

## COMMON CIVILIZATIONAL VALUES AS PERCEIVED BY AN AMERICAN MUSLIM

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There is a pressing need for Western non-Muslims engaged in development projects in the Muslim world or with management responsibilities in offices with both Muslim and non-Muslim staff to understand the common civilizational values between these two cultures. A proper understanding of these commonalities can facilitate cross-cultural communication in developmental, educational, business, and organizational settings.

I don't know if anyone has as strong a claim to have straddled these two cultures as I. I was literally born between the Old World and the New, on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean in 1948 as my mother fled Palestine seeking refuge in America from the *nakba*, the Catastrophe. My father had already been an American citizen since 1936. An extremely intelligent, but uneducated peddler from a tiny village in the suburbs of Jerusalem, he had come to America while still a boy, and sought refuge from the xenophobia he found there in assimilation. Were it not for his refusal to eat pork or drink alcohol one would never guess that he was a Muslim (though he couldn't hide his Arab features and idiosyncratic accent). It was my mother, highly educated, both a teacher and a radio announcer (the first female to ever read the news on Jerusalem radio) who gave me a copy of Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an the summer that I turned nine, when I asked her what our religion was. "It's in here," she said. If I had any questions, I could ask her.

Thus, I bring to this journal the perspective from the twilight zone between an immigrant and a native of America, between a convert to Islam and one born into the religion. Both America and Islam are my native cultures and both aren't. My biases cancel out. I can afford to be objective. Or, perhaps I am biased towards both Islam and Americanism. In either case, who is better situated than I to detect and appraise their common values? My vision for a better world is centered on the understanding that those values that we boast are "Western" or "Islamic" are in reality universal values that, seen in a certain light, are shared by all people.

What are the values of America? Individualism, tolerance, family, justice, liberty, prosperity, security, and innovation in technology and the sciences are the usual candidates. What are the values of Islam? *Tawhîd*, *taqwa*, *ahl*, *adl*, *falâh*, *salâm*, *sabr*, and *salahât* must be included. Many would add *jihâd*. And what about tradition? One who has not lived in both cultures may think these quite different sets of values, but from the intersection of the two cultures, I do not see it that way.

Individualism has a bad name in much of the world only because it has been tainted with concepts like materialism, hedonism, and a lack of concern for the rights of others,

concepts that are really not inherent in it. I propose that the multinational corporations that manufacture Nike shoes or write their advertisements are not the quintessential manifestations of American individualism. The archetypical American individualist is Henry David Thoreau, a man of intense spirituality, simple tastes, and an uncompromising concern for rights of all men. Like Thoreau's transcendentalism, the Islamic concept of *tawhîd*, that none is worthy of worship except God, can be seen as individualistic when viewed in the same spiritual, modest, and egalitarian context. That is, that each human is directly responsible to the Almighty, a fundamentally individualistic perspective. It is no coincidence that the Qur'an is a document that addresses the individual directly. The ideal community is that which is created by the assemblage of devout individuals: "Verily Mankind is in loss, except such as have Faith and do righteous deeds and (join together) in the mutual teaching of Truth and of Patience and Constancy" (103:2-3).

The concept of *taqwa*, or God-consciousness and self-restraint, is strong in Islam and weak in the Western world today. Yet, there was a time when Westerners too would chasten companions who were bordering on the commission of evil acts to "fear God!" If someone uses such language today, of course, they are thought quaint at best and religious fanatics at worst. Yet in recent decades there has been a reawakening realization that the lack of awareness of God may be responsible, at least in part, for the decline in justice, charity, and perhaps even good manners. In 1965, Time magazine published its famous "God Is Dead" cover, but religion of all varieties has grown by leaps and bounds since then (perhaps Islam fastest of all). Six months later, commenting on John Lennon's "We're more popular than Jesus," a Jewish friend of mine jokingly asked how many albums Jesus had sold in the last year. Less than five years later, the rock album "Jesus Christ Superstar" was released to an enormous success that signaled that it was the seekers of spirituality who would have the last laugh.

*Ahl* means family, and the centrality of family values to Muslims is something that has not completely been lost in the West. On the contrary, I believe that the dysfunctional families of television are the perceptions of Hollywood and New York and not the reality of Middle America. I do not deny that the family has declined in importance in the West—in substantial ways pushed out of its function as the building block of society by the growth of the Welfare state and mass schooling. No longer do children see it their duty to care for their aged parents. That's the job of Social Security and Medicare. But like men who leave the mothers of their children to raise them on assistance from the state, such changes in attitude are not inherent in the American heritage, they are bred out of contemporary cultural forces that seek to disassociate the freedom of choice with the responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. If you *ask* most Americans what they think of family values they still think highly of them.

*Adl* means justice. The Qur'an emphasizes justice strongly. In the Arabic language map the notion of justice lies near the heart of the notion of religiosity, so that the word for religion, *dîn*, connotes justice itself. It is true, as Muslims have hastened to emphasize since Sept. 11, that *salâm*, the opening word of the Muslims greeting means peace and that it comes from the same root as the name of the religion, Islam. But so does *sil'm*

which means security. Islam teaches, and we would all do well to learn, that without justice there is no peace.

The Capitalist system has been very successful in the accumulation of material goods. Islam has no objection to material prosperity. *Falâh* means prosperity, and following a Qur'anic injunction, Muslims routinely pray for "good in this world and good in the Hereafter" (2:201). In the Islamic worldview material goods are not evil, but morally neutral. What you have is of no significance: what counts is how did you get it and what you are going to do with it now that you have it? I believe this is an attitude most Westerners could understand.

But what about the value of tolerance? Does not *jihâd* by definition rule out tolerance? *Jihâd* simply means struggle. One can engage in *jihâd* for good or bad purposes. The Qur'an only endorses *jihâd fî sabîl Allah* (struggle in the path of God). This can, but does not necessarily, mean military struggle, but in any case it cannot be struggle against justice and the other good values of which we speak. It may be a struggle for tolerance and the rights of the oppressed, but under no circumstances should it be against them. *Jihâd* is not an action but an intensity with which an action is pursued. The actions endorsed by Islam are *salahât*, good deeds: "To each is a goal to which God turns him; then strive together (as in a race) toward all that is good" (2:148). Accordingly, the Muslim affinity for tradition is properly understood as a resistance to human invention of new religious traditions and not a resistance to scientific or technological innovation. For hundreds of years Muslims led the world in such innovations. If they would reassert their right to original critical thinking, they might do so again.

Cynics in the West say that democracy is not valued by Muslims while cynics among the Muslims say that brotherhood is not valued in the West. It is true that Muslims have done poorly at building democratic institutions, as it is also true that Westerners have done poorly at establishing brotherhood that crosses ethnic, racial, and class lines. In my vision this is an opportunity to teach one another (and to learn from each other's mistakes).

If the West shall be judged on its ability to put behind it notions of supremacy (especially racial supremacy), Muslims shall be judged on their treatment of women. It is often said in defense of Islam that Muslim women received greater respect for their rights from the beginning than Western women. For example, Islam granted women a right of inheritance when Western women couldn't own property at all. That was then and this is now. Muslim criticism of the problems women face in the West is irrelevant to the fact that Muslim women are denied their rights under Islamic law. Western claims that Muslim daughters are only entitled to half the inheritance of Muslim sons and Muslims rebuttals that the equity of the Islamic system lies in the fact that women are maintained by men both miss the cruel reality that Muslim women often get none of the inheritance and are not properly cared for either. Debates as to whether adultery is or is not a capital crime in Islam miss the cruel reality that whatever punishments Muslim governments impose for sexual misdeeds, they are disproportionately imposed on women (as in America punishments for various crimes, death penalty included, are disproportionately imposed on black people.) In other words, Muslim women get neither equity nor equality.

Of course, Western women have achieved neither as well, but overall, Muslim women are so far behind that unless the gap is narrowed, Muslims shall remain vulnerable as to their commitment to justice and equity.

It is a common thing to hear it said that liberty is not a value at all to Muslims. I think this is due to a very serious misunderstanding. An acquaintance articulated this misunderstanding after we shared a meal at a recent conference, when, because he could tell from my body-language that I disapproved of his wine-drinking, he inferred that this somehow meant that I would favor imposing prohibition of alcohol on him even though he did not share my religion. The horrifying notion that anyone who has values must wish to forcibly, even violently impose them on others has driven the world into its current state of relativism, which is the real source of its malaise. Yes, the Qur'an prohibits me from drinking wine, but it also prohibits me from coercing others in to my way of life: "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256).

The salvation of the world lies in the abandonment of aggression, rather than the abandonment of values. It is in this principle of non-aggression that my vision for a better world lies. The idea that one is entitled to defend oneself, but not to aggress against others is a truly universal ideal found in both Islam (e.g., 2:190, 2:256, etc.) and in the Western Enlightenment. It is one of the highest values, an ethical corollary of *tawhîd* and the moral pre-supposition behind the notion of political liberty. In my vision, actualization of this ideal is the key to peace.

To achieve this, we need an intra-civilizational dialogue in which Westerners and Muslims confront people within our respective civilizations who do not appreciate this principle and convince them that its implementation is a duty worthy of *jihâd*. Managers of development projects in the Muslim world or of offices with diverse staffs anywhere are in an opportune position to encourage such a dialogue at the grass roots and enhance their managerial effectiveness in the process.

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