

Islam and the West: Toward Common Ground

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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: one story speaks of political confrontation and inherent incompatibility between Islamic and Western civilizations, while another story speaks 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.

The Third Story can be a story of reconciliation. It has yet to be written. 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. The West should take the initiative in improving relations because it is secure enough to do so. On the other hand, 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.

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.

In the Western pluralist tradition, diversity is seen in terms of the coexistence of the 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. While Muslims practice has often fallen short of Muslim principles and the advent of the nation state has created new tensions between national and subnational identities, the religion of Islam is remarkable for its explicit precepts favoring cultural and religious pluralism. Only when the value of multicultural community is made clear will creativity have a chance to replace conformity, with cooperation replacing competition.

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 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.

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. The West and Islam should meet not as rivals: the West should give Islam the best that it has in exchange for the best of Islam. The events of September 11 teach us that the whole world needs the whole world.

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