

## A Pathology of East and West Relations

Why have the relations between Islam and the West become so difficult in recent years? Why are they just rejecting and denouncing one another instead of reaching some form of engagement?

We can paraphrase this question this way: why have so many problems emerged in the relations between Islam and the West? The necessity of this paraphrase lies in the fact that both the Moslems and their Western fellowmen are human beings. This homogeneity calls for and necessitates a satisfactory, progressive coexistence. Now we should turn to the causes of these problems that have divided two significant parts of the world.

To unearth the aforementioned causes, or at least point out the significant factors involved in these problems, we will need to analyze our question into some issues.

The relations between Islam and the West could be in two levels:

I) The first issue involves ideological and cultural relations in the domain of weltanschauung, in general, as well as in the interpretation of the goal and philosophy of life. If this is the case, then one can say that there are no serious problems between the West and Islam. In both cases (religion and the higher principles of humanity), we have innumerable common beliefs upon which both blocks, i.e. Islamic countries and Western nations, can have a constructive coexistence without being involved in fatal conflicts. This communion, however, does not imply that these blocks are united on all issues, since such a unity is not possible even between the world's great religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism; in fact, one can say that such a unity is not even found among the followers of these religions, as there are numerous sects and factions inside them. These common principles, nevertheless, have maintained constructive cooperation among Moslems, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians. We have seen that numerous generous people from other religions working in the hospitals and academic centers of the Islamic world and contributing to the emergence of the magnificent Islamic civilization.

There had been continuous and fruitful intellectual engagements in the domain of sciences and philosophies between the followers of these religions. Moslems turned to Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Indian philosophies, not to mention others, worked on them and made new discoveries and shared their philosophical and scientific findings with Westerners. I think no enlightened mind, be it Moslem or Westerner, would ever deny the fact that the more intellectually mature men are, the more constructive and

emancipating their intellectual, ideological and diversities will also be, as corrosive hostilities are always brought about from the selfishness and egotisms of conflicting sides. The debates that Moslem leaders had with the scholars and intellectuals of other religions corroborate this fact. There are numerous records of such intellectual and cultural forums involving the Prophet (PBUH), Immaculate Imams and other distinguished Moslem scholars in historical and traditional sources. For example, you can see Tabarsi's *Al-Ihtijaj* ("Argumentation"), a reconstruction of Imam Reza (PBUH)'s debates with his time's philosophers, scholars and thinkers, some of whom even didn't believe in the trans-physical.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, Moslems and Westerners can reach an agreement on the Ultimate Telos of life providing that egotists, despots, hedonists and oppressors would allow that to occur! If you make a careful study of the history of mankind, you will come closer to the conclusion that the ruinous conflicts, massacres and destructive divisions that took place among religious authorities throughout the world had not been due to religious beliefs; in fact, it was the egotist votaries of power who have resorted to every means, including the exploitation of religious sentiments and deluding the masses through faked conflicts, to reach their evil purposes. We know that these Leviathans, in Hobbesian parlance, or beasts in folk's tongue, misuse and abuse everything, even science, freedom and the truth to break up people's unities and push their diabolic plans forward. Accordingly, if they leave people alone and clear the obstacles of proper thinking off their path, people will surely reach a consensus on the Ultimate Telos of life, since all human beings have the self-orientation toward Supreme Perfection as the Ultimate Telos of life inside them.

On the other hand, you Westerners and we Moslems are almost united on a very divine character called Abraham (PBUH), who is the religious father of we Moslems, you Christians and also the Jews. We all read in our scriptures, i.e. the Quran, the Gospels and the Torah, that Abraham is the paragon of the Perfect Man. By rediscovering this great divine figure and his religion, which is the religion of the human pure primordial nature, we can overcome our problems and divisions in our struggle for a just and intelligible coexistence, and take back history from the egotists who divide people for the sake of their evil purposes and entrust it to the people who care for human being and humanity.

I have already discussed this theory with some distinguished Western thinkers, who fortunately received it warmly. To name a few, I could mention Professors Hans Kung, Van Ess, Mayer and Wundrant from Germany as well as Reynaldo Galindo Pohl and Paul Marx from the UN Commission on Human Rights.

But regarding the higher principles of humanity, it would be sufficient to say that

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1- See: Ja'fari, M. T. *Divine Gnosis, An Interpretation of the Imam Ali Ibn Musa al-Reza's (PBUH) Discussions with Imran Sabi*. (Originally in Persian).

Westerners, like Moslems, are humans. They are the members of the same family of God, to which Moslems belong, too. This is not a sentimental remark indeed; in fact, it has been derived from an authentic quotation from the the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which reads:

*All people are members of Allah's family, and their most blessed one with the Lord, is the one who is most beneficial for the members of Allah's family.*<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, our shared cultural and moral principles, on the one hand, and the basic principles of human rights upon at least eighty percent of which we are agreed on the other, demonstrate that not only these two blocks but in fact all human beings on the planet can enjoy a fair coexistence.

For my part, I believe we can take effective steps toward the fulfillment of this goal by holding constructive and profound conferences on the aforementioned points of agreement provided we do not include those figures in the panels who only use such events as a showcase for satisfaction of their selfish sense of fame and trample the purported goals of these seminars only to say "I exist!" and see the participation in such conferences as in fact their vocation.

Only this way will we be able to either settle all of our discrepancies or bring about an atmosphere for a fair coexistence with the least confrontation to be established.

**II)** Islam and the West can expand their relations to the field of the objective phenomena of life, which are the products of legal and economical systems and an objective culture. Even at this level of relations, we have enough shared principles to sustain our intelligible coexistence. This consensus requires a realistic understanding of the shared principles and rules and overcoming the dividing whims, however we all know that utilitarianism, racism, hedonism and totalitarianism have not unfortunately yet allowed man to take a positive step for the intelligibilization of them.

There are numerous instances of evidence in people's life today that show that the words "human being" and "humanity" fill individuals with the same horror that the names of predators cause, as these words imply a guaranteed modification of hedonism and utilitarianism and the necessity of observation of laws and rules, while humanism, which has been developed in the West as an emancipating school, says no more than, "someone who is prosperous in life adapts himself with every condition that arises and does not surrender to any law or rule!"

It is indeed totally natural to see the horror caused by the words "human" and "humanity" in the face of those who seek to get the most pleasure and profit in life even if it costs the destruction of whole humanity.

Do you know what it means to say someone dreads human beings and humanity? It is analogous to a man who is afraid of and in fact escapes from himself. According to

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1- Sheikh Horr-e Ameli, *Wasa'el Alshi'ah*, Vol. 6 and also Kulayni's *Usul Al-Kafi*.

Rumi,

*Like the beasts gathering around the lake to drink water,*

*When we saw our picture on the lake we escaped from ourselves.*<sup>1</sup>

Now, can a man who escapes from himself ever taste the flavor of prosperity and development? Can such a creature at all enjoy the reality of natural life itself? It is evident that he cannot do so, as such a being is always involved in internal conflict and friction; he in fact denies his own entity. The status quo of human societies shows that we live in the century of the absence of humanity – the century of self-alienation, and strictly speaking, the century of self-contradiction.

### **How politics is not separated from religion in Islam?**

Regarding the definition and interpretation that Islam offers of "religion" and "politics", one cannot separate these two realities which are complementary to each other and together guarantee the wholeness and integrity of life that Islam purports to be after.

Let us have a cursory look at the definitions of these two categories. What is religion? Religion consists of participation in the universal cosmic movement toward Supreme Perfection. Exposing oneself to the radiations of divinity is the Ultimate Telos of life, for it connects man with Divine Essence, the Creator of the universe, and helps mankind understand the divine providence and wisdom behind the creation of human beings. Having exposed oneself to these divine radiations, man sees the whole universe as a pantheon of God and finds himself always in the presence of Divinity, whether he is studying nature through a microscope in the laboratory, making the necessary devices for his life in his workshop, teaching in a classroom or fishing to feed his family. A man's relationship with his fellowmen in the mirror of revealed religion is much like the relationship between a member and an integrated whole, as a radiation of Divine Essence, with its other members. Now what is politics? Politics consists of the management of the human society for reaching the best possible goals in a meaningful social life rather than in a life like that of a honey-bee. Thus conceived, politics is not only separated in any means from religion, but in fact religion is not whole without politics, in the sense that we have just articulated.

Generally speaking, not only politics but also law, economy, art, morality and other cultural elements, as constitutive moments of Islam, are involved in the process of evolutionary life (i.e., intelligible life). To understand this vital issue we need to think of the transcendent unity of human life. It is needless to argue that human life in itself – not its constitutive elements and powers – is an irreducible simple reality. If someone or a school is to reduce this integrity, its unique quality would undoubtedly have been destroyed. Although life itself may not collapse with the disappearance of this integrity, say due to the absence of economic aspects, we will nonetheless lose the genuine quality

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1- Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi, *Dīwān-e Shams-e Tabrīzī* ("The Sonnets of Shams of Tabriz").

of life that is provided by that integrity. A man whose life has lost its cultural element may still have a pleasant life, but we all know that an uncultured life is not indeed a human life but rather a type of wild life. A man or a woman who continues life without morality, knowledge or intelligible politics may seem to live a normal life – even with a smile – but such a human being will nevertheless fail to enjoy a free and conscious intelligible life.

Today we are witness to an unprecedented industrial progress in the West; no one can ignore this significant event. The wonderful effects of this industrial advancement are too clear for one to cast any doubt upon. However, when we hear the outcries of Western thinkers about the spiritual and ideological vacuum and the absence of higher moral principles, we remember the principle of transcendent unity in human life and express our great regret at it. This is itself evidence to the aforementioned transcendent unity, for we Easterners are regretful of the spiritual situation in the West, even if the Westerners do not pay enough attention to our concerns.

Let us turn now to nihilism, which can be regarded as an effective example in this regard. We know that in Western countries, as well as some other parts of the world, people have been deprived from having a higher goal which can interpret and justify all aspects of their life. Moreover, we know that no ideal or idea have yet been replaced with that Ultimate Telos. This is why we are nowadays beholding the prevalence of hedonistic and utilitarian ideas in human societies and systematic efforts for filling people's brains with meaningless and entertaining TV programs and artistic works which have been produced only for the temporal anesthetization of the viewers. As a matter of fact, these efforts for silencing human existential questions have not only failed to reduce human anxieties and fears, but have exacerbated them as well.

Furthermore, it is indeed a scientific fact that no one can ever separate the cultural aspect of human life from its political, legal and educational aspects, since - as we have mentioned earlier – human life is an irreducible phenomenon. Whenever you see that the political aspect in a society has been separated from its cultural aspect you should know that both aspects have lost their genuine functions in that society.

In any case, politics in the sense of the management of people's "intelligible life" in a society cannot be regarded as anything but religion, and Islam is strongly opposed to any form of politics that seeks only to serve the goals of oppressors via resorting to all types of means available as recommended by Machiavelli.

As I see it, contemporary nihilism has its roots in the positivistic movement of the nineteenth century, which was to regain a momentum for scientific outlook. This movement was to promote some scientific theories, which in some cases were indeed anti-scientific.

Among these so-called scientific theories was that presented by August Comte (1798-1857), a theory concerning the triple stages of the progress of the human mind, which not only had no positive outcome, but also no scientific proof whatsoever. To begin

with, let us go through an outline of the theory together.

Comte's positive philosophy emerged from his historical study of the progress of the human mind—the Western European mind. India and China, he claimed, had not contributed to the development of the human mind. Indeed, by “mind” he was in fact implying the sciences – astronomy, physics, chemistry, and physiology (i.e., biology). As seen by Comte, mathematics was a logical tool, not a science.

*THE THREE STAGES. The history of sciences shows that each of them goes through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. The progress of each field through the three stages is not only inevitable but also irreversible; it is, in addition, asymptotic—that is, we always approach, but never obtain, perfect positive knowledge.*

*Briefly, Comte's view of each of the three stages is as follows. In the theological stage, man views everything as animated by a will and a life similar to his own. This general view itself goes through three phases; animism, or fetishism, which views each object as having its own will; polytheism, which believes that many divine wills impose themselves on objects; and monotheism, which conceives the will of one God as imposing itself on objects. Metaphysical thought substitutes abstractions for a personal will. Causes and forces replace desires, and one great entity, i.e. Nature, prevails. Only in the positive stage is the vain search for absolute knowledge—a knowledge of a final will or first cause—abandoned and the study of the laws “of relations of succession and resemblance” seen as the correct object of man's research.*

*Each stage not only exhibits a particular form of mental development, but also has a corresponding material development. In the theological state, military life predominates; in the metaphysical state, legal forms achieve dominance; and the positive stage is the stage of industrial society. Thus, Comte believed, as did G. W. F. Hegel, that historical development shows a matching movement of ideas and institutions.*

*According to Comte, the first science to have gone through the triadic movement was astronomy, whose phenomena are most general and simple, and that affects all other sciences without itself being affected. (For instance, chemical changes on Earth, while affecting physiological phenomena, do not affect astronomical or physical phenomena.)<sup>1</sup>*

The following criticisms could be leveled at Comte's theory:

1- Comte's proposed theory of the triadic stages of the development of the human mind along with their corresponding realities is not consistent with the human routine for mental activity, as human brain normally tends to search for the causes of an event within nature rather than somewhere outside it. Transphysical explanation, on the other hand, requires the mental abstraction that is done in mathematical operations.

2- The so-called pre-metaphysical or theological stage, in Comte's parlance, dating back to the time when Hindu Vedas were written, has recorded many philosophical remarks as well. Upanishad truly provides a good example of the fusion of theological and metaphysical horizons upon the universe; one can even say that there are strong cases

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1- Mazlish, Bruce (2006), August Comte in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Second Edition (in 10 volumes), Editor in Chief Donald M. Borchert, Vol. 2, pp. 410-411 (Thomson Gale Inc., USA).

of evidence of scientific reflections in this book.

3- In each one of the triple stages, we see counterexamples of what August Comte claims. For example, in the stage of the permeation of philosophical ideas through religion, which is the fifth phase of Indian ideology, two groups of philosophers emerged:

I) Gnostics who believed in God.

II) Agnostics who did not believe in God. Both groups were then influential in India. Moreover, in Islamic countries in the same period of time, there had been both mystical and philosophical currents as well as direct scientific activities.

4- Such eminent scientists as Euclid and Archimedes also lived in hey days of Greek philosophy.

5- During the Middle Ages, which is classified as the age of philosophy in Comte's taxonomy, i.e. roughly from the late 9th century until the second half of 12th century, Islamic lands, according to leading Western historians of science, were home to serious scientific activities. In fact, it has been said that this point of history was the age of the flourishing of true science. Therefore, we can say that August Comte had not been careful enough in his classification.

6- Even in the so-called positive stage of the development of the human mind, one can easily discern numerous examples of theological, mystical and philosophical ideas. This stage is indeed the total sum of all stages through which Comte has described the evolution of the human mind.

7- As you know, divine and religious attitudes strikingly exist in all Comte's purported stages of development of human mind. Max Planck, the father of quantum physics and winner of the 1918 Noble prize for physics, writes

*There can never be any real opposition between religion and science, for one is the complement of the other. Every serious and reflective person realizes, I think, that the religious element in the human nature must be recognized and cultivated if all the powers of the human soul are to act together in perfect balance and harmony. And indeed it was not by any accident that the greatest thinkers of all ages were also deeply religious souls, even though they made no public show of their religious feelings and beliefs. It is from the cooperation of understanding with the will that the finest fruit of philosophy has arisen, namely, the ethical fruit. Science enhances the moral values of life, because it furthers a love of the truth and reverence – a love of the truth displaying itself in the constant endeavor to arrive at a more exact knowledge of the world of mind and matter around us, and reverence, because every advance in knowledge brings us face to face with the mystery of our own being.<sup>1</sup>*

Now we need to ask August Comte and his followers what it is that sustains this religious and spiritual attitude through all of the triadic stages of the development of the human mind.

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1- Planck, Max, (1932), *Where is Science Going?*

8- August Comte should have taken this self-evident truth into account that there is no contradiction between the human triple relationships with the universe, as we come across many figures throughout history who have once seen the world a sign of Divine Essence and said,

*Everything bears a sign inside it proving that the Lord is one.*

At the same time, they have done considerable philosophical and scientific researches of the universe. Anyone who reads the works of Avicenna or Rumi can easily discern such an intellectual comprehensiveness in them.

Avicenna's *Al-Isharat Wa-'l-tanbihat* (Remarks and Admonitions) is a brilliant example of the fusion of these three intellectual attitudes. In his *Masnavi* ("Spiritual Couplets"), Rumi has frequently pointed out the integrity of these alternative methods, for example, "The terrestrial wave is our understanding, imagination and thought".

This is the most objectivistic theory of human mental phenomena available to man. Moreover, the second hemistich of this verse communicates a very delicate mystical idea:

*The aquatic wave is consciousness, ecstasy and eternity.<sup>1</sup>*

[www.ostad-jafari.com](http://www.ostad-jafari.com)  
[Info@ostad-jafari.com](mailto:Info@ostad-jafari.com)

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1- Rumi's *Masnavi*, Book 1.