

Title:

The Clash of Islam and Liberalism

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Summary:

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Keywords:

Article Body:

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Judaism and its offspring, Christianity - though heavily involved in political affairs throughout the ages - have kept their dignified distance from such carnal matters. These are religions of "heaven" as opposed to Islam, a practical, pragmatic, hands-on, ubiquitous, "earthly" creed.

Secular religions - Democratic Liberalism, Communism, Fascism, Nazism, Socialism and other isms - are more akin to Islam than to, let's say, Buddhism. They are universal, prescriptive, and total. They provide recipes, rules, and norms regarding every aspect of existence - individual, social, cultural, moral, economic, political, military, and philosophical.

At the end of the Cold War, Democratic Liberalism stood triumphant over the fresh graves of its ideological opponents. They have all been eradicated. This precipitated Fukuyama's premature diagnosis (the End of History). But one state ideology, one bitter rival, one implacable opponent, one contestant for world domination, one antithesis remained - Islam.

Militant Islam is, therefore, not a cancerous mutation of "true" Islam. On the

contrary, it is the purest expression of its nature as an imperialistic religion which demands unmitigated obedience from its followers and regards all infidels as both inferior and avowed enemies.

The same can be said about Democratic Liberalism. Like Islam, it does not hesitate to exercise force, is missionary, colonizing, and regards itself as a monopolist of the "truth" and of "universal values". Its antagonists are invariably portrayed as depraved, primitive, and below par.

Such mutually exclusive claims were bound to lead to an all-out conflict sooner or later. The "War on Terrorism" is only the latest round in a millennium-old war between Islam and other "world systems".

Such interpretation of recent events enrages many. They demand to know (often in harsh tones):

- Don't you see any difference between terrorists who murder civilians and regular armies in battle?

Both regulars and irregulars slaughter civilians as a matter of course. "Collateral damage" is the main outcome of modern, total warfare - and of low intensity conflicts alike.

There is a major difference between terrorists and soldiers, though:

Terrorists make carnage of noncombatants their main tactic - while regular armies rarely do. Such conduct is criminal and deplorable, whoever the perpetrator.

But what about the killing of combatants in battle? How should we judge the slaying of soldiers by terrorists in combat?

Modern nation-states enshrined the self-appropriated monopoly on violence in their constitutions and ordinances (and in international law). Only state organs - the army, the police - are permitted to kill, torture, and incarcerate.

Terrorists are trust-busters: they, too, want to kill, torture, and incarcerate. They seek to break the death cartel of governments by joining its ranks.

Thus, when a soldier kills terrorists and ("inadvertently") civilians (as "collateral damage") - it is considered above board. But when the terrorist decimates the very same soldier - he is decried as an outlaw.

Moreover, the misbehavior of some countries - not least the United States - led

to the legitimization of terrorism. Often nation-states use terrorist organizations to further their geopolitical goals. When this happens, erstwhile outcasts become "freedom fighters", pariahs become allies, murderers are recast as sensitive souls struggling for equal rights. This contributes to the blurring of ethical percepts and the blunting of moral judgment.

- Would you rather live under sharia law? Don't you find Liberal Democracy vastly superior to Islam?

Superior, no. Different - of course. Having been born and raised in the West, I naturally prefer its standards to Islam's. Had I been born in a Muslim country, I would have probably found the West and its principles perverted and obnoxious.

The question is meaningless because it presupposes the existence of an objective, universal, culture and period independent set of preferences. Luckily, there is no such thing.

- In this clash of civilization whose side are you on?

This is not a clash of civilizations. Western culture is inextricably intertwined with Islamic knowledge, teachings, and philosophy. Christian fundamentalists have more in common with Muslim militants than with East Coast or French intellectuals.

Muslims have always been the West's most defining Other. Islamic existence and "gaze" helped to mold the West's emerging identity as a historical construct. From Spain to India, the incessant friction and fertilizing interactions with Islam shaped Western values, beliefs, doctrines, moral tenets, political and military institutions, arts, and sciences.

This war is about world domination. Two incompatible thought and value systems compete for the hearts and minds (and purchasing power) of the denizens of the global village. Like in the West, by high noon, either one of them is left standing - or both will have perished.

Where does my loyalty reside?

I am a Westerner, so I hope the West wins this confrontation. But, in the process, it would be good if it were humbled, deconstructed, and reconstructed. One beneficial outcome of this conflict is the demise of the superpower system - a relic of days bygone and best forgotten. I fully believe and trust that in militant Islam, the United States has found its match.

In other words, I regard militant Islam as a catalyst that will hasten the

transformation of the global power structure from unipolar to multipolar. It may also commute the United States itself. It will definitely rejuvenate religious thought and cultural discourse. All wars do.

Aren't you overdoing it? After all, al-Qaida is just a bunch of terrorists on the run!

The West is not fighting al-Qaida. It is facing down the circumstances and ideas that gave rise to al-Qaida. Conditions - such as poverty, ignorance, disease, oppression, and xenophobic superstitions - are difficult to change or to reverse. Ideas are impossible to suppress. Already, militant Islam is far more widespread and established than any Western government would care to admit.

History shows that all terrorist groupings ultimately join the mainstream. Many countries - from Israel to Ireland and from East Timor to Nicaragua - are governed by former terrorists. Terrorism enhances social upward mobility and fosters the redistribution of wealth and resources from the haves to have-nots.

Al-Qaida, despite its ominous portrayal in the Western press - is no exception. It, too, will succumb, in due time, to the twin lures of power and money. Nihilistic and decentralized as it is - its express goals are the rule of Islam and equitable economic development. It is bound to get its way in some countries.

The world of the future will be truly pluralistic. The proselytizing zeal of Liberal Democracy and Capitalism has rendered them illiberal and intolerant. The West must accept the fact that a sizable chunk of humanity does not regard materialism, individualism, liberalism, progress, and democracy - at least in their Western guises - as universal or desirable.

Live and let live (and live and let die) must replace the West's malignant optimism and intellectual and spiritual arrogance.

Edward K. Thompson, the managing editor of "Life" from 1949 to 1961, once wrote:

"'Life' must be curious, alert, erudite and moral, but it must achieve this without being holier-than-thou, a cynic, a know-it-all or a Peeping Tom."

The West has grossly and thoroughly violated Thompson's edict. In its oft-interrupted intercourse with these forsaken regions of the globe, it has acted, alternately, as a Peeping Tom, a cynic and a know-it-all. It has invariably behaved as if it were holier-than-thou. In an unmitigated and fantastic succession of blunders, miscalculations, vain promises, unkept threats and

unkempt diplomats - it has driven the world to the verge of war and the regions it "adopted" to the threshold of economic and social upheaval.

Enamored with the new ideology of free marketry cum democracy, the West first assumed the role of the omniscient. It designed ingenious models, devised foolproof laws, imposed fail-safe institutions and strongly "recommended" measures. Its representatives, the tribunes of the West, ruled the plebeian East with determination rarely equaled by skill or knowledge.

Velvet hands couched in iron gloves, ignorance disguised by economic newspeak, geostrategic interests masquerading as forms of government, characterized their dealings with the natives. Preaching and beseeching from ever higher pulpits, they poured opprobrium and sweet delusions on the eagerly duped, naive, bewildered masses.

The deceit was evident to the indigenous cynics - but it was the failure that dissuaded them and others besides. The West lost its former colonies not when it lied egregiously, not when it pretended to know for sure when it surely did not know, not when it manipulated and coaxed and coerced - but when it failed.

To the peoples of these regions, the king was fully dressed. It was not a little child but an enormous debacle that exposed his nudity. In its presumptuousness and pretentiousness, feigned surety and vain clichés, imported economic models and exported cheap raw materials - the West succeeded to demolish beyond reconstruction whole economies, to ravage communities, to wreak ruination upon the centuries-old social fabric, woven diligently by generations.

It brought crime and drugs and mayhem but gave very little in return, only a horizon beclouded and thundering with vacuous eloquence. As a result, while tottering regional governments still pay lip service to the values of Capitalism, the masses are enraged and restless and rebellious and baleful and anti-Western to the core.

The disenchanted were not likely to acquiesce for long - not only with the West's neo-colonialism but also with its incompetence and inaptitude, with the nonchalant experimentation that it imposed upon them and with the abyss between its proclamations and its performance.

Throughout this time, the envoys of the West - its mediocre politicians, its insatiably ruthless media, its obese tourists, its illiterate soldiers, and its armchair economists - continue to play the role of God, wreaking greater havoc than even the original.

While confessing to omniscience (in breach of every tradition scientific and

religious), they also developed a kind of world weary, unshaven cynicism interlaced with fascination at the depths plumbed by the locals' immorality and amorality.

The jet-set Peeping Toms reside in five star hotels (or luxurious apartments) overlooking the communist, or Middle-Eastern, or African shantytowns. They drive utility vehicles to the shabby offices of the native bureaucrats and dine in \$100 per meal restaurants ("it's so cheap here").

In between kebab and hummus they bemoan and grieve the corruption and nepotism and cronyism ("I simply love their ethnic food, but they are so..."). They mourn the autochthonous inability to act decisively, to cut red tape, to manufacture quality, to open to the world, to be less xenophobic (said while casting a disdainful glance at the native waiter).

To them it looks like an ancient force of nature and, therefore, an inevitability - hence their cynicism. Mostly provincial people with horizons limited by consumption and by wealth, these heralds of the West adopt cynicism as shorthand for cosmopolitanism. They erroneously believe that feigned sarcasm lends them an air of ruggedness and rich experience and the virile aroma of decadent erudition. Yet all it does is make them obnoxious and even more repellent to the residents than they already were.

Ever the preachers, the West - both Europeans and Americans - uphold themselves as role models of virtue to be emulated, as points of reference, almost inhuman or superhuman in their taming of the vices, avarice up front.

Yet the chaos and corruption in their own homes is broadcast live, day in and day out, into the cubicles inhabited by the very people they seek to so transform. And they conspire and collaborate in all manner of venality and crime and scam and rigged elections in all the countries they put the gospel to.

In trying to put an end to history, they seem to have provoked another round of it - more vicious, more enduring, more traumatic than before. That the West is paying the price for its mistakes I have no doubt. For isn't it a part and parcel of its teachings that everything has a price and that there is always a time of reckoning?