THE IMPORTANCE OF DISENTANGLING CULTURE FROM RELIGION

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I gave my first academic presentation on my recent research on disentangling culture from religion at the 31th Annual Conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists held at American University Oct. 25-27, 2002. It was fascinating to see how many other speakers also touched on this subject. Largely neglected, its importance has become apparent in the aftermath of the events of Sept. 11, 2001.

One area where this confusion between culture and religion has been most apparent in the past has been women's issues. A few examples: women's rights to divorce, so manifest in the sacred scripture, were denied in some Muslim societies; although Islam zealously guards the honor of women, there have been highly publicized cases in Pakistan and Nigeria where raped women are being charged with sexual crimes, while the alleged rapists are charged with nothing; in certain parts of the Muslim world female genital mutilation is commonly believed to be a religious requirement, even though it is in no sense an Islamic mandate. Cultural impingements have been identified from such varying sources as the pre-Islamic patriarchy of various societies that have adopted Islam, male domination of the Muslim jurisprudence after the earliest generations of jurists, and colonial influence.

My research shows that the problem of cultural confusion goes beyond the domain of women's issues and affects almost every area of Muslim life. This fact is of prime importance at a time when political forces seeking justification for taking away the land, the resources, and the liberty of Muslims are putting forth allegations of backwardness and authoritarianism against, not Muslims, but against the religion of Islam itself.

Of course, no one can deny that religion and culture are intimately related: culture emerges from the shared experience of a people, including their religious life. The *dîn* of Islam is a way of life. The problem is that a revealed religion professes to be a divinely inspired system, while the system of culture is evolved from the confluence of all common experiences. The term culture suggests organic growth, while the Islamic religion is rooted in divine *dicta*. People raised in a religious culture that professes that their religion is a complete way of life can become confused into thinking that their cultural preferences are mandated by the religion.

This can occur even when the practices are merely accepted by or even merely tolerated by the religion. Worse yet, practices that are disliked or even prohibited by the religion

can become seen as mandated by the religion simply because they were not successfully extinguished, or because their introduction from foreign sources has been forgotten or obscured.

During Islam's early expansion, the enormous flexibility of Islamic law guaranteed that even if the religious legalisms were strictly enforced, the new culture that emerged from the acceptance of Islam into the old native cultures would still reflect a great variety of flavors. For example, the Islamic dress code that requires both men and women to dress modestly might have had particular influences on this or that culture, but in no case would it require that the newly Islamized people adopt the dress of the Arabs. Nor did they do so. We can see this, for example in the matter of clothing colors. The Berbers maintained the bright colors they enjoyed before Islam after their Islamization, feeling no need to adopt the somber colors of the Arabs who brought Islam to North Africa.

The Qur'an gives a very limited list of *harâm* foods and then goes on to state that all other wholesome foods are *halâl* explicitly including seafood. Yet some schools of thought in Islam, apparently adopting the legacy of early Jewish converts, have declared shellfish prohibited.

Cultural attitudes have affected our educational and vocational preferences as well. Many Muslims have become first-rate practitioners of medical science and engineering, but the number of Muslims who are first-rate researchers in these areas is still negligible.

Cultural practices that impede economic development are numerous. In Egypt today, success is defined as being a civil servant, rather than operating a factory. This is clearly a remnant from the English colonization. In the early Mamluk times, the factory owners were respected members of society. During the British occupation, the occupying administrators were seen as the elites and once the Egyptians had rid themselves of the colonizers they longed to hold their jobs.

Another area where culture is a palpable impediment is in the area of the development of civil society. Civil society constitutes a separate sector of the community apart from the political and commercial areas. Its importance in American society is enormous. Yet not only have modern Muslim countries failed to develop a flourishing civil society, but Muslims in America are not well integrated into the civil society here.

My principle conclusion is that the confusion of culture and religion is rooted in the suppression of critical thinking. The Islamic religion advances notions of individual liberty while their suppression comes only from cultural practices. This is a vicious circle, for we have become embroiled in a culture that discourages the very critical thinking that could free us from our cultural chains.