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FOSTERING THE 'FRATERNITY OF CIVILIZATIONS' AND THE ROLE OF ISLAM

Maryam Sakeenah

ABSTRACT

The Clash of Civilizations has been extensively refuted, but remains a highly influential paradigm in international relations and intercultural discourse. It must, therefore, be exposed as a fallacious abstraction, and defeated through exploring ways to expand dialogue and intercultural communication. UN initiatives of Alliance of Civilizations, Khatami's initiative of Dialogue Among Civilizations and interfaith exchange are promising, but need to be taken up with commitment, sincerity and vision, and made more participatory and inclusive of authentic representatives across cultures. The West must abandon the myth of its superiority over all other cultures and its Orientalist lens vis-a-vis the East. It also needs to discard prejudice and stereotypes about the 'Other.' Conflict resolution is an urgent need in order to end the feeling of unfair victimization. Marginalized communities need to be integrated into the mainstream. Commonalities in religious tradition and cultures have to be highlighted and differences respectfully recognized. The role of religion in creating tolerance and peaceful co-existence must be explored, particularly the great potential of Islam as demonstrated in history for pluralism and egalitarianism, both essential for defeating the 'Clash'. The grounds for it are amply present both in the history of Islam, rich with narratives of pluralism, tolerance and peaceful co-existence with diverse communities and in the sacred texts of Islam - the Quran and the Prophet (*SAW*)'s S*unnah*. A reinterpretation of these sources highlighting their vast potential for conciliation and facilitation of intercultural dialogue is the need of the times.

Keywords: Civilization, Clash, Co-existence, Orientalist, Pluralism

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The 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis may stand refuted as it very well is, but "refuting the Clash of Civilizations thesis will not stop the Clash of Civilizations concepts being applied to the War on Terror. The issue therefore is not how one can refute it, but how one can challenge its application in the world today."[1] In order to rise above and move beyond the Clash of Civilizations, some fundamental questions need to be asked: "How does one co-exist with people whose race, religion and skin color is different, but who are part of the same species? How do we accept difference without violence and hostility? How do we respect and understand other civilizations without coercion?"[2]

To begin a discussion on realizing a true civilization that transcends schisms, one must first redefine the concept of 'civilization'. In its broadest sense, 'civilization' is

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[1] Michael Dunn, 'The Clash of Civilizations and the War on Terror', *49th Parallel,* Vol.20 (Winter 2006-2007), *www.49thparallel.bham.edu.uk.pdf* (accessed May 2, 2009).

[2] Remarked by Professor Edward W. Said in his 1998 lecture titled "The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations" at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, United States of America. *www.youtube.com* (Accessed May 2, 2009).

about wholesome, collective, intergenerational education of a community through universal values that lie embedded in its historical, cultural and religious narratives, whatever they may be. It is not inherent in a culture that may be 'superior' to others, but is acquired through self-education both at the personal and communal level:

> Civilization is social order promoting cultural creation. Four elements constitute it: economic provision, political organization, moral traditions, and the pursuit of knowledge and the arts. It begins where chaos and insecurity end. For when fear is overcome, curiosity and constructiveness are free, and man passes by natural impulse towards the understanding and embellishment of life... Civilization is not something inborn or imperishable; it must be acquired anew by every generation, and any serious interruption in its financing or its transmission may bring it to an end. Man differs from beast only by education, which may be defined as the technique of transmitting civilization..[3]

With the state of things as they stand, we may be moving towards the 'Clash' that Huntington predicted, but the understanding that such a clash is not inevitable, and that it does not have to be so, is extremely important.

There is need for understanding, cooperation and dialogue on both sides. Intellectuals, writers, scholars, academics, the media and political leadership have a very important duty to highlight the grounds for cooperation between cultures and civilizations. In his speech at the 2006 meeting of the UN 'Alliance of Civilizations' committee, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, "Misperception feeds extremism, and extremism appears to validate misperception. That is the vicious circle we have to break... We have to ask ourselves an uncomfortable question: how effective are our voices of moderation and reconciliation, when it comes to countering the narratives of hatred and mistrust?"[4]

While underscoring the need for what has been called a 'Dialogue Between Civilizations', it is important that the imperatives of a successful and effective framework for such a dialogue must first be established, otherwise all attempts to create an 'alliance between civilizations' through dialogue will be in vain and will be little more than chasing an illusory ideal. Dieter Senghaas points out the flawed strategy in contemporary attempts at bringing civilizational representatives to the talking table. He contends that participants in the dialogues sponsored by the West (as in fact all dialogues have been, so far) are not true representatives of the sides to the conflict. Particularly, Muslim representatives in the Dialogue are almost invariably those of the West's choosing—believers in a 'moderated' Islam which does not enjoy any sizeable following in the Muslim world: "On the whole, the Muslim participants are not hard-boiled representatives of Orthodox Islam, be it the traditionalist, Islamist, integrationalist or fundamentalist sense. Believers or non believers, they are all the representatives of a 'modern' Islam (whatever that

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[3] Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, "Introduction," Story of Civilization, Part 1 (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1954), ii.

[4] Staff Report, "UN Chief Urges Efforts to Counter Extreme Views", *Gulf Times*, (Monday, February 27, 2006)

means)."[5] On the other hand, Senghaas notes, Western participants are rather naive and unaware of the Muslim standpoint, with little to offer. Such a dialogue, as Senghaas terms it, is 'intellectually exhausted', leading to a dead end.

Another danger the West needs to guard against for a genuine dialogue between civilizations is what Senghaas terms 'profile essentialism',[6] which is a belief in one's own culture to be essentially unique and exclusive. The West must pull itself out of the Cold War mentality of creating and bloating up enemy images in order to direct an ambitious foreign policy at an adversary―real or imagined. The West should reject attempts at demonization of the enemy through a greater sense of responsibility, and understand that its version of modernity cannot be imposed on the Muslim world, and that just as it took thousands of years for the West to evolve, it must allow other communities to develop according to their own orientation and essential values. Besides, the West must engage with authentic, popular representatives of the Muslim world who represent the mass sentiment: "An intellectual debate should rather be dealing intensively with the concepts of the democratic representatives of the Islamic world... How do writers, scientists, politicians, the representatives of social and especially religious groups envisage a desirable political constitution for their increasingly complex societies?"[7]

On both sides of the current divide, voices of conciliation and peacemaking need to be empowered over and above the call to isolate and avenge.

Religion has a very significant role in the process of reconciliation. A number of religious personalities, scholars, organisations and institutions are engaged in the task of reconciliation, peacemaking and rapprochement through religion. However, their contribution and potential has largely been unacknowledged and unrecognized: "We do not know most of these people, nor do we understand their impact, because we in the West have had a tendency in the modern period to view religion as only the problem in the human relations of civil society, never part of solutions."[8]

It is also true on the other hand that religion is also misused for generating violence, hatred and conflict. Religious doctrine, therefore, has the potential both for peacemaking and conflict resolution as well as violence and conflict, depending on those who interpret it or put its directives into action. In the Islamic context, this underscores the need for '*ijtehad*', that is the juristic reinterpretation of the sources of Islam according to the exigencies of the times. To undertake this task, the onus lies on the scholars of Islam. It is the peacemaking and conciliatory role of religion which is not scarce by any means, that ought to be highlighted and emphatically asserted through such an interpretation of the sources of religion:

At the end of the day, it will come down to interpretation, selection and the hermeneutic direction of religious communities. That, in turn, is deeply tied up with

[5] Dieter Senghaas, *The Clash Within Civilizations* (London: Routledge, 2002), 105.

[6] Ibid., 107.

[7] Ibid., 107.

[8] Marc Gopin, "Religion and International Relations at the Crossroads", *International Studies Review*, (Vol. III, issue III, Fall 2001).

the decisions of key leaders to direct their communities' deepest beliefs, practices and doctrines towards healing and reconciliation or towards hatred and violence.[9]

It is religion that can help create a global civil society based on the sanctity of human rights and the necessity of conflict resolution. However, to truly accord that position and role to religion, it must be learnt that "Religion does not kill. Religion does not rape women, destroy buildings and institutions. Only individuals do those things."[10] This is particularly true for the West to understand in its perception of Islam. Instead of viewing violence as an intrinsically 'Muslim' phenomenon, the West needs to take responsibility for ill advised policy victimizing Muslims that has raised apprehension and mistrust in the Muslim world. It needs to understand the victim's experience and worldview. It needs to understand that "...it is not about Islam. It is not about an 'Extremist Ideology' out there to take you over by storm. It is not about monsters and demons. It is not about bloodthirsty suicide bombers with an inbuilt genetic drive to bomb the hell out of you. It is about human beings like you and me. It is about human beings horribly gone wrong. It is about the sinned-against who become sinning in this dreadful mire of poverty, disease, lawlessness, corruption. It is about injustice and oppression. It is about human beings being made 'as flies to the wanton boys.'

And it is as simple as that. As simple as Newton's third law of motion: an equal and opposite reaction; to every action of ours."[11]

Indonesian President Yudhoyono, while speaking at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University in October 2009, put forward what he called 'nine imperatives to achieve harmony among civilizations', which are listed below:

i)   The use of 'soft power.'

ii)   Intensification of global dialogue and outreach.

iii)   Resolution of political conflicts that drive a wedge between Muslims and the West.

iv)   Strengthening voices of moderation.

v)   Multiculturalism and tolerance for each other.

vi)   Making globalization work for all.

vii) Reforming global governance, particularly restructuring the United Nations Security Council.

viii) Education: turning ignorance into compassion and intolerance into respect.

ix)   Development of the 'global conscience.'[12]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Stated by Giandomino Picco, quoted in *United Nations Year of Dialogue Between Civilizations 2001,* Introduction, *www.un.org/dialogue* (accessed May 9, 2009)

[11] Maryam Sakeenah, "Daring to Understand," *Counter currents,* (October 31, 2009) http://www.countercurrents.org/sakeenah311009.htm

[12] "Toward Harmony Among Civilizations", speech delivered by President of Indonesia, at Kennedy School of Government, (Harvard University, October 2009).

Several writers and intellectuals throughout history have recognized the extraordinary potential of Islam as an arbiter between civilizations through its emphasis on equality, justice and brotherhood that goes beyond all distinctions of nationalism, race or creed. According to H. A. R. Gibb:

> But Islam has a still further service to render to the cause of humanity. It stands after all nearer to the real East than Europe does, and it possesses a magnificent tradition of inter-racial understanding and cooperation. No other society has such a record of success uniting in an equality of status, of opportunity, and of endeavours so many and so various races of mankind . . . Islam has still the power to reconcile apparently irreconcilable elements of race and tradition. If ever the opposition of the great societies of East and West is to be replaced by cooperation, the mediation of Islam is an indispensable condition. In its hands lies very largely the solution of the problem with which Europe is faced in its relation with East. If they unite, the hope of a peaceful issue is immeasurably enhanced.[13]

The extinction of race consciousness between Muslims is one of the outstanding achievements of Islam and in the contemporary world. There is, as it happens, a crying need for the propagation of this Islamic virtue... [14]

The universal brotherhood of Islam, regardless of race, politics, color or country, has been brought home to me most keenly many times in my life—and this is another feature which drew me towards the Faith.[15]

Ample evidence for this is present in the sources of Islam. According to the Islamic tradition, the Prophet (*SAW*), in his Last Sermon made to all of his living followers at that point in time, said:

> O people! Verily, Allah says, 'O mankind! We have indeed created you from a single male and a female, and then We made you into nations and tribes so that you may recognize (or identify) each other. Indeed, the most honored among you in the Sight of Allah is the one who is the most righteous.'(In the light of this verse), no Arab has a superiority over a non Arab, nor does a non Arab have any superiority over an Arab; and a black does not have any superiority over a white, nor is a white superior to a black, except by one thing: righteousness. Remember, all human beings are the sons and daughters of Adam (A.S), and Adam (A.S) was made from dust. Be warned! All (false) claims of blood and of wealth are under my feet.[16]

The huge stumbling block towards an understanding of Islam as an egalitarian, emancipatory, humanistic tradition in the West is, as mentioned earlier, the Orientalist lens with which the West has always viewed Islam. Due to a very flippant, superficial understanding of it, violence in the Muslim world is seen as intrinsic to Islam and Muslim society, while the role and responsibility of the West

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[13] H.A.R. Gibb, *Whither Islam: A Survey of Modern Move* (London,Rutledge, 1932), 379.

[14] A.J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 205.

[15] Col. Donald S. Rockwell, U.S.A. Poet, Critic and Author, quoted by Memoona Sajjad (Ed.), *Setting the Record Straight: A Rejoinder, (*Lahore: EPIC Publications, 2008), 8.

[16] Martin Lings, *Muhammad (SAW): His Life Based on the Earliest Sources,* (Vermont, Rochester (USA), Inner Traditions, 2006).

in provoking militancy through its policies is overlooked. This mindset becomes obvious in the Palestine-Israel conflict, a weeping sore in the modern world which embodies in itself all the prejudice, misunderstanding, hate, mistrust with which human beings have viewed others on the basis of difference in religion or race or country. Karen Armstrong states:

> It is not sufficient for us in the West to support or condemn parties to the conflict. We are also involved and must make our own attitudes our prime responsibility... Crusading is not a lost medieval tradition: it has survived in different forms in both Europe and the United States and we must accept that our own views are blinkered and prejudiced. The prophets of Israel—the parents of all three faiths, proclaimed the necessity of creating a new heart and a new soul, which was far more important than external conformity. So too today. External political solutions are not enough. All three of the participants in the struggle must create a different attitude, a new heart and spirit. In the Christian West we must try to make the painful migration from our old aggressions and embark on the long journey towards a new understanding and a new self. [17]

In the conclusion to his great book 'Orientalism', Edward Said states that the single greatest failure of Western thinking is its Orientalist frame of thought, and that it must be surpassed. If this is done, the realization of the vision for a global human community would become possible:

> I consider Orientalism's failure to have been a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience.[18]

Overcoming this stumbling block requires acknowledgement of the West's debt to the Orient and to Islam, and reaching the realization that Islam in fact is central and not extrinsic to Western civilization. In his speech to the Muslim world, U.S. President Barack Obama mentioned Europe and America's debt to Islam:

> As a student of history, I also know civilization's debt to Islam. It was Islam—at places like Al-Azhar University—that carried the light of learning through so many centuries, paving the way for Europe's Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was innovation in Muslim communities that developed the order of algebra; our magnetic compass and tools of navigation; our mastery of pens and printing; our understanding of how disease spreads and how it can be healed. And throughout history, Islam has demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality.[19]

The West needs to reinterpret history and do away with the narrow, parochial understanding of an exclusively 'Western' individualism that its history celebrates. It needs to acknowledge the debt, for only through that will mankind be able to seek

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[17] Karen Armstrong, *The Crusades and their Impact on Todays World* (New York: Random House, Inc, 2001), 539.

[18] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978), 328.

[19] ABS-CBN News, *Text of Obama's speech to Muslim world, www.abs-cbn.com*, June 4, 2009, 8:21 PM. (Accessed July 18, 2009).

the common thread buried beneath the morass of clash and conflict. Will Durant writes, "Europe and America are the spoiled child and grandchild of the Orient, and have never quite realized the wealth of their inheritance. But if, now, we sum up those arts and ways which the West has derived from the East, or which, to our current and limited knowledge, appear first in the Orient, we shall find ourselves drawing up unconsciously an outline of civilization..."[20]

Effort needs to be made to create the realization in the Western mind, of the historically attested fact that "The Western heritage is not simply Judaeo-Christian, but rather Judaeo-Christian-Islamic. Islam belongs to the same Abrahamic family of religions as Judaism and Christianity, and modern Western civilization has inherited a large part of Islamic intellectual and scientific culture."[21]

According to Amartya Sen:

> Instead of celebrating the fact that ideas on mathematics, science, literature, architecture, or tolerance have repeatedly crossed the boundaries of distinct "civilizations," the claim is made that Western science is quintessentially "Western" and that "a sense of individualism and a tradition of individual rights and liberties" rampant in the West well before modernity is "unique among civilized societies." That parochial Western perspective has such following today that counterexamples are treated as "merely anecdotal," combined with a determined unwillingness to take any serious note of the plentiful examples of tolerance or of science and mathematics that can be found in the history of Arab people. But this intellectual surgery is rounded up with the dismissal of the history of tolerance in the Muslim world, which is linked closely to Muslim intellectualism, not to mention its practical political impact on a Saladin.[22]

On the other hand, the Orient must also understand that the response to Orientalism is not 'Occidentalism', because both are exclusivist, supercilious, divisive and false as they cut up humanity into 'Orientals' and 'Occidentals', according rigid, unvarying traits viewed from a tainted lens. The exercise of viewing human beings as 'Others' due to difference in skin, blood, geography or culture is, as Said termed it, 'a degradation of knowledge.'[23]

The task ahead is to overcome the stumbling blocks in order to acquire a balanced world view, through which to strive to reach a middle ground on the basis of a system of sharing, exchange and intercultural communication between civilizations.

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[20] Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, Story of Civilization, Part 1, "Introduction," (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), viii.

[21] Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue,* Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya, 1997, p.42.

[22] Amartya Sen, letter to Robert Kagan, "Is there a Clash of Civilizations?" *Slate Magazine*, (Posted Friday, May 5, 2006, at 11:52 PM)
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/dialogues/features/2006/is_there_a_clash_ofcivilizations/was_world_war_ii_a_clash_of_nationalities.html (accessed on November 11, 2012)

[23] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978), 328.

At the heart of the process is the understanding that we may be different, but we also share our humanity, and must make the most of this shared, indissoluble bond:

> The different civilizations in the world are not inherently prone to conflict… Civilizations embody many similar values and ideals. At the philosophical level at least, world religions share certain common perspectives on the relationship between the human being and the environment, the integrity of the community, the importance of the family, the significance of morality and indeed the meaning and purpose of life.[24]

This does not mean, however, that personal identities ought to be diluted, distinctions erased, barriers eliminated. That is neither practical nor advisable. What is needed is a delicate balance between civilizational (inclusive of religion, culture and all other identities short of singular humanness) and human identity. Quoting Amartya Sen again, "While the demands of a global identity cannot submerge all the other identities we have—national, religious, political, social, or linguistic — those broader demands are not dismissable, either. Indeed, in a world of real human beings, not miniaturized by singular loyalty to one unique identity, there is room for—and need for—both."[25] Edward Said reiterated the same concept when asked what commonalities can unite the human race:

> There are already commonalities that need to be recognized. (To promote this), education must be de-nationalized and history taught as both the exchange as well as the conflict between civilizations. That is the first step. Inhuman practices like apartheid and ethnic cleansing should be vehemently rejected… I do not, however, suggest that differences should be eliminated. Things cannot be flattened out and homogenized. However, the other extreme is that everything is clashing. I think that is a prescription for war, and Huntington says that. The other alternative is coexistence with the preservation of difference. We have to respect and live with our differences. I do not suggest a unified, simplified, reduced culture, but the preservation of differences while learning to coexist in peace.[26]

This too is the vision of Islam, which has largely gone unrecognized both in the Western world as well as among Muslim communities. The potential and promise of Islam in fostering the 'fraternity' or the 'alliance' between civilizations is immense, as in fact, Islam has achieved this tremendous undertaking at several high points in its history. Spain under Muslims is an ideal worth emulating. Malaysian Professor Osman Bakar states:

> Was not the civilization built in Spain by Muslims, Jews and Christians under the banner of Islam a universal civilization? A number of Jewish and Christian thinkers think so. Max Dimont makes the remarkable claim that the

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[24] Chandra Muzaffar, "The Clash of Civilizations or Camouflaging Dominance?" *The Clash of Civilizations: Asian Responses* (Ed.) Salim Rashid, (Dhaka: Oxford University Press, 1997), 104.

[25] Amartya Sen, letter to Robert Kagan, "Is there a Clash of Civilizations?"

[26] Remarked by Professor Edward W. Said in his 1998 lecture titled *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations* at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, United States of America. *www.youtube.com* (Accessed May 2, 2009).

> Jewish Golden Age in the medieval period coincided with the Golden Age of Islam, thus implying that what Muslims, Jews and Christians had built together within the Islamic civilization was truly universal in nature. There exists among some European scholars nostalgia for the Andalusian culture and civilization. They wish to return to the universality of Andalusia because post modern Western civilization has become particularistic and exclusionary.[27]

Despite the essential differences between Islamic and non-Islamic tradition, historically Islam has never had 'adjustment problems' or difficulties in creating pluralistic societies where peoples of diverse religious traditions have lived together and prospered. In fact, as mentioned earlier, Islam has a rich pluralistic tradition unsurpassed by any other civilization. It has a vast experience of interaction and alliance with non-Muslim communities. Instances of conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims have never been, it must be observed, over 'civilizational differences', but for the exigencies of security and self-defence. The idea, therefore, that Islam's differences in worldview with non-Islamic civilizations make a clash inevitable is falsified by the history of Islam itself. Rather, the history of Islam presents a veritable model of a 'world civilization', as stated by Professor Bakar:

> Huntington's view that the idea of the possibility of a universal civilization is exclusively Western conception is not supported by history. It is a historical fact that Islam built the first comprehensive universal civilization in history even if we go by all the modern criteria of universality. Islam was the first civilization to have geographical and cultural borders with all the major contemporary civilizations of the world, and it was Islam that had the most extensive encounter with other civilizations.[28]

This pluralistic tradition of Islam springs from the most fundamental sources of the religion itself. Two very pertinent verses from the Noble Quran may be quoted here: i) *"O People of the Scriptures! Come to common terms, to that which is common between us and you that we worship none but Allah alone, and that we associate no partners with Him…"*[29] ii) *"Say: O disbelievers! I do not worship that which you worship. Nor do you worship what I worship. And I shall not worship that which you worship. Nor will you worship that which I worship. Hence to you be your religion, and to me be mine."*[30]

In the first verse, the need to 'seek the common thread', and to come together on the common grounds that we share is emphasized. The essential truth of the natural belief in the singularity and omnipotence of the Creator is at the heart of human nature. It is this that must be reached into and reinstated, as it exists as a common point of origin in almost all religious traditions. To seek this singular essence, differences must be transcended. Islam believes in the oneness of the human family, and differences that lie at the fringes are artificial and obtrusive. The vision of Islam

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[27] Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1997), 10.

[28] Ibid., 10.

[29] Al Quran, 3:64.

[30] Al Quran, 109:1-6.

is to overcome difference and settle for what harmonizes and unites. This is the idealism of Islam.

However, this has to be seen together with the second verse. The second verse apparently highlights difference. It is, however, about living with, respecting and tolerating difference and letting the other be while retaining and asserting your identity and the freedom to live it out. It is about live and let live, and about prizing one's freedom to believe and live by it. It is about defending this freedom to believe and rejecting all attempts to take it away.

In fact, the two verses are easily reconcilable and become important guidelines to reach the 'middle position' which is Islam's prescription for outdoing the Clash of Civilizations. This 'middle position' is to understand difference as natural and learn to live with it, without having to dilute one's own identity. It is to give space to one who chooses to live differently. This was implemented thoroughly and completely by the earliest Muslim state and has in fact defined the nature of Muslim rule over non-Muslims generally. However, while we build fences to be good neighbors (borrowing from Robert Frost) for the sake of peace and harmony, we ought not to forget the larger picture and the higher goal of the ideal society beyond conflict. In fact, the orientation of Muslim civilization is to struggle towards the achievement of this state of being – complete harmony and singularity of the human family on the basis of the natural faith that is the core of all religions, philosophies and thought-systems. By calling attention to this single 'core value' of monotheism which Islam considers 'natural' to man, the differences of doctrine, ritual, culture, etc. are slighted and sidelined, and eventually wither away and fall apart.

However, one is led to question that if this indeed is the vision of Islam, where, then, does a 'Clash' emerge? It emerges as a corollary to interventionist, adventurist, exploitative policies vis a vis the Muslim world by the ascendant West steeped in the compulsions of its espoused materialism and capitalism. The 'Clash' is not inevitable, but it can become possible if such policies are mindlessly and relentlessly pursued by the West, and if the Muslim world does not engage in self criticism and undertake a rediscovery of the pristine message of Islam. As long as the West keeps pursuing its ill advised course, insecurity and militant responses will proliferate among the Muslims. In such a case, Muslim opinion leaders will be compelled to rally together their people for strengthening, fortifying and gearing up for the West's assault on what is most precious to them. Given the insensitivity and superficial grasp of the West over the prevalent mood in the Muslim world, the vicious cycle of hostility will go on. This is exactly the self-destructive path towards the Clash of Civilizations which in the long run will be in the interest of none. The way out, however, is given by the Islamic doctrine itself.

Islam recognizes the importance of the maintenance of distinctions, but it also teaches tolerance for and a sacred inviolability of natural and cultural differences, while rejecting any discrimination on the basis of such differences. Islam, while asserting its universal human ethos and appeal, does not warrant alienating or 'othering' communities. Rather, it instills in its followers tolerance and respect for different communities with an understanding that diversity in human communities is

a Sign of God. It does not harmonize or impose, as is asserted by historical precedent, but integrates and includes through the creation of a participatory culture based on justice and equality for all who share in a single humanity.

Professor Osman Bakar believes that the Qur'anic title of Muslims as a 'middle nation'[31] suggests the potential of Islam to act as the arbiter between civilizations through its universal essence:

> In Islam, civilization-consciousness is deeply rooted in such Qur'anic ideas as a common human ancestry, a common humanity, the universal goodness of man, the universality of divine favors to the human race, ethnic and cultural pluralism, intercultural pluralism and cooperation in the pursuit for the common good of all mankind, global social justice, a common responsibility for the protection of our planet earth, and all this is rooted in the idea of 'middleness.'[32]

This holistic concept of the 'middleness' of Islam as an arbiter between civilizations and an antidote to an inevitable Clash of Civilizations is elaborated upon by the professor hence:

We may illustrate the idea of middleness as applied to human culture and civilization with the following examples: In politics, Islam strikes a middle position between the kind of theocracy hated and feared in the West and secular modern democracy founded on Western individualism. Islam's 'democracy' harmonizes the rights of God with the rights and duties of man. In economics, Islam strikes a balance between secular capitalism of the 'free West' and the atheistic socialism of the Communist bloc. In theology, Islam seeks to synthesize the idea of a transcendent God and that of an immanent God. In philosophy Islam has struck a balance between extreme forms of rationalism and empiricism… we can go on enumerating these 'middle positions' of Islam in many other areas of human life and thought.

Elsewhere, this writer has stated:

> However, despite the loyalty to one's own that Islam demands, it keeps a perfect balance of fidelity to what belongs to you and tolerance and respect for what belongs to another. Therefore, nowhere does Islamic culture reek of or border on fanatical patriotism and narrow nationalism that breeds arrogance, prejudice and intolerance of the other. This is the character of the 'Middle Nation', the '*ummatun wusata*', firmly poised in its cultural values of moderation. In Islam, it is not nationalism, territory or racial roots that are important or create identity—it is Idea (the central belief in One God and complete submission to Him) and the Way of Life that springs from it that stands taller. This Idea and its accompanying Way of Life is about human values, and is ethically all-inclusive. Therefore, believers in it rise above the trappings of skin, caste and nationality that subsume true human identity. The idea of *Hijrah* (migration undertaken by the Prophet and his followers) too was new to the Arabs. It was inconceivable to be leaving home, family, tribe

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[31] The Noble Qur'an, 2:143.

[32] Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 1997), 8.

and kin for an Ideal. But that was just the Islamic Revolution: living for an Ideal. Culture becomes oppressive and imbalanced when power-dynamics enter the scene and begin to dictate the norms. Islam replaces the power-dynamic with its powerful moral imperative of justice, giving culture a whole new orientation. The justice and morality of this Ideal Culture is the antidote to contemporary paradigms of clashing civilizations. It is in reverting to this culture of justice and humanistic values that the solution lies. This is the panacea for our world.[33]

CONCLUSION

While Islam is a distinct ideology fundamentally different from other cultures, particularly Western secular-materialism, co-existence and pluralism are a hallmark asserted by its history. Although the 'Clash' thesis is not inevitable, not working to throw it overboard can bring it closer.

Such a Clash of Civilizations must actively be prevented through the following measures:

History and culture must be reinterpreted in an inclusive, integrative way and the pattern of sharing, interaction and intercultural communication must be brought out. Education must be 'denationalized' and cleansed of embedded prejudice and bias.

The West needs to realize its responsibility in eliminating the root causes of militancy in the Muslim world. The Middle East conflict must be seriously addressed and resolved according to the aspirations of the Palestinian people. Confidence building through conflict resolution and cessation/reversal of interventionist policy needs to be undertaken.

The role of religion as a means for peacemaking and reconciliation must be acknowledged and religion be allowed to begin a 'healing process'. Interpretation of religious texts by credible authorities to emphasize on peace and tolerance must be disseminated and strongly encouraged.

The West must stop viewing the non-West from the Orientalist lens and acknowledge its 'debt to the Orient and to Islam' to overcome its self-absorbed profile-essentialism.

A process of dialogue between civilizations must be seriously undertaken on a global scale, with representatives from all communities and civilizations having a say to represent their points of view and develop understanding of each other. For such a dialogue to be successful, it must involve credible, popular and genuine representatives from all civilizations. A dialogue must be carried out on the basis of absolute parity of all parties. The Western participants must realize that imposition of their version of modernity or choosing 'moderate' representatives from the Muslim world who are merely on the fringes of mainstream Muslim society will not work.

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[33] Memoona Sajjad, "Ideal Culture", *Muslim Writers Alliance,*
http://www.oneummah.net/content/view/65/1/, 13 September 2007. (accessed March 17, 2009).

The Muslim world must seriously undertake a tremendous, multi-pronged effort to inform the Western mind about quintessential Islam and its contemporary interpretation. Muslims, both at the individual, communal and state level, should give intellectual, moral and material support to all those who are engaged in such an effort. Muslims must devise strategies and channelize resources to establish links with and gain access into the academia, the mass media and policy makers in the West. Muslim minorities in the West have a huge responsibility for the establishment of cultural bridges and the promotion of the Muslim image in the West.

Lastly, the extraordinary potential of Islam as an arbiter between civilizations owing to its universalism and egalitarianism which is also attested by its history, must be recognized and put to use both by the Muslim world (in order to reject exclusivist interpretation) and the West (to be able to initiate genuinely constructive, conciliatory engagement with the Muslim world).

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