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Subject: Eastern and Western Civilizations, Islam and the West on Women's Rights

Nationality: Japanese / Major: The History of Iran

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Nakanishi: I have a question in regard to the dialogue among civilizations.¹ Following the remarks of President Seyed Muhammad Khatami concerning the combination of parts of Western and Eastern cultures, I would like to ask which parts of Western culture are of avail for Iranians in your view.

Ja'fari: If the notion of culture covers science and industry as well, whatever which is concerned with the necessities of human life and can contribute to the expansion of human knowledge is seriously defended by Islam.

As a historian, you know that Moslems had founded a library in Andalusia by late second century A.H. which contained more than six hundred thousand manuscripts in various fields of science, philosophy and the like. This example as such shows how highly interested Moslems were in culture and its expansion. There are numerous examples of such rich libraries across Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

By the early third century A. H., some eighty faculties had been

1- The former Iranian president Seyyed Muhammad Khatami introduced the idea of "Dialogue among Civilizations" as a response to Samuel P. Huntington's theory of a Clash of Civilizations. The term was initially used by Austrian philosopher Hans Köchler who, in 1972 and in a letter to the UNESCO, had suggested the idea of an international conference on the "dialogue between different civilizations" (*dialogue entre les différentes civilisations*) and had organized, in 1974, the first international conference on the role of intercultural dialogue ("The Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations") with the support of and under the auspices of Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor. (Translator).

established in Andalusia. If culturophilia had not been an essential part of Islam, Moslems would not have left such magnificent works behind. Moslems' discoveries in chemistry, mathematics and medicine are very renowned.

In his *Adventures of Ideas* (1933), Whitehead compares Islamic culture with Greek culture and describes the former as authentic while he categorizes the latter as imitative. He writes:

*The Byzantines and Mahometans were themselves the civilization.*¹

Whitehead is one of the founders of modern mathematical logic and I believe that he is the Plato of the contemporary Western world. He has written the best works on the history of civilization. I've widely quoted from him in most of my lectures and works as I have found him very competent. Whitehead is a wise, conscientious and distinguished philosopher.

But what does "civilization" mean in Islam? If we define civilization as material development and prosperity, no harmony and agreement would ever be envisaged among civilizations, as this definition only encompasses personal interests. Thus, giving the priority to man and his economic interests in civilization will only exhaust the energies and powers for the satisfaction of egotisms. But if our discourse on civilization is purified of racial classifications, civilizations will become more harmonizable and can behold constructive competitions and continuous development.

In a meeting with the secretary general of the Soviet embassy in Tehran during the Brezhnev² presidency, I asked him, "Do you have any quarrel with me as a human being?" "No," he replied. I said, "I do not have any problem with you, either. If we are after a human civilization, we should not have any conflict. All conflicts have their roots in "egotisms". Islam does not accept a civilization which is fraught with contradictions and conflicts. When there is no cooperation, dialogue is meaningless too. Civilizations require some common principles in order to engage with each other in a peaceful manner.

But as to your question about elements of western culture which can

1- Whitehead, Alfred North, *Adventures of Ideas*.

2- Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev (December 19, 1900 – 10 November 1982) was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, presiding over the country from 1964 until his death in 1982. His eighteen-year term as General Secretary was second only to that of Joseph Stalin in duration. During Brezhnev's rule, the global influence of the Soviet Union grew dramatically, in part because of the expansion of the Soviet military during this time. However, his tenure as leader has often been criticized for marking the beginning of an era of economic and social stagnation that eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

be useful for Eastern people, I should say that there are two significant issues in Islam which have been discussed in a theoretical form and we behold them in practice:

The first issue is discipline. Islam believes that life without discipline ends up in nihilism. There are also numerous prophetic traditions regarding the necessity of discipline in life. Imam Ali (PBUH) states:

I strongly recommend you to observe discipline.¹

We can find this discipline in practical form in Western civilization. The lesson reads: "O' Moslems! What is in your principles of faith is practicable, so put the discipline into practice!"

The second issue, which is even more important, is taking the world seriously. We have not believed yet that the material world is very serious. Therefore, there are some baseless cultures and moral taboos in the East. We think that we can manage our affairs with sentiments and daydreaming, while it needs practical measures and serious decisions. As every medicine has its own particular chemical formula and not every medicine can be prescribed for every patient, such seriousness and precision is necessary in all aspects of material life. Westerners have taken material affairs very seriously. Of course, Islam has also recommended to believers that, "Whoever does not take this world seriously will not take the hereafter serious, either". To put the matter otherwise, we must take this world as seriously as we take the hereafter world.

It is not clear what has caused Easterners to ignore the importance of material affairs. Of course, Japan has been fortunately less infected with this virus, and this can be studied as a turning point in their culture. When Japan underwent striking economic developments, Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir in Iran also started some movements, which were unfortunately thwarted. We do not exactly know when human sentiments and emotions have begun to permeate into the serious issues of life in Eastern lands. The serious issues of material life have their own particular procedures which do not fit in the structure of human emotions and sentiments, while these two have been combined in the East and have led to our underdevelopment.

One of the reasons for this technological and industrial underdevelopment seems to be radical spiritualism, which has plagued almost all Eastern countries. Extremism in every form is dangerous. Unfortunately, the West is also pestered with material radicalism. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western people have been *merely* occupied with material affairs. New developments made in industries, war implements and the like, have changed man into a dangerous creature! Therefore, they are

1- *Nahjulbalaghah*, Letter 47.

unconscious of the universal spirit of the world. They set on wars and trespass the rights of oppressed and poor people. This is itself one of the factors that have dissuaded Eastern people from taking concrete steps toward industrialization and technological developments. On the other hand, if spiritual matters had been considered by Westerners too along with material affairs, a universal movement would have taken form which could have united the East and the West in many aspects. Victor Cherbuliez,¹ who has widely written on wars and peace treaties argues:

*From 1500 B.C. to 1860 A. D., less than eight thousand peace treaties were signed, each one supposed to provide everlasting peace, but not even one them lasted any more than two years.*²

If man had turned to spiritual matters, such wars and peace deals would have never occurred. This statistics show that treaties have been mostly signed under the pressures of one powerful side; otherwise, the fire of war would always keep on burning.

Now you may ask how one can reconcile matter with meaning. There is an unbridgeable gap between physics and metaphysics, and yet we speak of reconciliation!

Max Planck, the greatest religious physicist of the twentieth century, has said:

*There can never be any real opposition between religion and science, for the one is the complement of the other. Every serious and reflective person realizes, I think, that the religious element in his 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 feeling. It is from the cooperation of understanding and 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 truth and reverence – the love for 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.*³

Thus, the cooperation of "understanding" and "will" results in the

1- Cherbuliez, Charles Victor (b. July 19, 1829 – d. July 1, 1899) was a French novelist and author. He was born in Geneva, Switzerland and died in Combs-la-Ville. He was the eleventh member elected to occupy Seat 3 of the Académie française in 1881. (Translator).

2- For more details see: Ja'fari, M. T., *A Translation and Interpretation of Nahjulbalaghah*, Vol. 12. (Originally in Persian).

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

emergence of the finest fruit of philosophy, i.e. ethical fruit. *Undoubtedly, science adds to the moral values of life.*

There are numerous prophetic traditions which urge believers to take the material world seriously. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has been quoted to have said:

If you eat a date and throw its kernel away without having thought of its planting, you have committed dissipation.

In another *hadith*, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) states:

O' Lord! Bless our bread [i.e. economy]. If we had no bread, we would not have prayed, fasted and fulfilled our other religious obligations.¹

Therefore, Easterners can learn "discipline" and "seriousness in material affairs" from the Westerners, although both issues have been frequently underlined in our religious texts.

As you are working on Islamic sciences and traditions, I propose that you should make also some studies of Shi'ism and encourage your society to pay attention to this divine school as well.

Nakanishi: Last year I read an article in *Tehran Times*, in which you had written, "Europeans must prove, through philosophical arguments, that man has inherent dignity and is not an animal with a brutal nature". Would you please explain your remark and tell me whether Islam has a different view of this issue than that of Europeans?

Ja'fari: Yes, Islam has its own particular view on this issue. Man has a definite inherent dignity in Islam. The Quran states:

And surely we have honored the children of Adam.

(The Night Journey 17:70)

In other words, Islam considers all human individuals regardless of their religious backgrounds and affiliations as being worthy of honor, but in the West, we do not see such an egalitarian attitude. If we ground our worldview in Hobbesian and Machiavellian ideas, we should say that human interests have honor, not man's nature! If Machiavellian oppressors had believed that man has an inherent dignity, which must be observed without any consideration, so many wars and bloodsheds would never have happened. Are the wretched human conditions in Africa and other points of the world indeed compatible with human rights? If man had been honored, we wouldn't nowadays see such miserable scenes of human crises worldwide.

Nakanishi: It is not so that all Western schools of philosophy are

1- Muhammad Ibn Koleyni, *Al-Foru' Min Al-Kafi*, Vol. 5.

Machiavellian, and Machiavelli's thesis is basically no more than a philosophical idea.

Ja'fari: That is right, but the evidence existing around us shows that most Western governments are established upon such cruel principles. A great European man has said, "Political philosophy is what philosophers expect from politics, while politics is what politicians *do*." Whitehead states that:

*Human nature is so complex that plans for the society are to statesman not worth even the price of the defect paper.*¹

Nakanishi: I would like to know your view on the new movements of women's rights in Iran. In European countries, women and men have equal rights, but Islamic Shari'ah has a different view as to this issue and claims that woman always needs men's support. What is your assessment of this issue?

Ja'fari: When we turn to authentic Islamic sources to find the answers of the dilemmas concerning women, we see that all of these sources unanimously announce that men and women have equal existential value. The Quran openly states:

O' men! Surely we have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty); surely Allah is knowing, aware.

(The Apartments 49:13)

But as to the second question, which can be also examined from a legal point of view, I should say that no one would doubt that the man is physically stronger than the woman and is more patient in the face of natural disasters as well. Struggles with nature, splitting mountains, excavating seas and taking part in wars all fits in with the physical features of men, though this does not mean that men are existentially more valuable than women. However, there are some legal considerations which should be taken into account, as Islam strongly insists on the primacy of the family and the importance of its management, which has been assigned to the woman, who is the "mother" of the family. On the other hand, emotions should be sought in the eyes and bosoms of mothers. A man cannot fill the vacant space of a meaningful motherly look. According to Sir Bertrand Russell:

A child who does not grow in his mother's arms is better for war.

Thus, I believe that "**the woman lives the taste of life, while man only conceives it.**" If we see nowadays that people are estranged to each

1- Whitehead, Alfred North, *Adventures of Ideas*.

other and live alone in the West, it is indeed a result of the destruction of the family's foundations. As Nietzsche says:

A woman's passion, a total renunciation of all rights of her own, postulates precisely that the same feeling, the same desire for renunciation, exists also in the other sex, for if both severally made this renunciation for love, there would result, on my word I do not know just what, shall we say, perhaps, the horror of nothingness. The woman wishes to be taken ... she demands, therefore, someone to take her, someone who does not give himself, who does not abandon himself, but who wishes, on the contrary, to enrich his ego through love ... The woman gives herself, the man adds to himself by taking her.¹

Nakanishi: Why should the law support women?

Ja'fari: In Islam, the man is obliged to pay for the woman's cost of living and this has an economic reason, since men are more eroded in economic processes and women have a secondary presence in the economy. It is men who bear the burden of economic activities. Women play a distinguished role in Iranian families. If a woman is pious and intelligent, her man prefers to lean upon her shoulders and choose her as his companion. In fact, the woman gives the orders and the man implements them. There is no objection against women's employment if it does not cause the family any damage. Many books have been written on women's problems throughout history while it is only less than a half century that there have been debates on women's presence in economic affairs in the West. Since the very dawn of Islam, women have successfully worked in such fields as nursing, medicine, jurisprudence, rational debates and philosophy, while they have also fulfilled their duties within the family. Lady Amin Isfahani was a *Mujtahid* woman who had continuous jurisprudential debates with her contemporary *Mujtahid* men.

Islam has frequent recommendations on the observation of women's rights. For example, one of the legal orders as to the woman is that if someone quarrels with a woman and pulls her hair in this quarrel, the judge can fine the puller to pay the whole price of the blood of a man if her pulled hair does not grow again, because her beauty has been damaged and this is as if her life has been taken. Do you have such tough laws in support of woman in the West? The implementation of these laws is an obligation.

Mr. Ja'fari introduced some sources for university courses in Shi'ism in universities to Professor Nakanishi and recommended that she should use "Shi'ah in Islam" by Allameh Tabatabaei.

1- de Beauvoir, Simone, *Le Deuxième Sexe* ("The Second Sex") (1956), p. 623 [translated into English by H. M. Parshley, Jonathan Cape Publishers, London].