Perspectives of Cultural Interaction in the Inter-Faith Societies
Of the Eastern Mediterranean

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Abstract

This paper reviews some aspects of cultural interaction within the inter-faith societies of the Eastern Mediterranean region; a region in which the three monotheistic religions, namely: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, have emanated and prospered achieving a powerful role in defining people’s values and identities, and helping them to coexist and interact together, for centuries, with tolerance and co-operation. By the early seventh century, although Islam had become the most prevalent religion in the Eastern Mediterranean region and throughout Arabia, a few tribes still adhered to their Christian or Jewish faiths, and were free to perform their tradition within a society that encouraged, and still does, multiculturalism and freedom of faith. Thus, the first part of the paper highlights some principles and values of the Islamic religion which affirm tolerance, unity of humanity and fair dealing within multicultural and multi-religious societies. The second part illustrates multiculturalism in Jordan, one of the countries of the Middle East. It also examines some aspects of inter-faith interaction between Christian and Muslim Arabs and indicates how religious differences between them are compensated by cultural commonalties that promote respect, tolerance and co-operation. Finally, with the accelerating process of Globalization and the emergence of certain theories which anticipate a clash between civilizations that is based on cultural and religious identifications the paper concludes by confirming the need for a true inter-faith dialogue between representatives of the three monotheistic religions which would alleviate such assumed clashes, promote peace, and ensure a global cultural co-existence.

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I

In his speech accepting the Philadelphia Liberty Medal, Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic, has neatly noted:

“Politicians are rightly worried by the problem of finding the key to ensure the survival of a civilization that is global and multicultural. The central political task of the final years of this century, then, is the creation of a new model of co-existence among the various cultures, peoples, races, and religious spheres within a single interconnected civilization. Yes, it is clearly necessary to invent organizational structures appropriate to the multicultural age.”

The acknowledgement of the need to ensure co-existence among the world’s various cultures and religions is undeniable. This fact has granted the study of culture an enormous importance as a mean to apprehend international relations based on understanding (or misunderstanding) among nations and societies from different cultural areas.

In social anthropology, the term ‘culture’ is coined to represent the values of any specific human group that have been acquired throughout their lifetime and are passed from one generation to the next. Hence, culture is considered a collective phenomenon, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. Accordingly, as almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time, people unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within themselves corresponding to different levels of culture. Among these, the national, regional and religious levels are identified. Thus, it is obvious that religion represents values as well as faith, and once it has settled, it reinforces the previously existing value patterns on the basis of which it was adopted, by making these elements into core elements in its teachings.

Consequently, religion cannot be considered primarily as a moral or personal spiritual force, but a social institution that is shaped and reflected by its political, cultural and economic contexts.

II

For centuries, the Eastern Mediterranean region, which is termed from a western perspective as the Middle East, has been the hub of cultural and trade exchanges in a vast area extending from Morocco at the north west of Africa to China at the north east of Asia. One also cannot deny that the presence of different religious groups, within the borders of this region, is a historical fact, for the revealed Abrahamic religions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are all eastern in origin. They all emanated and prospered in the Middle East where the holy books were revealed and the prophets had taught, bringing down new messages pertaining to the needs of their peoples.

By the early seventh century, polytheistic religions were prevalent throughout the Arabian Peninsula. While a few tribes still adhered to their Christian or Jewish faiths, and were free to perform their tradition, Muslim tribes have, over time, become the
most powerful throughout Arabia. Moreover, when Islam spread from the Arabian Peninsula to other nations, it began to address universal issues pertaining to the existence of different races and nations.

For that reason, the very ancient nature of organised religions in this region has given it a powerful position in defining people's values and identities, and granted it a national as well as a personal, moral and spiritual role.

Therefore, despite catastrophic wars, large and small, that raged throughout the Mediterranean, as Christian Europe and Muslims faced each other in the pre-modern era, it is important that western countries understand how religion in these societies, as it constitutes one of the main components of their culture and national identity, helped, and still does, people to coexist and interact in an environment that promotes tolerance, peace and co-operation.

However, although Islam is the most prevalent and official religion of the Arab society, it should be emphasised that this same society is multiracial, multireligious, multilingual and multicultural within the framework of a unity that encompasses a system and a life which allows and regulates such pluralism. Islam has always been able to accommodate this diversity due to its openness, tolerance, flexibility, and solid bases which deem respect for other monotheistic religions, undeviating insistence on the execution of justice and protection of the individuals’ rights, irrespective of their religion, colour or race. Hence, Islam is, in many ways, a return to the original doctrine of pure monotheism that characterised the early Judeo-Christian tradition. For that reason, certain principles such as unity of humanity, unity of religion, freedom of faith and fair dealing, which encourage pluralism and multiculturalism in Islam, are reflected in Islamic teachings that are established in several verses of the Holy Qur’an.

The Qur’an sympathetically states: *To each one of you We have set up a code (of legislation) and a way (of worship). Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation, but that He might test you in what he has given you. Therefore, race for the performance of righteous deeds. Your return is to Allah, Who will inform you concerning your differences* (Q.5: 48-116).

This verse, unambiguously, encourages pluralism. It clearly states that: to each one of you we have set up a code of legislation and a way of worship, and that: if Allah had willed, He would have made you one nation, but obviously he did not, since He wanted to try humans and see whether they could live in peace despite plurality of religions and faiths. We have to live in harmony by way of excelling one another in performing good deeds.

Pluralism is also combined with the unity of humanity in Islamic teachings. God says: *Oh you human beings! We have created you from a male and a female, and We have made you peoples and tribes in order to know each other. Those who are dearest to Allah among you are those who are the most righteous* (Q.49: 13-517).

Another verse shows that Islam is based on freedom of belief for non-Muslims, as well as refusing encroachments it. God says: *There shall be no compulsion in religion; the truth has become discernible from error* (Q.2: 256-42).

Finally, it is noticed that the term ‘*Ahl Al-Kitab*’ (People of the Book), is used in the Holy Qur’an, and which also has been used by earlier Muslims, to denote the term
‘religious minorities’ that is being used today. The following verse reflects fair dealing with People of the Book. God says to Prophet Mohammed in this connection: *To that [reli***gion] you shall call, and be steadfast, as you have been ordered. Do not follow their desires, but say I believe in all the Books that Allah has sent down. God doth command you to render back your trusts to those whom they are due, and when you judge between man and man, that you judge with justice* (Q.4: 58-87).

This statement includes all people and is not confined to Muslims or Arabs alone. But God signalled out the ‘People of the Book’ with a judgement that concerns them when He says to the Prophet: *But say: I believe in the Book which God has sent down; and I am commanded to judge justly between you* (Q.42: 15-484).

### III

Instituted on these values and principles of Islam people, of different races and religions in the Middle East, have coexisted together, for centuries, enjoying the rights and shouldering the duties proscribed for Muslims, except in matters of faith. The doors of a safe and free life were wide open for all ethnic and religious groups, enabling them to become an integral part of the Islamic civilization in an open and tolerant Muslim society. They all lived, worked and had equal opportunities to perform many professions and excel in different fields. Therefore, throughout Islamic history, we find an endless series of contributions by different people in many fields in accordance with the Quranic verse that stresses the concept of the one Ummah (nation) that is made into nations and tribes in order to know each other, and in which the most righteous are the most honoured in the sight of God.

Within the Arab countries of the Middle East, multiculturalism is apparent in Jordan. The majority of 4.4 million Jordanian people are Arabs descending from the various tribes that have migrated to the area over the years from all directions. In addition, there are Circassians, descendants of Muslim refugees from the Tsarist Russian invasion of the Caucasus in the 19th century, and a much smaller group of Chechens, Jordan, also has a small Armenian population. More than 92% of its people are Sunni Muslims and about 6% are Christians. The majority of Christians in Jordan belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, but there are also Greek Catholics, a small Roman Catholic community, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox and a few Protestant denominations. Several small Shi’a and Druze can also be found in Jordan.

Jordan has valued its diverse population and has, consequently, provided for the cultural rights of its entire people. All of Jordan’s ethnic and religious groups have full freedom to perform and participate in their clubs, associations and schools or places of worship. Ethnic groups are also free to teach their own languages. The tradition of tolerance and appreciation for diversity and multiculturalism has long been a hallmark of Jordan and it has helped to provide a stable social foundation on which to build the country.

Inter-faith interaction is particularly evident between Muslim and Christian Arabs of the Middle East, who are in no way aliens to Muslim Arab society; a society whose history and culture they have shared for over fourteen centuries to date, without interruption, and to whose material and moral civilization they have continually contributed, and eminently so, on their own initiative or by trustful request.
Estimated at approximately ten million, Christian Arabs continue to flourish in several countries of the Middle East, in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as among the Arabs of Palestine and Israel. Yet, far more important than their numbers is their social, economic, and cultural visibility. Throughout the Arab world, Christian Arabs of different denominations not only pioneered in different learned professions but also played prominent roles in the politics of other emerging Arab countries where they happened to be found: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and now Palestine. Moreover, and during the Ottoman rule of the region in the nineteenth century, Christians played a leading role in the Arab renaissance of that period, laying the intellectual foundations for the idea of Arab nationalism and effecting a remarkable revival of Arabic humanism.4 In addition, being naturally attuned to the ethos of the West, Christian Arabs, who happened to be articulate, were ideally suited to present the positions of their respective countries - also, the Arab national position in general, on whatever issue-on international platforms. They have normally been entrusted to do this by unanimous Arab consent. Until the present day, Christians remain leading spokespersons for Arab national causes- most notably, the Palestinian Arab cause.5 Cultural commonalities that promote tolerance, respect and co-operation compensate religious differences between Christian and Muslim Arabs. As national and religious identities are both manifestations of the need for belonging, they obviously coincide urging both sides to assert their belonging to one nation that is the Arab nation. Hence, being a Christian or a Muslim does not subsume the individual self-identification in the public discourse. However, it should be noted here that in Lebanon when religion coincided with other social or political factors, it was used as a justification for separation and hostility and, consequently, contributed to armed conflicts and inter-communal tensions during the eighties of the past century.

Most importantly, Christians and Muslims in the Middle East hold the same values that they have acquired from a one national culture. Family orientation of the Arab people, for example, develops from a mixture of Islam and Christian philosophies, both of which stress respect for one’s own family and ancestors. Furthermore, they also share a common language and a common civilization, unified by one history. There are no substantial social, behavioural or moral discrepancies between Arab Christians and their Muslim brothers and sisters. In the course of their daily lives, they share food, homes and the countries they live in, and their children study in the same schools and learn the same lessons. They also share the requirements for their fundamental human needs in basic fields as housing, employment, health care and physical security. And at this stage of history, as the Middle East region is passing through extremely precarious circumstances, because of the inherent transformations and possible changes in the near future, Christian as well as Muslim Arabs share hopes for a genuine, just and comprehensive peace, to which the people of the region will adhere in their quest to protect their security and livelihood.

IV

With the dawn of a new century, it is evident that the world is passing through a phase of transition in the global, political, economic, social and cultural aspects within a framework of what is called the process of “Modernisation” or “Globalization.” Some believe that such moves towards change might lead societies to show an increased
attachment to their own culture and beliefs, and they might involve disorders causing political upheavals, ethnic problems, religious fundamentalism, environmental destruction and many others. It is in this context that Huntington’s concept of “The Clash of Civilizations,” pitting the Islamic and Chinese civilizations against the Western civilization, has appeared.\(^6\) This theory, which maintains that in the twenty first century relations among nations will be based on cultural and religious identifications, presents an interpretation of history that is founded on conflicts, and only conceives co-existence among cultures as the way of “westernising” other civilizations.

Although Huntington’s ideas impress the reader as hypothetical, which lack a lot of support and documentation, they have, however, received great interest and coverage, especially in western societies. This could be the result of their acceptance by a public already prepared for a horrific picture of Islamic religion and by a western media which continues to depict distorted images of an Islam characterised by hatred and confinement to static concepts and beliefs. It also could be linked to the exaggerated reports on Islamic fundamentalism in some Arab countries, which have caused a fear of Islam (Islamophobia), in western societies.

Undoubtedly, religious fundamentalism is a phenomenon that is not confined only to Islamic societies. It dominates the societies where persons are vulnerable, where existing social structures are not fulfilling human needs, and where people are fearful for their future, hence, they affiliate themselves to a religion that helps them accept the uncertainties they cannot defend themselves against. For that reason, such reports on Islamic fundamentalism overlook another side of Islam, that the west is either unaware of or is insistently trying to ignore, namely the ordinary lives of most Muslims who do not have an instinctive hatred for others, but are rebellious against their conditions and fear of remaining underdeveloped and poor in a world dominated by the rich and powerful, and of never being able to catch up. Still, pockets of poverty and marginalization are similarly existent in the big cities of the rich industrial west, producing the very seeds of confrontation that the clash of civilization’s theory ignores. However, whether Huntington was right or wrong, it is undeniable that he brought to the world's attention the importance of culture and religion in international affairs.

Finally, history, since the time of the Crusades, has been replete with European attachment with the Middle East, and Europe, for its part, is aware that it cannot shield itself from its neighbouring countries on the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean. But, a continuous misunderstanding of Islam, may serve to distance Europe from the Arab region, widening a perceived cultural gap and acting as an obstacle to finding common grounds on which to approach different issues.

Nonetheless, we hope that the presence of Muslim immigrants, many of whom are citizens, in several European countries will increase their awareness and understanding, and may serve to renew Europe's closeness with Islamic Arab countries in the future. Another area that should be assigned a high priority is to institutionalise a Euro-Mediterranean dialogue between representatives of the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity and Judaism to mitigate conflicts, promote peace, and lead them to the initial messages of their faiths: peace, tolerance, hope and co-existence.
Despite that some analysts⁷ may observe certain difficulties in initiating such a dialogue between Muslim and western countries, due to different historical obstacles and conceptual barriers, the fact remains that this dialogue will enhance understanding, by different parties, of the sensitivities of the other and, consequently, overcome various ethnic, linguistic and sectarian differences, which will contribute to a dialogue between civilizations, instead of a “Clash of Civilizations.”

It is important, in our times, while we declare human rights and freedom of belief, to struggle in order to avoid any global conflict. We also have to look at every alternative and see its validity, not only in alleviating the tension, but also in achieving a global cultural co-existence.

ENDNOTES

5 ibid.97
7 See Mohammed Sahir Janjar "Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Ethics of Tolerance in Intercultural Dialogue in the Mediterranean "Selected papers of Civil forum Euromed, (Malta, April, 1997),114-123.