

KINSHIP IN THOUGHT BETWEEN ISLAM AND THE WEST
A Symposium on Iqbal Day at Copenhagen on 14 November 2010
By Sarosh Alamgir

Islam and the West!!! ---- A rather strange topic, is it not? Islam is a religion – a matter of faith And West, a geographic distinction ... It is not even comparing Apples with Oranges, but as strange as --- Apples with --- I don't know ---- baskets??? but no, thinking of it carefully ... Islam is not the name of mere faith or a personal relation with God; it is the name of a character, guided by what is believed to be a holistic universal outlook, and animated by an objective ideology -- regulated through a legal framework, encompassing both, individual as well as social aspects. Putting it shortly, Islam is a way of life, aiming for a higher ideal. West, similarly, is not just a compass, or geographical distinction – This geographical distinction, despite the diversity that it incorporates, is characterised by certain traits, and certain political, religious and cultural trends; In this context it represents a set of ideologies, values and legacies. Contrasting the two systems, which are not in effect mutually exclusive, there is a myriad of aspects that craves dialogue and discussion; ideological, social, historical, economical and most of all political aspects. There are shared ideals, and also the dimensions where a further consolidation is most desirable. Since it is not possible to cover even one of these, let alone all, in the available time, I shall highlight only a couple of points on the kinship we share, mainly from the ideological perspective, and also emphasising the fact that the subject of discussion is not West and the Muslim world, but the West and Islam, often confused together to promote certain interests by “*religiousizing*” the purely political issues, among other things. This subject, “West and Islam” relates to more fundamental issues than the ones addressed by the dialogue between “West and the Muslim world”.

Speaking of the West and the Muslim world, which as I said is not the topic today, but certainly provides a convenient point of departure, they say “*clash of civilisations*” ---- clash of *civilisations* ---- ----- not to me ----- deducting certain state and political elements, to me it is largely and fundamentally only a clash of ignorance --- through and through ... at both ends.

Looking at the history, I do not see a clash, when I look at the golden chain from Alkhwazimi to Alkindi to Omar Khayam, to Fibonacci to Newton to John Newmann, --- I see a continuum ---- from Jabir Ibn-e-Hayyan to Roger Bacon, from Razi to Beruni to Einstein, Idrisi to Piri Reis to Mercator to David Harvey ---- I see a beautiful spectrum spread from Avicenna to Ibn-Al-haytham to William Harvey to Edward Jenner --- what I see is a spectrum of modern discoveries ----- what I see is these continua of the scientific and technological progress -----

But is this chain of connected achievements all that important? Does it not appear a bit too shallow or too narrow a view into the Kinship of the two paradigms? Yes, this is not it that is important here; Important is the shared fibre that underlies these shared advancements let me explain ...

If we have to name the defining characteristics of the West today, a heightened sense of *Action, Movement and objectivity* on one hand, --- and on the other, a sense of *freedom* will be among the first ones; these are the two shared values which constitute the focus of my talk, and It is the former, action, movement and objectivity, that relates to my earlier propositions ----- It is to a great extent the empirical attitude of the west that has distinguished it from the rest of the world in the recent history, also being the main factor of its scientific progress today. On the other hand in Islam, Quran turns the sense of action into a golden rule, “Lais-al-Insaana Illa Ma Sa’a” (53/39) – For

man it is only that for which he strives. Then at different places it goes on and on giving Action the key importance in every regard along with the ideology. Further it goes on to inspire man to study the world surrounding him; it speaks of mountains and oceans, and their formation, unicellulars and mammals, the making of clouds and rain, clay and water as the origin of life, the evolution, and the process of reproduction, the planetary motion and their orbits, air currents and atmospheric dynamics ---- it calls all of these the signs from God, but only for the thoughtful ones ---- Quran exhorts its followers to reflect and contemplate in the universe and the various sciences, and even says that only the ones who *do*, can truly appreciate the grandness and objectivity of God's plan and creations. And then also, that all this has been subjected to us, the humans (*Wa Sakhkhara lakum Ma Fissamawaati wamaa Filardi Jami'amminhu. Inna fee zalika la-ayatin liqawmin yatafakkaroon (45-Jathia/13)*). It was not a coincidence, but *this* inspiration and empirical attitude of Quran which was taken with great respect and responsibility by the Muslims, and they went on to be the founders of virtually every modern science known to man. And this continued till it was here in Europe that the west shrug off the spell of intellectual stagnation and took over this noble responsibility with great dedication and sincerity, taking it to new heights ----- What I see is a continuum ---- what I see.. is a shared character.

I shall try to close with a brief mention of the other defining characteristic of the West today -- that is freedom. Although true semantics and dynamics of freedom make a great point of discourse between Islam and the west; I shall keep the discussion to the intended value at each end. The notion of freedom has no doubt become the proud insignia of the west in recent times ---- be it the freedom of thought, the freedom of speech or liberal democracy, it is considered a signature value of the western culture by most ---- now once again I am barring certain state and political factors. Quran, again, turns the question of freedom into an eternal rule, "*Laa- Ikraha Fid-Deen (2-Albaqara/256)*" – There is no compulsion, no forcing in Deen, or roughly speaking, the religion. In the political sphere, it gives the golden democratic principal, "*Wa-Amruhum shoora baynahum (42-Shura/38)*", that is, the affairs are to be conducted with collective consultation and counselling. All in all, Quran gave a framework for social and political systems with no trace of despotism, where the caliph did not possess a right to rule, but only a duty to govern, based on the laws and people's will – the framework that gave the world its first non-imperial and major welfare state.

At the end, there are several ways to look at the question of Kinship between Islam and the Religious or Ideological others. I have only spoken of some of the shared values in the brief time that I had, and left the other very important viewpoints for the intellectually more capable ones to discuss with more freedom of time. I must admit that the story does not end here, and the ideologies go much farther than the shared character and wisdom we discussed; I must admit that I have only shared a *part* of the whole truth, but we must realise that this is also the *neglected part* of the truth; I wish I had the time to explain HOW this part of the truth is important for both sides, but I shall leave only sharing that the idea is not to converge the two ideologies, but *rediscovering* an *existing* shared pool of understanding, where we can immerse our respect and appreciation for each other, and for the rest of the truth, without needing to convince each other on a part thereof.

Thank you ...

Q/A With the Audience

Question from Mr. Bashy Quraishy:

I have a question to Sarosh, which has two parts:

- 1- Islam and the West are not directly comparable, Islam being a religion, and West being an artificial conception of a regional unit. This comparison is not only misleading, but can also be dangerous. What are your comments on this?
- 2- Being a politician I always look for the solutions that we can apply to the society in real. We have discussed various things in this symposium, but did not suggest a solution. If you think that Islam has a solution, then what is that? Why not share how the west can benefit from it, and how it can be applied to our problems?

Answer by Sarosh:

1- Lack of coherence between the terms, "the West" and "Islam":

a)- I totally agree that from a technical standpoint, 'Islam' and 'the West' do not offer any taxonomical symmetry for a formal contrast, however, I am also sure that this is not the first time that you have heard of these terms together in such connection. The continuity and the ubiquity of this combination suggest that outside the "perfect world" of academe and intellect, a viewpoint exists with an enduring perception that defines the social outlook to a great extent, however anomalous it might appear to us.

b)- When used in such a context, "West" does not only represent a region, but a whole set of ideologies, values and legacies attributed to it; this is despite the great diversity "the West" incorporates, that this geographical distinction is in concept characterised by certain traits, and certain religious, political and cultural trends, and this is exactly what a person has in mind, with a certain degree of deviation, when he uses "West" in such a context. Similarly, Islam, when used in such expressions, never means merely a belief system, or set of rituals, but bears all the implications of the ideological, social and political effects it aims at producing, or the ones found in cultures claiming an affiliation to it (there are certain variations to this, which we can discuss, but I guess the overarching idea is clear enough). Taken with these connotations (or, as in some peoples mind, taken in the context of Christendom vs. *Islamdom*) "West" and "Islam" not only weave a symmetric plane for comparison, but render it imperative even if for the counter of the popular perception. Having said that, I do not think I should state anything regarding the mind-set finding a clash between these two, to someone like yourself who is way more insightful and experienced in countering this mind-set at every level of the society.

c)- I am a big fan of using the popular constructs of ideas and language, as a point of departure, as means for a dialogue more engaged and connected with the society and the ground realities. In my opinion, we ought not to neglect the popular perceptions even if the aim is to refute those on any grounds. One must communicate at the same plane of discourse if the goal is a meaningful and objective dialogue; this is also my biggest criticism at our intellectuals and academe in general that their plane of discourse is too disconnected from the social intellectual norms to produce any significant effects on the current social dynamics; our academe is hence, self-absorbed and self-seeking (I do not buy the idea of intellectual-discrimination being inevitable at the extent that it is practiced, and I have successfully experienced otherwise).

d)- Based on the above, the popular conception of the phrase "Islam and the West" gives enough grounds to make it a point of reference for a healthy dialogue, without resorting to the dictionary meanings and rejecting the notions which otherwise are a bit too "real" among the grassroots. One goal of such a dialogue might also be to show how these expressions are technically wrong, but as long as the perceptions are real, tied up with one expression or another, this is not of much significance or immediate urgency to me. Consolidating the two sides at the ideological and conceptual level is much more important than the artificial veneers and patches of naive philosophy.

2- Solution to the Problem:

This is a long debate and can certainly be addressed from many different angles; A real solution in such a case has to be multipronged, needing efforts at political, social and religious levels; I wish I had the time to discuss some of these in the symposium. I shall save you a huge bulk of text on this, however, the single point that my small, informal talk at the symposium highlighted, *was* a small part of the solution at the social tier. The overarching idea was to highlight the characteristic and ideological kinship we have, but which has been extremely neglected in the recent times, and blurred

by the mutually contrasting elements, particularly the exteriors. The idea is to neutralise the effect of acrimonious extremes by developing a shared pool of understanding where we can immerse our mutual respect and appreciation, not only for each other but also for the less agreeing parts of our character and ideologies. This approach has shown to be most effective in practice at the social level, and while I could not get to the point of explaining how this is important, and how this must be used, I am sure it is pretty obvious anyways.

Before this first step of moving forward to accept each other's realities with a certain degree of respect and excluding an element of competition, I do not see much promise for real positive effects in any side coming forward with a claim of having a remedy, or showing off its advantage in terms of the level of agreeability or willingness to embrace etc, no matter how true the claim is, and how eloquently it is presented. Once again, I am speaking with a view of the grassroots perceptions, which might not be in full agreement with the academic viewpoint.