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Islam and the West: A Controversial Dichotomy

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Abstract: *'Islam and the West' is an expression we often come across when we debate any historical, political, theological, anthropological, sociological, or geopolitical issue. Though the terms are asymmetrical, their recurrent association makes them appear natural. Islam, which is a religion, is associated with the West that refers to a cultural entity – the world of people who are not Muslims and not even Arabs. It might be more appropriate to say Islam and Christendom, or the East and the West. Raising the problematic of asymmetry allows one to ask the question: why is Islam often the first in position? Or why do we never say the West and Islam? With the aim of confirming that it is not an order at random, several interpretations may be given. None of these will state that Islam is taken for its literal meaning. It is viewed as a complicated abstract concept, a word loaded with an infinite number of connotations, and a faith whose context spans not only mere epochs but the whole world history. The point of departure is to consider where the overwhelming ideological onslaught of the West stems from. If we assume the motives to be religio-political, the whole article would seek to locate the West's antipathy towards Islam both historically and theologically.*
Keywords: *Antipathy, History, Islam, the West, Theology.*
Résumé : *« L'islam et l'Occident » est une expression que nous rencontrons souvent lorsque nous débattons d'un problème historique, politique, théologique, anthropologique, sociologique ou géopolitique. Bien que les termes soient asymétriques, leur association récurrente les a fait paraître naturels. L'islam, qui est une religion, est associé à l'Occident qui se réfère à une entité culturelle - le monde des gens qui ne sont pas musulmans ni même arabes. Il serait peut-être plus approprié de dire l'islam et la chrétienté, ou l'est et l'ouest. Le fait de soulever la problématique de l'asymétrie permet de se poser la question : pourquoi l'islam est-il souvent le premier en position ? Ou pourquoi ne dit-on jamais l'Occident et l'Islam ? Dans le but de confirmer qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un ordre au hasard, plusieurs interprétations peuvent être données. Aucune d'entre elles ne dira que l'islam est pris pour son sens littéral. Il est considéré comme un concept abstrait compliqué, un mot chargé d'un nombre infini de connotations, une foi dont le contexte s'étend non seulement à de simples époques, mais à toute l'histoire du monde. Le point de départ est d'examiner l'origine de l'attaque idéologique dominante de l'Occident. Si nous supposons que les motifs sont politico-religieux, l'ensemble de l'article chercherait à situer l'antipathie de l'Occident envers l'Islam à la fois historiquement et théologiquement.*
Mots clés : *Antipathie, Histoire , Islam , Occident , Théologie.*

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1. Introduction

Islam and Christianity are the two largest religions in the world and share a historical and theological background. Both share a common place of origin in the Middle East, and both are monotheistic faiths. In spite of Islam's internal splits and temporary conflicts, it was a peaceful system embracing diversity, unity, inclusion and co-existence throughout much of its history. Yet, with respect to the literature on Islam and the Christian world in the West, too much misunderstanding and misconception are revealed. After the end of the Cold War, a hysterical fear of Islam's resurgence erupted into the world's political scene and resulted in a global split between Muslims and non-Muslims, the notion of "a clash of civilizations", and Muslims' segregation as others. It has drawn a great deal of media coverage; by then, the world underwent its last and current division – Islam and the West. This new antagonism was overestimated to have ''many different layers and is over determined by a series of binary oppositions: reason vs. dogma, democracy vs. despotism, civilization vs. medievalism, modernity vs. tradition, and so on'' (Mutman, 1992: 165). Indeed, Islam has been unfairly targeted as a source of global dissonance only by the end of the twentieth century. But for a fair understanding, this new antagonism should be located historically.

2. The Historical View

In the wake of the Islamic march of expansion beyond the Arabian Peninsula, and despite original Jewish and Christian resistance to Mohammed's (peace be upon him) claim of prophecy in Mecca from 612, many Jewish and Christian communities that came under the rule of Islam were on the whole provided protection, and allowed to live free of any religious persecution (Kia, 2008: 2). This is to indicate that a remarkable degree of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and tolerance prevailed in the Islamic world at least in the first five centuries of its growth.

Although the history of conflicts between Islam and the West is as ancient as the rise of Islam itself in the 7th century and continued with the subsequent caliphates, it would suffice to go back at least as earlier as the Crusades which were launched first in 1095. The Crusades were waves of religious fanaticism that swept across Europe during the time of Medieval England, prompted by calls for aid from the crumbling Eastern Roman Empire against the Muslims of the Middle East. Under the authority of Pope Urban II, and with "the twin aims of freeing Christians from the yoke of the Islamic rule and liberating the tomb of Christ, the holy sepulchre in Jerusalem, from Muslim control" (The Oxford History of the Crusades, 1999) An assembly of people mostly from the countryside and soldiers were pulled by preaching to take vows and receive indulgences. These campaigns were not only considered holy wars, but also likened to pilgrimage.

The first Crusade was launched when the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnesus requested help to win back the territory conquered by the Seljuk Turks. At the council of Clermont, central France, the Pope called out, "whoever for devotion alone, but not to gain honour or money, goes to Jerusalem to liberate the church of God can substitute this journey for all penance" (Somerville, 1971: 74). At an age of intense religiosity, this armed 'Pilgrimage' achieved its goal with the seizure of Jerusalem in 1099, and slaughtered hundreds of men, women, and children in this victorious entrance.

> The Crusaders were spectacularly severe in capturing Jerusalem in 1100. They not only brutalized and humiliated the Arab Muslim citizens of Jerusalem, but also made the Jewish inhabitants of the city suffer to the extent that many of them felt they had more to fear from the Christians than from their traditional Muslim rulers. Although the Muslims eventually dislodged the Crusaders, the whole incident changed the favorable view that Muslims had held so far of Christians, and many Muslims remained wary of them for a long time to come. Even so this still did not lead to any assault by Muslims on Christianity which they continued to respect as a religion of the Book sanctioned by the Qur'an. (Saikal, 2003: 32).

Large armies marched to Constantinople to recover the city of Edessa and secure the Pilgrim Pass. Despite some success in the Mediterranean namely the acquisition of Lisbon and other small settlements, this Crusade was a failure and the first real sign of the decay of the crusader states in the Middle East because after their defeat, Jerusalem was weakly protected. In 1187, a very powerful adversary and an excellent military leader recaptured Jerusalem. This resulted in a call for a third Crusade forty years later, preached by Pope Gregory and led by Europe's most important leaders – Philip II of France, Richard I of England and Frederick I, the holy Roman Emperor. None of the kings could defeat Saladin. Nevertheless, the English proved superior thanks to the Knights Templar[1] and the Hospitallers. Consequently, Richard could make Saladin sign a treaty where Jerusalem would remain under Muslim control, but also unarmed Christian Pilgrims would enter the city. The failure to subjugate the Holy Land again led to the fourth Crusade which was a series of conflicts and battles with the primary aim of conquering Jerusalem, but it did not occur. The capture and looting of Constantinople in 1204 marked the end of the fourth Crusade. The remainder of the thirteenth century witnessed a variety of Crusades which aimed not only at recovering Jerusalem for which their hopes had been hurt several times, but also at combating any of those seen as enemies of Christianity. These Crusades became short-lived raids which would end forever after nearly two centuries.

Using the word Crusade in addressing the nation on his return to the White House on September 16th, 2001, President George W. Bush cast himself a crusader, "This Crusade, this war on terrorism is going to take a while" (BBC News, 2001), and he injected a religious element into America's responsibility to history. Many prominent figures have fingered the Crusades as the root cause of the present conflict, so they considered the use of the word 'Crusade' most unfortunate because it recalls brutal and unprovoked attacks against a sophisticate and tolerant Muslim nation. In fact, the great historian of the Crusades, Steven Ranciman, denounced the Crusades and stated that they were "one long act of intolerance in the name of God which is the sin against the Holy Ghost" (Tyerman, 2009: 10)

Furthermore, the sort of language on the president lips generated confusion between politics and religion, could easily sway moderate Muslim opinion against America, and could also undermine support for Washington. All in all, the crusades were initiated by religious fanatics whose presence is real in the west as well as in the Islamic world, but

[11]Members of the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, a religious military order of knighthood established at the time of the Crusades that became a model and inspiration for other military orders. It was originally founded to protect Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land.

"the continued broad-based support for the Crusades depended far more on the self-image of a society that commanded the loyalties of people than on fanatical zeal" (Powel, 1995: 663-669). Though the Crusades were wars between Christendom and Islam, the Muslims "regarded the Crusaders less as the representatives of Christendom than hordes of barbaric franks who dared to threaten the abode of Islam" (Akhavi, 2003: 550).

Despite the failure of the Crusades, belligerent Western Christianity persisted in Spain under the label of "The Reconquista". This effort purged the territory of Muslims who had arrived there in the beginning of the eighth century. When Columbus discovered America in 1492, it was the same year of the fall of the last Arab Islamic presence in the West – the Kingdom of Grenada. This defeat marked the final retreat of Islam from the West.

The wars between Christian and Muslim empires lasted intermittently from the seventh century until World War I, and, to a degree, continue to the present in the Balkans, East Africa, Caucasus, East Indies, and the Middle East. But Muslim-Western encounters had not always been devastating and antagonistic. For instance, the soldiers who participated in the Crusades had realized one major fact: Eastern civilization was far more advanced than its Western counterpart. Its technology and culture outdistanced the feudal life west of the Byzantine Empire (Lewis, 1988: 137). Unlike Muslims who were aware of the value of learning since their faith tells them to "seek knowledge, even unto China", their Roman counterparts ignored such matters and persecuted thinkers – particularly the Greek who migrated to parts of the Islamic world where they were welcome. With this in mind, the Islamic scene had witnessed a rich cultural interaction. Philosophy flourished: Al-kindi and Al-Farabi made achievements and influenced Jewish philosophy whereas Ibn Rushd significantly influenced both Christian and Jewish thinkers, and had his works translated into Hebrew and Latin.

> During the high Middle Ages, the works of Aristotle, which represent the ancient foundations of Western scientific development, were made available to European scholars through the translations and commentaries of Arab and Arab-Jewish philosophers such as Avicenna (Ibn Sina / 980–1037), Averroes (Ibn Ruschd / 1126–1198) and Maimonides (Moshe Ben Maimun / 1135–1204) (Hafez, 2000: 4).

Europeans began to import these concepts into their own native lands. They were able to use their newly found experience and knowledge of the Mediterranean, and the Chinese technology such as gunpowder, silk, and printing which were brought and diffused by traders, adventurers, and scholars. In the Mediterranean, Europeans encountered writings of the ancient world that had been lost in Europe, and acquired a taste for new foods and flavors as well (McNeese, 1999).

During the most prosperous years of the Ottoman Empire, tolerance with merchants and diplomats was reflected in the agreements signed to permit them live in peace. Though Ibn Taymia warned of an Islamic decline as early as the 14th century, his advice went in one ear and out the other. Later on, the age of exploration together with mercantilism deprived the Ottoman Empire of its fiscal and commercial privileges. When it became clear it is no time to idealize the Golden Age and the greatness of the Islamic Empire, European scholars started to criticize Arabic philosophy and Islamic theology –though

just like the Renaissance in Europe had been a natural result of the scientific achievements of the Islamic Orient, there came a time when modern Islamic world would be deeply influenced by Western ideas and thoughts. In this respect, Akhavi states that:

> Beginning with the second siege of Vienna in 1683, the Empire entered into a long period of decline and European domination that ended only in 1923. The theoretical and actual separation of church and state in the West, sparked by the Cartesian epistemological revolution, greatly influenced the West's ascendency. Without the triumph of Cartesian radical rationalism; the disembedding of church and state and the scientific and industrial revolutions could probably not have occurred. It is, of course, highly symptomatic that by the time of empiricist and rationalist thinkers such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), European scholars had lost their interest in Muslim philosophy (Akhavi, 2003: 552).

The decline of the Islamic Empire and its continuous period of stagnation facilitated the adoption of new European notions such as *'border'*, 'nation *state'*, and many other political ideas which were occasioned by the French Revolution. After Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which some historians preferred to call an expedition owing to the process of modernization that it triggered, the first perceptions that Napoleon and his friends represented a Christian European Crusader threatening Islam were noticed by later generations.

By and large, the spread of communications and the subsequent European military and political intrusions into the decaying Ottoman Empire led to a political transition of the Arab provinces under one political and religious entity to individual states. Initially, Muslim rulers had been persuaded of the advantage of Western patterns of modernization and, most importantly, that their religious and cultural identity would be preserved. However, it soon became clear reforms would cause Muslims to undo the Shari'à, and abandon the execution of some of God's commands. Hence, organised Islamic movements and parties began to call for al-Islam din wa daula, i.e. the union of religion and state in fear of secularism. Islamic modernism became a real fact but put under control through an open peaceful dialogue with the West led by a great reform movement known as *'Salafyya'.*

From the late eighteenth century, the Western powers (the French, Spanish, Italians and British) partitioned different parts of the weakening Ottoman Empire: North Africa, the Middle East, Transcaucasus, Central, South and Southeast Asia fell one after another to colonial domination and cultural suppression. The colonial subjugation of the Arab domain and many other parts of the Muslim world reinforced among the Muslims the residue left by the Crusades.

Overseas rule gave birth to national movements organized in secular terms and soon became the primary engine to liberation. Religious movements, such as Pan-Islamism, attracted a great deal of people, but were more ideological than pragmatic, as pointed out by Bruce Lawrence: "Throughout the twentieth century links among Muslims of different races, regions, and languages remain more rhetorical than pragmatic, signaling a loose affinity of faith, not an actual alliance of forces, whether military or political or both" (1998: 24). Furthermore, Islam was no longer considered as the organizational force for

any socio-political change. Muslim identity was superceded by national identity, and this is clear in the words of Abduh quoted by Bruce, "What had begun as an attempt to protect Islam by reinterpreting it tended to end as a discussion of the possibility of creating a secular society with nationalism as its animating principle, and with Islam as its inherited culture rather than a guide to social action" (24).

Besides the fact that Islam became a symbolic resource during the colonial period because the colonial experience rather than the faith was considered as the force which united Muslims, it also made relevance only in reference to European Non-Muslim colonizers. This subordination and victimization of Islam, which in this way appears to be beyond violence, remained until the increased integration of world societies as a result of improved communications, media, travel, and migration makes meaningful the concept of a single Islam practiced everywhere in similar ways, an Islam which rises above national and ethnic customs, and an Islam which is a vital power not a label.

It is depressing that misunderstandings between Islam and the West should persist though it was not the case with any other religion or race. For example, there has been a lot of hostility towards Jews for quite some time, and some events need to be discussed to understand where the hostility stems from. During the Middles Ages (7th-15th centuries) the Christians blamed the Jews for Jesus Christ's death. In the 13th century, England was the first country to force Jewish people to leave for what many thought they did – killing Jesus. Later, France dismissed the Jews out of their country as the English had done. Later during the 15th century, Spain and Portugal grew hostile towards Jews. A lot of the hostility from other countries came from the fact that Jews believed in things different from Christians and Muslims. Jews were, for a majority of the time, forced to pay expensive duties, wear special clothing to be more noticed, and were even abandoned in horrible living conditions such as ghettos. It is still contradictory that "the Jews exemplified a rejection of Jesus, yet they were living in the midst of Christians" (Cohen, 2004), and there is no media coverage or prints on Judaism and the West. What is wrong with Islam, then?

All in all, Muslims were first excluded from history leaving the ground to the Christian West to shape the world. But this was not enough; the next step was to exploit and deceive them with the rhetoric of civilizing mission and liberal democracy, and later they determined their destinies by implementing pro-European policies. Current practices and rules are shaped by a process of acculturation through political, economic and even linguistic expansion. Eventually, the antagonism between Islam and the West is by no means supported by history.

3. The Theological View

Among non-Muslims and among Muslims themselves, very little is known about Islam because it has become common in the modern world to profess a religion in ways that are moderate; not orthodox. In fact, orthodoxy stands for religious fundamentalism, which is showing one's complete faith to the tenets of his religion. Although orthodoxy is synonymous to fundamentalism, the latter has come to be a pejorative term, exclusive to Islam. This is mainly generated by the writings of some Christian evangelicals and orthodox Jews to support their thesis that Islam and the West are on a collision. They associate Islam with acts of violence and terrorism, and they speak about Islam, militance

and international threats in the same breath. In effect, Islam is both misunderstood and unrecognized. Muslims have now realized what, centuries ago, their prophet (peace be upon him) informed them on how "Islam began as a stranger, and will revert again to the condition of being stranger. Blessed are the strangers" (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: 145).

This relationship of rivalry shaped by Western policy makers and influential scholars deepens the degree of misunderstanding which remains terribly high. It ignores the fact that both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic faiths which trace their roots to Abraham and embrace a common concept of god and his attributes. In Islam as in Christianity and Judaism, the creator of the universe is God who is sovereign in the lives of his creatures. On the five pillars of Islamic belief: the belief in God, angels, the prophets, the sacred books, and the Day of Judgment, there is no basic disagreement.

Islam represents more than a faith for Muslims; it is their world. The main feature of the universality of Islam is the oneness of God (tawhid). Christians, however, define the one God in three persons and take one prophet and one book fewer than in Islam. Nonetheless, they share many key values in common: respect for knowledge, peace, and compassion towards the poor, mercy and modesty. Justice, which is akin to Christianity, is a Qur'anic precept. « Be just - that is closer to piety » (7:8) To Muslims, respecting all god's apostles and revealed books that came before their prophet (peace be upon him) and the Qur'an is an obligation. They must treat the followers of these religions who are under their rule equally. But they must embrace Islam as final. In the Qur'an, the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) is told to inform *"the people of the Book"* (Jews, Christians, and others with a sacred scripture): "Come to a common principle between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no equals with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than God." (3:64). Like the other religions, much value is given to human life in Islam.

After the first human death and murder in history (the two sons of Adam, one of whom, Qabil, murdered the other, Habil), God prohibited the killing of a human being. In the Qur`an killing or saving a single person is like killing or saving the whole humankind and not just the tribe or race descending from him as stated in some passages of the Talmud. Now every man knows that who is empowered to give and take life is only God. Both Christianity and Islam believe in the afterlife when people will be judged and sent either to hell or paradise. Still, however, many authors see that Islam is unique in its conception of religion. In respect to this, Waardenburg claims,

> This is what may be called an Islamic 'theological' vision of religion itself, which contains the principal elements of an Islamic 'theology of religions'. There is one God, whom human beings have to become conscious of, to whom they should surrender, and whose will is that they obey the religious prescriptions. There is one fundamental Revelation that is contained in its linguistically pure form in the Qur'ân. And there is one monotheistic Religion that is, beyond empirical Islam, the primordial and eternal Islam, radically opposed to all forms of idolatry or 'associationism' and to all forms of disobedience to the basic rules of religion (Waardenburg, 2002: 165).

To materialize God's commands, many Muslims affirm the unity of God and Muhammad's (peace be upon him) prophecy, congregational prayer, fasting during the sacred month of Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, and paying poor dues. Yet, others add to

these points, which remain individual, the interest of the community. Because Islam is both religion and politics, Muslims consider the virtuous good society a prerequisite for Islam to prosper. Christian tenets such as, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21) are rejected by the Muslim community which attaches much importance to its unity rather than privatizing faith. Muslims have generally respected the Jewish and Christian scriptures as foundational texts for Islam and consider Jews and Christians as deserving protection. But they also believe that they turned from God's ordinances, so Judaism and Christianity are superseded religions on that ground. Islam is also a legalistic religion, and Muslim clergy are recognized more as jurists whereas their Christian counterparts are theologians.

In Judeo-Christian myth, even before the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the Arabs were known to ancient Israelites and Greeks, and the appearance of a non-Jewish, non-Christian Arab monotheist had been mentioned therein. The first boundaries that separated the three religions, thus, were theological polemics. Then, public disputations between Muslims, Jews and Eastern Christians took place at the aim of nullifying the validity of the new religion. By that time, Western Europe Christians and its Jews lacked knowledge of this new theological enterprise – Islam. They considered the faith a non-Christian enemy that should be defeated on the first encounter, which did not take place till the eleventh century with the beginning of the Crusades. Islam, then, started to be perceived as a theological challenge to Christendom. Medieval Europe viewed Islam as heresy and its prophet as an imposter.

Accordingly, the idea of Islam as an adversary, which survives up to now, began in religious terms and gained a new non-religious dimension only after the attack on the twin towers of the USA. Common views of Islam as the religion of the sword preached by a violent prophet and a book of gibberish stem from this early medieval dismissive perception of Islam. Despite the refutation of certain Judaic and Christian beliefs, Islam was not rejected for its difference. It is for its unexpected pace of expansion with which it reached North Africa and parts of Europe within the first century of its advent that alarms were sent to the leaders of Christendom. This alert to Islam's march continued throughout the Crusades, the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates and under the Ottomans.

By the time Europe witnessed the Renaissance, the image of Islam came to possess a cultural perspective: a rich civilization and an extravagant world immersed in luxuries. Even in the modern period, the Western inferior view of Islam as a heretic and pagan faith did not change in spite of the possibilities of co-existence on the ground of the appreciation of the Islamic thought, culture and intellectual heroes. Asserting voices of Carlyle, Goethe, Emerson and Thoreau did not hide their admiration of things Islamic. In fact, thirst for the Orient was an interest in the worldly features of Islamdom disguised in an elegant rationale for colonialism – mission civilisatrice.

Yet, Orientalism reached its peak years in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century and offered the Western world a massive body of books, journals, translations, and academic articles for the study of Islam, but could do very little to ameliorate the West's dark image of Islam. The monolithic images and endless stereotypes attached to Islam seem to become inherited and they prevail to the present century, presumed and revitalized by Huntington's thesis of clash of civilizations.

4. Conclusion

The dawn of the twenty first century condemned Islam and Muslims. In the minds of many Americans after 9/11, Islam was identified with extremism and violence. To promote world peace, almost all political commentary programmes discussed the impact of Islam on the West and searched the roots of misconceptions as well as its repercussions. However, the demonization of Islam and its Umma swept across all regions of the world and it is continuous over time. Whatever the degree of hatred, it is odd in many ways that Islam remains a theological challenge, and medieval closet misunderstandings between Islam and the West should persist.

Throughout this article, enmity between Islam and Christianity has been pointed out, and religious conflict is still being intensified with the very existence of ideologies such as the dichotomy of the world into two opposed faith groups: Islam and the West. If something does not change in terms of attitudes, the future would not be a safe place. To maintain peace and promote justice, interfaith dialogue and educating people on how to accept the other unconditionally are indispensable. This, along with the development of a theological framework for how Islam is universal and timeless, would reduce suspicions and violent reactions to its growth. A theology of hospitality, in an ever-growing pluralistic world, may well lead to a reciprocal openness towards religions and replace their brutal histories with ones based on respect and cooperation.

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