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Breaking the dichotomy between Western and Islamic discourses on Islam: Visions of coexistence, peace and harmony

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Abstract

The discourses on Islam in Western and Islamic world remain parochial and biased in their outlook. Perceptions and policies which are guided by such biased accounts with a parochial outlook, spiral down the problem and prevent any possibilities of dialogue between the Western and Islamic world. It is imperative to critically engage with literature from both parts of the world to provide a synoptic view of Modern Islam and the issues surrounding it. Sufist discourse, which propagates peace and mutual coexistence provides an alternative vision of Islam which focusses on dialogue and interaction amongst different religious denominations. The Western and Islamic world needs to transcend its parochial outlook for any meaningful dialogue to take place.

Keywords: Islam, Western, Non- Western, Sufism

1. Introduction

“Peace cannot be kept by force; it can only be achieved by understanding.”

— Albert Einstein

In an article published in foreign affairs in the year 1993, Samuel P. Huntington hypothesized that the primary reason for conflicts in the post-cold war world would be cultural and conflicts would occur between nations and groups of different civilizations⁽²⁾. It remains one of the highly debated and controversial thesis on the shape of the post-cold war world. The article and the book that was later published by Huntington, rose to prominence and immediately became a bestseller in the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11 on United State of America.

9/11 was seen as well as portrayed in the West as coming true of the Huntingtonian prophecy. Probably this is what the belligerents, who in the name of Islam conspired the attacks had also wanted. The two great civilizations of Islam and West, were posited as antagonistic to each other and the attacks were seen as an attack on the western values of freedom and liberty. Islam and Muslims in general were seen and portrayed as the product of a civilization which was inherently violent and antithetical to the West.

The response to the attacks in the Muslim world varied. On one hand, the attacks were condemned by most of the Islamic nations as being un-Islamic and having no relation with ‘true Islam’. But at the same time there were factions of people and radical Islamic organisations who went into celebrations, for what they saw as a befitting reply to the years of domination and subjugation of the Islamic world by America and its support to Israel.

“In the years since 9/11, scholars and experts have done little to resolve the contradictions. Often, they have merely taken them to a higher level. On one side, broadly speaking, are those sympathetic to the views of Princeton historian Bernard Lewis. The British-born scholar and author sees the events of 9/11 as the tragic consequence of a long conflict between the Islamic world and the West, a conflict largely dominated by the former until a little over 300 years ago, when the Ottomans failed in their second attempt to take Vienna. Crediting bin Laden with a strong (if not altogether accurate) sense of history, Lewis argues that the al Qaeda leader gave expression to the “resentment and rage” of people throughout the Islamic world”^[14].

“Strongly rejecting this reading of the problem are the experts associated with the late Columbia literature Prof. Edward Said, author of the influential book Orientalism. The

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The Palestinian-American scholar charged that Lewis is one of those western 'orientalists' whose oversimplification of eastern civilizations has helped to justify European imperialism. Said insisted that Islam is no 'monolithic whole' but a divided body of competing 'interpretations'. It should be treated the same way Christianity and Judaism are, Said urged, 'as vast complexities that are neither all-inclusive nor completely deterministic in how they affect their adherents' [14].

So the scholarship on Islam, both in the Islamic world as well as the West blame each other for the 9/11 as well as the contemporary quagmire in the Middle- East. The western scholars tend to blame the scriptures and culture of Islam whereas the non-western and Islamic scholars blame the West for its meddling and interventions in the region as well as America's unabashed support to Israel as the primary causes of the rage against the West. It then critically engages with the scholarship on Islam from both the Western and non-Western (Islamic) end of the spectrum.

Finally, it argues that arriving at answers to the question of resolving the contemporary issues, requires a common, unbiased approach to understand the multifarious dynamics of Islamic World. Towards the end of paper, revival of the Sufi discourse which propagates co-existence, peace and harmony amongst different religious beliefs has been shown as an alternate to the parochial vision of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations and against the dichotomous discourse on Islam.

However, before we move further, it is also important to note that the Western and Islamic discourses should not be seen as homogenous categories and in complete opposition to each other. Numerous scholars have actually transcended the parochial visions and attempted to provide a more neutral and unbiased understanding of the issues concerning Islam today. But they remain a miniscule minority and the mainstream discourse on both sides is dominated by a huntingtonian understanding of the world.

Below, we first take a look at the western discourse on Islam.

2. Islam in the Western Discourse

Most of the scholarship on Islam in the West has been highly critical of Islam with the exception of a few scholars like John Esposito, who have made an attempt to contextualize the current events and represented the history of Islam in a non-partisan manner⁽¹⁾. But the mainstream discourse in the West remains critical of Islamic scriptures and often correlations are established between modern phenomena's like terrorism and Islam as a religion.

A noteworthy aspect of this biased representation of Islam is that it could be traced back "to the days of the birth of Islam, which ultimately resulted in a conflict for establishment and expansion of the sway of political territoriality between the Christian and the Muslim worlds" [4]. Such negative representations continued to exist even during the middle-ages, when the Islamic civilization declined and modernity spread to Europe⁽⁴⁾. This trend of the demonization of Islam has continued in the contemporary world and most of what is written about Islam as a religion adds to Islamophobia against Muslims. These neo- oriental discourses fail to contextualize history of Islam and thus their understanding of contemporary Islam remains de-historicized.

One of the oft-quoted and highly debated works in the Western discourse is of Samuel P. Huntington. Huntington

in his 1993 article in Foreign Affairs, saw the post-cold war world as divided into certain monolithic civilizations and claimed that the future wars would be fought between these civilizations. He singles out Islam among these civilizations and claims it to be the main challenger to West and its culture being antithetical to West [2]. His hypothesis projects Muslims as inherently violent with the roots of violence lying in the culture of Islam.

Another prominent scholar on Islam in the west Bernard Lewis in his article 'What Went Wrong' rejects one by one all the claims made by the Islamic scholars towards the Western meddling into the affairs of Islamic world as 'unconvincing'. He attributes the hatred towards Israel as merely the 'acceptance of the anti-Semitic history' from Europe [6]. His oriental worldview fails to notice the suffering of the people of Palestine at the hands of Israel which is actually the primary cause of hatred towards Israel rather than the acceptance of anti-Semitic history.

Lewis cites the examples of repressive and dictatorial regimes and the failure of modern-state in rooting out poverty from the Middle- East [6]. But again, he overlooks the politico-military support to these dictatorial regimes by United States and the arbitrary crafting of states with utter disregard to ethnic identities by the colonial rulers. Towards the end of his article, Lewis asserts "For the time being the choice is theirs" [6]. This also supports the primary argument of this paper, where the scholars on both sides of spectrum, blame the other side responsible for contemporary issues surrounding Islam. Scholars like Lewis have ignored that how the West in particular United States for a long time, intervened and continues to do so in the region to serve its own geopolitical and economic interests.

Apart from Huntington and Lewis around whom much of the Western discourse on Islam revolves around, there are several other scholars like Daniel Pipes, Doran and many others who through their writings target Islam, creating Islamophobia.

"Western scholars and policymakers have long struggled to understand the nature of this conflict, but so far, their efforts have fallen short. Although experts on Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and history have produced rich scholarship on Islamism, they have tended to treat it as if it were unique" [8]. This attribution of uniqueness to Islamic history as distinct from other civilizations seems to be a part of the larger discourse on Islam which tries to portray it as demonic and spreading hatred.

American President Barack Obama in one his recent speech highlighted this fact. He said "Humanity has been grappling with these questions throughout human history. And lest we get on our high horse and think this is unique to some other place, remember that during the Crusades and the Inquisition, people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ. In our home country, slavery and Jim Crow all too often was justified in the name of Christ" [9].

"In this count, the Western critique of the Muslim world based on an attack on Islam as a religion, culture and philosophy, dubbing it ontologically violent, is shallow and stands on a flimsy ground" [4].

3. Islamic/ Non- Western discourses on Islam

The Non-Western discourse on Islam like the Western discourse is biased in its approach to understand the problems surrounding Islam today. The epistemological

space in Islamic discourse has been mostly captured by radicals whereas the moderate voices have often been silenced or relegated to the background.

Even most of the moderate voices, tend to blame the West for its oriental outlook, imperialism, interventions, support to the dictatorial regimes and the support to Israel as the primary causes of all the issues facing Islam today and the rage and hatred against the West within the Islamic society. This creation of the image of a Western 'other' who wants to spoil Islam, subvert Muslims, impose its values and culture on Islam creates a hatred for the Westerners among Muslims. In their attempt to counter the Western discourse, most of these moderate voices on Islam actually become 'America bashers' where all the blames are put on America. Though their accusations regarding the West are not entirely false but blaming the West and Israel for each and every thing happening within the Islamic world remains as unconvincing as the Western discourse's blame on Islamic scriptures for the contemporary quagmire. For example moderate voices often blame the American cold war strategies^[7], the oriental constructions of the image of orient^[10] or America's war economy which perpetuates the continuous construction of the image of an 'enemy'^[3]. These moderate voices remain a major critique of the Western policies and rightly so but they fail to take account of the problems within which the Islamic world, which have actually resulted in demise of this once mighty civilization.

They need to realize that it is the lack of consensus among Islamic scholars and schools of jurisprudence regarding how much the modern state ought to be influenced by Islamic laws and regulations which has been major cause for the majority of issues surrounding Islam today. As has been rightly remarked in an article in the Foreign Affairs that "It is not Islam that is generating discord. Rather, the problems is a deep disagreement among Muslims over the degree to which Islam ought to shape the laws and institutions of society. Most Muslims, Islamist or otherwise are, of course, not jihadists or revolutionaries. But the ongoing competition over what constitutes good public order has polarized them, creating vicious enmities that resist compromise. The result is a self-tightening knot of problems in which each aggravates the others"^[8].

Apart from this debate on the role of Islam in the Muslim societies, Islamic discourse largely ignores that secularism in the modern sense or the dhimmi status given to minorities according to Islamic laws has also actually been not provided in most of the Islamic societies. The state machineries have failed in weeding out poverty, massive illiteracy, inequality, unemployment and discrimination against women. When accounting for terrorism all these factors which play a major role in fuelling terrorism have been ignored.

The lack of freedom of speech, failure to use 'ijtihad' (independent reasoning) while interpreting the Quran and the silence of liberal and moderate voices on matters concerning Islam are also largely ignored by the Islamic discourse. There is a ubiquitous absence of all these issues in the writings of Islamic and majority of non-western scholars. These scholars to ignore the fact that the distortion in understanding Islam is happening both inside the Islamic World as well outside in the Western writings.

To the critiques regarding of Western imperialism, Bernard Lewis rightly remarks that "in practicing sexism, racism and imperialism, the West was merely following the common

practice of mankind through the millennia of recorded history"^[5].

To summarize, "the multifaceted nature of Islamic theology, philosophy and jurisprudence indicate the extent of epistemological space that Islam has offered for rational intervention"^[4]. But the contemporary scholarship continues to see the problem through a parochial lens and the epistemological space remains captured by radicals.

4. Conclusion

One of the famous Sufi woman Rabia Basri often said "I am so absorbed in loving Allah that I have no time to hate Satan"^[9]. This remark truly captures the spirit of Sufism which is grounded in love and peace for all. "Sufis are a liberal, tolerant and inclusive form of Islam which has interwoven in its tapestry the fabrics of local and folk cultures and elements of other forms of spirituality in many parts of the world" (Bharati, 2013)^[11].

This paper began with a discussion of the state of contemporary world, where we are such at cross roads in history that a dialogue between the Western and Islamic world is crucial. Sufism as has existed in the South Asian part of the world for over ten centuries, shows the possibility of a world where a dialogue among civilizations could be initiated through the syncretic nature of Sufism.

It is often the poor and downtrodden section of the societies which are more vulnerable to extremism and radicalisation. "Sufism had an important part to play in the formation of Muslim societies as it educated the masses and met their felt needs, giving spiritual meaning to their lives and channeling their emotions"^[12]. Sufism on it part has embraced the Sultans and the beggars, the lower and the upper and the Hindu and the Muslim alike.

Sufis propagate the doctrine of 'Wahdat al-Wajud' which stands for Unity of all beings. "The doctrine implies that the whole of humankind is one and it reflects the glory of God. It means that essential Being is one and we all are manifestations of this Being. The doctrine inculcates a sense of unity among human beings and deep respect for every particle of the cosmos, as everything is the reflection of God's glory. The doctrine implies that God's existence pervades through the whole universe"^[13].

A really good example of the impact of Sufism in fighting radicalisation is an observation made by the noted historian of South Asia, William Dalrymple. He writes about Sindh province of Pakistan that "Here is an entirely indigenous and homegrown Islamic resistance movement to fundamentalism, with deep roots in South Asian culture. It is one of the few sources of hope left in the increasingly bleak political landscape of this strategically crucial country" (Bharati, 2013)^[11]. Dalrymple further suggests that "Sufism can provide an inclusive openness and ecumenical intra-faith dialogue within the Islamic streams and sects as well as inter-faith dialogue with other religions for more tolerance, mutual respect and understanding" (Bharati, 2013)^[11].

To conclude, the West and Islamic world both can realize what Philip Jenkins rightly asserts that "Sufis better than anyone, can tell disaffected young Muslims that the quest for peace is not a surrender to Western oppression, still less a betrayal of Islam, but rather a return to the faith's deepest roots" (Bharati, 2013)^[11].

The West and Islamic discourse need to transcend their parochial lenses to understand Islam and the issues

surrounding it for a dialogue among civilizations to take place.

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