Western Culture Differences and the Contradictions in the Islamic World

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Abstract. Regarding to the issues that are currently happening in the world, more than any other time the differences between West and Islam is under discussion. The cultural relations between Islam and the West took a drastically new turn when Europe arose as the dominant and unchallenged force of the modern era. The author by using descriptive-analytical method tries to analyse one of the most controversial questions facing analysts of relations between the Islamic world and the West: what are the roots of the conflict? This paper addresses the history of the intellectual tradition of the West and the attitude of Muslim world regarding to the rise of western modernity. Also the differences of two groups on philosophical foundations such as religion, power, science and humanism will be explained. The authors believe that the real difference between the West and Islam is epistemological.

Introduction

Since there are the ambiguity of the concepts and perceptions differences, finding a relationship between the two macro concept of “Islam” and “West” is not such an easy task. Islam is an ideological concept, while the West has a political meaning and refers to a geographical territory. Usually, according to the users of these concepts, Islam means the Islamic world, namely a set of political, economic, movements systems and Islamic nations, which is geographically concentrated in the south, and west means a set of systems, concepts and policies that are widespread in geographic of north [1].

There are two main approaches among Western scholars about the Islamic world: (1) most anthropologists and sociologists have Constructionism perspective. They believe that Islam has found particular expression in different environments, so there is no single Islam, and it should not be evaluated in terms of its teachings, but must be considered and examined in terms of its external manifestations. (2) In contrast, some Western scholars like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington has Essentialism or cultural perspective to the Islamic world. In this approach, there is an emphasis on the substantial identity of Islam which has more or less the same definition in all contexts, and is useful to understand the Muslim world [2]. Nowadays, the recent approach is more common towards Islam.

During centuries, type of confrontation between the West and the Islamic world has been different. In the 4th and 5th centuries AD, the first confrontation between the West and the Islamic world in the form of the Crusades happened; Westerners considered Islam as a military doctrine based on violence, cosmopolitanism and anti-Christianity religious or Judaism. For this reason, they were always trying to invade Muslims [3]. However, in recent centuries, war and military action has no taken place, and contrast has been proposed in another form in different cultural and political domains. Today, a group of Western scholars considers cosmopolitanism as goal of Islam, and some have tried not to deny Islam and Muslims, and they also mentioned the positive and accepted points of this religion [4].

In the Islamic world from the nineteenth century onwards, there are two main approaches among Muslim scholars about West: (1) positive attitude; those who praised the scientific progress of West and tried to found a way of conformity with the West. [5] In this regard, a pro-Western course entitled Modernisation formed in the Islam world, which according to some scholars is still
continuing [6]. In the process of Westernization, some considered anti-traditionalism as a necessary condition of modernization, and to be a westerner from toe to head [7]. (2) Negative attitude entitled *Revivalism*; those who instead of following the Western civilization, emphasizing on Islamic identity and its roots. This conception is a reaction to the decline of Muslims in contrast to their former glory and an answer to this question that “why the place of Islam and Islamic civilization is changed and now Western civilization is surpassed?” [8]

**Religion**

In the West, there are two views about religion. The first considers religion as a man-made tool and reject it. The second view refers to a group which has at least two attitudes toward religion: One group considers religion as a set of belief in a transcendental creature and supernatural. For example, The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines the nature of religion as follows: “Religion is recognizing a superhuman creature that has absolute power and especially belief in God or gods which are worthy of worship and obedience” [9]. The second group was arisen in the late eighteenth century. At this time, instead of ideological and theoretical definitions scholars explained the empirical, emotional, intuitive and even ethical sections of religion as the most important factors. So, religion in the west is two-fold element, sometimes it is emphasized on noetic, the doctrinal and theological aspects of it, and sometime emotional. One could say that, the first one has summarized religion in the beliefs and noetic teachings, and the second approach, defined religion related to inner feelings and experiences [10]. Among Muslim thinkers, there has not been disagreement about the definition of religion and one of the major reasons for this is a shared resource, called *the Qur’an*, which forever, has directed Muslims.

According to the Muslim’s book (Quran), religion refers to a set of ideas, practices, laws and regulations, which is to manage and develop the Muslim community. This definition reflects the fact that, religion in the world of Islam has had both theoretical and practical aspects. For this reason, the definition of religion in Islam and West is different [11].

**Science**

The terms of Science is a concept that the identity of any culture is formed by how to deal with it, and therefore is very important. According to the Western positivists view on science, the metaphysical and non-experimental foundations of science are discussed, whereas, science and technology policy makers of the Western countries change empirical knowledge by the metaphysical presuppositions. There are some assumptions which are incompatible with Islamic culture:

The universe is regulated. Human has the ability to understand the universe. Knowledge is preferable to ignorance. All natural phenomena have cause. Nothing is obvious. Everything can be obtained from sensation and perception [12].

Given the dependence of the science on philosophical foundations of the West, we can see a Western science with temporal identity. In today’s West culture, experimental and natural science leads to authority, development and progress, however, it is considered as a unique feature of human civilization. At this point, the West with the loss of religious concepts and rational science, and without religious fiat only binds to the understanding of worldly affairs.

In the Islamic world, in contrast, science has different degrees and various tools, which there is a significant relationship among its degrees and existence, and its summit is divine knowledge. In various fields of Islamic philosophy, God is the origin of the universe. God is omniscient, and all the sciences are infinite manifestations of His knowledge. In Islamic culture, science has religious and divine identity, and the science of monotheism is at the center of all values, as far as is considered as the origin of human beings prosper and in addition to worldly affairs; also has a strong connection with worldly affairs [12].
Power

Another feature of the West culture refers to the originality of the power and is considered as the perfection of human talents. If in the first era of west culture, Plato emphasized *justice* as the highest virtue and in the second period, Christians emphasized *helping* others, in the new era and the modern culture of the West, the supreme virtue of man is *the power*. For this reason, the West always try to achieve power and destroys any thought and school that stands in front of its power and believes that its survival is achieved by destroying others. Based on this idea, the West constantly feels the spirit of hegemony over other cultures and tries to strengthen it day by day.

However, power in the Islamic culture has another meaning and in Quran, the emphasis is on the fact that, power is allocated to God; that all forces are for God. So, where there is a strength and power, in fact, it is a manifestation of divine power, and no creature torn from God can do anything. The Quran never prevent people to achieve power, however warns that the material advantages have been false, and prevent one from achieving true excellence.

Strengthen this idea about power in the West culture, and the help of theorists, led to invade of western countries to different nations in recent centuries; conquering and plundering the people’s wealth. The result of brutal attack of Europeans in Africa and other nations led to suffer and hunger of the people and made Europeans more and richer. Principles associated with this influx are created by Western thinkers and experts, and they mentioned Western as people with human emotion and thoughtful people in their magazines and books, and have accused others as people with authoritarianism and brutality to pave oppression path.

Edward Said, the Arab scholar writes, “Europeans wrote about the East which the East’s man is irrational, corrupt and different, and European human is rational, chaste and normal. Clear message explains that, in principle, Europeans with desirable properties that are in their nature are superior to the rest of the world, and that is why, should dominate the world, and enslave the world people.”

Humanism or Human Origin

Another feature of West is giving authenticity to the human. West purpose of human authenticity is that the man is the main core in everything so, West considers human as a Self-sufficient creature, which means that, human alone determines morality, politics, economics and everything, and does not achieved them from religion and revelation. The emergence of this thought is related to the Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social contract* which expresses the issues of civic society, and in all those elements and issues, human is a determining axis, and without any metaphysical element. Heidegger, German philosopher, and Hume also believed in independent of human.

Islam and in particular the Quran offers a special approach towards humans. Unlike a humanitarian point of view, which by rejection of any human spirit considers his body and desires as the center of the universe, and is seeking to shape the world according to its desires, and dominant nature, in the Islamic approach, the axis of the universe is not a sinful human, but God Almighty is the center of all things; that is, the development of the world issues goes back to God, and in the Holy Quran, God is creator of all things of the universe, and legislation system will be formed with wise will of God.

Islamic human away from any arrogance and incorrect judgment to himself accepts his own defects and different desires within itself, which the lack of moderation in each of them leads to human destruction and his intellect captivity. In Islamic teachings, God-based and not anthropocentric is emphasized. This is the most important pillar of view and the Islamic approach to all things, including humans.

Conclusion

Despite of some conflicts which are felt in the behaviors of Westerners and Muslims in today’s world, as well as some disparities which can be seen in view of Westerners and Muslims about various Topics and themes, the most immediate conflict between the two cultures can be found in
theoretical and epistemological of both cultures and civilizations. In other words, any conflicts that is created in Muslims actions with Western institutions and any incompatibility between different Islamic and Western educations is due to the differences of theoretical foundations. We are facing with two discourses, in one, ethical and religious beliefs are important, and in the other one, objectivism is highlighted. These two cultural systems, however, are distinct from each other.

The history of formation of Western thought and civilization shows that, a long era of the Middle Ages did not make Western foundations completely religion. With the start of the industrial era, Western scholars began to review the heritage of the West in ancient Greece, and quickly, forgot religious changes that occurred in the third and fourth centuries AD in the West. The five hundred year domination of modernity on the West led to epistemological foundations of Western culture to be considered as critical view, and although different groups and schools in the West have different views on these principles, however, the major scholars of culture and civilization of the West history have been faithful to these principles.

In this paper, those western cultural principles were discussed which in Islamic civilization has been thinking enough about them and made the difference and conflict. The Muslims believe Islamic culture has a strong framework about these foundations, and in the areas of philosophy, jurisprudence, theology, mysticism and Islamic ethics has been theorizing well about them. As it explained, there are fundamental different opinions in principles between the two groups, and often these views are against each other which cause the conflict: Western culture is quantity-oriented, however, the Muslims believe Islamic culture without having to renounce the quantity, prefers quality. According to the Westerners view, science is purely secular, however, Muslims believe in Islam it is defined based on the perspective of religion. Power is a target for the West, however in Muslim scholars’ opinion, power is considered as a tool for doing good deeds, and should be controlled and available for mankind. Westerns believe in anthropocentrism, whereas in Islamic culture, everything comes from God, and goes back to God, and mankind is created by God. West links religion to feelings, or a set of rituals and beliefs, however, a Muslim considers religion as a way for individual; social; material and hereafter life. Today, opposition view to Islam in the West is changing, and discourses that have focused on the final battle between Islam and Christianity have been marginalized.

The author believes this is the duty of both sides’ scholars to have more dialogues to each other. Through meetings, conferences, they can find the similarities in their cultures or principles and emphasize on them so that they prevent the spread of differences. They should create an environment that the two systems communicate with each other. In other words, the relationship between Islam and the West is now considered as a necessity. In this regard, of course, there are many conflicts and ambiguities; however, at this point no doubt Peace will be achieved through dialogue between West and world of Islam.

References


