

## RELIGION of TRUTH versus RELIGIONS of IDENTITY\*

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**Abstract** *Unlike Eastern religions, Western ones –Judaism, Christianity and Islam- have normative nature. Reciting the scripture does not give its member just spiritual sense but creates norms for them to be applied in their daily life. Many dos and don'ts of the scriptures are clear enough to see this normative character. But these holy texts can't speak but their interpreters do on behalf of them. And they interpret them within an interpretive context that geo-historically, geo-culturally and geo-politically rather different from one another. This is the reason why there are conflicts not just among those who believe and don't but among the members of the same holy text, as well. Through out of context quotations some so-called devout members can easily distort the very meaning of the text, and thus transform it into a source of uproar and chaos rather than peace and serenity. Considering this historical experience, my paper puts a difference between the scripture and historical phenomena it has created and criticizes the essentialist approach that identifies the scripture with its members. In this context the following titles will be dealt with: Islam of identity and Islam of truth and neo-Orientalism, essentialism and contingencies about scripture and its relation to believer' behavior.*

**Key Words:** *The Holy Scripture, Religion of Truth and Religions of Identity.*

### Preliminary Remarks

Goethe says “those who know only one language indeed does not know any language”. Likewise Max Müller adapts this saying into religions and says “those who know just one religion indeed do not know any religion”.<sup>1</sup> All these conferences make it possible for the believers to know each other more and consequently develop common values that will encourage them to act together in order to overcome the contemporary problems.

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<http://www.livemediagr/default.aspx?action=showMedia&id=687&albumid=36&content=videos>

<sup>1</sup> F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1872), p.11.

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Although religions emerged in different geographical and cultural settings, they message addresses to the very nature of the man with their common values. This commonality turns geographical differences into intellectual unity. It goes without saying that in a time when all ethnic and religious identities interact we need much more common elements unifying us.

The example of *convivencia* (Muslim Andalusion experience of different religions living together in peace and creating the common good together) is a model which shows us how different religions could create a 'common good'. In the mid and southern parts of Spain from 711 through 1492 lived a civilization and ironically produced this *convivencia* in the ages that were ironically called dark ages. Undoubtedly we today need this kind of experience far more than this, as there is nowadays barely a homogenous nation that is made up from one religion or one ethnic group. In the past there were countries called Christendom or *dâr al-Islam* (land of peace) with their pure Christian and Muslim population. What about the same countries now with other religious groups? Are we still in a position of defining them as Christendom or *dâr al-Islam*? Are we still position of defending basic human rights just for us ignoring others? At this point we are very much in need of an ultimate authority like religion that will push us hard to value life over everything. And it is at that point that religion gains its real and effective meaning when it helps people to get rid of their personal whims and dedicate themselves to create the common good. In this regard religion does not just presents believers just a metaphysical system but daily and timely principles that guide us a true interaction with others, i.e. a good life philosophy through life dialog, as well. True religion presents its God not just an ultimate principle in itself but rather a God that assures everyone a serene life irrespective of their color, ethnicity and religiosity. Let me just mention two verses from the first and the last chapters from the Holy Qur'an reminding us this universal stance. In the beginning it is said 'Praise be to the Lord of the Worlds' and in the last 'Say I seek refuge to the Lord of the People'. The proclamation of 'The Lord of the worlds' and 'the Lord of the people' reject any monopoly and monolatry about God and sees the God as the guarantor of basic human rights for all as it sees Him as the Lord of all.

Islam takes it for granted that there are similarities and divergences among religions. Believing in One God and creating an ethical ground for our beliefs are among leading similarities. This common ground causes us to think that human kinds have a rational and intellectual capability of understanding and then constructing what is good for the people aside from divine authority. It is this rational and intellectual capability that makes it possible for human kind to question the truth-claims of religions. Even the least understandable elements in religion starts revealing themselves to our ratio and intellect the moment we start talking about them. Because talking about something means that it is discussible,

understandable and explainable. That means every element in religion has also a rational ground that makes it explicable to us. So in Islam religion (theology) and reason (philosophy) are considered twin brothers as in the example of Ibn Rushd/Averroes as he is known in the West. That is the cognitive and realist aspect of the religion, which means that the religious message has an intrinsic understandable characteristic. What makes it possible for people from different religions come together and discuss in religious matters is this cognitive and realist structure of the religion. This goes contrary to the classical understanding that the distance between religion and reason is the same distance between Athens and Jerusalem, as it is stated by Tertullianus.

### **1. The Scripture and Its Contingent Interpretations: Religion versus Historical Phenomena of Religion**

Here as a case study I will analyze the position of Islam, but this corresponds to other religions as well. This analysis will show us that religions have a core belief system on the one hand, and some historical appearances which many times clash this core system, let alone overlapping it.

The history of Islam is the history of interpretations. Much of what is known as Islam is in reality nothing more than its historically and culturally interpreted form. There is no one-on-one overlapping between Islam and its historical phenomena including this day and age. So, in order to figure out the current situation, three building blocks in a religious tradition, in Islam in this case, are to be analyzed: First, the scripture that constructs and produces Muslim mind. Secondly, the mind that interprets the scripture and thus creates a theological tradition. And finally the actions that this mind creates throughout history which I called historical phenomena of Islam.

Without referring to the scripture, it is hardly reasonable to explain the mind and the actions or phenomena created by this mind. But it is also not realistic to explain the mind and actions referring completely to the scripture. As the text is just one of the components that produces this mind and actions beside cultural and geographical milieu, to get an authentic evaluation all these factors have to be scrutinized together.

It is believed that to reveal the real character of Islam one has to read the Qur'an from beginning to the end. But this approach is not accurate. This leads one to take out of context quotations to justify one's position. This is the case of 'essentialists' and 'apologetics', which is totally provocative and far from being creative solution. Through this evaluation many go far as to compare Qur'an to Hitler's *Meine Kampf*. So it is necessary to consider the emotional, situational and cultural context or 'brackets' while interpreting the Qur'an. These contexts are the reason behind the occurrence of multiple-meanings that traditional exegesis scholars

suggested in several Qur'anic expressions. Just as it is wrong to justify one's wrongdoing with the scripture, so is to try to find a reference from the scripture to comprehend any Islamic act. The real context of any action is economical, sociological and anthropological more than scriptural.

We are at the heart of different geographical and cultural spaces where there operates not what is commonly called 'Islam' but *Islamic fact or phenomenon*. There is no unified Muslim world or Islam. Rather there have been Islam and Muslim (realities). Considering Islam as a monolithic entity is a mistake. Even during the Golden age of Islam at the height of Abbasid period, there were rival caliphates in Cordoba and in North Africa as well as ethnically based Turkish and Iranian dynasties that challenged Bagdat's Abbasid caliphate authority. The clash of civilization theorists grossly confuse this fact and erroneously reduce different realities or phenomena of Islam into a unified and implicit form of Islam. This kind of unified and unequivocal Islam is epistemic and historical absurdity. The same mistake is made by these theorists in their consideration other civilizations as unified like Indian civilization. India's Muslim population is greater than the combined population of Britain and France. There are also Sikhs, Jains, Budhists. The southern part of India is totally Christian. How reasonable then to depict Islam and other religions and civilizations as unified and cohesive!

Correspondingly, in apprehensive arguments, Islam and Islamism are being conflated into one and the same phenomenon, both seem to embody a threat to democratic values, or are seen to stand for terrorism. As long as Islam and Islamism or other forms or phenomena of Islam are not isolated from one another, a precise solution may be far from being grasped.

## **2. Islam of Identity and Islam of Truth**

Since the interpretive knowledge has no claim to be eternal and infallible, it is imperative to keep religion and the knowledge of religion as separate entities. However, in contemporary fundamentalism this understanding is reversed and the difference between religion and religious knowledge is collapsed, i.e. the interpretation of religion is held as religion. The profoundly heretical nature of this view emerges when one realizes that fundamentalism acts as if the ultimate and last interpretation of Islam has been (or could be) reached, which rests on the implicit postulation that theologians (*'ulama*) are capable of producing sacred and thus indisputable knowledge. Thus the logocentric character of the knowledge implied in the Qur'an has been transformed into a nomothetic one. While the former focuses on the 'truth', the latter underlines an 'identity'. Different claims of truth are possible to come together to attain a common denominator, but this is barely possible if one's aim is to establish totally different identity. The nomothetic ingredients within the logocentric systems can create this identity. To a controllable extent this nomothetic

character is allowed, but if it dominates the logocentric side, the search for the truth and common good, then clash of identities commences.

Scholarly tradition throughout the centuries, whether of philosophical, theological, or mystical orientation, has stressed the centrality of knowledge in Islam in the strongest terms to generate this truth side of religion. Islam's finest scholars books on "Knowledge," in which one finds a long list of quotations from the first centuries of Islam, all insisting on the significance of the pursuit of knowledge and learning-as a lifelong endeavor and as humanity's truest accomplishment. By contrast, the sole knowledge dear to Muslim fundamentalists is the knowledge of ritual and legal obligations; it is the knowledge of "things to be done." Their Islam corresponds to what 'Abdolkarim Soroush calls the "Islam of identity." Accordingly, what Soroush deplores most in today's Muslim world at large, not just in fundamentalism, is the loss of the "Islam of truth":

*"I believe that the Islam of identity should yield to the Islam of truth. The latter can coexist with other truths; the former, however, is, by its very nature, belligerent and bellicose. It is the Islam of war, not the Islam of peace. Two identities would fight each other, while two truths would cooperate."*<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Neo-Orientalism, Essentialism and Contingencies about Scripture and Believers' Behavior**

It is the general characteristics of evaluations on religions to identify any action of any believer with the scripture ignoring social, economical, etc. troubles. Here again I will analyze and criticize this identification within the context of Islam but this can easily be taken a broad view to other religions, too.

If we observe the social and political debate on hand on modern-day Muslims, we can see that this has produced two schools of thought, whose members, through their reciprocal denigrating formula, have been termed neo-Orientalists and Apologists. So, following such a Manichaean division, those suggesting that Islam leads to extremism have been classified as neo-Orientalists by those who deny that extremists are real Muslims; the neo-Orientalist has claimed that this latter position was nothing other than apologetic. These both are the essentialist view of Islam. This distinction is to be rejected, because it is produced by political interests dealing with the Middle East crisis and in particular, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

It could mislead us to cling the idea that the behavior of Muslims through all centuries and countries can be explained primarily by reference uniquely to their belief system, which can be conceptualized as 'essentialism'.

'Essentialists' are those who argued that the Islamic world was dominated by a set of relatively enduring and unchanging processes and meaning, to be understood

<sup>2</sup> Jahanbakhsh, Forough, "Abdolkarim Soroush: New 'Revival of Religious Sciences,'" *ISIM Newsletter*, 8 (2001): 21.

through the texts of Islam and the language it generated. By contrast, as Halliday describes them, ‘contingencists’ reject any universalistic framework and prefer to focus on the ‘contingent’ realities that exist in each Islamic country or socio-political situation (as Esposito).<sup>3</sup>

Essentialism is ‘an ontology which stands outside the sphere of cultural influence and historical changes’. To this explanation there is something within Islamic faith which assumes axiomatic behavior for its members. Although there are axiomatic rules, they do not interpret themselves, on the contrary they are interpreted in different times and in different cultures. Essentialists have discussed Islam but ignored Muslims, and in particular their identities. Identity is an emotional commitment through which people experience their autobiographical selves. This could explain why those Muslims who do not practice, or even respect the basic rules of Islam (such as drinking alcohol, gambling, etc.) still define themselves as Muslim. Simply, because they feel to be Muslim.

Essentialism is to some extent right. If the people are religious, those everyday terms will in some way be influenced by their religious convictions, for it is in the nature of faith to claim effective sovereignty over human behavior. But here the scripture with its symbols dominates believers and it is not likely to hear the voice of religion nor the believers.

We must admit that Islam could have more than one interpretation. Muslims in different geographies are not pure products of their religion. If so the best Muslim could not be other than Muslim extremist who claim the literal structure of scripture.

Gellner claims that Muslims have some ideological cards, the crucial ones of which are: scriptural faith, a *completed* one (the final edition, so to speak) is available, and there is no room for further accretion or for new prophets; also, there is no warrant for clergy, and hence for religious differentiation; and, third, there is no need to differentiate between Church and State, between what is God’s and what is Caesar’s, since it began as a religion of rapidly successful conquerors who soon *were* the state ... The consequences of all this is that the trans-social standard which judges the social is a Book, and not Church.<sup>4</sup>

Gellner has presented Islam as something historically unique and overlooked the role that Muslim scholars play within the disparate Muslim traditions. It is true that Muslims do not have a centralized and hierarchical church, but is equally true that the Qur’an cannot interpret itself. Socio-political and cultural dynamics mark the relationships between single Muslim believers and ‘the Book’. This is what shows us the discrepancies among Muslim countries.

<sup>3</sup> Halliday, F., ‘Review Article: “The Politics of Islam” – A Second Look’, *British Journal of Political Sciences* 25 (3): p.401.

<sup>4</sup> Gellner, E., *Muslim Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981, p.100-1.

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'Neo-Orientalist' and 'apologetic' positions generate much hot air, so a third middle ground is needed. And it is cultural comprehension of Islam which will enable the observers to see that different cultural milieus are not but the field the scripture casts its seeds and according to this local atmosphere it harvests its products.

Hodgson has suggested that a third way may be developed, combining the essentialists' and the contingencists' paradigms and concluded that the main feature of any Muslim philosophy is to achieve the Islamic ideal. By contrast, Halliday has argued that the study of Islamic societies involves observing Muslims' peculiarities and differences so that one can grasp different representations of the Muslim World and thus can avoid reductionism.

### **Conclusion**

It goes without saying that the religion originally aims at unifying the humankind around some universal basics considering their historical, cultural and geographical discrepancies. We can easily notice from this statement that we have a **text** to be transferred to different **contexts**. The relation between the text and the context is the backbone of this paper. Without taking different cultural settings into account it does not make more sense just to recite the text, rendering it a meta-text. And it is also useless to be dependent on distinct cultural settings leaving aside the text. Considering the austere relation between these two a third element comes forth: the reader of the text and the dynamic actor of the context. So a triple network consisting of the text, the context and the dynamic actor of controlling over these two operates in this process. This distinction gives us a prospect of separating the religion (the textual character) from religious identities, realities or phenomena. So the history is not the history of religion but of the actors that are active in history. There is no any *sui generis* history of religion independent from the interpreter of the text and from the actors acting according to this text. This distinction between text and the historical, cultural and geographical reader or actor of the text (contextual facet of the course) creates for us a due frame to understand any behavior of believers, be it a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew and the like). In order to understand any action of any believer it is not true to directly refer to the text but to all these mentioned factors which I call cultural understandings of religion.