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Islam and the West: Three Stories

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Introduction

Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood religion today, both among non-Muslims and among some of the Muslims themselves. The saying of the Prophet Muhammad appears to have been realized: "Islam began as a stranger (*gharib*, i.e. exiled and unrecognized), and it will revert again to the condition of being a stranger. Blessed are the strangers."

If Islam has suffered estrangement, this condition is not the result of inattention. Historically, the second half of the twentieth century is remarkable for the slow and often painful reemergence of Islamic societies in the international system; this process has been accompanied by a great deal of story-telling, by Muslims and Westerners alike. The themes of these stories are familiar: some speak of political confrontation and inherent incompatibility between Islamic and Western civilizations, while others speak of common historical roots, cultural compatibility, and political accommodation. While much can be learned from listening to these two varieties of tales, we have reached a point where the old narratives no longer suffice, and we find ourselves in need of a third story. We are truly between stories -- between the stories of the past, and the story which we must now create together.

To this day, the presumption of incompatibility has provided the dominant motif for story-telling about Islam and Western Civilization. Both Western observers and Muslims paint with broad brush strokes when they engage in generalization about civilizational units of analysis, and they fail to account for the diverse strands of cultural legacies. As protagonists of the story of incompatibility, they often resort to a language of exclusivity, preoccupy themselves with defining boundaries, and retreat from intercultural experiences to psychological and cultural segregation. Implicitly or explicitly, the "other" is depicted as a threatening monolith. When American journalists write pieces on fanaticism and terrorism in the Middle East, for example, they speak of Islam, terrorism, and militance in the same breath, without differentiating between *Islam* and *Muslims*. The religion of a perpetrator is thereby associated with acts of violence in ways which are scrupulously avoided when Jews and Christians commit comparable offenses.

We have come far enough to dispense with the clichés of confrontational discourse, which alleges an incompatibility of Islam and Western civilization while neglecting

fundamental questions: Which Islam and which West? How are we representing the West (geographically as well as culturally and intellectually)? Who represents the "West"? Is the development of the West a finished project, or is the West still developing? Furthermore, what are we representing as Islam? Who represents "Islam"? Is Islam a static set of authoritative cultural norms, or is Islam a dynamic, spiritual response to life based on essential precepts?

The First Story: Incompatibility and Confrontation

The first story is, unfortunately, the most often repeated one. The story pertains to cultural incompatibilities, political confrontation, and protracted historical conflict, and we are all acquainted with at least one version of it. Since the Muslim version of the story is less familiar, we will accentuate those details of the script which are important to this perspective.

Americans remember 1492 as the year Columbus, sailing under the Spanish flag, discovered America. Arabs and Muslims remember 1492 as the year of the fall of the kingdom of Grenada, the last Arab Islamic presence in the West. Islam receded to the East, to the periphery, to become a non-Western phenomenon. Beginning with the Treaty of Karlofca in 1699 and later the Treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarca in 1774, the Ottomans retreated from Europe and Muslims were reduced to passivity in world politics, leaving for Christianity the task of shaping the modern world. Since then, Islam has been seen as alien, and intrusive in a relationship of rivalry. More recently Western policy makers, influential pundits and scholars have advanced simplistic views that dominate the present debate on Islam and Islamic revival, also described as fundamentalism.

In effect, Muslims were excluded from history. Their destinies were determined by the West. The rules and practices of current international relations reflect nineteenth-century Western experience and interests. Thus, the common bonding of the world today is a product of the conquest and acculturation of Islamic and other non-Western elites that occurred as the result of the West's political and economic expansion. The common language of the world has largely become Western in both form and content.

Cultural contact in this global context of unequal political and economic relations has blemished the exchange between Islam and the West. It left the latter arrogant and insensitive and the former defensive and insecure. The sense of triumphant culture is a profound source of conflict between the West and Islam. Cultural triumphalism -- a pervasive attitude in Western civilization that is usually attributed to a melding of Hebraic-messianism and Hellenic rationalism -- asserts that what is right, true, and real is the same for everyone in the past, present, and future. Cultural triumphalism favors and reinforces Western cultural values and styles and produces a displacement of Islamic culture. The process of the continued triumph of Western civilization is sustained through the use of mass media and educational systems, as well as by the control of the symbols of legitimacy and status.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, internal conflicts in the West and the assimilation and diffusion of Western technology within the Islamic world have redressed the balance between these two cultures. Among other adjustments, there has

been a somewhat slow growth in the tide of greater self-confidence as Islamic peoples are rediscovering the inherent worth of their own cultures. Probably the most dramatic example is the awakening still underway in the revival that is called Islamic fundamentalism by Westerners. This revival combines a rediscovery of the vitality of the Islamic experience with a determination not to submit any longer to the cultural humiliation of judging oneself by Western standards.

Many Western observers have responded to the broad appeal of revitalization movements with alarm. In their accounts, Islam is portrayed as an alien ideology driven by violence, intolerance, and irrationality. This negative projection reflects ignorance and fear, but it is rooted in long-standing historical interpretations. It would be merely lamentable, if not for the grave consequences it has on Western attitudes and policies, which target revivalism and fundamentalism rather than the root causes of terrorism -- exclusion, maldistribution of resources, and absence of legitimate and genuinely participatory governance. Policies born of preponderant power and an exaggerated fear of a seemingly monolithic force compromise Western policies toward the Islamic countries, fostering resentment, reaction, and instability in a segment of the world which plays an integral role in the emerging global order. For example, use of the term "Islamic bomb" by Western security analysts reflects a deep-seated distrust of Muslim countries; the term has gained currency among certain Middle Eastern voices primarily as a result of alienation, disempowerment, and an experience of double standards in the domain of nuclear proliferation.

Dynamics of confrontation are supported by media-driven caricatures. The tendency to view the Islamic world solely through the prism of extremism and terrorism is so pervasive that one finds that those who attempt to debunk the notion of an "Islamic threat" often perpetuate the simplistic "good Muslim" (secular/moderate/pro-Western) / "bad Muslim" (Islamist/militant/anti-Western) dichotomy. The governments of many Muslim countries even play into this dichotomy, particularly when soliciting economic or military support from the West. While perceiving the Islamic world in such polarized terms may appear understandable in light of events in Algeria, Afghanistan, Palestine, or Saudi Arabia, this dichotomy fails to do justice to the complex reality of Islam.

The Muslim image of the West is colored simultaneously by envy and admiration, fear and suspicion. Western civilization is seen as an example to be copied. Western technological, economic, and political achievements are appealing, while the assertion of Western military, political, and economic power, and pervasive Western cultural penetration underscore Muslim fears. Overall, Western civilization is seen as an example to be copied, but when Muslims look at Western materialism, they see cultural decadence.

While Muslim critics look to the West and see moral decay and a disintegration of family values, Western pundits accentuate the value of individual freedom in their critiques of Islam. In the Islamic world, they suggest, the individual is not free or liberated, whereas in the West freedom of the individual from political, religious, and cultural coercion is enshrined in the social system. For reasons which are seldom made explicit, the Jewish and Christian streams of the Abrahamic tradition are perceived to be immune to theocracy, whereas Islam is held to be particularly susceptible. In response to such criticism,

contemporary Muslims locate freedom at the level of the community, and argue that the West has become estranged from itself, placing expediency ahead of all other values. From the Muslim perspective, Western families have become atomized and fragmented. Muslim societies, in contrast, are meeting the hardships of economic transformation and still maintaining the family as the cornerstone of their social system.

The story of incompatibility reflects impoverished notions of both Islam and the West. Muslims have failed to recognize such subtle manifestations of Western morality as regulations to accommodate the handicapped. Many Westerners have remained satisfied with the notion that the religion of Islam is highly susceptible to a contagion of militant fundamentalism; they represent extremists as "strict," authentic, and observant Muslims and assume that so-called "moderates" are compromisers.

Muslims see the legacy of imperialism in their current relations with Western countries; it is no mistake that the language of political Islamicism is heavily laden with anti-imperialist rhetoric, for Islamism has more to do with politics and culture than religion. Meanwhile, Westerners see a continuation of the cold war. For example, Western analysts know that the Bosnian Muslims are not like Taliban, and that their outlook is not very similar to that which is prevalent in Qum, Iran. Yet Iranian support for the Bosnian Muslims is viewed with a reflexive suspicion of Iran's intentions and an unrealistic fear of influence on the Bosnians, who have inherited a very different variety of Islam. It is feared that a conspiracy may be lurking in the background. Such perceptions underlie the idea that the expression of Islamic sentiment in politics must be contained through open or tacit support for authoritarian regimes. This reflects a cold-war mentality, as well as a failure to differentiate Islamic fundamentalism, a reaction to a perceived external threat, from Islamic revivalism, a movement to renew the community from within.

The Second Story: Compatibility and Coexistence

In contrast to the first story, which places emphasis on incompatibility, the second story accentuates compatibility, and posits coexistence as an alternative to confrontation.

From this perspective, Islamic revival is not the enemy of the West. It is not really a religious movement, nor is it, as some fear, expansive and monolithic. Muslims seek to restore an old civilization which has a genuine historical affinity with European civilization, not to create a new empire. Among the world's historical powers, only the Muslims, as a people, have not reversed the decline in their global status. The Japanese, the Chinese, and the Europeans have all regained their world influence; Muslims are likely to recover their dignity and stature if provided an opportunity to be modern within the framework of their own culture.

From the standpoint of the compatibility story, the shared cultural roots joining Islam with the West are forgotten far too often. Although recently voiced (and frequently ill-conceived) opinions regarding a "clash of civilizations" posit that Islam falls outside the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic cultural continuum, the reverse is in fact the case. Classical Islamic civilization was constructed out of Arab, Biblical and Hellenic cultures, but cast a wider net by integrating Persian, Central Asian, as well as Indian components within its cultural synthesis. Historically, Islam is the true bridge between West and East.

Islam's Hellenism was mediated primarily through Eastern Christian intellectual

circles, and Muslim philosophical and scientific thought still remains an understudied field linking Late Antiquity with the Renaissance.¹ Islamic contributions went far beyond mere preservation of the classical legacy, as is testified by the efforts which 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun made to tutor an Andalusian prince after the model of Plato's Republic, or by the Heliocentric planetary theories which Copernicus read *in Arabic* during his studies at the library of Padua. So one may assert with much justification that Islam as a civilizational force and religious tradition should be perceived as an integral part of the Western tradition.

The rich character of Islamic civilization suggests the vitality and adaptability of Islam, for which evidence can be found in the extent to which Muslims are already coping with Western social systems on national and global levels. Forms of Western culture have already been universalized, and successful Muslims in places such as Malaysia, the United States, and Europe are proving that they can retain their identity while successfully responding to modern challenges. If the role of religion in politics is still a matter of contention in Muslim countries, Muslims are by no means unique. Disputes within Islamic societies are similar in kind to debates underway in Israel and even in the United States.

The story of compatibility opens possibilities which are largely foreclosed in the confrontation story, such as a reconciliation between Islam and democracy -- a crucial first step toward peace and stable progress. Democracy, Western or Islamic, is not practiced anywhere in today's Arab world. Does it follow that Islam and democracy are not compatible? The answer is no. The practice of democracy is always less tidy than its definition, but its practice is more dynamic than its formal description and prescription. There are democratic precepts in Islam just as there are in other religions. There are also Islamic traditions which, like traditions in other religions, result in transgressions against democratic ideals. The claim of incompatibility between Islam and democracy equates Western (liberal) institutional forms of democracy with the substance of democracy. The substance of democracy is a human society that has a sense of common goals, a sense of community, wide participation in making decisions, and protective safeguards for dissenters. The form of democracy on the other hand is cast in the mold of the culture of a people.

There is nothing in Islam that precludes common goals, community participation, and protective safeguards. It is true that Western liberal forms of democracy with their provisions for political parties, interest groups, and an electoral system are alien to Islamic tradition. But democracy is not built upon institutions; it is built upon participation. The absence of democracy in Islamic countries is more the result of lack of preparation for it and less because of lack of religious and cultural foundations. Democratic traditions in

¹ The contributions of Avicenna, Averroes, and other Muslim thinkers to the scholastic tradition of the West are notable in this regard, particularly in such fields as medicine, chemistry, and philosophy.

Islam have been more commonly abused than used, but the abuse of the individual is not Islamic. Islam underscores the nobility of the person. Islam granted legal personality to women long before Western women were able to achieve this status. Islam also accentuates egalitarianism. In principle, there is no priesthood or "Church" in Islam, nor are social distinctions to be allowed in the mosque, which has no pews.

There is a great and pressing need for a revitalization of participation in public life and decision-making in Islamic countries. Without appropriate forms for democracy, the innovative thinking of reformists will be muffled or suppressed, and the dynamic energy of renewalism will be forced into narrower channels marked by extremism and violence. The exclusion of the people of the Muslim world from active participation in political life undermines global stability and stymies cooperation within and between societies.

Presently, the door is open for a new thinking and reconceptualization regarding democracy. We should factor into this new thinking on democracy consideration of the roles of the community, the individual, the state, and religion in order to fashion a model for cooperative, participatory politics which is responsive to cultural needs. In particular, a model of Islamic civil society can be constructed -- a model which accounts for neighborhood associations, self-help groups, charitable and medical services, women's organizations, professional organizations, and labor unions which have not been founded by states and express themselves in an Islamic idiom. It would be a mistake to exclude these modalities of free, independent association from a conception of civil society simply because of their religious overtones, especially considering the disjunction between the theory and practice of civil society in the West, where apathy, unequal access to financial resources, and the politics of interest groups detract from the vitality of civic life and ideals of democratic process.

Developed -- modern and democratic -- can also mean Muslim, but not if modern/democratic means imitation of the existing models that prevail in the West today. Presently, there is no available model for modern, democratic, and Muslim advanced by modernized Muslim thinkers either. At the close of the nineteenth century in Egypt, liberal thinkers began to accept the Western democratic norm as reality. In so doing, they began to hang Islamic garb on these concepts. It did not work then, and it is doubtful that it will work now. Especially today, when many people in the West are trying to rethink the meaning of development to include environmental, cultural, and social factors, Muslims need to reexamine and reconstruct an Islamic idea of what is modern and an idea of development as well.

The processes of change have blurred the distinctions between modernization and development in the Islamic world. The developmental process is the way in which society and its members seek to reach their potential within the context of their environment. Development is a process with a goal, even if this goal is perceived as an ever-receding one. True, there is always a utopia by which this process is measured, one that is extracted from the experience of people and generalized into a vision of the desired society. However, since experience is constantly enlarged, it is natural that the utopia ideal changes. How we manage the tension between theory and practice, between reflection and experience -- our praxeological style -- determines how well we keep the dream alive. If we fail, the dream becomes a nightmare.

Modernization is the adoption of modern technologies for the uses of society. It attempts to make society more rational, efficient, and predictable, especially through the use of comprehensive planning, rational administration, and scientific evolution. Modernization also carries the connotation of a more productive society, at least in economic terms. Like development, modernization is always at least a partially conscious effort on the part of individuals who have a vision of what modern society would look like. In the Islamic world, societal values are excluded from emerging patterns of development.

Modernization is not a substitute for development, but in much of the Islamic world, development is simply identified with modernization imposed from above without construction of a popular base of support. Social justice, political participation, and ecology are sacrificed for modernization. The opiate of consumerism preoccupies the upper strata of society.

There is a tremendous amount of thinking to be done about development and Islam, precisely because Muslims are forced by today's conditions to make the connection between two worlds. The Islamic economic doctrine of *Shari'ah* is compromised by traditionalist-capitalist and secularist-socialist states alike. Present-day Islamic countries do not practice Islamic precepts patterned after the *Shari'ah*. The socialists and secularists deny that religious law has strategic utility for modern materialism. The capitalists and traditionalists have the *Shari'ah* out of its original shape. This perceived irrelevance of Islamic precepts to present conditions, whether implicit or explicit, has not been accompanied by indigenous intellectual development.

Islam and development can be reconciled by freeing development from the unilinear, rationalistic idea of progress canonized by the Western mind. The European Enlightenment postulated progress as the person's domain in nature established by reason and science. Progress was abandoned when the concept became a little too hollow to use -- a trifle too obviously laden with Western superiority -- and the concept of development was substituted in its place.

What is needed is an Islamic alternative that is neither a superficial compromise nor a schizophrenic reaction. What is needed is a response based on Islamic values that reflects the historical development of Islam and responds to the challenges of contemporary life.

A Third Story: Convergence and Reconciliation

The first story -- the story of incompatibility -- portrays dialogue between the West and Islam as an exercise in futility, and the second story -- the story of compatibility -- provides a hint of what might be gained by moving beyond facile, stereotypical language and judgments. The third story -- a story of reconciliation, we hope -- has yet to be written. Nonetheless, we would like to suggest a possible script for this new narrative.

Stereotyping distracts the West and Islam from the search for common ground. The West and Islam need to break the twin cycles of arrogance which breeds contempt, and defensiveness which fosters paranoia. Paranoia has become a dominant discourse; the suspicions of the West and the conspiracy theories of Muslims mirror one another. If Muslim distrust of the roadmaps offered by the United States has become commonplace, this has much to do with American assertiveness in dictating the rules of the road. The

West should take the initiative in improving relations because it is secure enough to do so. On the other hand, the Muslims should not be so insecure as to believe that they can only reflect or reject the West. The enduring strength and creative genius of authentic Islam can absorb the shocks of Western intrusions. Muslims can accept those creations of the West that are sure to complement the inevitable revitalization of Islam.

Because Islamic traditions provide a set of powerful political precepts and practices with universal implications, Islam also can make important contributions to an integrated world order -- one that affirms the unique value of all cultural traditions. In particular, Islam prescribes a strong sense of community and solidarity of people; it postulates a collaborative concept of freedom; and it demystifies the Western myth of triumphant material progress and development.

Societies have so often been repressive that a strong Western tradition has emerged that sees the elimination of repression and want as the chief goal of society. A false dichotomy between the individual and the community has developed, with the individual seen as serving the individual. Too often, the cultural community in which most human realization must take place has been ignored. It is true that cultural systems, like political, economic and social ones, have usually contained much to impede human development: forces such as prejudice, chauvinism, competitiveness, racism, sexism, and so on. This does not change the fact that the cultural community must be served by political, economic and social systems, rather than the reverse.

There are many roads to humanistic cultural pluralism, many potential systems of communitarian, free, creative life, and many potential languages, arts, musics, dramas, and literatures that are compatible with humanistic ethics. No doubt, every community needs some "cultural revolution" to remove those things that dehumanize society or inhibit human development. But only as the primacy of the cultural community is made clear will creativity have a chance to replace conformity, with cooperation replacing competition.

In the Western pluralistic tradition, diversity is seen in terms of the coexistence of political systems and ideas but not of cultures. Cultural pluralism has roots in an Islamic tradition of ethnic diversity that fosters a universalist tendency toward cultural broadness and flexibility. This heritage has allowed autonomous non-Muslim cultures to flourish within Islam to this day, while the West has succumbed to the destruction of native cultures and to sporadic, but virulent, anti-Semitism.² While Muslims practice has often fallen short of Muslim principles and the advent of the nation-state has created new tensions between national and sub-national identities, the religion of Islam is remarkable for its explicit precepts favoring cultural and religious pluralism.³

² Ali Mazrui, "Islamic and Western Values," *Foreign Affairs*, "Islamic and Western Values," Vol. 76, No. 5 (September/October 1997), pp. 118-132.

³ *Qur'an* (2:256, 5:48,10:47, 49:13, 109:6).

There is here a real opportunity for leadership. Today's challenge for the West is to live up to its liberal tradition, which requires continual openness to new revelations of truth. Today's challenge for Muslims is no more than the expansion of the original ideas of Islam. As Muslims seek to harmonize the Islamic spirit of communalism with the changing conditions of their own societies, they contribute to the betterment of our world.

A retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group, be it Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist or Hindu, is not only a denial of the rich diversity of the modern cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations. Retreat is one of two faces of political fundamentalism, which could be defined as a pathology of culture that arises when a group takes a subset of the basic tenets of a tradition, and either under the pressure of insecurity (in the case of today's Muslims), or in the pursuit of hegemony or total security (in the case of the West), uses them either to seal off others, or to maintain dominance.

In all conflict situations, people under stress react by reducing their own beliefs to a small, workable subset in order to fight and protect themselves. Fundamentalism implies a closing off of the ability to hear and communicate. Yet a return to the larger frame of a culture and its humane values, always present if sought for, can open up the space for understanding, cooperation, or at the very least, mutual respect. The inexorable dynamics of modern history rule out pretensions by any one group or cultural tradition of establishing a world hegemony. We have moved from a humanity that experienced its collective life as fragments of the whole to a humanity experiencing itself as whole.

Conclusion

Popular slogans to the contrary, Islam and the West are not inherently incompatible. The first story -- the dominant story in political and strategic analyses -- informs us of tensions which do in fact exist, but it neglects the deep resonances between Islamic and Western civilizations which are cited by the reformers and specialists who narrate the second story. The third story exists only in the form of a working outline; we have attempted here to suggest the contents of future versions which draw lessons from the ongoing dialogue.

The third story points to the prospect of a cooperative, nonadversarial relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations. Such a relationship would be premised not on ideas of cultural superiority, but on mutual respect and openness to cultural eclecticism.

Muslims and Westerners can learn from each other and cooperate in the pursuit of humane values. Seeming contradictions will have to be dealt with on a higher plane. If Western individualism is to bring lasting happiness to the individual, a model of free community will have to be explored; if Muslim ideals of community are to reach their fulfillment, it will be necessary to revisit traditions which underscore the dignity of the individual. Muslims can benefit from the Western experience with political pluralism, and Westerners can extract lessons from centuries of Islamic experimentation with cultural pluralism.

All who identify with Islam and with the West can become coauthors of a new story. We need a new story to tell, and the story we begin to tell today has a bearing on the story we will tell tomorrow. We are all heirs of the story of conflict. If we leave aside tired generalizations and seek to know one another, we can become the architects of a truly new order of cooperation.