Islam and the West

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Abstract: The scientific and technological developments during the 18th and 19th centuries ensured material progress of the West, as well as emergence of the West as the dominating power which colonized the rest of the world. During the post-colonial phase, Islam emerged as a revitalized sociopolitical force. This has been mistaken as a threat by the West, and Islam has been portrayed as the "new enemy" after the demise of communism. This is partly an effort to establish a Western identity, which is disintegrating due to lack of a challenge; and partly a reflection of the failure of Muslims to realize the social and ethical ideals of Islam.

The West is a powerful, dominant and highly complex world-civilization, founded on the philosophical premises of the 18th century Enlightenment, which dethroned the traditional religion, i.e. Christianity, and relegated it to the peripheral realm of private life. This period enthroned Reason—divorced from Revelation—as the sole instrument and arbiter of human progress and prosperity. This secularistic, humanistic and rationalistic ethos forged the modern positivistic paradigm which, in turn, nurtured and fostered the phenomenal scientific and technological advancement of Western nations and secured for them their material progress. It also led to the emergence of world-wide imperialism and colonialism, propelled by the European industrial revolution, and fuelled mutual rivalries of the modern nation states of Europe, later to be joined by the USA. As a result of Western imperialism, the countries of Africa and Asia became,

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for several centuries, the victims of aggressive economic exploitation and of the political dominance of Western powers.

Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia and China were carved up by competing colonial powers. The West justified its domination and exploitation of those countries in the name of *mission civilisatrice*—the responsibility of bringing civilisation to the uncivilised parts of the world. This self-appointed responsibility was, as it were, a "white man's burden." For Spain and Portugal, in particular, colonialism was motivated by "Gold, Glory and Gospel." Christian missionary movements, encouraged and facilitated by the colonial powers, followed in the wake of economic plunder and political bondage to spread the teachings of Christianity through the establishment of churches, Christian schools and clinics. Western political systems, laws, education and culture were imposed on the colonized peoples. Consequently, Westernized indigenous elites, "the brown *sahibs*" emerged in all the colonized countries to serve in the prestigious civil services. Muslim scholars, writing on the colonial system of education, would often refer to Lord Macaulay's infamous remark that the objective of education, as far as British India was concerned, was to produce English gentlemen who were Indian only in their skin colour. Where Britain succeeded in producing her own breed of brown Anglophiles, Mother France triumphed in transforming a whole generation of French Algerians who not only lost the ability to speak their native language (Arabic), but also lost their Islamic identity. Post-Osmanlı Turkey, once the "Sick Man of Europe" bent over backwards in order to become totally westernized, and completely modernized, so that she would be fully accepted as a European nation. It is no wonder that Cantwell Smith and many other Western scholars in the fifties and sixties were preaching to their Muslim readers to follow the example of Kemalist Turkey since she was regarded as the correct path for all Muslims to follow in order to achieve the goals of progress and modernization.

To many Muslim nationalists, religious leaders and intellectuals, the period of colonial subjugation and imperialism at the hands of Western powers was the most humiliating period in the history of Islam. It was their greatest tragedy, permanently etched in their collective and individual memories so that the desire to reclaim their lost self-esteem and restore the dignity of being human—on equal footing with their erstwhile masters—fired the imagination and fervour of nationalists.
throughout Muslim countries. Today, many Muslim leaders born in the heyday of colonial domination no longer see the West as an adversary. Rather, it is a civilizational repository of both strengths and weaknesses. The challenge for Muslims, in their view, is to acquire the qualities and values of strength while shunning the weaknesses.

The long and bitter struggle for liberation and independence from colonial bondage brought Islam and nationalism together. Even communism was combined with Islam and nationalism, as in the case of post-independence Indonesia, through the ingenuity and spell-binding charisma of President Sukarno. Independence, which was a post-World War II phase of Muslim national existence, led to the era of ideological struggle between liberal democracy and socialism. Muslim countries became appendages in the power struggle between capitalism and communism. In this bipolar world struggle, Muslim countries which leaned towards the capitalist world such as Iran under the Shah, Tunisia, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Turkey, and so on, embarked on a programme of economic development which followed the capitalist paradigm, while those which were oriented towards the socialist bloc—Egypt under Nasser, Indonesia under Sukarno, Algeria, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen experimented with a nation-building programme based on socialist ideals. In this period, some Muslim countries vacillated between capitalism and socialism while a few countries ventured to experiment with a new concoction called "Islamic Socialism": Nasser, Sukarno, and Ali Shari'at'i were among the chief proponents of this hybrid ideology, though each would interpret it in his own way. Nevertheless, the flirtation with Marxist socialism could not be sustained in several Muslim countries under the impact of a new phenomenon in the post-independence Muslim world. This was the phenomenon known as Islamic "resurgence" or "revivalism" or "revitalisation." The relationship of this new phenomenon to earlier Islamic reforms and revivalist movements, in the 18th and 19th centuries, has been well documented and analysed by John Voll in Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World. One can also study the intellectual content of contemporary Islamic resurgence and gauge its sociopolitical implications in the writings of John Esposito. The resurgence, to be sure, was a continuation of the Islamic movements which resisted the invasion of foreign powers, challenged Western imperialism, and struggled for liberation from foreign rule.

The revitalization of Islam as a sociopolitical force in Muslim
countries in the seventies came to the forefront of national affairs for various reasons.

1. Disillusionment of the younger generation of educated Muslims with the secular nationalism of the older generation. Besides, nationalism generated international conflicts and deepened the divisions of the already weak Muslim countries. Dependent on the West, the nationalists could not chart a course of national development free from the capitalist or the socialist models.

2. Westernization—not modernization—seemed to be the goal of national development. Only a small group benefitted from the development process.

3. Corruption of political power and injustices were on the rise. Many Muslim political leaders were seen as lackeys and cronies of Western powers. This led to the crisis of Muslim leadership.

4. The perception that neither capitalism nor socialism could deliver the promises of justice, peace and prosperity for the Muslim masses. Experiments with both orientations seemed to have failed. There was a strong feeling that ex-colonial powers continued to exert their efforts and to use their influence to "Westernize" the liberated Muslim countries so as to perpetuate the state of dependency and the centre-periphery relationship between the West and the rest of the world.

5. The dualistic educational system operating in Muslim countries as part of the colonial heritage had failed to produce ethically infused professionals, or worldly, informed religious scholars. This had precipitated what has been called the "crisis of the Muslim mind." It was this realization that led to the emergence, in 1981, of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, based in Herndon, Virginia.

It is important to bear in mind that the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence is essentially an internal critique of the Muslim state of affairs: politically, economically, socially and morally. Proponents of the movement saw the leadership of many Muslim countries during the periods of colonial domination and post-independence as severely wanting in religious commitment, and as having failed to understand Islam as a complete way of life. Their open criticism of the secular-
izing status quo or dictatorial tendencies or oppressive governments or morally decadent monarchies placed them in a precarious position vis-à-vis the national power-holders. Many of these power-holders and regimes resorted to severe suppression of the emerging Islamic movements, and thousands of the leaders and followers of these movements throughout the Muslim world were imprisoned or tortured.

The experience of violent oppression at the hands of the state and the determination of the state to curb popular Islamic dissent through the imposition of Draconian laws led, in the long run, to the emergence of extremist or militant tendencies in some Muslim countries. The leadership of Islamic movements generally oppose the use of violence in pursuing their objectives. They realize that the challenges they are facing require a long struggle, and that the social transformation they are aspiring to see in their own countries needs comprehensive change in many interrelated dimensions, beginning with the individual, the family, the group, the institution, the system, the society and finally, the state. Many are aware that, given the shortcomings obtaining in their own organizations and the external obstacles in their societies, they may not achieve their objectives in their own lifetimes. Nevertheless, they believe it is their responsibility to continue their efforts in the name of al-jihād fi sabil Allāh (striving in the way of God), leaving the results of their efforts to Allah.

Where circumstances allow them to operate in the open through democratic means, such as in Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey and Jordan, Islamic resurgent movements readily participate in national politics and eschew the use of violence to gain popular support. In some cases they agree to cooperate with government parties or share power with their one-time political rivals. The overriding factor, it seems, which determines the behaviour of Islamic revitalization movements (with the exception of Tablīghī Jamāʿat) vis-à-vis the political status quo is the nature of circumstances obtaining in the local contexts. Justice and fair play tend to generate respect and cooperation while oppression and manipulation tend to generate distrust, conflict and rebellion.

Since independence, Muslim countries have been facing serious economic, political and social problems. The experimentation with new or different political systems in the post-colonial period and the widening gap between the impoverished masses and the ruling elites have also contributed to the political instability of many of these countries. There are a few exceptions, and many observers acknow-
ledge that contemporary Malaysia is one such exception. The Muslim world is made up of fifty odd countries in which Muslims are in the majority. India, China and the former Russian republics (now called the Commonwealth of Independent States) have large Muslim minority populations while countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Kampuchea and several African states, not to mention U.K., France, Germany, Albania and former Yugoslavia are home to sizeable Muslim minorities. Altogether, the Muslims constitute a population of more than one billion, or one-fifth of the world population, occupying a total land area of more than 30 million square kilometres, or one quarter of the total world area. According to Ahmad Muhammad Ali, President of the Islamic Development Bank, the Muslim world has more than 50% of the world’s crude oil and a very large percentage of the world’s minerals and basic raw materials. Yet the total Gross National Product (GNP) of Muslim countries is less than 5% of the world’s GNP. Only four countries, the oil-producing ones, can be considered high- or middle-income countries, while 21 are low-income countries.

At the end of 1994 the external debt of the Muslim world stood at US$455.3 billion...and the debt ledger continued to add up at least at the rate of 7.6 billion US dollars yearly...In 1994, Muslim countries paid 52.8 billion US dollars in debt servicing, 34.4 billion in principal and 18.4 billion in interest. This was against an aggregate revenue of 45.2 billion US dollars; that is they had to pay out 7.6 billion US dollars more than what they had actually earned. It meant begging for new loans in order to recycle the old ones.4

In this vicious circle of borrowing, debt-servicing, dependency and more borrowing, Muslim countries are bound to become poorer and poorer while the ruling class and the privileged cronies tend to become richer and richer. The mismanagement of the economy, the corruption of the powerholders (including the ostentatious life-styles of the ruling class) and the political oppression of unpopular regimes in the Muslim world continue to be the subject of scrutiny and critique for independent democratic groups as well as for Islamic movements. As far as Western economic and political powers are concerned, it behoves them to evaluate every Muslim country on its own merits and, if possible, from the internal perspective before they decide to intervene, offer aid or withhold assistance. The context varies from country to country, and Islamic thought and action normally adapt themselves to the respective contexts, notwithstanding the emotion-laden transcendentalist discourse
of Islamic political dissent.

I would venture to say that the Muslim peoples and the Muslim states, with all their assertiveness and loud protests, do not constitute a threat to the West, despite the popular demonization and frequent distortions of Islam by the influential and powerful Western media. In addressing this issue, I have to refer to the analysis of Esposito.5

Events in the Muslim world and in the West continue to highlight the issue of an "Islamic threat" and of the role of Islam in international affairs. The secretary general of NATO caused a stir when he spoke of Islam as the new communism...6

In Europe and America, fear of the export of "Islamic Fundamentalism" and its threat to domestic security has captured media attention and at times reinforced the image of Islam as a demographic threat.7

Western fears of militant Islam seemed further confirmed by Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" in Foreign Affairs...The debate over a clash of civilizations has received widespread attention not only in the United States and Europe but also, and especially, in the Muslim world, where many saw this publication by a prominent member of the academic establishment as yet another proof of the West's true attitude towards Islam and the Muslim world.8

...many academic analysts and political commentators in Israel and the US increasingly warned of the global threat of Islamic fundamentalism to the West and questioned the compatibility of Islam and Arab culture with democracy, in articles such as: "Beware of Religious Stalinists," "By Peace or the Sword," "Israel Sees Self Defending West Again".9

It is true that many Muslim leaders often criticize Western powers for "their double standard in promoting democracy with enthusiasm in the West but very selectively in the Muslim World."10 A case in point is Algeria where, during the last few years, the army aborted the promising democratic process because the majority of the people seemed to favour an Islamic alternative to socialism or military rule. No Western power came to rescue the emergence of the democratic movement. Another case is that of Bosnia-Herzegovina where a whole community became the victim of bloody and inhuman "ethnic cleansing" and unspeakable mass carnage while Western powers
dragged their feet thus allowing the Serbs to perpetrate more damage. Indeed, the West prevented the Bosnians from defending themselves with arms although they were aware that Russia was continuously supplying arms to the Serbs. Muslims wonder why, in the case of the Gulf War, the Western powers and the so-called "international community" acted swiftly and decisively to punish Saddam Hussein and paralysed the Iraqi nation, whereas during the Iran-Iraq war Saddam was supported militarily by Western powers. The answer they give is: "There is oil in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and there is no oil in Bosnia-Herzegovina." There is also the Serbian propaganda that victory for the Bosnians would mean the creation of an Islamic theocratic state on the doorstep of Europe.

As in the past, religious extremism remains a threat today but, "it is not restricted to or inherent in any one religion." Extremist groups, organizations or individuals who resort to violence or terrorism for ethnic, religious or political grievances are certainly not confined to Muslim countries. Nor is "state terrorism"—often justified in the name of preservation of peace—the sole privilege of a nation belonging to the South or the Third World. As Esposito puts it:

> The challenge today, as in the past, is to avoid the easy answers fielded by stereotyping or the projection of a monolithic threat, to distinguish between the beliefs and activities of the majority (whether they be Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, Christians and Jews, Arabs and Israelis, Tamils and Buddhists) and a minority of extremists who justify their aggression and violence in the name of religion, ethnicity, or political ideology. It is equally important to distinguish between the aspirations and demands of legitimate political opposition groups and those of extremist groups.

If we ask Muslim nations to cease thinking solely in the context of their bitterness and suffering under the impact of Western colonial domination, then we should also expect the Western nations to transcend the Cold War mind-set and paranoia, in which the fear of a monolithic Soviet threat often blinded them to the humanity of a highly diverse world. It led them to support corrupt regimes as long as they remained on the Western side in the Cold War, and made them tolerate the injustices of virtual dictators in the Third World, and accept the suppression of legitimate dissent by these tyrannical rulers as long as the dissenters were branded communists, socialists or extremists.

The Muslim peoples and nations who opposed communism or militant atheism felt a great sense of relief at the defeat of the Russians
in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet system. They were looking forward to the opportunity to reconstruct their collective lives according to their own values and norms, just as the Muslim peoples of Chechnya and the newly emerging Central Asian republics aspire to free themselves from the bondage of the Soviet system and restore their Islamic heritage and identity. They are also hoping that one day the Muslim peoples of mainland China may be granted the freedom to organize their collective lives on the basis of Islamic teachings and philosophy of life. They are disheartened that, because of the extremist behaviour of a few among them, Islam and Muslims in general are singled out as "the new enemy" or "the new evil empire" to face the wrath of a triumphant unipolar world power heralded by President Bush as the "new world order."

The "new world order" could very well become, in the near future, a "new world disorder" if Europeans and Americans were to believe things like the widely-read German news magazine Der Spiegel which indirectly warns Europeans of a new threat coming from Muslim zealots "whose medieval ways of thinking are mainly characterised by hatred of everything Western";13 or the well-known Time Magazine which speaks of "The Dark Side of Islam";14 or the editorial of the magazine US News and World Report of 22nd March 1993, which says:

The Gulf War was just one paragraph in the long conflict between the West and radical Islam; the World Trade Centre bombing, just a sentence. We are in for a long struggle not amenable to reasoned dialogue. We will need to nurture our faith and resolution.15

Or take the views of Yossef Bidansky, who states that the Muslim world "has embarked on a fateful global Jihad (holy war) against the West, and its Judeo-Christian values. America is its primary target."16

In a book entitled The Next Threat: Western Perceptions of Islam, edited by Jochem Hippler and Andrea Lueg, which complements The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality of Esposito, Hippler says that the idea of the Islamic threat is "extremely attractive, as it can step in as the natural replacement for the lost enemy of the Soviet Union/Communism" (p.145). He believes that:

...justification of a heavily armed military apparatus and a foreign policy aimed at establishing supremacy in the Gulf needs a plausible basis, a credible enemy. And this ‘enemy’ must be more than just an enemy, it must encompass an extensive ideology, as did Marxism-Leninism. ‘Islam’ or ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ offer themselves as
ideal examples.\textsuperscript{17}

In his opinion, the perception of the Islamic threat is not actually due to the Middle East or Islam. It has:

- everything to do with the establishment of an inter-Western identity.
- It is about reassuring ourselves, about reassuring each other of how rational, enlightened and sensible we Westerners are. The need for this has of course arisen from the regrettable fact that standards of civilization in Europe are not high, and are constantly being dragged down by explosive set-backs.\textsuperscript{18}

Essentially, the book contends that "enemy" images from the other side tell more about those who produce them than about the real "other." This is also true of Western images conjured up by some writers in the Muslim world whose knowledge of the West comes mainly from superficial and highly prejudiced observations, or from watching Hollywood movies in cinemas or on television.

I would agree with Esposito that contemporary Islam "is more a challenge than a threat." He says:

- It challenges the West to know and understand the diversity of the Muslim experience. It is a challenge to Muslim governments to be more responsive to popular demands for political liberalization and greater popular participation, to tolerate rather than repress nonviolent opposition movements, and to build viable democratic institutions. At the same time, it challenges Western powers to stand by the democratic values they embody, distinguish between authentic populist movements and violent revolutionaries, and recognize the right of the people to determine the nature of their governments and leadership.\textsuperscript{19}

Several Muslim leaders are ready to admit that the negative image of Muslims which the rest of the world perceives, is largely the result of the failure of many Muslims themselves to realize and manifest the intellectual, social and ethical ideals of their religion. Although Islam urges its adherents to excel in knowledge, to uphold justice for all, to combat corruption in all its forms, to curb hypocrisy in religious life, to live by lofty ethical standards and to emulate the Prophet Muhammad (SAS) as "a mercy for all the worlds" (rahmatulil ‘alamin), it is a well known fact that very few Muslim countries are able to actualize the noble imperatives of the religion. For this reason, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, asserts that:
The challenges before Muslims, like people of their traditions in Asia today, are indeed great. They must endeavour to alleviate ignorance, disease, and destitution. They have to battle corruption and arrest moral decay. They have to strengthen the institutions of civil society to ensure order and stability, as well as protect the individual from the unwarranted denial of his rights.20

Today, as Asian nations are marching forward towards an "Asian Renaissance," a new image is being conjured by the Western media of Asia as a menacing, economic juggernaut which will threaten the lifestyles and fortunes of the industrial West. It would seem, as Anwar Ibrahim has said, "the fear of competition has been transposed into an impending clash on a civilizational scale."21 Against this background and the prospect of a new world disorder, he pleads for civilizational dialogue, for "fear that protracted mutual miscomprehension will lead to a supplanting of the Cold War with more insidious forms of confrontation."22

The new millennium which is just around the corner, in my humble opinion, should lead both the Orient and the Occident to a new "convivencia, a harmonious and enriching experience of living together among people of diverse religions and cultures."23 The Muslim peoples and nations have a lot to learn from the positive scientific, technological and intellectual achievements of contemporary Western civilization in their efforts to eradicate poverty, disease, ignorance, social injustices, political mismanagement and technical underdevelopment. The recent establishment of the International Islamic Forum for Science, Technology and Human Resources Development (IIFTIHAR) in Jakarta from 6-8 December 1996, which brought together 400 international Muslim intellectuals and scientists drawn from various backgrounds and disciplines, is the harbinger of a dynamic movement for the acceleration of the development of science, technology and human resources in the Muslim world. The active involvement of the Muslim peoples in the scientific project should also contribute to redress the ethico-material imbalance in the international system—an imbalance which has been responsible for the use of chemical or nuclear weapons to impose the political programme of a super-power on other nations. The Western peoples and nations, in the spirit of cultural pluralism, universal human rights and freedom, would hopefully be willing to review their perception of Islam and to provide the social space that it deserves. Perchance it could contribute to alleviating some of the grave social ills which have become a world-
wide phenomenon—rational prejudice, the breakdown of the family institution, the arrogance of power, the insecurity of urban life threatened by inner-city crime and senseless violence, the scourge of AIDS and the misery of addiction to intoxicating substances.

In a recent speech entitled "A Sense of the Sacred: Building Bridges Between Islam and the West" at a Foreign Office seminar in London on 13 December 1996, the Prince of Wales spoke at length on the long-term, damaging consequences of modern materialism in which science has attempted to take over the natural world from God, resulting in the fragmentation of the cosmos and destruction of the integral view of the sanctity of the world. He says:

We in the Western world seem to have lost a sense of the wholeness of our environment and of our immense and inalienable responsibility to the whole of creation...I believe there is a growing sense of the danger of these materialist presumptions in our increasingly alienated and dissatisfied world.24

The rupture between religion and science, the material world and the sacred, has taken its toll on the quality of our environment, medicine, architecture and urban planning, to mention a few examples. In attempting to restore an understanding of the spiritual integrity of human lives and reintegrating what the modern world has fragmented, Prince Charles refers to the integrated Islamic perspective. He says:

I start from the belief that Islamic civilization at its best, like many of the religions of the East—Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism—has an important message for the West in the way it has retained a more integrated and integral view of the sanctity of the world around us. We in the West could be helped to rediscover the roots of our own understanding by an appreciation of the Islamic tradition’s deep respect for the timeless traditions of the natural order.25

On the basis of his understanding that Islamic culture has preserved this integrated spiritual view of the world "in a way we have not seen fit to do in recent generations in the West," the Prince of Wales offers the following suggestion:

There is much we can share with that Islamic world view in this respect, and much in that world view which can help us to understand the shared and timeless elements in our two faiths. In that common endeavour both our modern societies, Islamic and Western, can learn afresh the traditional views of life common to our religions, as well as the sacred responsibilities we have for the care
and stewardship of the world around us.  

It is his firm belief that if we allow ignorance and prejudice to persist in both cultures, the harm that will be done will be incalculable. One of the ways to build this understanding and appreciation is to begin with a simple understanding of the sacred, to "help provide the basis for developing a new relationship of understanding which can only enhance the relations between our two faiths—and indeed between all faiths—for the benefit of our children and future generations".

I would like to conclude with some verses from the Holy Qur'an:

And to God belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn yourselves or your faces there is the Face of God. Surely God is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knowing (2:115).

O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you in the sight of God is the one who is most God-conscious. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware (49:13).

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards east or west, but righteousness is the quality of the one who believes in the One God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Books, the Prophets and to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing (2:177).

Notes


3. AbdulHamid A. AbuSulayman, Crisis in the Muslim Mind, Trans. by Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo (Virginia, USA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1994).
6. Ibid., vii.
7. Ibid., viii.
8. Ibid., viii.
9. Ibid., xiv.
10. Ibid., ix.
11. Ibid., xv.
12. Ibid., xv.
18. Ibid., 146.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 22.
26. Ibid., 24.
27. Ibid., 24.