

## ISLAM AND THE WEST: CONFRONTATION OR COOPERATION?

Islam is not new to the West nor is the West an unknown quantity for the world of Islam. It is significant that the first meaningful contact between Islam and Europe took place, not in the context of the Crusades or of any clash of economic interests, but at the initiative of the Prophet of Islam in the form of letters he sent through his ambassadors towards the end of his life. The letter to Heraclius (610 to 641/AC), the ruler of the Eastern Roman Empire, was sent on 11th May 628 CE (1st Muḥarram 7 AH) sharing with him the message of Islam in the wider interest of all human beings. There was a gentle response from Heraclius.<sup>1</sup>

This is how relationships between Islam and the West began on a moral and ideological plane. It would, however be incorrect to assume that relations remained non-confrontational for long. Scenarios began to change, yet looking down the long vista of fourteen hundred years, it deserves to be recorded that military confrontation, colonial clashes, and missionary encounters have not been the whole story; there have also been long spells of diplomatic understandings, trade relations, intellectual cross-fertilizations, the sharing of scientific and technological developments, and cultural exchanges. Understandably, there have been periods of rivalry and confrontation; but there have also been eras of peace and tranquility. Islam and the West have not been merely 'civilizations at war;' they have also been 'partners in history.'<sup>2</sup>

Islam and the Western world today once again seem to be in a position to approach each other on a moral and ideological plane and, as such, be a source of strength to each other in a common struggle against those forces destined to destroy human civilization. This is not the only choice. The other path of confrontation and clash is also very much available. It is, therefore, important that a fresh evaluation of the contemporary situation be made, not merely in the context of political flashpoints or economic feuds, but in the context of the ideological and civilizational challenge of the contemporary world.

---

<sup>1</sup> For texts of the letters see: *Siyasi Walheqajat* (Political Documents—from the Prophet's era to the Rightly guided caliphs) edited by Dr. M. Hamidullah Majlis Taraqqi Adab Lahore. 1960, p. 51-53. See also: *The life of Muhammad* by Muhammad Husayn Haykel translated by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi North American Trust Publications 1976, p. 364-5 and 374-75.

<sup>2</sup> A phrase very aptly emphasized by Prince Charles in his Oxford lecture 1993.

## II The Question of Comparability

Before we survey the contemporary ideological and cultural landscape, it may be worthwhile to reflect on the question of how far Islam and the West are concepts that are comparable! Islam, after all, represents an ethical, ideological, ideational and cultural phenomenon. It is a belief system, a code of conduct based on a hierarchy of values, norms, standards, laws and institutions. It represents a way of life, a world system and a social movement for historical change. It also represents a historical tradition spread over the last fourteen centuries, if not more. It is also a global phenomenon. Although the early Islamic state established in Medina and the Arabian Peninsula was Arab in ethos, very soon with the passage of time the message, the movement, and the tradition reached all corners of the world and, today, perhaps there is not a single corner of the world where Islam does not have its followers. Despite its Arab origin, Islam is not tied to any geographic entity, Arab or otherwise. It is universal not only in its message but also in its very physical existence. The world of Islam is neither Eastern nor Western, Oriental or Occidental, Northern or Southern. It is Universal.

The West on the other hand *primarily* represents a geographic entity as well as a politico-economic system which remains geographically specific. There is no denying the fact that the area of influence of what is looked upon as the West has changed over the years. It is also true that the West is no longer a *mere* geographic proposition, it has also developed cultural and civilizational dimensions. Yet the West continues to represent the ethos as well as the interests of what can best be described as the Western hemisphere of the world, Europe and the Americas in particular. At the conceptual level, the principles of secularism, individualism, economic liberalism and nationalism represent the hallmarks of the West's value system. Yet these values have articulated themselves in the form of economic, political and cultural institutions and traditions very much characterized by the historical ethos of Europe and America. The global influence achieved by these values and institutions through colonial expansion, missionary outreach and cultural encounter is an emerging reality, and it deserves to be noted that it is looked upon by people in other parts of the world as a Western intrusion. The general feeling has by and large been that Western Civilization has been and remains the civilization of the people in Europe and America. Despite its global outreach, its ethno-geographic character remains undiluted.

In the perception of a large number of people living in the Third World, the two superpowers of the recent past, and the ideologies of capitalism and socialism they represented, were and continue to be, despite the collapse of the Soviet bloc, aspects of the same Western civilization. The Cold

War may have come to a close, yet the future remains hazy. Whether the expected new world order emerges in the shadow of a single superpower or things move in the direction of a multipolar scenario, the West does represent, the way things stand today, a distinct civilization. The political and the economic interests of the West have and continue to influence the character of this West-oriented world system. People in other parts of the world do not look towards the Western system as their national destiny; instead, they have a growing sense of their own distinct identity and in this context they are concerned that cultural influences from the West may hamper their own moral, cultural, economic and political flowering.

While the geographical and the political aspects remain relevant in any analysis and appraisal of relations between Islam and the West, the diversity of the relationship is such that comparison remains difficult as well as varied. Islam cannot be described as the ideology or social system of those areas where Muslims presently rule. Islam is primarily a belief system, a religion, a social order and a universal movement. And there is a Muslim presence in all parts of the world. The civilization of Europe and America, despite its identification with a certain geographical sphere, also represents a different set of values and traditions. There are also the questions of political power conflicting economic interests and the geo-strategic context of the world as well as the importance of freedom of movement of goods, men and capital through land, air and water routes and other channels of communication. That is why the question of comparison and contrast as well as that of possibilities of confrontation, competition or cooperation between Islam and the West remain complex, yet difficult to ignore.

### **III The Context of the Current Debate**

The current debate on the relationship between Islam and the West is taking place in the context of certain far-reaching intellectual, cultural and geopolitical developments. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc and the near collapse of communism as an alternative political and economic ideology have created a new scenario in a very short period of time. Within a span of less than five years a superpower has disappeared from the world political map, notwithstanding the fact that the Russian Federation still has a large army and a huge stockpile of conventional and nuclear warheads. Its economic strength and political clout have reached such a low watermark that despite the rise of new monsters of nationalism, its role as a world power remains a thing of the past. In fact, it is becoming more and more dependent on the Western world. The period of the Cold War, that set the political and economic tone during the last 50 years, has come to an end. The balance of power has so changed that the world is

drifting towards a state of affairs where there may be only one superpower, resulting in a new world order characterized by the political hegemony of that superpower over the rest, and giving rise to apprehensions among the smaller countries of the world about the beginning of a new colonial era. This situation cannot go unchallenged. New political and economic alignments may emerge. Reunified Germany, resurgent China, reassertive Japan, and the regrouped Muslim world could be some of the new actors on the arena of world politics, unfolding new power scenarios in the future. The Western world, itself, cannot be looked upon as just one simple monolith. There are frictions and rivalries from within and there are possibilities of new power centres and alignments.

Also, at the intellectual level there are powerful prophets of doom, deeply concerned about the current crisis of human civilization and fearful of a future that might make life miserable for humans the world over.<sup>3</sup> There are others who are trumpeting the final and irreversible victory of the western liberal system and as a result predict "the end of history."<sup>4</sup> There is also a conspicuous search for new "demons," "threats," and "evil empires" that may be made targets of attack so as to keep the political and economic power of the West solidified. In this respect, a rather systematic effort has been made for almost over a decade to project Islam and the Muslim world as one of those new threats. Even the tragic genocide of the Muslims in Bosnia is being justified, by some, as an effort "to protect Europe from a fundamentalist Muslim State." Even academics of repute have gone to the extent of seeing this tragic situation as an aspect of the current

---

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in a recent article, says: "The cold war is over, but the problems of modern life that have been laid bare are immensely more complex than what had hitherto seemed to fit with the two-dimensional political plane. The former crisis of the meaning of life and the spiritual vacuum—which during the nuclear decades had even been deepened from neglect—stand out all the more. In the era of the balance of nuclear terror this vacuum was somehow obscured by the illusion of stability on the planet, a stability that has proved only transitory. But now the former implacable question looms all the clearer. What is our destination? . . . The 20th century did not witness a growth of morality in mankind. Exterminations were carried out on an unprecedented scale, culture fell sharply, the human spirit declined. (The 19th century, of course, did much to prepare this outcome.) So what reason have we to expect that the 21st century, bristling with first-class weaponry on all sides, will be kinder to us?" "After Communism, Back to the Problems It Pretended to Solve," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 November 1993. See also: *Civilization in Crisis: Human Prospects in a Changing World*, by Joseph A. Camilleri, Cambridge University Press, 1976, *The First Global Revolution: A Report on the Council of the Club of Rome* by Alexander King and Bertrand Schneider, Simon and Schuster, London, 1991; and *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* by Paul Kennedy, Random House, New York, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> The debate was sparked by an interesting article by Francis Fukuyama in the *National Interest* on "The End of History." See also his book: *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York, 1993.

and more serious emerging "Clash of Civilizations."<sup>5</sup> A number of intellectuals, scholars, journalists, political analysts, statesmen, and lobbyists are, in their own ways, trying to project Islam and the values it stands for as the "new threat" to the West.<sup>6</sup>

#### IV Is the West Really Threatened by Islam?

There are about 1.2 billion Muslims in the world today. Around eight hundred million of them live in 56 independent Muslim countries which make up two large clusters of states in Asia, Europe and Africa. The remaining four hundred million, almost one third of the Muslim people live in countries where non-Muslims constitute the majority.

The last 300 years have been years of domestic and internal weakness as well as external domination for the Muslims. It is only during the last 50 years that Muslim countries have again emerged as independent states on the world political map. From the 1970s their relative economic position has improved, yet most Muslim countries remain economically underdeveloped and very much dependent upon the West, particularly for technology, capital and know-how. Politically, Muslim countries remain divided and unable to achieve a modicum of political unity and economic solidarity. By and large these countries are passing through a period of transition from colonial to post-colonial status. They are also facing a moral and cultural crisis. Moreover, the political influence, if not interference, of the West remains at a high watermark. A major concern of the emerging forces of Islamic resurgence relates to the degree of political, economic and cultural dependence of the Muslims on the Western world.

Even at the cost of simplification, it may be suggested that there are three major trends in the Muslim World:

1. One dominant trend is represented by people who would like to align Muslim countries with the West, assimilate Western culture

---

<sup>5</sup> See "The Clash of Civilizations?" by Samuel P. Huntington, *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 72, No. 3) Summer 1993, pp. 22-49. Also see the debate on the thesis, *Foreign Affairs*, (Vol. 72, No. 4) Sept.-Oct. 1993 pp. 2-26 and Response by Samuel Huntington, *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 72, No. 5) Nov.-Dec. 1993 pp 186-94.

<sup>6</sup> See: *Islam and the West* by Bernard Lewis, Oxford University Press, 1993; *Some to Mecca Turn to Pray: Islamic Values in the Modern World*, by Mervyn Hiskell, Claridge Press, London, 1993; "The Challenge of Radical Islam" by Judith Miller, in *Foreign Affairs*, (Vol. 72, No. 2) Spring 1993, pp. 43-56; "Beware of Religious Stalinists," by Mortimer B. Zuckerman, *U.S. News and World Report*, 22 March 1993; "A New vision of Mohammad's faith" by Kim Murphy *Los Angeles Times*, 6 April 1993; "Help Algerian Fundamentalists" by William Pfaf, *The New Yorker*, January 28, 1993. For a more sympathetic treatment see: *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?*, John L. Esposito, Oxford University Press, New York 1992; "What Green Peril?" by Leon T. Hader in *Foreign Affairs*, (Vol. 72, No. 2) Spring 1993, pp. 27-42; "Islam and the West" by Ghassan Salame in *Foreign Policy*; Edward Mortimer; "Cold War Warmed Over: Militant Islam becomes the West's new evil Empire," *Financial Times*, 13 January 1993.

and values and in the name of "modernization" opt for "Westernization" without openly and completely discarding an Islamic nomenclature. They are prepared to go for that variant of secularism wherein the role of religion can be limited to the personal affairs of the individual. They want the state and society to be run in accordance with secular principles that go to make the basis of Western civilization.

2. Second, there are forces representing the orthodox tradition, who would like to reject whatever comes from the West. Their main object is to protect and preserve whatever has come through tradition, even if Muslim countries have to be cut off from the stream of modern life. While they do not deny the need to face the challenges of the age, their real focus is on the preservation of tradition and the avoidance of contact and confluence with the West.
3. There is however, a third and very powerful emerging trend which can rightly be described, not merely as a political phenomenon, or "militant Islam," as some outsiders have chosen to describe it, but as a movement of cultural resurgence in the widest sense of the word. This movement stands for affirming Islamic identity and adopting Islam as an alternative path: with its own world view, values and principles, social ideals and traditions. It aims at the reconstruction of the Muslim society and state in such a manner that the Muslim world can become a true representative of Islamic ideals, values and traditions. Proponents of this movement do not seek hegemony over others. They do not have any territorial claims over other people or lands. Yet nor do they want to be tied to the apron strings of the West, to exist under the shadow of Western civilization. They want to pursue an independent road and carve out a place of honor for themselves under the sun, without stepping on others' toes. They want to be cooperative. They do not regard everything Western as undesirable. They want to learn from the experiences of the West and follow the dictum, 'accept what is good and reject what is unsuitable.' This is the movement which is unfortunately misrepresented in the West as a movement of "Religious extremism," "Islamic fundamentalism," "Militant Islam," and "blind anti-Westernism!"

The sum and substance of the current Islamic revival is represented by the Muslims' urge to set their own house in order and to build their own societies and states, that is where they hold power, in light of their own beliefs, values and ideals. This is the ethos of current Muslim idealism. It deserves to be noted that the Muslim world has no territorial claims or dispute with any Western country. There are certain irritants like Palestine, Mindano (South Philippines), Pattani (South Thailand), Arakan

(Burma), Qibris (Cyprus), Kashmir, and recently Bosnia. Each represents a trouble spot. Nevertheless, none of them have any direct linkage to the territorial power base of the West. In fact, Muslims are suffering in all these places, because they are weak and discriminated against. They are the oppressed and not the oppressors. In all these cases, Muslims have been denied their right to decide their political future through their own free will. The primary concern of the Muslims is to seek security and the right to self-determination in accordance with the charters of the United Nations, the Non-Alignment Movement, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which are accepted by all nations of the world.

As far as the military power and political strength of the Muslim world are concerned, they are weak and dependent on the West. Where is the question of a military threat from the Muslim world? In the economic field, although rich in resources, the Muslim world's economic power has been marginalized and hardly has any economic leverage worth the name. There is also no reason to be obsessed with economic rivalries and the clash of commercial interests. In fact, there are built complementarities between the economies of the Muslim world and the West. There is every reason to believe that economic and political issues can best be resolved through negotiation and dialogue, not through confrontation. In fact, it is through healthy competition and cooperation that the two can achieve the best economic results. In the fields of science and technology the West is far ahead of the Muslim world. Here again, through cooperation and competition, both stand to gain. In the fields of ideas, thoughts, information and communications, the West remains the pace-setter. Current revolutions in information technology and communication systems have opened up new possibilities for global cooperation, although the present disparity in control over these technologies also gives rise to certain apprehensions about 'cultural imperialism' as were highlighted on the occasion of the final phase of the GATT negotiations in Geneva (Dec. 1993). Whatever the efforts on the part of Muslims to make up for their weaknesses, it is the West which remains dominant, not the Muslim world.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> "In the encounter between the world and the West that has been going on by now for four or five hundred years, the world, not the West, is the party that, up to now, has had the significant experience. It has not been the West that has been hit by the world; it is the world that has been hit—and hit hard—by the West. . . . The West, the world will say, has been the arch-aggressor of modern times. And certainly the world's judgment on the West does seem to be justified over a period of about four and a half centuries ending in 1950." Arnold Toynbee, *The World and the West*. BBC Reith Lectures, London, p. 1-4. Martin Palmer, Director of International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture, in a recent article in *The Independent*, London (March 19, 1994), says: "Whereas it is over 300 years since the West had to confront a Muslim invasion, the West has invaded Islam for the last 300 years or more. It has sometimes been done by military force, such as in Indonesia or most of the Middle East countries. More recently, the invasion has been by economic and cultural forces such as the world banking system, Western television and values. The sense of being under siege is very real and has considerable justification."

## V Civilizations: Clash or Co-Existence?

This brings us to the most important area of ideas, values, cultures and civilizations. This is an area where ill-advised policies can lead to bitterness, clashes and confrontation. A different set of policies, however, can pave the way for the healthy exchange of ideas, opening up new opportunities for dialogue and the cross-fertilization of cultures, finally building a new world order where different civilizations can coexist and even compete in a healthy manner without resort to war and exercises in mutual destruction.

The age of forcing ideas and values upon others through military and political power is over. In fact, Islam never believed in imposing faith through compulsion. It has stood from day one for religious and civilizational pluralism and coexistence. Islam affirms that faith, commitment to religion, and a world view are primarily moral decisions. Men and women, as moral beings, must make these decisions freely and voluntarily. Any compulsion on this count is abhorrent. It can only breed hypocrisy, a moral disease Islam wants to cure and eradicate. The superiority or otherwise of a system is established because of its moral excellence and its acceptance or rejection has to be free and without duress .

The Qurʾān affirms as a moral as well as an historical premise that the differences between men and women, in terms of wealth, race, color, language and physical features are natural, and that philosophical and religious pluralism is the norm and not an anomaly:

“And if God had so willed He could surely have made you all a single people: But [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Therefore, strive with one another in doing good works. Unto God you must return; and then He will make you fully understand all that on what you differed.”<sup>8</sup>

This pluralism constitutes the basic framework—the very divine framework according to Islam—in which human societies and civilizations have to exist. This also becomes a guarantor for their healthy coexistence, competition and confluence. Tolerance is imperatively the natural policy. The Qurʾān, again, is very explicit:

“And say: The truth is from your Lord: So let him who pleases believe; and let him who pleases disbelieve.”<sup>9</sup>

“Say (O Prophet): O Mankind! Indeed there has come to you the Truth from your Lord. Whoever, therefore, chooses to follow the Right Path,

---

<sup>8</sup> The Qurʾān, 5: 48

<sup>9</sup> The Qurʾān, 18: 29

follows it but for his own good, and whoever chooses to go astray, goes astray but to his own hurt. And I am not responsible for your conduct".<sup>10</sup>

Of course, it is the mission of the Prophet and his followers to convey the truth to mankind. It is also true that those who accept the divine message and those who refuse to accept it will have to face the consequences of their choice. Yet the right to choose is there and any amount of compulsion or force means elimination of choice, which amounts to the negation of the divine scheme. That is why the Qurʾān very clearly states, both as a fact as well as a prohibition:

"There shall be no coercion in matters of faith."<sup>11</sup>

And that is why dialogue has been prescribed as the best strategy for sharing the message with others:

"Call thou (all mankind) unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation and argue with them in most kindly manner."<sup>12</sup>

Along with this principled position, it may also be suggested that the present state of military technology makes it imperative that ideas and values should not be thrust upon people by force of war and violence. Indeed, the technologies of war have imposed a new kind of deterrence against war itself. The clash of civilizations via a global war can only mean the destruction of the entire human civilization and not the promotion of one culture over another. The only alternative available to mankind is dialogue in a framework of contact, communication and the free exchange of ideas. It is only through search, debate and dialogue that different moral, social and cultural alternatives can be presented in the world of today and appropriate choices made. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the present age lies in opening up the whole world to all thought movements and cultural influences. Today dialogue is taking place not only in particular parts of the world, but almost everywhere. All over the world people are free to search and choose. Wherever this freedom exists there is no justification for any resort to violence for the propagation of ideas and the promotion of culture. This represents a historic breakthrough. Fresh openings have been ensured for the entire human race. It would be a tragedy if this historic opportunity is destroyed by promoting phony wars between cultures and civilizations.

---

<sup>10</sup> The Qurʾān, 10: 108

<sup>11</sup> The Qurʾān, 2: 256

<sup>12</sup> The Qurʾān, 16: 125

It is not merely because of the political, economic, scientific, technological and military weakness of the Muslim world that we regard the projection of Islam as a threat as unrealistic; it is also because of this changed scenario that we deem it totally uncalled for. It is a matter of great concern that the historic opportunity that has been opened up for different peoples all over the world may be lost sight of by casting the spell of a newfangled paradigm of the 'clash of civilizations.' The human race is on the threshold of a new era ensuring the common search, cooperation and mobilization of the resources of the planet for the establishment of a pluralistic, multi-dimensional world where justice can be secured through negotiations, agreements, laws, conventions and a network of peaceful institutions.

There is an urgent need to look upon the problems of the world from the perspective of justice, tolerance and coexistence. As we stand at the closing years of the 20th century, it has to be realized that military clashes or economic warfare can only lead to mutual destruction and extermination. They cannot pave the way for setting the house of humanity in order. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn has rightly said, the only way the human race can expect survival and prosperity lies through self-restraint:

"to limit firmly our desires and demands, to subordinate our interests to moral criteria. If the humanity fails on this count, we, humankind, will simply be torn apart as the worst aspect of human nature to bear their teeth. . . . The paramount importance of self-restraint has only in this century arisen in its pressing entirety before mankind."<sup>13</sup>

## VI Towards a New Paradigm

It is in this philosophic, moral and technological context that the major issues facing the world today deserve to be reflected upon. If the world is heading towards a single superpower paradigm, with most other countries living under its hegemonistic control, this may be the road to final destruction. It would be natural that other centres of resistance will emerge, not necessarily outside the Western hemisphere, but also within the West. This may finally pave the way for armed confrontations, however illogical and self-defeating. This scenario can be avoided only by developing the vision of a pluralistic world where every culture and value system should have a genuine opportunity to exist and flourish. Everyone should have the right to live and also to assist in giving others the opportunity to live

---

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *International Herald Tribune*, *op. cit.*

and thrive. Technology has reached a stage where it cannot be monopolized by any one group or region, even if one so desired or contrived. If technology is denied, it will produce its own reaction. Like water that seeks its own level, the movement of ideas and technologies cannot be stopped, despite man-made barriers. Similarly, any artificial effort to protect and perpetuate a few islands of prosperity and affluence in an ocean of poverty and deprivation cannot hold for long. The so-called Third World countries make up four-fifths of mankind today and by the first quarter of the 21st century will make up almost five-sixths of humanity. It is only through the free and fair flow of resources amongst the nations of the world, and mutual cooperation in policies and programs leading to the elimination of injustices and deprivations from human society as a whole, that real stability for all can be achieved. This will not be achieved through economic wars or military confrontations. The revolution in information systems and communication technologies have made it possible for humanity to share with others the knowledge and technologies that can enable all the people of the world to attain an honorable standard of life no matter where they live.

This new paradigm of a pluralistic world is based upon the moral premise of the world being a part of the moral system of the universe. Over emphasis on secularism has corrupted man's moral roots. This has also resulted in an individualism that is not prepared to fulfil its social responsibilities. The spirit of tolerance has suffered. Acceptance not only of a plurality of political views but also of cultural and religious systems can provide parameters within which history can witness the flowering of a multi-cultural world. Instead of the "clash of civilizations," there will be coexistence and healthy competition between civilizations. This would inaugurate a new era in the history of mankind. The clouds of gloom that darken the horizon in these closing years of the 20th century could begin to dissipate. The 21st century could become a century of new opportunities for the exchange and cross-fertilization of ideas, ideologies and cultures. There would not only be freedom of expression, but also acceptance of a plurality of ideologies, cultures and faiths. Political and economic interests would be accommodated and conflicts resolved through mechanisms of negotiation, agreement and arbitration. The plurality of cultures, religions and civilization represents a high watermark in man's rendezvous with progress. It is through cooperation and accommodation that this can be achieved and Islam, as one of the world's leading systems, has played a very important role during the last millennium, and can play an extremely important role in the coming one.

## VII Obstacles and Irritants

This paradigm may remain a pious hope; it may also be translated into reality. In my view, there is an urgent need for a more effective, meaningful and all-embracing dialogue between the Muslim and the Western worlds in order to bring about a better understanding of each other's aspirations and ideals and to pave the way for a common search for consensus on a new paradigm. This requires a fresh blending of idealism and realism. Idealism should spur both worlds towards a new consensus. Realism should make them face realities, including real obstacles. It may, therefore, be of some help to make an effort to identify some of the major irritants with a view to finding the ways and means of overcoming them. For it is only through such idealistic realism that we may be able to build strong bridges between the Muslim and Western worlds.

It is unfortunate that the relationship between the Muslim and Western worlds has more often than not been projected in the context of two conflict scenarios: the Crusades and the Western colonial model. The historicity of these periods of clash and domination cannot be denied, but it would be a long way from the truth to assume that these have been the only modes of contact and confluence between these two cultural streams. There is also a long and brilliant history of peaceful relationships, diplomatic cooperation, economic and trade relationships, transfers of technology and the cross-fertilization of ideas and cultural experiences. In this respect, both have enriched each other. Any objective balance sheet of historical influences during the first millennium would lead to the conclusion that Islam's contribution to the development of Europe and other Western countries has been immense. To ignore this bright and brilliant tradition and concentrate only on the experience of clash and confrontation is neither fair to history nor helpful in promoting better relations in the future. A more balanced appreciation of the interaction between these two great historic forces is needed. This is not a plea to ignore certain facts, which may be bitter or unwelcome; rather it is a plea for the whole truth. To remember a partial truth is also a form of untruth. So the whole truth should be our target. It is, therefore, suggested that both positive as well as negative aspects should be taken into consideration with the objective, instead of condemning or condoning the past, to be the mending of fences for the future. In this context, discussion over irritants can pave the way towards removing them and opening up new pathways to cooperation. Most contemporary Western writers and statesmen, more often than not, ignore the creative contributions of the Islamic faith and Muslim-historical traditions towards the development of Europe and America in particular, and the evolution of human society in general. Equally, many Muslim writers, particularly the "angry young men," are not prepared to

see anything positive as a result of contact between the Islamic and Western worlds during the last few centuries of Western colonial rule. Both these approaches will fail a scenario which promotes cooperation between civilizations instead of confrontation.

Perhaps now we are in a position to briefly identify some of the irritants from the Muslim point of view. The purpose is to share, in all frankness, with Western intellectuals some of the factors which are responsible for the present estrangement, even bitterness, so rampant amongst Muslims about Western attitudes, policies and strategies.

Before we make an effort to identify some of these major obstacles and irritants marring relations between the Muslim and Western worlds, it may be worthwhile reminding ourselves that neither is the Western world one monolith nor the Muslim world another. Within both, a vast degree of variety can be found. This multiplicity is also an index of the flexibility and variation within the two camps. Similarly, there is a need to differentiate between the political leadership, the vested interests, and the common run of people—the men and women who make up these societies. Whatever is said about certain dominant concerns does not necessarily relate to every person or group belonging to the respective major traditions. Our observations are only of a general nature, and there exists a large number of individuals, groups and even states to which these descriptions may not apply. Because of this diversity, the possibilities for dialogue and the prospects for initiatives coming from people and groups within the two traditions have increased manifold. Some of the irritants are symbolic of both but do not necessarily reflect the wishes and viewpoints of all individuals or groups within a society. It is in the context of this spectrum that the following points deserve reflection:

1. There is a general feeling among Muslims that Islam remains the most misunderstood religion in the West, not merely because of a lack of information but also because of a long tradition of misrepresentation and distortion. Consequently, certain negative stereotypes have now become almost standard forms of projecting Islam and Muslims.<sup>14</sup>

Islam is presented as a force of aggression and intolerance. The entire Muslim *ummah* is held guilty of "extremism" and propensity towards violence. Common human failings, if they occur amongst people of the West or amongst people belonging to other religions, are not projected as "Western intolerance" or "Christian"

---

<sup>14</sup> See, *Islam and the West* by Khurshid Ahmad, Islamic Publications, Lahore, 1963; *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* by Norman Daniel, University Press, Edinburgh, 1966; *Islam Europe and Empire*, by Norman Daniel, University Press, Edinburgh, 1966; *Orientalism*, by Edward Said, New York Vintage Books, 1979.

or "Jewish terrorism." Yet when the same media and even the same intellectuals and policy-makers come across any failure or lapse in a Muslim context, this is projected as an "Islamic" folly. If America holds some 28,000 nuclear warheads and happens to be the only country to have actually dropped the atomic bomb twice as an act of foreign and defense policy, these are not described as "Christian bombs" or acts of "Christian violence." Israel possesses some 200 atomic warheads, but these are never reported as "Jewish bombs." India holds, according to authentic American reports, between two and four dozen bombs but again these are not treated as "Hindu bombs." Chinese nuclear capability is not rated in terms of "Buddhist" or "Confucian bombs." Yet the alleged one or one and a half "balls" supposed to be in the reach of Pakistan are projected as an "Islamic bomb" and as a "threat to the West"—as if this has changed the balance of power in the world! Ulster has witnessed reckless violence for the last 25 years. This is not treated as "Christian terrorism," although the basic dispute is between two religious communities belonging to different Christian denominations. Yet any violent reaction in any Muslim, Arab land is patently projected as "Islamic terrorism." Terrorism and extremism are condemnable wherever they may be, but to characterize such acts by "Islamic labels" is highly discriminatory and subjective. The tolerance and respect shown for minorities' rights by Muslims throughout their history to the extent that the Muslim world became a sanctuary for other religious minorities who were persecuted in their homelands, particularly in Europe, is simply ignored and forgotten. Instead a systematic effort is made to project the Muslim world as inhospitable to minorities. Iran, Libya and Sudan, like any other country, have their failures and lapses, but the exaggerated and out of proportion projection of these countries as Islamic "terrorist states" is more a product of prejudice and discrimination than an objective portrayal of reality as it is. Any Muslim country or people who want to run their political and economic affairs according to Islamic laws are presented as "fundamentalist" and "fanatic." This bias against Islam has even produced such anomalies whereby the Christian church in predominantly Muslim Indonesia has objected to Muslims adopting Islamic family law for Muslims!<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> See, "The Role of Christian Missions in the Indonesian Experiences," by Muhammad Rusjidi, in *Christian Mission and Islamic Dawah*, Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation, The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, 1982, pp. 69-80.

Extremism, violence and terrorism are not found in certain Muslims contexts only. They are a universal phenomenon, however regrettable that may be. These outbursts deserve to be studied and objectively analyzed with a view to understanding the causes responsible for such behavior. Instead, a simplified approach is adopted to condemn Islam with bell, book and candle, for failures produced by whatever causes. The way America and other Western countries responded to the challenge from Iraq differs fundamentally from the way they are responding to Serb aggression against the Bosnians. If the Muslims infer from this that there is a positive bias against the Muslims in the approach of the Western powers, how far would they be wrong? Or is it to be assumed that oil is more important than human life and honor?

2. Muslims also feel that there is a contradiction in the way some Western countries deal with Muslims as distinct from others. For example, Israeli terrorism and violence are condoned, but Palestinian reaction is condemned as violence, pure and simple. The application of religious laws in Israel causes no concern among the liberals in the West, with even its law of nationality and citizenship based as it is on an orthodox interpretation. Yet any move towards the introduction of the *shari'ah* in Pakistan or other Muslim countries hurts many in the West. The moment Muslim democracies like Malaysia and Turkey show any interest in "returning to their roots" (the values, traditions or laws of Islam in the Muslim context) alarm signals are raised about their falling prey to "fundamentalism". Iran under the Shah was no less dictatorial, autocratic and guilty of human rights violations, yet he was looked upon as a liberal *par excellence*, and his regime was regarded as "an island of stability in an ocean of instability." The same Iran, after the Islamic Revolution, despite the fact that it is becoming more and more open to the outside world, and has been holding elections and referenda with regularity, is not looked upon even with a modicum of sympathy. Even its minor lapses are projected as grandiose crimes. The promotion of democracy is emphasized as one of the policy objectives of Western countries, particularly America, Britain and France. Yet the denial of democracy and the reversal of the electoral process in Algeria is accepted as "a defense of liberalism." Countries in the Muslim world whose system of government is dictatorial and tyrannical but who toe the Western policy line are "goodies" and "friends" as has been the case with Egypt and Syria, (a "terrorist state" before the Gulf War). But others who may be even less authoritarian but are not looked upon as the camp-followers of the West are threatened with ter-

rorist state status, as is the case with the Sudan and Pakistan. This contradictory and discriminatory attitude is looked upon by Muslim intellectuals and the masses as reflective of prejudice and discrimination against Islam. Even the West's concern for human rights remains quite selective. This makes Muslims sad, sometimes even bitter.

3. Muslims also feel that the West has little understanding of the real aspirations of the Muslim people. If there is divergence or even conflict between the wishes of the Muslim people and the ideals and policies of certain political regimes in Muslim countries, regimes which try to project themselves as secular and liberal and who are ready to follow the policy guidelines that conform to the interests of Western powers, the latter have all the support of the West, even if these regimes suppress their own people and their record on human rights is scandalous. In fact, there is a feeling amongst the Muslim people that even criticism directed against these local regimes is looked upon in the West as enmity to the West itself. The support of Western countries for such domestically unpopular regimes further alienates the populace not only from their domestic, despotic regimes, but also from the West whom they regard as mentor and protector of these regimes. Some of the violence that has unfortunately tainted the behavior of certain Muslim groups in some Arab and Muslim countries is, in fact, a reaction to state terror unleashed by Western-oriented secular regimes against their own people. Yet the sympathy of the West is, by and large, with regimes guilty of terror and oppression, and all its wrath and fury are directed against the errant individuals or groups who are actually victims of state terrorism. More often it is precisely this state terrorism which produces violent behavior in ordinary men and women. Muslim people find it hard to believe that this attitude of the Western powers and intellectuals is one of ignorance.
4. The way in which the forces of Zionism, born and nurtured in the West, are protected, promoted and strengthened and the way the people of Palestine are deprived of their homes and hearths is a further obstacle. Additionally, the way in which the Israeli State was created, in fact imposed through the use of political, military and economic power, has shattered the positive image of the West in the minds of both Arab and Muslim peoples. The Arabs and Muslims of Palestine have never denied Jewish people the right to live in Muslim lands. They are hurt and aggrieved because of the injustice that has been perpetrated *vis-à-vis* the Arab people of

Palestine. This scenario remains a major irritant in the relationship between the West and the Muslim world.

5. The manner in which Bosnia-Herzegovina was not allowed to continue on the political map despite the fact that the country came into existence through a democratic referendum and was recognized by both the UN and the European Community, which also gave assurances of protection of borders under international law is another irritant. The way in which aggression and genocide in Bosnia have been tolerated has also damaged the relationship between the Muslim people and Western powers. Intolerance of a state which had only a 41 percent Muslim population and which stood for a multi-religious, multi-ethnic state under Western democratic traditions has led Muslims to believe that all talk of liberalism and tolerance ends when the question of the rights of Muslims arises.

Perhaps this protection and even support of Israel in its pursuit of colonial rule in occupied territories, and the destruction and annihilation of the Muslims of Bosnia are two major issues that have damaged the confidence that Muslims time and again have shown in the institutions as well as declared ideals of the West.

6. Although in the West there is a general acceptance of the plurality of political parties and actions, there is an implicit as well as explicit intolerance towards other cultures and religions. As long as religious and cultural minorities, particularly from the East, were nonexistent in Europe and America, the issue remained hidden. Now, however, it is becoming more and more apparent that the idea of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society remains an anathema in most Western lands. Linguistic, ethnic and racial intolerance are on the increase and as Muslims are the victims of many of these rising forces of fanaticism, the Muslims' belief in Western tolerance and liberalism is being shaken to its roots.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> See: *National States and National Minorities* by C. A. McCartney, Minorities Committee of the League of Nations; See also, *In Praise of Idleness* by Bertrand Russell, chapter on "Western Civilization." Russell identifies "intolerance" as "a more persistent characteristic of Europe than many people realize." Dwelling upon the roots of this intolerance, he further observes: "Many of the unpleasant features of our age existed among the Greeks. They had Fascism, materialism, militarism, communism, bosses, and corrupt politicians; they had pugnacious vulgarity and some religious persecution. They had good individuals, but so have we; then as now a considerable percentage of the best individuals suffered exile imprisonment or death. Greek civilization had, it is true, one very real superiority to ours namely the inefficiency of the police which enabled a larger proportion of decent people to escape. . . . With them who dislike the intolerance of Fascism and Communism I have no disagreement, unless they regard it as a departure from European tradition. . . . I am afraid Europe however intelligent has always been rather horrid except in the brief period between 1848 and 1914. Now unfortunately Europeans are reverting to type." Bertrand Russell, *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*, New York Simon and Schuster 1972, pp 172-75.

7. The question of technology transfer and the extent of selectiveness and arbitrariness in this respect also intrigue the Muslims. On the one hand, Western countries are committed to promoting the advance of science and technology and on the other, they make every effort to ensure that the best in technology is not transferred to other parts of the world. There is a streak of arrogance and self-righteousness in the West's attitude. Certain technologies are assumed to be safe only in the hands of Western people. Others cannot be trusted, almost as if they are second rate humans. This definitely hurts those at the receiving end of this deprivation and discrimination.
8. The West has also show a great obsession with its own models of economic development and political democracy. Its efforts to make others follow this Western model and its unpreparedness to accept the position of others to discover their own paths to development and democracy remains enigmatic Democracy based on the Westminster or Washington models is regarded as authentic, while democracy which is more in keeping with the traditions and values of other societies and cultures is looked upon as fake. So is the case with developmental models. Economic aid has been used as an instrument to promote and even impose Western economic institutions and systems upon the less fortunate. Muslims regard this as a hangover of colonialism.<sup>17</sup>

The issues raised in this section are not exhaustive; they are only illustrative. It would be worthwhile to have some discussion on these and other related issues and to unveil those prejudices which unfortunately masquerade as objective realities. It is through identification of these obstacles and irritants that the causes of alienation and discontent of the Muslim people can be better understood and adequate remedies sought.

## VIII Concluding Observations

Before we conclude, it may be worthwhile to submit that the starting point for improving relationships between the Muslim and Western worlds should be an objective appraisal of present-day realities, including those areas of agreement and divergence between them. While no one can totally ignore history, it would be a tragedy if we become prisoners of the past. A more future-oriented approach is the need of the hour. In this respect what is going to be the most decisive factor is our vision of the

---

<sup>17</sup> See "The Third World's Dilemma of Development" by Khurshid Ahmad in *Non-Aligned Third World Annual*, ed. by Andrew Carvely, St. Louis Missouri Books International, 1970, pp.3-18.

future. If we can all hold on to the concept of a pluralistic world, both global as well as national, this may pave the way for a real peace based on justice and respect for law and common standards for all members of the community of nations.

Similarly, within a society and state there should be scope for pluralism and variety. This would be a non-imperialistic, non-hegemonistic approach, again at a global level as well as at every level of state and society. Political democracy deserves to be supplemented by social and cultural democracy. Similarly, individual and civic rights deserve to be supplemented by group rights as well as social, cultural and religious rights. The controversy between France and America during the final phases of the GATT agreement in light of matters of art, culture and services is very instructive. It shows how Europe in general, and France in particular, are sensitive to the protection of their own art and culture from the onslaught of American culture. If a totally free trade policy were allowed in areas relating to services and culture, Europe feels it would be outclassed by American products. Is it too much if Muslims expect the same sensitivity to be shown to their own cultural concerns and religious sensitivities?

*Institute of Policy Studies  
Islamabad, Pakistan*

KHURSHID AHMAD



---

---

## CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL WELFARE IN THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN ARAB SOCIAL THOUGHT

Within the Arab world, cultural perspectives—the norms and values that shape human expectations in the patterns of everyday life—derive from the principles of Islam interpreted within the framework of community customs and practices. The principles of Islam constitute a system of ideals perceived as absolute, universal and eternal ideals of life, while community customs and practices are variable over time and place according to the conditions perceived as beyond human control. Thus, cultural perspectives in Arab societies are a product of the interplay between timeless ideals and changing realities.

This paper examines the ideals established in Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) regarding the role and responsibility of government for the social welfare of the community. It then examines the major principles of classical Islamic jurisprudence on this matter as a reflection of the effort to reconcile the realities of life with these ideals and establish a public standard of practice in social welfare in the rapidly changing conditions of classical Muslim society. This provides the cultural context for understanding the perspectives of modern Arab thinkers on the social problems of contemporary Arab society and their prescriptions for public policy. The writings of some of the most influential nineteenth and twentieth century Arab thinkers are examined from this standpoint.

### The Ideals of Islamic Law

In Islam, the welfare of the individual is bound to the welfare of the community, and the welfare of the community to that of the state. There is no separation between the temporal and the spiritual; both are dimensions of Divine Will and Justice. The state in Islam is founded upon the rule of God's law in temporal affairs. Thus, Islamic law represents the ideals of justice in the perfect state. It is based upon the Qur'an—the work of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad—and the *Sunna*—the wisdom of the Prophet in interpreting the meaning of the Qur'an in its application to daily governance. As the constitution of the ideal state, the Qur'an establishes the moral and ethical standards of government responsibility for the social welfare of the community.