
ISLAMIC AND WESTERN VALUES

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Democracy and The Humane Life

Westerners tend to think of Islamic societies as backward-looking, oppressed by religion, and inhumanely governed, comparing them to their own enlightened, secular democracies. But measurement of cultural distance between the West and Islam is a complex undertaking, and that distance is narrower than they assume. Islam is not just a religion, and certainly not just a fundamentalist political movement. It is a civilization, and a way of life that varies from one Muslim country to another but is animated by a common spirit far more humane than most Westerners realize. Nor do those in the West always recognize how their own societies have failed to live up to their liberal mythology. Moreover, aspects of Islamic culture that Westerners regard as medieval may have prevailed in their own culture until fairly recently; in many cases, Islamic societies may be only a few decades behind socially and technologically advanced Western ones. In the end, the question is what path leads to the highest quality of life of the average citizen, while avoiding the worst abuses. The pat of the West does not provide all the answers; Islamic values deserve serious consideration.

The Way it Recently Was

Mores and values have changed rapidly in the West in the last several decades as revolutions in technology and society progressed. Islamic countries, which are now experiencing many of the same changes, may well follow suit. Premarital sex, for example, was strongly disapproved of in the West until after World War II. There were laws against sex outside marriage, some of which are still on the books, if rarely enforced. Today sex before marriage, with parental consent, is common.

Homosexual acts between males were a crime in Great Britain until the 1960s (although lesbianism was not outlawed). Now such acts between consenting adults, male or female, are legal in much of the West, although they remain illegal in most other countries. Half the Western world, in fact, would say that laws against homosexual sex are a violation of gays' and lesbians' human rights.

Even within the West, one sees cultural lag. Although capital punishment has been abolished almost everywhere in the Western world, the United States is currently increasing the number of capital offenses and executing more death row inmates than it has in years. But death penalty opponents, including Human Rights Watch and the Roman Catholic Church, continue to protest the practice in the United States, and one day capital punishment will almost certainly be regarded in America as a violation of human rights.

Westerners regard Muslim societies as unenlightened when it comes to the status of women, and it is true that the gender question is still troublesome in Muslim countries. Islamic rules on sexual modesty have often resulted in excessive segregation of the sexes in public places, sometimes bringing about the marginalization of women in public affairs more generally. British women, however, were granted the right to own property independent of their husbands only in 1870, while Muslim women have always had that right. Indeed, Islam is the only world religion founded by a businessman in commercial partnership with his wife. While in many Western cultures daughters could not inherit anything if there were sons in the family, Islamic law has always allocated shares from every inheritance to both daughters and sons. Primogeniture has been illegal under the sharia (Islamic law) for 14 centuries.

The historical distance between the West and Islam in the treatment of women may be a matter of decades rather than centuries. Recall that in almost all Western countries except for New Zealand, women did not gain the right to vote until the twentieth century. Great Britain extended the vote to women in two stages, in 1918 and 1928, and the United States enfranchised them by constitutional amendment in 1920. France followed as recently as 1944. Switzerland did not permit women to vote in national elections until 1971— decades after Muslim women in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan had been casting ballots.

Furthermore, the United States, the largest and most influential Western nation, has never had a female president. In contrast, two of the most populous Muslim countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, have had women prime ministers: Benazir Bhutto headed two governments in Pakistan, and Khaleda Zia and Hasina Wajed served consecutively in Bangladesh. Turkey has had Prime Minister Tansu Çiller. Muslim countries are ahead in female empowerment, though still behind in female liberation.

Concepts of the Sacred

Censorship is one issue on which the cultural divide between the West and Islam turns out to be less wide than Westerners ordinarily assume. The most celebrated case of the last decade — that of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in Britain in 1988 but banned in most Muslim countries — brought the Western world and the Muslim world in conflict, but also uncovered some surprising similarities and large helpings of Western hypocrisy. Further scrutiny reveals widespread censorship in the West, if imposed by different forces than in Muslim societies.

As their civilization has become more secular, Westerners have looked for new abodes of the sacred. By the late twentieth century the freedom of the artist — in this case, Salman Rushdie — was more sacred to them than religion. But many Muslims saw Rushdie's novel as holding Islam up to ridicule. The novel suggests that Islam's holy scripture, the Koran, is filled with inventions of the Prophet Muhammad or is, in fact, the work of the devil rather than communications from Allah, and implies, moreover, that the religion's founder was not very

intelligent. Rushdie also puts women characters bearing the names of the Prophet's wives in a whorehouse, where the clients find the blasphemy arousing.

Many devout Muslims felt that Rushdie had no right to poke fun at and twist into obscenity some of the most sacred symbols of Islam. Most Muslim countries banned the novel because officials there considered it morally repugnant. Western intellectuals argued that as an artist, Rushdie had the sacred right and even duty to go wherever his imagination led him in his writing. Yet until the 1960s *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was regarded as morally repugnant under British law for daring to depict an affair between a married member of the gentry and a worker on the estate. For a long time after Oscar Wilde's conviction for homosexual acts, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was regarded as morally repugnant. Today other gay writers are up against a wall of prejudice.

The Satanic Verses was banned in some places because of fears that it would cause riots. Indian officials explained that they were banning the novel because it would inflame religious passions in the country, already aroused by Kashmiri separatism. The United States has a legal standard for preventive action when negative consequences are feared – "clear and present danger." But the West was less than sympathetic to India's warnings that the book was inflammatory. Rushdie's London publisher, Jonathan Cape, went ahead, and the book's publication even in far-off Britain resulted in civil disturbances in Bombay, Islamabad, and Karachi in which some 15 people were killed and dozens more injured.

Distinguished Western publishers, however, have been known to reject a manuscript because of fears for the safety of their own. Last year Cambridge University Press turned down *Fields of Wheat, Rivers of Blood* by Anastasia Karakasidou, a sociological study on ethnicity in the Greek province of Macedonia, publicly acknowledging that it did so because of worries about the safety of its employees in Greece. If Jonathan Cape had cared as much about South Asian lives as it said it cared about freedom of expression, or as Cambridge University Press cared about its staff members in Greece, less blood would have been spilled.

Targets, sources, and methods of censorship differ, but censorship is just as much a fact of life in Western societies as in the Muslim world. Censorship in the latter is often crude, imposed by governments, mullahs and imams, and, more recently, militant Islamic movements. Censorship in the West, on the other hand, is more polished and decentralized. Its practitioners are financial backers of cultural activity and entertainment, advertisers who buy time on commercial television, subscribers of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS), influential interest groups including ethnic pressure groups, and editors, publishers, and other controllers of the means of communication. In Europe, governments, too, sometimes get into the business of censorship.

Censoring America

The threat to free speech in the United States comes not from the law and the Constitution but from outside the government. PBS, legally invulnerable on the issue of free speech, capitulated to other forces when faced with the metaphorical description in my 1986 television series "The Africans" of Karl Marx as "the last of the great Jewish prophets." The British version had included the phrase, but the American producing station, WETA, a PBS affiliate in Washington, deleted it without authorial permission so as not to risk offending Jewish Americans.

On one issue of censorship WETA did consult me. Station officials were unhappy I had not injected more negativity into the series' three-minute segment on Libya's leader, Muammar Qaddafi. First they asked for extra commentary on allegations that Libya sponsored terrorism. When I refused, they suggested changing the pictures instead – deleting one sequence that humanized Qaddafi by showing him visiting a hospital and substituting a shot of the Rome airport after a terrorist bombing. After much debate I managed to save the hospital scene but surrendered on the Rome airport addition, on condition that neither I nor the written caption implied that Libya was responsible for the bombing. But, ideally, WETA would have preferred to cut the whole segment.

WETA in those days had more in common with the censors in Libya than either side realized. Although the Libyans broadcast an Arabic version and seemed pleased with the series as a whole, they cut the Qaddafi sequence. The segment also offended Lynne Cheney, chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, who demanded that the endowment's name be removed from the series credits. After she stepped down from her post, she called for the NEH to be abolished, citing "The Africans" as an example of the objectionable liberal projects that, she said, the endowment had tended to fund.

In another case of decentralized censorship that affected my own work, Westview Press in Boulder, Colorado, was about to go to press with my book *Cultural Forces in World Politics* when editors there announced they wanted to delete three chapters: one discussing *The Satanic Verses* as a case of cultural treason, another comparing the Palestinian intifada with Chinese students' 1989 rebellion in Tiananmen Square, and a third comparing the South African apartheid doctrine of separate homelands for blacks and whites with the Zionist doctrine of separate states for Jews and Arabs. Suspecting that I would have similar problems with most other major U.S. publishers, I decided that the book would be published exclusively by James Currey, my British publisher, and Heinemann Educational Books, the American offshoot of another British house, which brought it out in 1990. Not even universities in the United States, supposed bastions of intellectual freedom, have been free from censorship. Until recently the greatest danger to one's chances of getting tenure lay in espousing Marxism or criticizing Israel or Zionism.

The positive aspects of decentralized censorship in the West, at least with regard to my books, is that what is unacceptable to one publisher may be acceptable to another; what is almost unpublishable in the United States may be easily publishable in Britain or the Netherlands. With national television, the choices are more restricted. Many points of view are banned from the screen, with the possibility of a hearing only on the public access stations with the weakest signals.

In Western societies as in Muslim ones, only a few points of view have access to the national broadcast media and publishing industry or even to university faculties. In both civilizations, certain points of view are excluded from the center and marginalized. The source of the censorship may be different, but censorship is the result in the West just as surely as in the Islamic world.

Life Among the Believers

Many of the above issues are bound up with religion. Westerners consider many problems or flaws of the Muslim world products of Islam and pride their societies and their governments on their purported secularism. But when it comes to separation of church and state, how long and wide is the distance between the two cultures?

A central question is whether a theocracy can ever be democratized. British history since Henry VIII's establishment of the Church of England in 1531 proves that it can be. The English theocracy was democratized first by making democracy stronger and later by making the theocracy weaker. The major democratic changes had to wait until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the vote was extended to new social classes and finally to women. The Islamic Republic of Iran is less than two decades old, but already there seem to be signs of softening theocracy and the beginnings of liberalization. Nor must we forget Muslim monarchies that have taken initial steps toward liberalization. Jordan has gone further than most others in legalizing opposition groups. But even Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states have begun to use the Islamic concept of *shura* (consultative assembly) as a guide to democracy.

The West has sought to protect minority religions through secularism. It has not always worked. The Holocaust in secular Germany was the worst case. And even today, anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe is disturbing, as are anti-Muslim trends in France.

The United States has had separation of church and state under the Constitution for over 200 years, but American politics is hardly completely secular. Only once has the electorate chosen a non-Protestant president – and the Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy won by such a narrow margin, amid such allegations of electoral fraud, that we will never know for certain whether a majority of Americans actually voted for him. Jews have distinguished themselves in many fields, but they have so far avoided competing for the White House, and there is still a fear of unleashing the demon of anti-Semitism among Christian fundamentalists. There are now more Muslims – an estimated six millions – than Jews in the United States, yet anti-Muslim feeling and the success of appeals to Christian sentiment among voters make it extremely unlikely that Americans will elect a Muslim head of state anytime in the foreseeable future. Even the appointment of a Muslim secretary of commerce, let alone an attorney general, is no more than a distant conjecture because of the political fallout that all administrations fear. When First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton entertained Muslim leaders at the White House last year to mark a special Islamic festival, a *Wall Street Journal* article cited that as evidence that friends of Hamas had penetrated the White House. In Western Europe, too, there are now millions of Muslims, but history is still awaiting the appointment of the first to a cabinet position in Britain, France, or Germany.

Islam, on the other hand, has tried to protect minority religions through ecumenicalism throughout its history. Jews and Christians had special status as People of the Book – a fraternity of monotheists. Other religious minorities were later also accorded the status of protected minorities (*dhimmis*). The approach has had its successes. Jewish scholars rose to high positions in Muslim Spain. During the Ottoman Empire, Christians sometimes attained high political office: Suleiman I (1520-1566) had Christian ministers in his government, as did Selim III (1789-1807). The Moghul Empire integrated Hindus and Muslims into a consolidated Indian state; Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) carried furthest the Moghul policy of bringing Hindus into the government. In the 1990s Iraq has had a Chaldean Christian deputy prime minister, Tariq Aziz. And Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a Coptic Christian, would never have been appointed secretary-general of the United Nations if not for his long and distinguished service in the foreign ministry of an otherwise Muslim government in Egypt.

The Republic of Senegal in West Africa, which is nearly 95 percent Muslim, had a Roman Catholic president for two decades (1960-80). In his years presiding over that relatively open society, Léopold Sédar Senghor never once had to deal with anti-Christian disturbances in the streets of Dakar. His political opponents called him a wide range of derogatory names –

hypocrite, stooge of the French, dictator, political prostitute – but virtually never taunted him for being a *kafir* (infidel).

When Senghor became the first African head of state to retire voluntarily from office, Abdou Diouf, a Muslim, succeeded him, and he remains president today. But the ecumenical story of Senegal did not end there; the first lady is Catholic. Can one imagine an American president candidate confessing on *Larry King Live*, "Incidentally, my wife is a Shiite Muslim"? That would almost certainly mark the end of his hopes for the White House.

One conclusion to be drawn from all this is that Westerners are far less secular in their political behavior than they think they are. Another is that Muslim societies historically have been more ecumenical, and therefore more humane, than their Western critics have recognized. Islamic ecumenicalism has sometimes protected religious minorities more effectively than Western secularism.

Between the Dazzling and the Depraved

Cultures should be judged not merely by the heights of achievement to which they have ascended but by the depths of brutality to which they have descended. The measure of cultures is not only their virtues but also their vices.

In the twentieth century, Islam has not often proved fertile ground for democracy and its virtues. On the other hand, Islamic culture has not been hospitable to Nazism, fascism, or communism, unlike Christian culture (as in Germany, Italy, Russia, Czechoslovakia), Buddhist culture (Japan before and during World War II, Pol Pot's Cambodia, Vietnam, North Korea), or Confucian culture (Mao's China). The Muslim world has never yet given rise to systematic fascism and its organized brutalities. Hafiz al-Assad's Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq have been guilty of large-scale violence, but fascism also requires an ideology of repression that has been absent in the two countries. And apart from the dubious case of Albania, communism has never independently taken hold in a Muslim culture.

Muslims are often criticized for not producing the best, but they are seldom congratulated for an ethic that has averted the worst. There are no Muslim equivalents of Nazi extermination camps, nor Muslim conquests by genocide on the scale perpetrated by Europeans in the Americas and Australia, nor Muslim equivalents of Stalinist terror, Pol Pot's killing fields, or the starvation and uprooting of tens of millions in the name of Five Year Plans. Nor are there Muslim versions of apartheid like that once approved by the South African Dutch Reformed Church, or of the ferocious racism of Japan before 1945, or of the racist culture of the Old South in the United States with its lynchings and brutalization of black people.

Islam brings to the calculus of universal justice some protection from the abyss of human depravity. Historically, the religion and the civilization have been resistant to forces that contributed to the worst aspects of the twentieth century's interludes of barbarism: racism, genocide, and violence within society.

First, Islam has been relatively resistant to racism. The Koran confronts the issue of national and ethnic differences head on. The standard of excellence it sets has nothing to do with race, but is instead moral and religious worth – what the Koran calls "piety" and what Martin Luther King, Jr., called "the content of one's character." An oft-quoted verse of the Koran reads:

O people! We have created you from a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes so that you may know one another. The noblest among you is the most pious. Allah is all-knowing.

In his farewell address, delivered on his last pilgrimage to Mecca in A.D. 632, Muhammad declared: "There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, and indeed, no superiority of a red man over a black man except through the piety and fear of God... Let those who are present convey this message to those who are absent."

Unlike Christian churches, the mosque has never been segregated by race. One of Muhammad's most beloved companions was an Ethiopian, Bilal Rabah, a freed slave who rose to great prominence in early Islam. Under Arab lineage systems and kinship traditions, racial intermarriage was not discouraged and the children were considered Arab regardless of who the mother was. These Arab ways influenced Muslim societies elsewhere. Of the four presidents of Egypt since the revolution of 1952, two had black African ancestors – Muhammad Nagib and Anwar al-Sadat.

Islam has a doctrine of Chosen Language (Arabic) but no Chosen People. Since the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine I in A.D. 313, Christianity has been led if not dominated by Europeans. But the leadership of the Muslim world has changed hands several times: from the mainly Arab Umayyad dynasty (661-750) to the multiethnic Abbasid dynasty (750-1258) to the Ottoman Empire (1453-1922), dominated by the Turks. And this history is quite apart from such flourishing Muslim dynasties as the Moghuls of India and the Safavids of Persia or the sub-Saharan empires of Mali and Songhai. The diversification of Muslim leadership – in contrast to the Europeanization of Christian leadership – helped the cause of relative racial equality in Islamic culture.

Partly because of Islam's relatively nonracial nature, Islamic history has been free of systematic efforts to obliterate a people. Islam conquered by co-optation, intermarriage, and conversion rather than by genocide.

Incidents in Muslim history, it is true, have caused large-scale loss of life. During Turkey's attempt in 1915 to deport the entire Armenian population of about 1,750,000 to Syria and Palestine, hundreds of thousands of people, perhaps up to a million, died of starvation or were murdered on the way. But – though this does not exonerate Turkey or its responsibility for the deaths – Armenians had provoked Turkey by organizing volunteer battalions to help Russia fight against it in World War I. Nor is the expulsion of a people from a territory, however disastrous its consequences, equivalent to the Nazi Holocaust, which systematically took the lives of six million Jews and members of other despised groups. Movement of people between India and Pakistan after partitioning 1947 also resulted in thousands of deaths en route.

Saddam Hussein's use of poison gas against Kurdish villages in Iraq in 1988 is more clearly comparable to Nazi behavior. But Saddam's action was the use of an illegitimate weapon in a civil war rather than a planned program to destroy the Kurdish people; it was an evil incident rather than a program of genocide. Many people feel that President Harry S Truman's dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was also an evil episode. There is a difference between massacre and genocide. Massacres have been perpetrated in almost every country on earth, but only a few cultures have been guilty of genocide.

Nor did Islam ever spawn an Inquisition in which the burning of heretics at the stake was sanctioned. Cultures that had condemned human beings to burn and celebrated as they died in

the flames, even hundreds of years before, were more likely to tolerate the herding of a whole people of another faith into gas chambers. Islam has been a shield against such excesses of evil.

The Order of Islam

Against Western claims that Islamic "fundamentalism" feeds terrorism, one powerful paradox of the twentieth century is often overlooked. While Islam may generate more political violence than Western culture, Western culture generates more street violence than Islam. Islam does indeed produce a disproportionate share of mujahideen, but Western culture produces a disproportionate share of muggers. The largest Muslim city in Africa is Cairo. The largest westernized city is Johannesburg. Cairo is much more populous than Johannesburg, but street violence is only a fraction of what it is in the South African city. Does Islam help pacify Cairo? I, along with many others, believe it does. The high premium Islam places on *umma* (community) and *ijma* (consensus) has made for a Pax Islamica in day-to-day life.

In terms of quality of life, is the average citizen better off under the excesses of the Islamic state or the excesses of the liberal state, where political tension may be low but social violence has reached crisis proportions? Tehran, the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is a city of some ten million. Families with small children picnic in public parks at 11 p.m. or midnight. Residents of the capital and other cities stroll late at night, seemingly unafraid of mugging, rape, or murder. This is a society that has known large-scale political violence in war and revolution, but one in which petty interpersonal violence is much rarer than in Washington or New York. Iranians are more subject to their government than Americans, but they are less at risk from the depredations of their fellow citizens. Nor is dictatorial government the explanation for the safe streets of Tehran – otherwise, Lagos would be as peaceful as the Iranian capital.

The Iranian solution is mainly in the moral sphere. As an approach to the problems of modernity, some Muslim societies are attempting a return to premodernism, to indigenous traditional disciplines and values. Aside from Iran, countries such as Sudan and Saudi Arabia have revived Islamic legal systems and other features of the Islamic way of life, aspects of which go back 14 centuries. Islamic movements in countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Afghanistan are also seeking revivalist goals. A similar sacred nostalgia is evident in other religions, such as the born-again Christian sects in the United States and Africa.

Of all the value systems in the world, Islam has been the most resistant to the leading destructive forces of the twentieth century – including AIDS. Lower levels of prostitution and of hard drug use in conservative Muslim cultures compared with other cultures have, so far, contributed to lower-than-average HIV infection rates. If societies closer to the sharia are also more distant from the human immunodeficiency virus, should the rest of the world take a closer look?

One can escape modernity by striving to transcend it as well as by retreating from it into the past. Perhaps the Muslim world should explore this path, searching for postmodern solutions to its political tensions and economic woes, and pursuing the positive aspects of globalization without falling victim to the negative aspects of westernization.

The Dialectic of Culture

Western liberal democracy has enabled societies to enjoy openness, government accountability, popular participation, and high economic productivity, but Western pluralism has

also been a breeding ground for racism, fascism, exploitation, and genocide. If history is to end in arrival at the ultimate political order, it will require more than the West's message on how to maximize the best in human nature. Humankind must also consult Islam about how to check the worst in human nature – from alcoholism to racism, materialism to Nazism, drug addiction to Marxism as the opiate of the intellectuals.

One must distinguish between democratic principles and human principles. In some human principles – including stabilizing the family, security from social violence, and the relatively nonracial nature of religious institutions – the Muslim world may be ahead of the West.

Turkey is a prime example of the dilemma of balancing human principles with democratic principles. In times of peace, the Ottoman Empire was more human in its treatment of religious minorities than the Turkish Republic after 1923 under the westernizing influence of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk. The Turkish Republic, on the other hand, gradually moved toward a policy of cultural assimilation. While the Ottoman Empire tolerated the Kurdish language, the Turkish Republic outlawed its use for a considerable period. When not at war, the empire was more humane than the Turkish Republic, but less democratic.

At bottom, democracy is a system for selecting one's rulers; human governance is a system from treating citizens. Ottoman rule at its best was human governance; the Turkish Republic at its best has been a quest for democratic values. In the final years of the twentieth century, Turkey may be engaged in reconciling the greater humaneness of the Ottoman Empire with the great democracy of the Republic.

The current Islamic revival in the country may be the beginning of a fundamental review of the Kemalist revolution, which inaugurated Turkish secularism. In England since Henry VIII, a theocracy has been democratized. In Turkey, might a democracy be theocratized? Although the Turkish army is trying to stop it, electoral support for Islamic revivalism is growing in the country. There has been increased speculation that secularism may be pushed back, in spite of the resignation in June, under political pressure from the generals, of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of the Islamist Welfare Party. Is Erbakan nevertheless destined to play in the Kemalist revolution the role that Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin played in the Leninist revolution? Or is Erbakan a forerunner of change? It is too early to be sure. The dialectic of history continues its conversation with the dialectic of culture within the wider rhythms of relativity in human experience.

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