

THINKING MAKES MAN GREAT¹

Segâh Tekin²

“If your Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one nation, yet they do not cease to differ.”³

“Had Allah willed He could have made you one community, but that He may try you by that which He has given you (*He has made you as you are*). So vie with one another in good works. To Allah you will all be returned, and He will then inform you of that wherein you disputed.”⁴

“-Why does a man live?
-In order to think about it...”⁵

Is it possible to understand a religion just by observing its outward features? Certainly not. All of the people who regard themselves as Muslims, living scattered around the globe, are not identical. They come from different historical, cultural, racial and socio-economic backgrounds in addition to the fact that they do not share the same level of understanding when belief is in question. This is also true for other religions. Neither Christians nor Jews living in different parts of the world form homogeneous, undivided societies. Beyond the differences among the sects, there are differences in perception and interpretation, even among the followers of the same sect, which are manifest in a range of issues from lifestyles to political views.

Muslims, just as the people living in China, in the shanty towns of Latin America or elite circles of Western Europe, are human beings. In addition to the heterogeneity of

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³ The Holy Qur’ân, Hûd, 11/ 118.

⁴ The Holy Qur’ân, Al-Mâ’ida, 5/48.

⁵ Erich Maria Remarque, *Arch of Triumph: A Novel of a Man Without a Country*.

the Muslim world, the problems occurring in the countries where Muslims are in majority, are misrepresented as the consequences of the Islamic worldview. Indeed, these problems are shared by many other countries around the globe, which have no significant relation with Islam. Many problems existing in Muslim countries such as internal conflict, non-existence of democracy or slow pace of democratic consolidation, unemployment and challenges of development in addition to the legacy of colonialism in some cases, are also the problems of many non-Muslim nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Many writers have pointed the fact that urban violence in Latin America is taking more lives than the conflict areas in Iraq or Afghanistan. Recently, Europe has been discussing how to tackle with the flow of Syrian refugees and how to integrate them. But the US has also its own 'migration' and 'integration' problems, due to the increasing flow of Hispanics to the country. In almost all of the Latin American countries, including Brazil -one of the two largest democracies in the Western Hemisphere- the uninterrupted period of democracy dates back to no more than thirty years.

Moreover, as the previous scene of power struggle between the US and USSR, ethnicity and religion have long been used as tools by these superpowers in the so-called 'Greater Middle East' region where Muslims comprise the majority of populations. For example, it is known that the roots of the armed fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan can be traced back to the US support during Cold War. After the decolonization period in the 20th century, many autocratic regimes in the region were supported by the superpowers with political, military and financial aid. And today, due to the recent involvement of both Russia and the US in the conflict in Syria, a new struggle between the great powers seems to emerge in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, these facts are quickly disregarded when discussing developments occurring in Muslim countries. Islam has always been taken as a holistic and unified empire and as a permanent threat against the West.⁶ Nowadays within this framework, the relationship of West with Islam is being considered abstractly with regard to the issues of fundamentalism and assumed intolerance of the Muslims. These are regarded as given problems of Muslims in general and threats against the West, forgetting that Muslims are the main sufferers of both fundamentalist terrorism and the violence of the

⁶ Mustafa Aydın, Sinem A. Açıkmese, "Identity-based Security Threats in a Globalised World: Focus on Islam", Brauch vd. (der.), *Globalization and Environmental Challenges*, Springer: Berlin, New York, 2008, p. 413-420'

recent Western invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is beyond the scope and means of this text to discuss the underlying reasons of the negative perception of the Muslim world in the West. Probably, the long historical background of conflict, beginning from the expansion of the Islamic rule against Eastern Roman Empire, causes the adverse treatment of Islam by the West and this can be regarded as one of the reasons.⁷ A second reason might be the place of the 'other' in the mental construction of the West. But this status is not exclusive to the Muslim world. Today, many critics tend to combine assumptions and historical facts with today's problems and personal stories, and they present a generalized, anachronistic and an unfriendly vision of Islam as opposed to the modern West. The easiness of judging Muslims based on such comments and adopting the imposed conflict language seems quite attractive for many people.

However, an objective reading of the history of Islam would provide us a useful framework for evaluation and would enable us to comprehend what Islam is and what it does try to achieve, in addition to the fact that expansion of Islam was not based on the 'otherness' of a religion or a community. First of all, Islam came into existence as a world civilization. Even at the very beginning, Islam was not the religion of a specific nation, dynasty or social class. Islam came out of Mecca, not an isolated Arab city in the desert, but a cosmopolitan city and the most important trade center in western and central Arabia at the time, which was connected to two major routes from South to North and from West to East. The first one connected Yemen and the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean coasts and the second one connected central Eurasia to eastern Africa. The spread of Islam and growth of the Islamic world took more than one thousand years encompassing cities, empires, nations and cultures; all of which contributed to the enrichment of the Islamic civilization. Indeed, the territory of the Sassanid Empire was conquered by the Arabs as early as A.D. 644, while the conquest of the Anatolian highlands started four hundred years later, in 1071, by the Seljuk Turks.⁸ All of the "races" having embraced Islam such as the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Greeks, Abyssinians, Berbers, Indians and others have contributed to the development of science and

⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Spiritual Needs of Western Man and the Message of Sufism", Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani (eds.), *Sufism: Love & Wisdom*, Bloomington; World Wisdom, 2006, p. 179-205, p. 203.

⁸ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization, Vol. I, The Classical Age of Islam*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 154; Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography*.

civilization in the Islamic geography. It is significant that, thanks to the religious tolerance; Christians, Jews and Buddhists alongside the Muslim scholars, contributed to the enrichment of science within this civilization.⁹ As there is “no compulsion in religion” according to Islam, the extension of the territories under Muslim control neither meant the the annihilation of non-Muslims, nor their forced conversion.¹⁰

In this geographical and social context, Islam emerged as an inclusive religion open to people from all racial, economic and social backgrounds. In a famous hadith, the Prophet praised his companions without discriminating any of them with the words: “My companions are like the stars in the sky. Whomever you follow among them, you will be rightly guided”. These first Muslims included both the rich and the poor; noble and slave men; the handicapped; the literate and the illiterate; single, married and divorced women; blacks; Jewish and Christian converts; Arabs; Persians; children and so on. Race, sex, ethnic origin, physical or socio-economic status were not determining factors in Islam as another hadith declares that “Verily Allah does not look to your bodies nor to your possessions but He looks to your hearts and your actions.” Accordingly, the achieved status of these first Muslims as true guides was the reward of their success in the greater jihad.

It is meaningful that after returning from the first important war of Islam with victories, the Prophet told his companions that the “lesser jihad” was over and the “greater jihad” that every human being has to conduct against his/her ego; “the struggle against oneself”, had just begun. Clearly, he attributed more importance to the inward struggle than the outward one. This is the greatest of the wars since it does last a lifetime until one’s last breath, whereas a period of peace might be reached following even the longest conflicts between the states. This greater war contains not only one’s fight with his/her ego in personal affairs but also his/her attitude towards other people whether they are a family member, a neighbor or a non-Muslim co-citizen.

Fighting against one’s ego, with the guidance of religion, sets a moral standard which is crucial for all the human beings created. This point of view, living the earthly life in preparation for an afterlife, guided by the principles of Allah who requires human beings to be just, merciful, compassionate and polite to other people, has influenced the

⁹ Muhammed Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam*, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, Ankara, 2013, p. 248.

¹⁰ The Holy Qur’ân, 2/256; Douglas E. Streusand, “What Does Jihad Mean?”, *Middle East Quarterly*, September 1997, Vol. 4, No 3, pp. 9-17.

thoughts, actions and writings of many scholars and statesmen such as the Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattâb, since the early years of the Islamic era. Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattâb, famous for his strict adherence to justice under any circumstance, has always been a prominent exemplar of a statesman for future generations. During his caliphate, which lasted only a decade, Persia was conquered in less than two years and two-thirds of the Byzantine Empire, including Jerusalem, entered into the Muslim rule. Owing to this expansion, large communities of Christians and Jews started to live within the territory of the caliphate.¹¹ He allowed the resettlement of Jews in Jerusalem. In his testament, he advised future rulers to treat the non-Muslim citizens of the state well, to protect them and to defend their lives and properties in case of need.

On the other hand, he served as a caliph during difficult times of drought, famine and plague which severely affected the community. He used to walk in the streets of Medina day and night in order to be sure that every citizen could sleep with a full stomach, unfortunately a goal that still hasn't been reached by many developing nations. While having preferred a simple life and humble conditions for himself, he tried to achieve the best for the people under his rule. He dealt with various problems such as corruption, hunger, poverty, minority rights, socio-economic inequalities and internally displaced people. His inspiring solutions offer good examples even for today's statesmen who have to deal with similar problems. Establishment of a welfare state providing not only allowances for adult Muslims but also benefits and pensions for women, newborn children, the elderly and non-Muslim citizens in need of money or healthcare, became only possible at the hands of this statesman who did not refrain from sharing the pain of the poor or confessing his own mistakes in front of the ordinary people. He lived like the poor, spent most of his time among the poor and the needy, and reflected on how to solve their problems.

Unfortunately as a tendency of human beings of our era, we neither want to empathize with 'other' people, nor spend time for reflection on who they really are. As Turkish author Sabahattin Ali wrote in his novel *Madonna in the Fur Coat*, people are aware of the reality that how difficult it is to get to know each other. That is why; they

¹¹ For the situation of Christians and Jews under the Islamic law; see Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muslim Conduct of State*. For information on the life of the Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattâb, see "Umar", <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umar>.

prefer to hang around as if they are blind and only become aware of each other's existence when they clash. It is no surprising that in today's world the "clash" of civilizations has become quite popular as a phrase, instead of an interaction or even an encounter of civilizations, which would more suit to the demands of the age of globalization. Probably, our planet has (in Tom Friedman's phrase) never been so "flat" allowing us travel and see different geographies, meet new people or learn more about them. Thanks to the advancement of communication technologies, information has never been easier to access. Nevertheless, travel and quick access to information are not prerequisites for healthy interaction. Instead, getting to know someone in depth necessitates both self-reflection on who we really are and reflection on the culture, background, living conditions, pains and emotions of the people whom we call as the "others". Only through reflection and empathy, meaningful and constructive dialogue among different views can begin and we can benefit from the achievements of each other.