
Kinship in Thought between Islam and
the West

An earlier version of this paper was
presented at the Iqbal Day Symposium
in Copenhagen, on November 14, 2010.

The topic of this symposium, “Kinship in Thought between Islam and the West,” is both important and urgent; the reason for this is two-fold: first, there are many people today, all around the world, who claim and believe that no kinship actually exists between Islam and the West, least of all in the area of thought; and second, these same people are likely to act in ways that most of us will find troublesome, if not outright dangerous and even reprehensible. Given this state of affairs, anything we can do to show that the truth is otherwise, that a significant amount of kinship does exist between Islam and the West, will be a valuable service.

Before going further, I would like to make a few preliminary remarks on each of the four key terms that appear in the topic: (1) thought, (2) kinship, (3) Islam, (4) the West.

First, what we call “thought” typically arises in response to a problem, and aims at solving it. We become aware of a problem when we experience *feelings* of unhappiness, discomfort, or irritation. Such negative or undesirable feelings indicate that some *need* of ours is not being met. An unfulfilled need is another name for a “problem,” and a problem is precisely what stimulates thought.

If we agree that the purpose of thought is to solve problems, i.e., to help us meet our unfulfilled needs and thereby overcome our feelings of unhappiness, discomfort, or irritation, then we have a reasonable standard for judging the value of any given thought. Insofar as a particular thought is able to help us address the problem at hand, we may identify that thought as “true.” Insofar as a particular thought is not able to help us address the problem, or makes it even worse, we may describe that thought as “false.” In case some of us feel that the terms “true” and “false” are too strong, we may substitute them with “more valuable” and “less valuable” without any loss of significance.

The second key term is “kinship.” What we call “kinship” indicates a relation of commonality, continuity, or overlap between two sides. A “kinship in thought” implies the emergence of a similar or identical thought in two different contexts; this may be due to coincidence, similarity of circumstances, mutual borrowing, derivation from a common source, or some combination of these factors.

The third key word is “Islam.” Unfortunately, the word “Islam” has come to carry so many different meanings that it is hardly possible to untangle them from each other. But regardless of how we may define “Islam,” one thing is certain: it is not a monolithic and unchanging entity that speaks with a single voice. The same is obviously true of the fourth key word in our topic, “the West.” This too can have a

variety of different meanings; just as “Islam” is not one thing, neither is “the West.”

For the limited purposes of the present discussion, we may take the last two terms, “Islam” and “the West,” as very approximate ways of signifying two social and cultural *contexts* that have relatively fuzzy boundaries. This means that when we talk about a “kinship in thought between Islam and the West,” we cannot possibly mean that “Islam” as one entity and “the West” as another entity are somehow similar. We can only mean that some specific elements of “Islam” are similar to some specific elements of “the West.” To be more accurate, we are talking about a similarity or continuity or overlap between a set of thoughts emerging in “Islam” (conceived as a social and cultural context) and a set of thoughts emerging in “the West” (conceived as a social and cultural context).

As already suggested, the demonstration of such kinship is a positive and much-needed service in view of the contemporary state of the world, where the conventional wisdom tends to accentuate their mutual differences and even posits an essential incompatibility.

Almost twenty years ago, an American historian of Islam, Prof. Bernard Lewis, published an essay in which he explained the causes behind what he believed to be a global wave of anti-Western anger among Muslims. According to Lewis:

It should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.¹

This essay was widely read, but “clash of civilizations” did not immediately become a household phrase. It rose to prominence when, less than three years later, an American political scientist, Prof. Samuel Huntington, published an essay explaining the geo-politics of a post-Cold War world in terms of warring civilizations. According to Huntington:

Conflict along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1,300 years. This centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline. It could become more virulent.²

Both Lewis and Huntington spoke in their respective essays as defenders and representatives of

something they called “the West.” As one might expect, at least a section of Muslims agrees with them; they too make the same claim, except that they speak as defenders and representatives of something they call “Islam.” Let me quote one Muslim opinion:

I say that the West’s occupation of our country is old, yet new, and that the confrontation and conflict between us and them started centuries ago. This confrontation and conflict will go on because the conflict between truth and falsehood will continue until Judgment Day.³

This last statement is from Osama bin Laden.

Obviously, the three individuals quoted above are coming from very different backgrounds. Yet, there is an uncanny similarity in their respective styles of reasoning. Each of them assumes that there is such an entity as “the West,” and that this entity is in a state of conflict or warfare with another entity called “Islam.” In this viewpoint, “Islam” and “the West” are separate and distinct *things* with no overlap between them, no common grounds, no “kinship.” In fact, the conflict or warfare between the two sides is precisely due to the fact that they are mutually exclusive; they are rivals or competitors because they are both seeking the same prize—world domination—the very nature of which precludes any negotiation, compromise, or sharing. It is further assumed that only one of these two sides is valid and true, which requires the other side to submit or cease to exist. In effect, “Islam” and “the West” are locked together in a centuries old struggle for survival and domination that can only end in a scenario where one side wins and the other loses. There is no third option, no middle ground.

Needless to say, this viewpoint is more prevalent than we would like to believe, and it is probably as common among Muslims as it is among non-Muslims. Equally obvious is the fact that there is something profoundly wrong with this viewpoint, for those who adopt it tend to act in ways that increase human suffering rather than decrease it. Here we have an example of a “thought” whose adherents are found in both “Islam” and “the West.” Yet, this is not the kind of “kinship” that we find very desirable. It does not solve problems, but is itself a problem that needs to be solved; it does not help meet our needs, but is itself a hindrance that prevents us from meeting our needs.

It is true that the “clash of civilizations” thesis has, over the years, received a close and extensive scrutiny from a wide variety of scholars who have fully exposed its numerous flaws and weaknesses.⁴ The problem, however, is that academic criticisms of the “clash of civilizations” thesis have not reduced the number of people who either subscribe to this viewpoint, or are likely to find it attractive and believable.

Even though the thesis has been analyzed, critiqued, and rejected by some of the most brilliant intellectuals in disciplines like political science, history, and Islamic Studies, it continues to inform the attitudes and policies of some of the most powerful and/or most desperate individuals across the globe. It is a strange phenomenon that a flawed and inaccurate belief, particularly one that has been deconstructed a million times, continues to incarnate itself in true believers who feel inspired to shape the world according to its mandate.

The answer to this puzzle, in my view, is that academic criticisms have very effectively refuted the “clash of civilizations” thesis itself, but they have done very little to address the style of reasoning that underlies this thesis and that continues to provide it with an aura of plausibility. In fact, individuals like Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, and Osama bin Laden represent the least of our problems; they, or their ideas, are not as troublesome as the style of reasoning that all three seem to employ when they make their arguments. So long as the particular reasoning style is not identified and critiqued, the notion of the “clash of civilizations” will not go away; instead, it will keep raising its nefarious head in a variety of disguises. In fact, so long as the underlying style of reasoning remains unconscious it will continue to produce or empower not just one but a whole range of problematic ideas, leading to varying degrees of human suffering.

As suggested earlier, what we call “thought” arises in the human mind in response to some problem that it seeks to address. Consequently, the real value of a particular thought lies not in its logical consistency or its elegance, but in the extent to which it can actually help solve the problem at hand. This means that when we talk about a “kinship in thought between Islam and the West,” our aim shouldn’t be to find just *any* kind of continuity and overlap; instead, we ought to be looking for continuity and overlap in relation to that kind of thought which would have the best chances of solving the most pressing problems that we are facing today. In order to do so, we would have to start from the actual *problems* and then work our way backwards to find the kind of thought that is most suitable for addressing them. After all, we cannot appreciate the value of any given *answer* if we have not already realized the importance of the *question* that it seeks to address.

What are the most pressing problems that humankind is facing? This is a relatively easy question to answer, since our common problems are extremely obvious to any discerning observer. Today, one does not need to be a genius to realize that humankind is facing a crisis of unprecedented magnitude, a crisis that is threatening to unravel the very structure of civilization.

While *Homo sapiens* have been living and thriving on earth for 200,000 years, and possibly even longer, the specific form of cultural and social organization that we call “civilization” is barely 10,000 years old. Canadian author Ronald Wright defines civilization as “a specific kind of culture” that is characterized by a large and complex society “based on the domestication of plants, animals, and human beings” and typically involving “towns, cities, governments, social classes, and specialized professions.”⁵ Ronald Wright uses the word “civilization” in the singular; he implies—correctly, I think—that in the present moment the entire humanity is in the same boat. It is absurd to talk about one civilization coming to dominate another; or one civilization surviving the challenges of this era while others facing doom and destruction. Whatever cultural differences may exist today, contemporary challenges are characterized by the intertwining of the local and the global in such a way that their mutual differences are becoming less and less relevant. Consequently, and as a matter of practical reason, we must learn to imagine humanity as part of a single civilization, which, as a whole, is going through a crucial phase in its history. Ronald Wright argues that, depending upon how things turn out, it is civilization *as such*—and not this or that civilization—that will either survive or fail to survive.

It seems there are three fundamental problems that threaten the viability of human civilization into the distant future; these are (1) political and economic inequality, (2) environmental destruction, and (3) violent conflict.

There are several reasons why we need to focus on these particular problems. First, all three are the inevitable outcome of the same logic that makes the very project of civilization possible. In its initial stages, civilization gave rise to these problems at a relatively small scale; as it continued to spread and grow over the subsequent millennia, these problems continued to increase in complexity and scale. Modernity, through its institutionalization of secularism and capitalism, as well as science and technology, was once believed to possess the capacity for reducing and even eliminating these problems. The results, however, have been disappointing. During the last two centuries or so, there has been an unusually rapid increase in the efficiency and effectiveness with which human beings are able to control and manipulate the world; while this has led to many desirable results, there has also been a corresponding increase in the magnitude of the problems that threaten civilization. It seems that with every gain we make in the direction of “progress,” the crisis of civilization becomes more serious and more acute.

Second, these three problems are deeply interrelated, so much so that none of them can be understood, let alone successfully addressed, without taking into account its relations to the other two. Political and

economic inequality is usually maintained with the help of direct violence or the threat of such violence. If direct violence is identified in terms of its effects, i.e., loss of life and/or diminishment in the quality of life, then any system of political and economic inequality should likewise be identified as violent insofar as it leads to the same consequences. By definition, systems of political and economic inequality are characterized by gross disparities in the distribution of the means to support life, all of which can be traced back to some form of natural resource. The maintenance of such disparities requires extraction and consumption of natural resources on a scale that quickly outstrips the earth's capacity to recover and renew itself. Worsening environmental degradation threatens the life-chances of large groups of people, increasing the chances of rebellious and violent behavior on their part and requiring, in turn, increasingly stringent "security" measures that further contribute to the vicious cycle.

Finally, all three are universal problems, affecting human individuals and communities all over the earth. One requires a human and a planetary viewpoint in order to recognize them as the most pressing problems that are threatening civilization. In contrast, a viewpoint informed by our commitment to a particular nation-state, an ethnicity, a race, or a religious community will usually help us identify problems that are most relevant to the particular object of our loyalty. Such a parochial viewpoint generates a competitive attitude that may help solve some problems in one part of the world while disregarding, or, what is more often the case, worsening the same or another problem in the rest of the world. By definition, a parochial viewpoint does not take the entire *system* into account; instead, it only allows us to see particular parts of a system as if they existed and functioned in isolation from the whole. Consequently, our efforts at establishing order in one part of the system inevitably produce an increase in chaos in a different part of the system. Most cultures have been able to disregard the reality of our deep interconnectedness for several thousand years, but that attitude can no longer be maintained.

Among modern Muslim thinkers, Muhammad Iqbal stands out as one of first to recognize the need for a human and planetary perspective; he is also one of the first to recognize the nature and seriousness of the contemporary crisis of civilization. While he thinks and writes and speaks as a committed Muslim, and also as an Indian, deep down he is a citizen of the world. His basic agenda may be identified in one word, "reconstruction." Iqbal sets for himself, and for his followers, the task of what he calls the "reconstruction" of Islam—by which he mean the "reconstruction" of Islamic thought, the Islamic self, the Islamic community, and Islamic institutions. Yet, he does not conceive of this task of "reconstruction" in parochial or competitive terms; instead, he believes that the "reconstruction" of Islam is the necessary prelude for saving human civilization from its own suicidal tendencies. In Iqbal's own words:

Humanity needs three things today—a spiritual interpretation of the universe, spiritual emancipation of the individual, and basic principles of a universal import directing the evolution of human society on a spiritual basis.⁶

Notice that he uses the word “humanity,” rather than “Muslims” or “Indians” or “Asians.” For Iqbal, the modern relevance of Islam stems from the fact that Muslims possess a living revelation, in the form of the Qur’an, which offers them precisely what *humanity* as a whole needs today with an unprecedented urgency. The idea behind his project of “reconstruction” is not to enable one religion or one culture to conquer and subdue the rest of the world, nor is to win the “clash of civilizations” on behalf of Islam. For Iqbal, the goal of the “reconstruction” of Islam is to make available to humanity at large what *all of us* need in order to address the contemporary crisis of civilization, in a form that *all of us* can appreciate and embrace. Iqbal’s passion for Islam is an expression of humanism at its best.

Iqbal’s work is of utmost relevance today because it can help us overcome the kind of faulty reasoning we find in such dangerous ideas as the “clash of civilizations” thesis. Iqbal can help us see that humanity is facing far bigger problems than the conflict between some narrow-minded Muslims and some equally narrow-minded Westerners. With Iqbal as our guide, we can transcend the parochial and competitive mindset that makes us approach our problems in terms of our loyalty to a particular nation-state, a race, an ethnicity, or a religious community. He can help us realize that human beings are pretty much the same everywhere; they face the same kinds of issues, have the same set of needs, and find satisfaction in the same kind of solutions. By using Iqbal’s insights, and—more importantly—by applying his method and approach, we can locate the root causes of the contemporary crisis of civilization, as well as begin to address them effectively.

As already mentioned, the three main problems that constitute the contemporary crisis of civilization—political and economic inequality, environmental destruction, and violent conflict—are the same problems that humanity has been facing since the birth of civilization. In this background, Iqbal can help us see that two important changes mark our own specific situation: first, certain elements in modernity have led to a continued exacerbation of these problems at a scale never before seen in history, and second, certain elements in modernity have made it possible and even inevitable that we approach these problems from a human and planetary—and, indeed, a religious and spiritual—perspective. Iqbal’s response to modernity is therefore a qualified “yes” as well as a qualified “no.” Insofar as modernity may be associated with what we call “the West,” Iqbal shows us that there is a significant degree of kinship

between Islam (as he understands it) and certain elements in Western thought. He is well-known for having claimed that the intellectual aspects of Western culture are “only a further development of some of the most important phases of the culture of Islam.”⁷ This judgment remains valid despite Iqbal’s trenchant criticisms of Western imperialism, materialism, and capitalism, and his dislike for what he calls “the dazzling exterior” of Western culture. Overall, Iqbal is among the very few non-Western thinkers who demonstrate an independent, judicious, and remarkably objective attitude vis-à-vis the modern West.

For Iqbal, modernity has not only aggravated the problems to which Islam can contribute some form of solutions, but modernity can also highlight and empower certain positive and desirable tendencies within Islam that have either remained dormant so far or have not yet been fully realized. When Iqbal emphasizes the “empirical attitude of the Qur’an,” the “republican” spirit of Islam, the prophetic teaching about the universal “brotherhood” of humanity, or the social meaning of the “finality of prophethood,” he demonstrates precisely the kind of “kinship in thought” that can help us address the contemporary crisis of civilization. According to Iqbal, the real purpose of Islam has been only *partially* actualized in history up to this point; modernity has brought to the fore not only new challenges and problems for Islam, but it is also offering Islam entirely new opportunities for actualizing its dormant or partially realized possibilities. From Iqbal’s viewpoint, modernity is forcing Islam to live up to its own highest potential, to face the challenge of living with courage and creativity during a period of unprecedented crisis, and to even lead humanity out of that crisis. He is convinced that an increasingly fuller realization of Islam’s highest possibilities *coincides* with the realization of the highest possibilities inherent within humankind itself, so much so that a “reconstruction” of Islam is merely another name for the renewal of humanity.

Perhaps most importantly, Iqbal’s work can help us recognize that a great deal of what has gone wrong with the ten thousand year experiment of “civilization,” and particularly with the two hundred year experiment of “modernity,” ultimately stems from a particular style of reasoning. I am referring to the same style of reasoning that is found in the arguments of men like Bernard Lewis, Samuel Huntington, and Osama bin Laden. The notion that “Islam” and “the West” are two distinct entities that have nothing in common is of the same logical form as the notion that “religion” and “science” are two distinct entities that have nothing in common, or that “tradition” and “modernity” are two distinct entities that have nothing in common. In arguments of this sort, an unbridgeable gap is posited between two abstract concepts, both of which are assumed to be well-circumscribed entities that are identifiable as such, and it is assumed that only one side of the given dualism can be true or valid. The “clash of civilizations” thesis, in both its Muslim and Western versions, is a typical example of this kind of reasoning, which also underlies a variety of other supremacist ideologies like racism, sexism, and nationalism.

Iqbal's work provides sophisticated models of how to recognize and avoid such pitfalls of human reasoning. Even a cursory examination of Iqbal's work will show that he is concerned with overcoming a wide range of artificially reified dualism because he finds them particularly pernicious in their human consequences. Examples include Permanence and Change, God and the World, Time and Eternity, Thought and Will, Religion and Philosophy, Intuition and Logic, Religion and Civilization, Matter and Spirit, Thought and Feeling, Tradition and Modernity, Religion and Science, Humanity and God, Rationality and Mysticism, and so on. Iqbal's procedure is to show that the assumption of discontinuity between the two sides of a given dualism is the result of incomplete information and/or faulty reasoning; he then provides the missing information and/or corrects the argument so that a higher form of continuity or "kinship" is revealed that substitutes the original assumption of an unbridgeable gap.

In this background, the very fact that we are discussing the "kinship in thought between Islam and the West" constitutes an undertaking that Iqbal would enthusiastically endorse. Insofar as Iqbal's thought can help us recognize this as well as other artificially reified dualisms, it can also help us understand the nature of some of the most pressing problems that such a style of reasoning produces. And, to the extent that Iqbal's thought actually helps us *solve* some of these problems in one way or another, to that extent we could even come to appreciate the "truth," or, at the very least, the "value" of his thought.

¹ Bernard Lewis. "The Roots of Muslim Rage" The Atlantic Monthly, September 1990.

² Samuel Huntington. "The Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993.

³ "Resist the New Rome" Audio Tape released on January 4, 2004. Cf., James Howarth, Bruce Lincoln, and Osama bin Laden. 2005. Messages to the World: Statements of Osama bin Laden. London & New York: Verso.

⁴ See, for example, Emran Qureshi and Michael Sells (Eds). 2003. The New Crusades: Constructing the Muslim Enemy. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵ Ronald Wright. 2004. A Short History of Progress. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.

⁶ Muhammad Iqbal. 1986. The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 142. Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.