

Globalization and Religion: Towards a Theology of Soft Otherness

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There were days when probably all peoples believed in the existence of well defined borders between self and other. Their rhetoric reflected multiple worlds as absolute separate entities. They believed that their respective worlds were autonomous, not noticing the creeping influence of other cultures. The acceptance of foreign cultural values was eclectic, though some infiltrated unconsciously and slowly. There were no systematic campaigns to market and disseminate cultural values, as we are witnessing nowadays. The advanced information technology changed the slow process, most probably for ever.

Today, in the age of globalization, there is a fast and an aggressive attempt to promote western commercial material icons all over the world. Classical colonialism invaded, at least in its first stage, the physical space of the other. On the other hand, neo-colonialism attacks the spiritual and intellectual space of the other in an attempt to uproot the other from her space and implant her in a surrogate culture as if she lacks a natural one. Self-identity, while still resisting the prospects of radical change, was never at risk as in these rocking times.

While the classical war was waged by armies advancing in the territories of the other, the new one is waged by western "intellectuals" from the comfort of their think-tanks, away from the "exotic" land of the other that attracted their predecessors! It seems that at one point, when super powers are blinded by the massive power they

accumulate, especially when one of them becomes the sole super power, the temptation to force a world view on the other, including change of regimes, becomes irresistible. The super power enlists the international organizations to its service such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations. The latter, being undemocratic because of the veto "right", it reflects the will of the powerful. Their policies are directly responsible for an impoverished world with hundreds of billions of dollars debt in each of Asia, Africa and South America. In addition, the direct use of force and the violation of international law becomes the order of the day. This is also perpetuated at the hands of regional "super powers" fulfilling the master plan, including the use of state terrorism.

Definitely, the way the world is dominated today is unprecedented. For the foreseen future, there is only one *will* that dictates world agenda. It is that of the United States. This world order might go on unchallenged for a while. Nevertheless, policing the world is a very exhausting business. Speaking from the history of the rise and fall of empires, it is burdensome to maintain their greatness that eventually leads to their demise.

A reaction ensues at the hands of those who see their culture and natural resources eroding while their governments watch helplessly, not being able to protect the interests of their own people. Or worse, these governments adopt the "Western" position and become complacent. Some would attempt to resist the change and recover a lost heritage peacefully. Others might react to this loss as an existential problem leading to the use of force. It is here that one might address some of the roots of actions that reflect a desperate psyche!

The freedom to be *other* is not out there anymore unless it is superficial otherness that does not challenge the sociopolitical order which is promoted by the new world order. It is even alarming because of the apocalyptic tone that associated this paradigm with the end of history.¹ Genuine pluralism and multiculturalism or, to put it simply, alternative ways of life are not respected. After the collapse of the communist regimes and the end of the cold war, a devilish propaganda "promoted" Islam as the archenemy of the west. It is nothing but the art of creating misconceptions, stereotyping and misinformation. It is being creative in creating enemies out of the vast pool of others. Part of the problem is that the rhetoric of this propaganda is adopted and reproduced by naïve elements in the Muslim world, who express their views, unwittingly, in terms of this imagined clash of civilizations.

World heritage is deeply rooted in the spiritual realm. Yet, spirituality and transcendence are the first victims to fall when the material ethos occupies central stage. World cultural heritage faces a grim reality. The rainbow of these cultures might lose all colors. The cultures that ornamented the earth are fading away, because humanity is bombarded systematically by symbols of a monolithic and boring material culture. Many of them are idols of sex and violence that reflect the moral decadence of modern age.

In the fierce arena where the material does not recognize the spiritual, unless of course it can utilize it commercially, the other is reduced to less than a human being. Humanity becomes identified with the market, the competitors, the consumers...etc. The human being is perceived as the *homo economicus*! The public sphere and discourse are systematically detheologized. It is replaced with pseudo-religion, where the transnational corporations are the high priests of the global temple.

¹ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992.

The only form of worshipping in this pseudo-religion is the consumption of the icons produced by such high priests. Piety is measured against one's submission and loyalty to specific brand names. Within this paradigm, shopping at the mall is the closest thing to performing a pilgrimage at a holy place.

Axiology, in the age of dehumanization, could become superfluous. The material ethos, which is organically related to secularism, failed to provide meaning for life. Therefore, it created a vacuum, open for all possibilities including bloody conflicts, especially when billions of human beings are destitute. In addition, the very practices of the transnational corporations proved to be detrimental to human life *per se*. One example is the excessive deforestation to provide more grazing lands, so that enough beef is supplied to these transnational restaurant chains. Such deforestation which takes place at the expense of the green lungs that enable the earth to breathe, leads to ecological disasters.

Yet, regardless where we stand vis-à-vis globalization, it remains that the world is interconnected in ways that no human imagination could have captured decades ago. Technology "compressed" time and space. Yet, it is the same technology that allowed the abuse of natural resources, leading to the destruction of our natural habitat. It is good that world leaders talk about sustainable development, but it will be excellent if they move into action. The world is transformed into a global village, devoid of the warmth and harmony that are characteristic of village life. Human suffering increased and conflicts abound. The gap between the rich and the poor is wider than ever. Much of the suffering stemmed from belonging to forms of otherness that are used unjustly to justify the conflict. Wow to those who belong to "savage", "third world" or uncivilized peoples! One of the most important issues to

be addressed, within this sphere, is the role of religion in creating, recognizing or providing solutions to the problematic of otherness?

Humanity has witnessed many forms of otherness. Some kinds are based on color, "race", ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, nationalism, ideology, religion...etc. The range of suffering ranged from discrimination to genocide. In dealing with the problematic of otherness, one needs to deal with the roots of the problem. While it is possible to move from the nation-state to other political forms or from one ideology to another, it is not possible to remove all the differences from the face of the globe. It is not possible for all of us to become one culture, with one religion, one language and one color. Even then, human ingenuity would make sure new forms of otherness are created. Anything beyond "I" might constitute some form of otherness. Such logic could be softened or, as in the case and language of the Sufis, all forms of otherness can be "annihilated", for nothing really exists except for God! Ultimately, it is a problem of education. For those who dwell on this orbit, one's relationship with the other is a reflection of the relationship with God.

Yet, I realize that practically it is not possible to reconcile with all forms of otherness. Unlike the different natural characteristics which should be celebrated, there are human constructs that cannot be accepted. All ideologies that are based on or have social Darwinism components are not to be tolerated. All calls for the supremacy of one "race" over the "other" are inhumane and evil. There should be no hierarchies for human beings. At the same time, all forms of otherness based on colonialism and imperialism should quickly become a thing of the past. It is a shame that at the turn of the third millennium there are peoples who still live under occupation, despite all UN resolutions. One should, on ethical grounds, categorically reject the above-the-law status of occupying forces.

On the role of religion within this sphere, many modern social and political thinkers were prolific in their writings against religion and its institutions. They even anticipated that religion would also disappear for the sake of a more progressive and peaceful society. Those are invited to rethink their position which is rooted in the past. It was the negative history of religion in Europe that was used to justify secularization. One might ask if this wasn't a problem peculiar to a specific time and space. It is legitimate to look critically at the relationship between Christianity and the dark ages of Europe. Yet today, compared to the anti-scientific spirit that prevailed in the dark ages, it is easy to find Christian educational institutions that excel in the sciences, with priests who are specialized in the exact sciences. Also, it was the church that had problematic financial affairs in medieval times, while today it is the "developed" secular countries that inflict harm on their own people and on the third world. Separation between church and state was supposed to be a way out of the miseries of the middle ages, only to find ourselves trapped in more sophisticated ways of injustice.

Didn't secular states go to World War I and World War II? Wasn't it a secular state that dropped the atomic bombs on Japan? Wasn't Nazi Germany secular when the atrocities of Kristal Nacht took place? The list is extremely long and for the most part it is western secularized states that performed some of the most abhorring crimes against humanity. It is mind puzzling that the US is against the establishment of an international court that would look into crimes against humanity, and that it lobbies the European countries to withdraw their support for such a court!

Therefore, I would question the generalization that does not take into consideration the different historical contexts and does not recognize the unique experience of other religions and cultures. Success stories of religion are rejected

because of the problematic of otherness. To give an example, I would like to highlight Jean Jacques Rousseau's own recognition of the role of Muslims in rescuing Europe by transferring the sciences and scientific methodologies. Religion and science, and more generally religion and the public sphere, are not at odd within the Islamic worldview. Yet, despite Rousseau's acknowledgement, it was obvious that had resentment towards Muslims. He failed to appreciate the help that Europe enjoyed simply because of the otherness of the agent. In *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, which won him a prize from the Academy of Dijon in 1750, he stated the following:

“Europe had relapsed into the barbarism of the first ages. A few centuries ago the peoples of that part of the world, who today live such enlightened lives, lived in a state worse than ignorance. Some nondescript scientific jargon, even more contemptible than ignorance, had usurped the name of knowledge, and posed a nearly invincible obstacle to its return. A revolution was needed to bring men back to common sense; it finally came from the least expected quarter. It was the stupid Moslem, the eternal scourge of letters, who caused them to reborn among us.”²

There is a possibility that Rousseau's position reflected the prevailing mood at the time. How much of it was dependent of the collective memory of Europe? Was it a selective memory? And does stereotyping play a role today similar to the past?

Moving back to the modern scene, where stereotyping is manipulated as a tool to discredit the other, we find other tools used against those who are critics of globalization as people who are against modern life. The use of *ad hominem* fallacies against those critics is nothing but a scarecrow. These are critics who are motivated by the lack of justice. They *are* concerned for human rights, they defend endangered cultures and they reject the idea that globalization is good for the poor.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts; The Basic Political Writings*, Donald A. Cress, trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988) p. 3.

Religion reclaimed a prominent status and proved to be a viable social force on world stage. It is a force that cannot and should not be ignored. The problem arises when this strength is misused, eventually fueling conflicts. It should be remembered that whenever religion is part of a conflict, the secularists hasten to use the occasion to justify their position which relocates religion to personal life. One should only recall the many wars that took place without religion being a factor. In fact, and in many cases, the warring parties were secularists or had identical cultural and religious backgrounds.

It is the problematic of otherness, which secularism could not solve, that forms the essence of the arguments that "justify" the initiation of conflicts. Within the last century alone, massacres, genocides and holocausts were perpetuated because of otherness. Many secular governments have laws that prohibit discrimination against those who are legal minorities. There are affirmative action programs in support of the other, attempting to offer some compensation, yet the collective other still moves about the same socio-economic location. What is worse, and potentially dangerous on the long run, is that they are not accepted by the majority.

To promote a solution to otherness based on dropping the religious argument is counter productive and proved to be futile. I argue "aggressively" that religion contains messages of reconciliation and peace in as much as it has statements that could fuel wars when taken out of context. It all depends on allowing ourselves the chance of reading the religious text without the cultural, historical and ideological packages that coerce us to adopt or go along views of conflicts. To formulate a theology of *soft otherness* does not mean that it is something totally new, at least from an Islamic perspective. It is nothing but an attempt to represent anew, in the language of the day, what has been stated in the Islamic worldview fourteen centuries ago. It

contributes to coexistence and world peace wherever Islam is part of the debate, including Europe. It recognizes that religion reclaimed a very important status on world stage after being subjected to the onslaught of modernity, as philosophy and praxis, for many centuries.

It forms, moreover, 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. But it is the comprehensive and holistic approach, along with its historical positioning, emerging after its elder sisters, Judaism and Christianity, that differentiates Islam from other systems and makes it possible to develop a theology of otherness that is different. I would like to stress that my primary concern here is the relationship within the Abrahamic family.

Islam is not a religion as the word denotes in English. It is a way of life that goes beyond systems of belief. The Islamic world-view is comprehensive in the sense that it has enough sources to address the issue either directly or indirectly through *Ijtihad*. The latter means exerting one's intellectual effort in understanding and expressing the Islamic worldview. It comprises the use of 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. One form of it is reasoning by analogy [*qiyas*]. Yet, it is a much more complicated issue with differing views as to the parameters of this intellectual activity.

The essence of this article is a call to reconnect to the transcendent. It is a call to reclaim a spirituality that is hospitable to the other. More openly, it is the opposite of the materially, "down to earth", positivist and reductionist position that ultimately led many thinkers to advance homocentric world-views that wanted to do away with metaphysics altogether. They, later on, formed the backbone of Eurocentric thought to which the rest of the world was "invited" to subscribe to. Labels such as "fundamentalism" are sprinkled lavishly whenever someone dares to depart from Eurocentrism. The process that reflects the dissemination of Eurocentric values to others is called westernization. In Arabic, "westernization" has other connotations. Both of west (*gharb*) and strange/stranger (*ghareeb*) have the same root (i.e. gh-r-b). Westernization (*taghreeb*), therefore, embodies a sense of alienation from the Arab's indigenous culture linguistically which deepens the impact of this phenomenon.

The beginning of the problem can be dated to the time when religion and reason collided on European soil and took separate courses. Reason triumphed and dominated public life, and religion was secularized and, subsequently, accepted to withdraw to personal domains. Forcing religion to withdraw to the periphery did not solve the problem; it created new ones. 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-conscious person who will tend to the affairs of both worlds. 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 strike a balance between both realms by shedding more light on the spiritual needs. The loaf of bread and the prayer go hand in hand in the nourishment of the human being, body and soul.

The development of a theology of soft otherness, it is hoped, would open the door for healthier relations. It stems from the realization that one cannot undo otherness altogether, nor otherness should be inflated to the degree that it becomes employed in conflicts. There is so much in common amongst us to the extent it is possible to focus on these commonalities to work towards a peaceful and shared humanity. It is, in one sense, an invitation to see the humanity of the other. In another sense, it is an invitation to actively participate in rehumanizing the other to counterbalance the process of dehumanization.

In more than twenty years of interfaith dialogue, I have witnessed participants who identified their religion totally with the other as if there were no differences at all. It was obvious to me that this position does not hold water; it did not last for long. Interfaith dialogue faces many challenges and it remains elitist in the best scenario. Total identification with the other, in addition to being epistemologically and existentially flawed, it contributes to the alienation of an already suspicious general public. As a result, they distance themselves from being identified with the other, who happens to be the immediate enemy in specific contexts. I find this detrimental to the prospects of peaceful coexistence.

While total identification with the other could be regarded as an ideologically motivated position, there is another one which does not recognize any similarities between the different religions at all. The latter view does not recognize the benefit of interfaith dialogue and it is suspicious of those who participate in them. Hence is the

search for a theology of soft otherness that could be considered a middle path between artificial assimilation and total rejection.

The suffering that resulted from globalization renders the search for a just alternative a moral imperative. Obviously, deconstructing the monopoly on globalization and steering it in the direction of human good is a prerequisite for a sound paradigm that would revive a humanity that has lost track of the meaning of its very existence. Excluded from participating in this search are those who are blinded by their exclusivist interest in reaping the "benefits" of globalization, be it individuals or institutions such as the transnational corporations.

Globalization is an ongoing process that shows 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. Power has shifted from the state towards these transnational corporations. They become the decision makers, not the state and, therefore, not the citizens. 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 hits. 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 members of the same humanity.

A deep respect for the right of cultures to exist should be promoted. It is existential pluralism without relativizing truth. Differences should be seen as phenomena taking place within the larger human family. It is also possible to take into consideration other softening factors such as the affiliation with the Abrahamic family. Here we have the concept of the "People of the Book", such as Jews and Christians, coming to the foreground. Equally important is the extension of the latter category to those who might have received a revealed Book, such as the Sabians.

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. It begins with a reminder of being members of the same human family:

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

Still, the Qur'an reminds us that the variations in our physical appearances such as colors and acquired cultural skills such as languages are signs pointing in the direction of the Great Creator:

And among His Signs I the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are Signs for those who know. Qur'an, 30:22

Do we not enjoy and celebrate the variations in the colors of the different flora and fauna that we encounter in nature? How could we discriminate against another person and create a category of otherness out of her because she looks naturally different?

Furthermore, 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

As to the nature of the relationship with the other, the Qur'an asks Muslims to look beyond the immediate hostilities:

It may be that Allah will establish friendship between you and those whom you [now] hold as enemies. For Allah has power (over all things); And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Qur'an, 60: 7

Once the other is a peaceful citizen, the Qur'an invites Muslims to treat the other in the best possible manner:

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loves those who are just. Qur'an, 60: 8

Absent from this English translation is the beautiful Arabic wording for the kind treatment of the other "*tabarruhum*". The Qur'an describes the relationship between

prophet Jesus Christ (Peace be upon him) and his mother Mary (Peace be upon her) using a word with the same root. The same word was also used by prophet Yahya (John the Baptist, Peace be upon him) to describe his kind relationship with his parents.³ Yet, the ultimate beauty that comes from the same root lies in the attribute *Al-Barr* [The Beneficent], one of the 99 beautiful names of God.⁴ It is my understanding that, against all the verses that include this word, we are invited to participate in this attribute of God for the sake of humanity at large. Islam advocates a theology of justice. The love of God and His Prophet is translated into justice for all. There is no requirement to love the other, yet we are invited to maintain the golden rule as stated in a tradition of the Prophet: "None of you will be a [true] believer unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."

One important area where justice should be administered is the financial sector. 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 are better off staying away from borrowing and depend on their own resources for development. Unless paying the "service" or "interest" on the loans, that is many folds the original sum, is in the borrowing country's interest!

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? The market economy made governments look like parents who standby watching their own children being hurt, and may be get killed, because they respect the freedom of

³ See Qur'an, 19: 14, 32.

⁴ See Qur'an, 52: 28.

their own children. These are 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. It is obvious that deregulation creates the kind of freedom animals have in the jungle, where the strong devours the weak.

The voices that called for wiping out the debt of the third world at the turn of the third millennium, including that of the Vatican 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. You should not expect any material gains when give a loan. It is strictly a good deed. 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"! The Islamic position is in line with the original position of Judaism and Christianity.

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.

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 banks, including "Islamic banks" where the investor enters into a kind of partnership with the bank, would fail to live up to this ideal. For along time I wrote and spoke publicly about the concept of Islamic Banking as being organically related to social services. This however proved to be a false assumption rooted in my own ideal outlook. This position of mine is dramatically different from those I promoted for almost a decade. This includes a paper on globalization that I presented at the Istituto Internazionale Jacques Maritain in Treviso, Italy in February, 2001, out of which I incorporated some ideas here. My position in that paper was that "many Islamic Banks would qualify for this category [of being a tool for the welfare of the society]".⁵ The change in my position took place after a discussion with the C.E.O. of one of these Islamic Banks who explained to me that these banks opt for short term, high yielding investments, as the investors expect a good return on their investments! In short, they are not charities. I find the attachment of the word "Islamic" to the names of businesses, at times, troubling for me. This particular bank in the Palestinian town of Ramallah was willing to invest in the tobacco industry. I find this absolutely contradictory to Islamic teachings which prohibit inflicting harm on people.

It is obvious that it is rather difficult to reach consensus about what constitutes justice and the best venues to achieve it. While one does not have to belong to religion in order to be a caring person, religion itself is a good candidate for the

⁵Mustafa Abu Sway, "Towards a New Planetary: The Role of Religion from an Islamic Perspective" [Un'anima per la globalizzazione] *Globalizzazione: Conflitto O Dialogo Di Civiltà?* Ed. Roberto Papini (Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane: Napoli, 2002) 239-244.

pursuit of justice. The existential plurality of religions and other ways of life make it imperative that we 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. He stated that "in the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace...".⁶ I do not think that cultural differences will drive people to conflict, rather it is injustice that does. Justice is the prerequisite for world peace.

The East and the West are Eurocentric constructs open for deconstruction. Portraying any of these two categories in terms of total otherness might be a source of comfort for those who would like the warring scenario to be the only one in sight.

I believe that there is a possibility to perceive the reality of the situation other than the way it is presented by most popular media and those who are interested in maintaining a narrative of a conflict. This does not mean at all that we ignore any component of what constitutes the *other*.

The scenario that we are dealing with here is that of how to perceive the presence and interaction between the different religions and ethnic backgrounds globally and in places such as Europe?

As far as the Islamic presence on the European continent is considered, one thing is definite: Islam and Muslims in Europe are not modern phenomena! While there are millions of Muslim immigrants, there are also European Muslim peoples and communities in the Balkan and Eastern Europe, dating back for many centuries. In addition, there are Europeans who reverted to Islam. This means that there are

⁶ Samuel Huntington; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 321.

Muslims who are Europeans through and through! One could go beyond this and question the nature of European identity in the first place.

On the civilizational level, Muslims contributed to the welfare of Europe during the heydays of the Islamic civilization in Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), not as an external entity, but as being indigenous to the European scene. Al-Andalus is celebrated as a model for coexistence between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The European academic Islamic centers in Cordova and other cities provided the foundations for the Renaissance. Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was a European in as much as he was a Muslim. His philosophy was at home in Europe, though there were those who rejected it on philosophical grounds or because it made them uncomfortable.

Muslims today continue to contribute to their European countries. Europe needs to go beyond the formal and academic discourse on multiculturalism and proceed to have an open house that recognizes and accommodates everyone. The Muslim minorities and peoples in Europe are worried about their status. To deny Islam a proper place in the public sphere would be a loss of a viable civilizational force.

There are two things that Muslims carry with them; Islam and culture. By Islam I mean the universal message, which is contained within the Qur'an and the Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet). It would be an asset for coexistence if Islam is perceived as a continuum of monotheism as espoused by earlier revealed messages, including Judaism and Christianity. Islam augments and revives the original message that suffered from human editing. There is recognition of the history of revelation. It is no wonder that Jews and Christians are considered "People of the Book". In fact, many of the names of the prophets and messengers that were sent to the Jews and the

Christians are celebrated in the Qur'an. They are presented as the most respected models for humanity to imitate. The end result of this approach, from an Islamic perspective, is a softening of the otherness of the Jews and the Christians. They are definitely not totally other. The Qur'an does include a critique of specific theological issues in Judaism and Christianity. Yet, there is so much in common that if scholars deconstruct the myths and human additions that were accumulated along the years, their respective theological positions should be identical! One should note that the Islamic world view recognizes only one book *in toto*, the Qur'an. A compendium of Hadith does not enjoy the same recognition, though the hadith itself might. In the absence of a central religious authority or hierarchy, it is the responsibility of Muslims to continuously attempt to produce the Islamic worldview as sound as possible. Yet, no infallibility is attributed to any scholar.

This should lead us to the role of culture, the second thing that Muslims carry with them, as something distinct from revelation. At times, it contradicts the universal message. The cultural package is not monolithic and reflects a rainbow of cultures at least as many as the Muslim communities themselves. The ethnic background also differs and that is why some of the social divides amongst the Muslims themselves are erected. It is for these reasons that we find some of the neighborhoods, in some of the larger European cities, reflecting ethnic clustering. This is understandable from a sociological point of view. The rational behind this phenomenon is a search for support and a place where one might feel at home. For the immigrant Muslim, this could prevent a dramatic cultural shock, yet it might prevent the same person from being at home outside his or her safe haven! Of course, two things could be

observable from a distance; ethnicity and material cultural symbols. While some of it might be celebrated, other parts might be grounds for discrimination.

One can see how in the case of women's head cover, only when Muslim women wear it, it is misinterpreted. The problem stems from being *other*. It is the *otherness* of the Muslim which forms the backbone of discrimination. The otherness of the Muslim women does not depend on wearing a scarf on her head. Even if she appears in public like her other European counterparts, the problem of otherness does not disappear. The term *hijab* gains weight and prominence in the light of the otherness of the Muslim. The very use of the Arabic word in English is discriminatory.

In addition, the media, and those reflecting on the world of Islam are invited to use terminology that reflects the Islamic worldview. I found it utterly unacceptable that a certain choice of words is used as representative of the Islamic political discourse, when they are really non-existent in the Islamic worldview. Take for example the concept of "Holy War". While I can translate it into Arabic as *Harb Muqaddasah*, it does not show up in the Qur'an or the Sunnah, not even once. What is more interesting is that this concept was never used by any Muslim scholar in the history of Islam which covers fourteen centuries of prolific scholarship. Any scholar of Islam knows that Jihad is not the equivalent of "Holy War", nor it can be reduced to fighting in the first place.⁷ He or she would know that war is not holy at all in the Islamic worldview. Why then this is the prevailing choice? Why is the total disregard for the moral and ethical Jihad? Proper translation is another way of softening otherness, here of the Muslims.

⁷ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 1988) pp. 70-75.

Another important concept that has implications for Muslim-Christian relations is that of Dar Al-Harb (The Abode of War). I acknowledge this time that these words do exist in Islamic literature. Nevertheless, it should be known that this concept is a construct. It does not exist in the Qur'an or the Sunnah. It does exist in late works in Jurisprudence. In addition, it is not the only concept that is used to describe the category of the lands of non-Muslims. Dar Al-Sulh (The Abode of Reconciliation), Dar Al-'Ahd (The Abode of Covenant), Dar Al-Da`wah (The Abode of Preaching) and Dar Al-Shahadah (The Abode of Witnessing). The latter was coined in Europe, I believe by Professor Tariq Ramadan, if I am not mistaken. If I have to pitch in, I would say that it is Dar Al-Hiwar (The Abode of Dialogue). The argument remains the same. Why is it the case that *Dar Al-Harb* only is highlighted?

Feeding a language that reinforces stereotyping along with the repetition of some of the images with which the western audiences are continuously bombarded would lead ultimately to Islamophobia. There is a need to protect the Muslim minorities in the European context from the repercussions of this phenomenon. The peaceful majority bares the brunt of policies or trends that result from the systematic stereotyping, especially when a dramatic event takes place. Within the same context one should not forget the many Jews and Christians who come to the aid of the Muslim community in times of crises. It is the loss of the civil liberties that is at stake in times of crisis or constructed conflicts.

The media is invited to play a positive role in easing the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in their countries by avoiding stereotyping. It is almost exclusive to the Muslim that his/her religion is highlighted whenever something goes

wrong. The media should think on its own of an ethical code, where equal treatment is awarded to members of all faiths and backgrounds.

The Islamic worldview continues to challenge other worldviews, in as much as they do to Islam. That being said, it does not automatically translate into a conflict. It is very strange how the ideas or actions of a fringe of people, on both sides, are highlighted to maintain the validity of the narrative of conflict. This in turn would justify the enormous budgets allocated for the military industry and war machines. Obviously, a peaceful coexistence would send many military generals to early retirement.

While the first generation of immigrants continue to entertain the idea of going back to where they came from, the second generation usually goes beyond this internal conflict. In both cases, we talk about law abiding citizens who are loyal to their European countries. A small margin continues to struggle. Being loyal to one's country does not mean that one should always agree with domestic or foreign policies. The Muslim community should not be tested every time there is a crisis with a certain part of the Muslim world. It is their right to differ with their governments and to voice their concerns.

I suggest that there should be a dialogue between the local authorities and the Muslims to prevent the ghettoization of the Muslim community. There are political implications for this and both sides ultimately benefit from this dialogue. No one should be exempted or dismissed. I have seen "moderates" being promoted, while the rest of the community is marginalized. This is counterproductive. There are ample

ways to engage the Muslims in the affairs of the larger community while being accommodated.

Muslims' relationship with Europe is not a zero sum game. The dynamics that govern the life of Muslims in the European context, reflect an ethos that is both European and Islamic. They cherish being European while at the same time they respect their Islamic and cultural values. They should not be forced to choose between both.