



Western Culture & Muslim Traditions: Critical and Analytic Study

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ABSTRACT- Keeping this historical reality in mind, it is evident that the story of Islam involves peoples of many different races, ethnicities and cultures, many literatures and languages, with many histories, and a myriad of interpretations some of which may in conflict with each other. The Islamic Cultural Studies course is an invitation to explore a small slice of the rich and dazzling diversity that characterizes the worlds of Islam by examining the dynamic interaction between religious beliefs and practices and their political, economic, social, literary, and artistic contexts across time and space. Besides exposure to new content material, the course is also intended to equip you with the tools to analyze and think critically about what it means to study not only Islam, but any other religious tradition in its cultural contexts. In this broader sense, this course is about how to study religion in an academic context. The underlying premise of the course – knowledge is culturally constructed – is as applicable to the study of the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu traditions as it is to the study of Islam. To properly understand the role of religions in human societies, the course contends, we must go beyond descriptive summaries of beliefs and practices and look at them as a living and dynamic traditions that are constantly changing according to context and circumstance of their adherents. Ultimately, this article will help provide us with greater literacy about the study of religion in general and better awareness of the complexities involved in such study.

Keywords: Muslims, West, Norms, Ideology, Impacts

I. INTRODUCTION

The onset of European imperialism created a crisis of monumental proportions in the Muslim world. For Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars, it became abundantly clear that the nations of Europe had been able to conquer and subdue Muslim societies due to superior weaponry and machinery. The crisis, however, was not simply political or technological. It was also economic, social and cultural, as the structures and institutions introduced by the colonial powers brought with them a range of challenges to traditional Muslim world-views and perspectives on a wide range of issues. For instance, with European colonialism came the idea of secularism and the notion that sovereignty, the ability to make laws, and to determine right from wrong, rested neither with God nor with religious institutions claiming to interpret God's will, but with the consensus of the people as expressed in the institutions of the state. Colonialism also brought it with Christian missionaries who were anxious to take advantage of the opportunities to spread their religion under the benevolent protection of the colonial state. These missionaries, along with early western scholars who studied Islam under colonial patronage, promoted the view that Islamic doctrines, practices and concepts, such as jihad, polygamy, the veil, and the shari'a, were evidence that Islam was a "backward" religion, incompatible with progress and development. Hence, it was their duty to embark on a mission that was to simultaneously "Christianize" and to civilize colonial subjects and show them the way to progress. In the civilizing mission of European imperialism, Muslim communities were confronted with a force that was powerful enough to transform them into its own image, using brute military might, if necessary. For many Muslims, the political, cultural and religious denigration they experienced under colonial rule resulted in a crisis of faith as religious ideals chafed against historical realities. Viewed particularly from the perspective of Sunni Islam, to which the majority of world's Muslims adhere, the history of their faith, until the eighteenth century, had been on the whole, with a few exceptions (such as the Crusades and Mongol invasions), a history of political triumph characterized by the steady expansion of Islam as a global religion. This political triumph, lasting many centuries, had been interpreted in theological terms: it was a sign that God was on the side of the Muslims, rewarding them with triumph in the world for faithfully following His commands. The new dominance and the visible strength of the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created an uneasy feeling among many Muslims that something had gone wrong in history, triggering anxious questions. Was not the loss of hegemony in world affairs a sign that God had abandoned them because they were no longer practicing their faith correctly? How were Muslims to respond to challenges to Muslim identity and faith in this new context? What were the reasons for the

political and economic decline? Secularists blamed outmoded interpretations of Islam, its institutions and role that they played in public life for the ills facing Muslim societies. They felt that secularism, that is, separation of religion and politics and establishment of nation-states based on models derived from the West, would open the path towards modernization. By imitating the nations of Europe, they were convinced that Muslim societies would once again regain their lost dignity and their rightful place on the world stage. In contrast, conservative religious leaders (the 'Ulama) argued that imitating the West was not a cure; on the contrary the West was a deadly poison for Muslim societies. For them, Muslims were in a situation of powerlessness because they had deviated from the correct practice of religion as interpreted by the great Sunni scholars of the ninth and tenth centuries, the founders of the four main schools of Sunni religious jurisprudence. If Muslims were to follow carefully the teachings of the learned teachers of the past, they would surely return to the Sirat al-Mustaqim, the "right path" and then, perhaps, God would be on their side once again.

II. ISLAMIC CULTURE & WESTERN APPROACH

Islamic modernism emerged as a compromise between secularly based advocacy of Western ideals and religiously motivated rejection of these ideals. It was an attempt by Muslim intellectuals, many of whom were not part of the traditional religious elite, to reconcile fundamentals of the Islamic faith with modern concepts such as nationalism, constitutionalism, rationality, scientific inquiry, modern western style education, women's rights and so on. Its leaders struggled to redefine Islam in terms of dominant Western values and to demonstrate its ability to adapt to the new world that Muslims encountered as their societies modernized. Integral to Islamic modernism was a process of internal self-criticism in which Muslim intellectuals struggled to come to terms with causes of decline while at the same time developing interpretations of Islam that accommodated modernity. For Islamic modernists, the Ulama, through their old-fashioned and outdated modes of interpreting Islam and its religious texts, constituted a major part of obstacle in the path of reinvigorating Islam in the new context. For instance, a leading modernist, Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani (1838-1897), felt that the 'Ulama, by stifling independent and rational thought, had been responsible for the decline of Islamic civilization. Claiming that they were the true enemies of Islam, he likened them to "a very narrow wick on top which is a very small flame that neither lights its surroundings nor gives light to others." The modernists challenged the status of the 'Ulama as sole authoritative interpreters of the faith by declaring that the doors to Ijtihad, individual interpretation, had never been closed. According to the modernists, the notion of taqlid, following or adhering to the interpretations of the learned, had been clearly promoted by the 'Ulama to bolster their authority and suppress alternative viewpoints and interpretations. Viewed from this perspective, Islamic modernism was "nothing short of an outright rebellion against the Islamic orthodoxy, [and] displayed an astonishing compatibility with the nineteenth century Enlightenment." (M. Moaddel and K. Talattof, *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam*, p.1) Not surprisingly the 'Ulama did not take too kindly to Modernist attacks on their authority and used their traditional control over the masses to fight against the Modernist vision by declaring its proponents to be kafirs, or infidels, and apostates.(1)

The readings for this Session cover the period between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when a group of prominent Muslim thinkers promoted the Modernist vision in the Middle East and the Indian Subcontinent. They critically examined traditional conceptions of various aspects of Islamic thought, including legal systems, and called for new ways of interpreting the Quran and the other sources of Islamic jurisprudence. The most prominent of the modernists was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97) around whom developed a circle of influential disciples. Al-Afghani promoted the view that Islam, correctly interpreted, was a socio-political ideology and civilization whose values were superior to Western civilization and could be used to unite politically Muslims of different nationalities and ethnicities against European colonialism. In this regard, he is often perceived as the father of pan-Islamism. He was also a strong advocate for the adoption of modern science which he considered central to the survival of Muslim civilization against European cultural onslaught. Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), an Egyptian scholar, was one of the most prominent disciples of al-Afghani. Together they founded a short-lived journal called *Al-Urwah al-wuthqa* which vehemently opposed European imperialism and demanded Islamic reform and unity. Based on his familiarity and training in traditional Islamic education, Abduh called for a fresh interpretation of the Qur'an and the sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad so that it was more appropriate to a modern context. Indeed, for him, interpretation of divinely revealed texts was a dynamic process in which reason and revelation were to be harmonious. In his eyes, anyone who denied scientific truths or the importance of rationality was committing a grievous sin. On account of his teaching position at Al-Azhar, a premier institution of learning in the Sunni world, he was able to influence students who came from as far as Indonesia and Malaysia. Abduh espoused his ideas in *al-Manar* "The Beacon" a journal widely read in parts

of the Muslim world. Abduh edited this journal with his disciple and biographer Muhammad Rashid al-Rida (1865-1935). While Rida, like al-Afghani and Abduh, called for a reinterpretation of the Qur'an as well as the compatibility of Islam with science, reason and modernity, over time he became religiously more conservative and critical of the increasing secularization of society. He advocated that Muslims follow the example of the early Muslim community, the *salaf*, laying the foundation for the more strident Islamist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood that was to evolve later. Qasim Amin (1863-1908) was another important figure in the circle of disciples associated with al-Afghani and Abduh. He was a prominent among the Modernists for his advocacy of equal rights for women, an end to their seclusion and, through access to education, equal participation in public life. (2)

As we read about Islamic Modernism, it is worth keeping in mind that it is a complex movement, far from being monolithic for it is comprised of several strands some which were in deep disagreement and contradiction with each other. Such tensions inherent in the movement would explain why Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was quite critical of the ideas and outlook of a fellow Modernist, Sayyid Ahmad Khan whom he considered to be a puppet of the British colonialists. The onset of European imperialism created a crisis of monumental proportions in the Muslim world. For Muslim intellectuals and religious scholars, it became abundantly clear that the nations of Europe had been able to conquer and subdue Muslim culture and civilization.(4)

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the end of European imperial rule over many parts of the world. In the aftermath of World War II, the network of institutions that had enabled European control over Asian and African societies became increasingly weak and unstable. As a result, movements for political independence blossomed in the colonies, many of which eventually declared themselves to be sovereign, independent nations. Notwithstanding the ending of formal European political rule, these "new" nations continue, however, to be impacted by the legacy of colonialism. This impact can be discerned in the political, economic and legal institutions they inherited, including even the conception of the nation state which historically originated in Europe. Indeed, as Vali Nasr writes, in the general reading assigned for this session, "the legacy of colonialism is key in explaining both the diversity and unity of different experiments with state formation in the Muslim World." (5)

Muslim societies in the post colonial period have witnessed a search for satisfying and legitimate interpretations of Islam in relation to a range of issues including globalization, industrialization, uneven economic development, rapid social change, religious and ethnic pluralism. In this search all sorts of interpretations have been put forward, ranging from progressive to reactionary ones. At a political level, the failure of ideologies such as capitalism, communism, and socialism to deliver social and economic justice have prompted crucial questions concerning the role of Islam in the nation-state. As a result, Islam has sometimes come to be interpreted not simply as a system of religious beliefs, practices, morals and ethics, but as a political ideology underpinning the nation state; an ideology that will solve all the problems facing contemporary Muslim societies. As Reza Aslan aptly points out in his book, *No god but God*, "Islam has been invoked to legitimize and to overturn governments, to promote republicanism and defend authoritarianism, to justify monarchies, autocracies, oligarchies and theocracies." He points out that the proponents of each form of government have considered theirs to be the only "authentically Islamic" formulation, usually legitimizing their formulation by invoking their particular understanding of the state established by the Prophet Muhammad in Medina. As a consequence, he points out, "...the Islamic state is by no means a monolithic concept. Indeed, there are many countries in the world that could be termed as Islamic states, none of which have much in common with each other....And yet not only do all these countries view themselves as the realization of the Medinan ideal they view each other as contemptible desecrations of that ideal." (6)

The readings explore, through the case study method, some of the diverse political, economic and social contexts in which Muslims live today and the different roles that Islam plays in particular nation states. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the end of European imperial rule over many parts of the world. In the aftermath of World War II, the network of institutions that had enabled European control over Asian and African. (8)

No doubt believers of many faiths who, being comfortable with understanding their religion from a devotional perspective, will have difficulties in coming to terms with the scholarly and analytical approach we have discussed above. Some Muslims, for instance, may insist that there is only one Islam and differences, if they exist, are superficial. But this conception is itself influenced by a certain cultural context. Such Muslims are not alone in this conception for there are non-Muslims who also conceive of Islam as one unified, homogeneous monolith. More recently, particularly after 9/11, a range of historians, political scientists, journalists, public intellectuals have also considered Islam as one mega-civilizational block, stretching across the globe, that is in conflict with the so-called West which they also conceive as a self-contained and unified civilization. The readings selected for Session One from Carl Ernst's book, *Following*

Muhammad, begin with a critical examination of the manner in which conceptions of Islam, and for that matter notions of “religion,” are culturally and politically constructed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. (9)

According to the traditional view of Islamic civilization, which had at the outset been creative and dynamic in dealing with issues, it began to struggle to respond to the challenges and rapid changes it faced from the 12th century onwards, towards the end of the Abbassid rule; despite a brief respite with the new Ottoman rule, the decline apparently continued until its eventual collapse and subsequent stagnation in the 20th century. Some scholars such as M. I. Sanduk believe that the declination began from around the 11th century and still continued after this. Some other scholars have come to question the traditional picture of decline, pointing to a continuing and creative scientific tradition through to the 15th and 16th centuries, with the works of Ibn al-Shatir, Ulugh Beg, Ali Kuşçu, al-Birjandi and Taqi al-Din considered noteworthy examples. This was also the case for other fields, such as medicine, notably the works of Ibn al-Nafis, Mansur ibn Ilyas and Şerafeddin Sabuncuoğlu; mathematics, notably the works of al-Kashi and al-Qalasadi; philosophy, notably Mulla Sadra’s transcendent theosophy; and the social sciences, notably Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah* (1370), which itself points out that though science was declining in Iraq, Al-Andalus and Maghreb, it continued to flourish in Persia, Syria and Egypt during his time. Nevertheless, many agree that there was still a decline in scientific activity. Despite a number of attempts by many writers, historical and modern, none seem to agree on the causes of decline. The main views on the causes of decline comprise the following: political mismanagement after the early Caliphs (10th century onwards), foreign involvement by invading forces and colonial powers (11th century Crusades, 13th century Mongol Empire, 15th century Reconquista, 19th century European colonial empires), and the disruption to the cycle of equity based on Ibn Khaldun’s famous model of *Asabiyyah* (the rise and fall of civilizations) which points to the decline being mainly due to political and economic factors. (10)

North Africa’s Islamic civilization collapsed after exhausting its resources in internal fighting and suffering devastation from the invasion of the Arab Bedouin tribes of Banu Sulayman and Banu Hilal. The Black Death ravaged much of the Islamic world in the mid-14th century. Plague epidemics kept returning to the Islamic world up to the 19th century. There was apparently an increasing lack of tolerance of intellectual debate and freedom of thought, with some seminaries systematically forbidding speculative metaphysics, while polemic debates in this field appear to have been abandoned after the 14th century. A significant intellectual shift in Islamic philosophy is perhaps demonstrated by al-Ghazali’s late 11th century polemic work *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, which lambasted metaphysical philosophy in favor of the primacy of Revelation, and was later criticized in *The Incoherence of the Incoherence* by Averroes. Institutions of science comprising Islamic universities, libraries (including the House of Wisdom), observatories, and hospitals, were later destroyed by foreign invaders like the Crusaders and particularly the Mongols, and were rarely promoted again in the devastated regions. Not only was not new publishing equipment accepted but also wide illiteracy overwhelmed the devastated lands, especially in Mesopotamia. Meanwhile in Persia, due to the Mongol invasions and the plague, the average life expectancy of the scholarly class in Persia had declined from 72 years in 1209 to 57 years by 1242. American economist Timur Kuran has argued that economic development in the Middle East lagged behind that of the West in modern times due to the limitations of Islamic partnership law and inheritance law. These laws restricted the growth of Middle Eastern enterprises, and prevented the development of corporate forms. (11)

III. FINDINGS AND WAY FORWARD

Scholars and historians from around the world have affirmed further that the Islamic civilization and Muslim scientists made tremendous contributions to the revival of modern western civilization during the European Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. The West returned to its great ancient Greek tradition through the Arabic translations of Greek scholars available in the Muslim world. The scholarship of Medieval Islamic ‘giants’ like Al-Kindi, Al-Razi, A-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd and numerous other scientists/scholars contributed to the reasoning and rationality that made western sciences possible and provided the critical thinking which led eventually to the Reformation of the West. Thus Islamic Civilization contributed not only to the scientific and literary revival in the West but also to the intellectual challenges to Christian theology. (13)

As the present situation of humankind (world-wide) has precipitated into turmoil, economic melt-downs, tribulations and dangers of clash of cultures, Islamic civilization must be moved into playing its historic and constructive role (through love and tolerance) once again in the globalizing world peacefully. The essence of meta-history for today is that civilizations will only survive and thrive on the basis of their innovative ideas and peaceful coexistence. As occidental and the oriental societies polish their ideas, their pens and realize that they no longer need to clash or confront each other in wars. A global civilization (of love and

tolerance) is the most suitable to this day and age and we can only then inherit the harmonious future, and unite the entire mankind into a universal brotherhood and fraternity. (16)

We of the Muslim world today, first and foremost, need to explore, plan and safeguard the future of our own Civilization through ongoing debates and discussions with visionary Muslim intellectuals and insightful leaders from around the world. We must rejuvenate our self-confidence, energy, and direction as a culture and civilization. Our mission is to recreate a positive environment in which the evolutionary intellectuals and scholars at the leading edge can share their know-how and set out their vision for our future to inspire others.

Samuel P. Huntington a well known professor of strategic studies at Harvard University of America stated the future plan of U.S for Muslim Civilization at 2017. He says "Concept of global culture focuses on the spread of Western consumption patterns and popular culture around the world. Cultural fads have been transmitted from civilization to civilization throughout history. Innovations in one civilization are regularly taken up by other civilizations. These are, however, usually either techniques lacking in significant cultural consequences or fads that come and go without altering the underlying culture of the recipient civilization. A slightly more sophisticated version of the global popular culture argument focuses not on consumer goods generally but on the media, on Hollywood rather than Coca-Cola™. American control of the global movie, television, and video industries is indeed overwhelming. Little or no evidence exists, however, to support the assumption that the emergence of pervasive global communications is producing significant convergence in attitudes and beliefs. In due course, it is possible that global media could generate some convergence in values and beliefs among people, but that will happen over a very long period of time". He further more describes the motives of western culture that "Two central elements of culture are language and religion, and these obviously differ greatly among societies. Scholars have also measured societies along a number of other cultural dimensions and classified them in terms of individualism and collectivism, egalitarianism and hierarchy, pluralism and monism, activism and fatalism, tolerance and intolerance, trust and suspicion, shame and guilt, instrumental and consummatory, and a variety of other ways. (18)

In recent years, however, many people have argued that we are seeing the emergence of a universal worldwide culture. They may have various things in mind. First, global culture can refer to a set of economic, social and political ideas, assumptions, and values now widely held among elites throughout the world. This is what I have called the Davos Culture, after the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum that brings together hundreds of government officials, bankers, businessmen, politicians, academics, intellectuals, and journalists from all over the world. Almost all these people hold university degrees in the physical sciences, social sciences, business, or law; work with words and/or numbers; speak reasonably fluent English; are employed by governments, corporations, and academic institutions with extensive international involvements; and travel frequently outside their own country. They generally share beliefs in individualism, market economies, and political democracy, which are also common among people in Western civilization. Davos people control virtually all international institutions, many of the world's governments, and the bulk of the world's economic and military capabilities. The Davos Culture hence is tremendously important. Worldwide, however, only a small portion of the world's population shares in this culture. It is far from a universal culture, and the leaders who share in it do not necessarily have a secure grip on power in their own societies. It is nonetheless one immensely significant consequence of the globalization of economic activity that has occurred in recent decades". (19)

IV. MUSLIM WORLD AND CHALLENGES

Every front. The role of the Muslim countries in global geo-political affairs, international trade, international finance and global security is none whatsoever. Similarly, when any incidence occurs in any part of the world, e.g., 9/11, the Madrid bombings (March 2004), the London bombings (July 2005) or the offensive cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, Muslims all over the world are branded as the real threat. No doubt, religion is a major factor in global politics, possibly not in the sense of spirituality but in terms of defining global alliances along ideological lines. It may be secular Turkey's desire to join the EU, Syrian and Iranian proposals for a nuclear-free Middle East²⁶⁷;

(BBC²⁶⁸);, Pakistan's wish for a nuclear-free South Asia as well as an intention to resolve the Kashmir dispute in accordance with UN resolutions, the bottom line is that the population of these countries and their rulers are all predominantly Muslims and are viewed by major global players through the prism of religion. A lot has been written on these issues which is published all over the world and it is neither advisable nor possible here to present a detailed historical and analytical overview of these issues; rather the following discussion is aimed at main relevant issues. (22)

The impact of the insult (popular entertainment media that is disrespectful toward Islam and Muslims) on top of the injury (news of Muslim victimization told from a Muslim perspective) is to feed a humiliation,

resentment, and even rage in much of the Muslim world against Western sources of both policy and what is viewed as propaganda aimed at Islam and Muslims. The result of this rage became evident with the furor that erupted in late 2005 and early 2006 over cartoons that were printed in a relatively obscure newspaper in Denmark.⁸ Months before that crisis unfolded, the Gallup polling agency asked in a survey of popular attitudes in ten predominantly Muslim countries what the West could do to improve relations with the Muslim world. The single greatest response, at 47% of total respondents, suggested that the West “stop disrespecting Islam” and “stop portraying Muslims as inferior in its media.” (28)

V. CONCLUSION

The Westernization has affected the Islamic culture negatively. Muslims tend to forget about their own culture. This can be seen in the way they dress, the way they socialize and the way they eat and to name a few. Now we are living in age of globalization and through media these influences have reached the Muslim society. Islam requires everyone to wear decent and dignified clothing. The Western world, however, does not consider decency in their fashion and style very much. That is why they, special women, wear revealing clothes. But they don't allow Muslim women to wear scarves. This is the freedom that they talk about always. We are suffering from inferiority complex which eventually has led us to think of them being superior. The values and ideas of West are penetrating into Muslim societies and they are picking them up like a wildfire without realizing their harmful effects. Muslims today feel that in order to be civilized, one has to be westernized in mind and manner.

Therefore, it has become important that the Muslims, especially the youth, are informed about the Muslim culture and the Islamic way of life so that the generation of today and the future generations do not lose their cultural identity. Muslim youths can be both Muslim and modern at the same time. They can compete in many fields with the Westerners such as education, technology and many more. Dressing is not the only standard of being modern and civilized. A lot has to be done for the development and progress of Muslims. So, instead of changing in appearance, Muslims should focus on their own issues and problems and everyone ought to play his/her part in the building of this great Ummah. Above all, the media should play a key role in a situation of crisis that may occur anywhere in the world.

There is a desperate need to identify cultural experts in the Muslim world and for the Muslim world to take a proactive role in celebrating and communicating its own cultures. Muslims World should create religious and cultural enclaves using Latest Technologies and the Internet, as well as traditional channels.

Some Islamic leaders do promote the goal of internationalization and globalization. Such designs have been circulating in the Islamic world at least since the days of early Islamic modernists Gamal Al-Din Al-Afagani (1839–97) and Mohamed Abdu (1849–1905). More recently, Egypt's Sunni leader or Mufti, Nasr Fareed Wasil, affirmed that Islam should not be reticent in developing its case for globalization. He argued that Muslims should not fear globalization and should seek to benefit from all the means of progress in science, economics and wealth. In his opinion, Muslims should be careful to protect themselves from the negative effects of this kind of expansion, remaining aware of the danger of being dissolved in the world and losing their identity. Violence and Islam cannot come together since Islam means peace. Western media should be more sensitive to the beliefs and traditions of Muslim community. At the same time, Islamic community should take more scientific approach to deal with its own internal problems. Social psychologists, psychiatrists, historians, theologians and other intellectuals should gather to discuss about how to convert the contemporary Muslims from emotionally driven people to rational thinking community. Therefore, all Muslims should work together to defend the sovereignty of our nations. What we are doing is actually defending our own independence. No less than that. Do remember, those who created the economic, political and social problems that we are facing now are just like the colonists who once colonized us. Do not ever think that their behaviors have changed. As the Malay proverb says, "Tigers will always have their stripes." (29)

we need to educate non-Muslims about Islam and Muslims about other faiths to establish mutual understanding and tolerance. To achieve this end, we invite and encourage sharing of various perspectives, partnership with other religious and cultural organizations and we organize educational activities such as seminars, lectures and discussion panels, all of which inspire and illuminate us in our endeavor to fulfill our mission.

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