign investment to activate social mobility and strengthen the middle class, new and easy ways of communication and dissemination of knowledge through information technology, in various disciplines and the promotion of co-operation at the time of natural calamities and popularity of human rights including rights of woman are its merits. Islam is not opposed to the operation of such levels of globalization. There is no exclusiveness, aloofness or alienation in Islam. On the contrary, accommodation of pluralities and socio-economic and cultural contacts between communities and nations are encouraged on the basis of universal ethic of humanity. One of the prominent Muslim intellectuals of the contemporary times has precisely put this response to globalization in the following words:

Societies are becoming less exclusive and more multi-religious. It is as if the social reality is forcing us to get rid of our exclusive attitudes and develop a universal orientation that is more accommodating to the other.

Perhaps this is the path that nations must take for a universal community founded upon a common humanity. It is a community that globalization will never be able to achieve. Perhaps this we will understand what the illustrious mystic, Jallaluddin Al Rumi, meant when he wrote, "The lamps are different but the light is the same."²⁰

Conclusion

The above discussion, thus, brings out that the West has emerged as a powerful civilizational reality and is not essentially a formidable enemy of

Islam. It inherits religious consciousness through flourishing of the various traditions of faith, propounding human values, civil rights, women rights and social security. Its rational approaches and scientific researches at the extensive level not only led it to enormous progress in terms of raising social and economic standard of living but also brings it nearer to the Islamic spirit of learning and investigation. The West is indebted to Islam in developing this scientific tradition yet the purpose of the two are somewhat different. Still there is wide scope for dialogue and reconciliation between the two civilizations. By the mutual understanding of the developments taking place from two sides the better fruits can be reaped without doubting and threatening the other. The Muslim world, therefore, need to rise to the occasion and play an active role in undertaking scientific researches and mould it towards just and welfare goals. Similarly the process of free flow of business, culture, knowledge, technology etc. through globalization is partly acceptable to Islam on account of its positive merits providing economic stability, easy access to knowledge, information and peaceful co-existence of diverse communities. In fact it is the sincere and serious move towards understanding from the both sides that can build the true image of the other community, culture or civilization. So long this attitude of dialogue is understood and encouraged properly the mankind will become broader in vision, tolerant towards the diversities of culture and search for more and more reconciliation and peaceful living to evolve itself as a universal community.

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