

## **Towards a New Planetary: The Role of Religion from an Islamic Perspective**

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This article forms an attempt to formulate a response, from within the Islamic worldview, to the challenges and effects of globalization. Being the religion where the line of the monotheistic family of religions culminated, that which is described as an Islamic response may correspond to the position of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, it may intersect with all other religions on some principles such as justice, if not on some details. I would argue that secular thought retained some values, but it is the comprehensive and holistic approach that differentiates Islam from other systems. This means that any partial implementation of the Islamic value system will fall short from reflecting all its merits.

It is in this spirit that this paper attempts to present what maybe described as an Islamic response to the onslaught of globalization. The Islamic world-view is comprehensive in the sense that it can address directly the issue. If no direct answer is available, then Islam has the necessary epistemological and legal infrastructure within the Shari`ah, based primarily on the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet, that enables it to formulate a position that can be applied to any emerging issue.

The essence of this article is a call to reconnect to the transcendent. More openly, it is the opposite of the materially, "down to earth", positivist and reductionist position that ultimately led many enlightenment thinkers to advance homocentric world-views that wanted to do away with metaphysics altogether. It is rather obvious that the beginning of the problem can be dated to the time when religion and reason collided on European soil and took separate courses. Reason dominated public life

and religion accepted to withdraw to personal domains. This dichotomy between reason and revelation caused humanity to lead life of bewilderment clinging to material fulfillment as a way out. It is the reintegration and reconciliation of what is sound in both paths, reason and revelation, that will produce a God-conscientious person. This will be the cornerstone of positive change. It will be reflected through a caring and community-oriented personality that will make up for the lack of care due to an acute epidemic of egoism. It is a call to revive a way of life that has a soul, and not simply a mechanical one that tends to the physical needs of the body. Moreover, it is a call to relocate material needs to their proper place in the life of humanity. They are necessary for living but not good enough for the attainment of happiness. One should create a balance and shed the light on the spiritual needs of humanity. The loaf of bread and the prayer go hand in hand in the nourishment of the human being, body and soul.

The call for a "new planetary" is indeed a call for a new paradigm in which humanity enjoys healthier conditions and relations. It is a call for the protection of the weaker cultures against deculturation or rather against substituting the indigenous ways of life with the material paradigm. The suffering that resulted from globalization renders the search for a just alternative a moral imperative. Obviously, deconstructing globalization is a prerequisite for a sound paradigm that would revive a humanity that lost track of the meaning of its very existence because it has been enslaved by the material idols of consumerism. Excluded from participating in this search are those who are blinded by their interest in reaping the "benefits" of globalization, be it individuals or institutions that could be as big as the state.

Globalization is an ongoing process in which there is no respect for human dignity. The human being is the subject of impoverishing policies, dictated by specific governments that are no longer capable of representing and defending the vital interests of their peoples. The transnational corporations, the latest gimmick in accumulating wealth in the hands of the few, made sure that the role of governments is reduced and borders almost a thing of the past. If the criterion is based upon unjust practices that aim at cheating other societies out of their wealth, then there is no doubt that globalization can be listed along with colonialism. Both of them reflect different stages in the history of capitalism.

The search for a sustainable alternative to the existing model of globalization recognizes the negative effects that trail behind it wherever it hits. Like a tornado, it cannot be stopped and it causes havoc and destruction wherever it reaches. The difference is that the path of the tornado remains limited while globalization recognizes no limitations. The tornado literally claims the life of its victims, globalization claims their souls, albeit metaphorically.

Tornadoes are egalitarian; they do not discriminate between victims. Also globalization does not target specific cultures, though the third world has suffered most due to the long history of abuse at the hands of western colonial powers. It is only a matter of time before its impact reaches all, though certain industrial countries might be able to resist a little more than others. This does not mean that we ignore the roots of the disparity between the north and the south, and ways to bridge the gap between both; an essential element in reconciling and fostering one humanity.

What I would like to say here is that the average person, in rich countries, will not be spared the effects of globalization (e.g. relocating factories from the USA to Indonesia), and will be hit hard as a result of the unfolding new economic practices.

Rather than being served in ways that will free them to address the perennial questions regarding the meaning of life, human beings find themselves caught in a vicious circle of economic activities that aim at satisfying their biological needs, and hardly so.

The same logic applies to the relationship between the industrial countries. Those who can will certainly cause harm to the others whenever a clash of interest emerges. One example is that of the banana war between the USA and Europe, where the USA imposed sanctions in the form of increased tariffs up to 100% on specific European products. Behind the war were the American companies trying to maintain a monopoly on Latin American production and distribution. In short, it seems that the pie is never big enough for sharing!

The rainbow of cultures that ornamented the earth is fading away, because humanity is bombarded systematically by symbols of a monolithic and boring material culture. Needless to say that the borrowed, or rather invading symbols, are devoid of warmth and originality. Many of them are idols of sex and violence that reflect the moral decadence of modern age. Consumerism brought with it new symbols that can be recognized anywhere in the world of today.

In order that the new material symbols are granted entry to the world markets, most governments *had* to sign treaties that are not in the interest of their peoples. This led to "free" flow of "goods" and "values". To ensure that there is a free flow of goods, there has to be a "need" for them, and when the "need" is not part of a specific culture, it is created! It is here that local agents are needed so that the package that paves the way for exporting the material symbols is adopted. Market (i.e. WTO) related "truths" and principles found their way to other cultures through intellectuals,

officials and non-governmental organizations who, because of hefty funding, sold their souls to the market!

The Islamic world-view genuinely believes in cultural and religious co-existence. It is divine will that different peoples exist in unique ways to create the possibility, according to the Qur'an, for knowing each other. No "race" is superior to another:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). Qur'an, 49:13

No world-view should be forced on one another. Without rendering truth relative, Islam prohibits coercion:

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error...Qur'an, 2:256

To the service of the globalization we find a host of international institutions. These include the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. Their "experts" make sure that loans are given to countries that it is much better for them to stay away from borrowing and depend on their own resources for funding without stretching beyond them. Unless paying the "service" or "interest" on the loans, that is many folds the original sum, is in the borrowing country's interest! Some of these international financial institutions resemble gigantic monsters that have huge bellies, huge enough to keep the billions of dollars taken from the wretched countries that will never be able to pay their national debts. This is a true story of beauty and the beast, where bestiality is always a threat to humanity and cannot be reformed.

Islam is against monopoly and certain specific measures such as the prohibition of tariffs as stated in a famous tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him). Yet, to allow this kind of "free" trade, the way globalization wants it, is monopoly in disguise. For who can protect the smaller businesses and farmers? Newly reduced and quasi-governments look like parents who standby watching their own children being hurt, and may be get killed, because they respect the freedom and privacy of their own children. The same children who are suffering nowadays from drug, alcohol and sexual abuse because of the new cultural symbols. Governments should assume their responsibilities in primarily protecting their own citizens, for deregulation creates the kind of freedom animals have in the jungle, where the strong devours the weak. It shouldn't be a surprise if the motto of globalization is summarized as "gobble, gobble, gobble!"

The voices that called for wiping out the debt of the third world at the turn of the new millenium, including that of the Pope, were not listened to. This took place in an age that boasts excellent modes of communication, an essential characteristic of the global village, but unfortunately few people are truly listening. The Islamic position encourages loans or grants that would help relief the needs of the poor, but it prohibits usury. The Qur'an uses straight forward verses to express it position:

But God has permitted trade and forbidden usury...(2:275)

God will deprive usury of all blessing, and will give increase for deeds of charity...(2:276)

O you who believe! Fear God and give up what remains of your demand for usury, if you are indeed believers. (2:278)

If the debtor is in a difficulty, grant him time till it is easy for him to repay. But if you remit it [i.e. the loan] by way of charity, that is best for you if you only knew. (2:280)

It is rather obvious that the latter verse encourages the remittance of the debt of the poor. It will be wonderful if the poorer nations that are exhausted because of debts are granted a new beginning without the burden of the debt or its "interest"!

Modernity successfully substituted *usury* with "interest", in as much as it substituted *adultery* with "extra marital affair". It is using a rhetoric that is devoid of the religious connotations that would burden human conscience. The new language is essential in promoting Hollywood's ethics and values, if any, and the old one is essential to bring humanity back to its senses.

I do believe that real investment in long term and low-yielding projects should be part of responsible banking and not only the absence of usury. If this were the criterion, then many "Islamic banks" would qualify for this category.

It is also hoped that this call, which is translated into the invitation of speakers representing different religions and backgrounds, does not represent a cosmetic stance, but rather a genuine recognition of the possibility of solutions outside what might be described as "western" paradigms. This will send a clear message that intellectuals, belonging to *otherness*, do not have to adapt their ways of thinking.

While it is understandable why one would still have a problem with religious hierarchies that continue to claim infallibility in relationship with what constitutes truth in the area of faith and jurisprudence, one should not reject religion altogether because of such positions. We, human beings, are equipped with enough methodological expertise that illogical notions should have no social space.

Thus one finds herself / himself trying to deconstruct that which was accrued outside the sphere of religion, and to deconstruct human additions to religion that were, and still being added.

It is obvious that it is rather difficult to reach consensus. Therefore, at least one could look for common grounds that would allow for the possibility of more peaceful and respectful conditions for the human being. The challenges that one world-view poses to the other should not be interpreted as an indication of a clash of civilizations as Huntington concluded wrongly.

When speaking from the background that there is an end to this life and that there is a day of reckoning, one realizes that whether his or her life was is a comedy or tragedy can only be known for anyone after life ends! This should be a driving force to excel in serving humanity and to act in a responsible way.

I would like to end my presentation in the comfort of story telling, for we are entitled for a break away from abstract statements. During one of my visits to South Africa I came across a photo of a traditional Zulu dancer whose necklaces included, along with the beautiful beads, bones and stripes of leather, a can of Coca-Cola!