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**“Liberals Without Ties and Muslims Without Mutawwa:
Disentangling Liberalism from Westernization”
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This is a paper on the sub-themes of “The De-colonization and Politicization of Knowledge,” “Discourse Ethics and Cosmopolitanism,” “Human Rights/Civil Liberties,” “Diaspora: Integration, Assimilation, Resistance,” “Multiple and Fractured Identities,” “Progressive Islam and Who are Progressive Muslims,” and “Islamic Feminism in Transnational Contexts”

Abstract

The desire of many to rid the Muslim world of intellectual stagnation, authoritarian governments, institutional corruption, poverty and the oppression of women is seen by many others as an excuse for cultural colonization. We propose that there is a failure to disentangle cultural preferences and symbols from substantive human rights issues in the minds of both Western advocates of progress and Muslim world opponents of Westernization. We define the essence of liberalization in its epistemic and ethical manifestations. We consider specific cases in which Westernization has been confused with liberalization. We explore how the comparisons of the prisoner abuse by Americans at Abu Ghraib prison by Americans to abuses by Saddam’s regime overlook cultural context. We propose a checklist of starting points for disentangling cultural notions from religious or philosophical misconceptions. We propose that the sources of confusion are of two types: confusion due to provincialism and confusion due to philosophical laxity. To overcome provincialism, we recommend direct contacts between the people of the differing cultures. These would include visits to each others’ cultures, workshops to explore particular issues, traveling exhibits and expositions, and opportunities for interaction over the Internet. Philosophical misconceptions must be resolved not only by addressing apparent conflicts between Islamic principles and Muslim practice (e.g., respect for women vs. honor killings, forced marriages, and forced seclusion) but also by addressing alleged conflicts between liberal theory and Western practice: (e.g., freedom of expression vs. bans on headscarves; individual rights vs. invasion of privacy; free choice of lifestyle, vs. prohibition of polygyny).

Introduction

The desire of many to rid the Muslim world of intellectual stagnation, authoritarian governments, institutional corruption, poverty and the oppression of women is seen by

many others as an excuse for cultural colonization. We propose that there is a failure to disentangle cultural preferences and symbols from substantive human rights issues in the minds of both Western advocates of progress and Muslim world opponents of Westernization.

Imagine a conversation among three Muslims. Mehmet, from Turkey, is sipping a straight up whiskey. Muhammad from Saudi Arabia sports a beard exactly one fistful in length, no more, no less. Mohamed carries an mp3 player with a collection of rap songs. They seem to agree on nothing, and yet each insists that he is living an Islamic way of life.

Now imagine a conversation among three Americans. JJ, John and Johnnie. JJ likes to spend weekends gambling in Atlantic City. John works so hard at building his business that he never takes any weekends off. Johnnie is a gay rights activist. They are nothing alike in dress, speech, preferences, and yet each insists he is living the American way of life.

Is it necessary for a proponent of an open society to wear a tie? Is a community unIslamic if there are no morals police beating bareheaded women with sticks? I shall here argue that the answer to both questions is no.

The American Way of Life

The phrase “way of life” is very familiar. American politicians declare their commitment to defend “the American Way of Life” while Islamists insist that Islam is “not just a religion, but a way of life.” A way of life is a comprehensive term. Does it refer to every aspect of a culture, or only to its essence? Americans live differently now than they did two hundred years ago. Does this mean that past generations of politicians have failed to defend the “American Way of Life?” Slavery, buggy whips, and enforcement of adultery laws have all vanished. Votes for women and criminalization of marijuana didn’t exist at the nation’s founding but were instituted in the 20th century. Burlesque houses came and went. Does this mean the American Way of Life has been compromised or that it is has been perfected?

Benjamin J. Barber wrote a book called *Jihad vs. McWorld* which reflects this confusion. For him the term “jihad” represented tribalization driven by parochial culture while the term McWorld symbolizes cosmopolitan trends driven by universalizing market forces. Yet his choice of terminology in itself demonstrates the confusion of which I speak. “Jihad,” whether understood properly as a spiritual struggle against all that is evil or whether taken to mean a war to spread Islam (as pro- and anti-Muslim extremists would have it) is a universalizing concept, while “McWorld” (meaning no particular multi-national corporation, but multinationals collectively) has been able to spread not solely by its economic merits but by the anti-competitive advantages enjoyed by major corporate institutions that small businesses and individual entrepreneurs are forcibly denied by the great powers, by their trade policies, and the trade agreements they enforce.

It is not at all obvious that the hamburger sandwich is superior to shwarma wrapped in pita, but it is obvious that if the Third World denizen wants the former in the era of globalization it shall be delivered by a multinational corporation based in the West, while if an American wants a shwarma sandwich he will also end up buying it from such a corporation.

Contra Mr. Barber's metaphors, the hamburger sandwich is not inherent in the concept of liberalization. To understand the essence of liberalism, we turn to one of its most brilliant exponents, Fredrick Hayek.

[T]wo strands of thought which provided the chief ingredients of what in the nineteenth century came to be called liberalism were on a few essential postulates, such as freedom of thought, of speech, and of the press, in sufficient agreement to create a common opposition to conservative and authoritarian views and therefore to appear as part of a common movement. Most of liberalism's adherents would also profess a belief in individual freedom of action and in some sort of equality of all men, but closer examination shows that this agreement was in part only verbal since the key terms 'freedom' and 'equality' were used with somewhat different meanings. While to the older British tradition the freedom of the individual in the sense of a protection by law against all arbitrary coercion was the chief value, in the Continental tradition the demand for the self-determination of each group concerning its form of government occupied the highest place. This led to an early association and almost identification of the Continental movement with the movement for democracy, which is concerned with a different problem from that which was the chief concern of the liberal tradition of the British type.¹

In America, the British strand of liberalism was incorporated into the founding documents and thus that which is called "liberal" in Europe is often called conservative in America. We shall use the term liberal, with the understanding that we refer to classical liberalism. This liberalism has an epistemic side and an ethical side.

The epistemic notions are inherent in the term "liberal education." By this is meant a pedagogy that is broad in its subject of study, and critical in its approach. It is in this respect the opposite of education that is narrow in focus and which is aimed at mere technical training. The notion common now throughout the Muslim world that knowledge consists of a body of facts is illiberal. It goes hand in hand with the pedagogical framework that the brains of students are vessels into which teachers must pour the facts. Liberal epistemology acknowledges that any fact may be mistaken and learning is an active process that requires constant review and reassessment. This attitude produces active scholars who can revise the theoretical frameworks in which they operate and, over generations, can even break out of an old paradigm should it prove unequal to the task of accommodating the ever-growing and ever-changing corpus of facts.

¹ F.A. Hayek, *New Studies in Philosophy, Politics, Economics and the History of Ideas*, Routledge & Keagan Paul, London and Henley, 1982 [1978], pp. 119-151.

Muslim education used to be this way, but hasn't been for hundreds of years. Our notion of scholars today is that they are living books who can regurgitate the classical answer to a classical problem and when confronted with a new problem are restricted to making the best analogy possible. Any departure from parroting a previous interpretation of Qur'an is declared to be a rejection of the Qur'an itself. Yet, some earlier interpretations are so absurd that even some of the interpreters preferred to believe that some verses of the Qur'an had been lost or abrogated rather than confront the anti-Qur'anic import of certain elements of the fiqh (e.g., capital punishment for adultery).

The corollary of this liberal epistemology is the necessity of absolute freedom of expression. How can we discover our mistakes if others are not allowed to challenge our conclusions and our reasoning?

Liberalization has its ethical side. This is what Hayek meant by "the freedom of the individual in the sense of a protection by law against all arbitrary coercion." I have reformulated it as the "non-aggression principle" that no person or group has the right to initiate force or fraud against another to seek to attain its values.

Now let us consider an appalling specific case in which Westernization has been confused with liberalization. Some commentators reacted to the revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghuraib prison by insisting that the prisoners' tormentors were not engaging in actual torture as Saddam Hussein had done to his prisoners. Setting aside the rather left-handed nature of this defense, it drops the important element of cultural context. Making a pyramid of naked students may be fraternity hazing in the West, but it is a supreme deprivation of dignity in the Muslim and Arab cultural context. The argument that forcing a prisoner to masturbate in the vicinity of another prisoner's mouth is not as bad as inflicting physical pain is less than persuasive to the people of the culture on which these abuses were inflicted. I am reminded of the indignation in the American women's movement at the assertion that rape is not as bad as a beating. They argued, justifiably, that to a woman the violation of her body by rape had an emotional dimension beyond the issue of physical pain. The American Constitution's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment is an example of a liberal value. It was not observed at Abu Ghuraib because of the absurd notion that American *cultural* standards are more universal than Iraqi standards.

A frequent example of the confusion of Westernization and liberalization that has received much attention is the French ban on the headscarf. Clearly, the French have chosen to identify a foreign cultural practice as a threat to their society. Yet, to ban this practice constitutes a betrayal of the liberal philosophy they profess to wish to defend.

We propose a checklist of starting points for disentangling cultural notions from religious or philosophical misconceptions. We propose that the sources of confusion are of two types: confusion due to provincialism and confusion due to philosophical laxity.

Solving the Problem of Provincialism

To overcome provincialism, we recommend direct contacts between the people of the differing cultures. Provincialism, by definition, is associated with the provinces. Urban areas are more cosmopolitan because they contain citizens with a mix of backgrounds and have an influx of visitors of even more varied backgrounds. Getting to meet and know people from varying cultures and the interchange of ideas associated with such traffic have a beneficial effect of humanization of the “Other.” This can be duplicated by the encouragement of “people to people meetings” such as Pres. Khatemi has recommended for Iranian-American relations.

An important examples of such encounters would be visits of American to the Muslim world and of Muslims to America. Americans, including American Muslims, could go to Muslim countries not only to observe life there, but to engage in discussions of issues of everyday life, of comparative religion, and methods of education. Muslims could visit America to observe its civil society first hand and to audit classes in its universities, to see the small town life that is not pictured on television and in movies.

Traveling exhibits can be exchanged to allow large numbers of people in each culture to get a more accurate picture of the other. Special Internet sites could be constructed to facilitate exposure to differing cultures in an economical and convenient way.

Solving the Problem of Philosophical Misconceptions

Philosophical misconceptions must be resolved not only by addressing apparent conflicts between Islamic principles and Muslim practice but also by addressing alleged conflicts between liberal theory and Western practice.

To resolve the philosophical misconceptions confronting the Muslim World, we must overcome the divide between those who want to address specifics and those who wish to speak only in generalities. Islam has a great respect for women. This statement has universal agreement among believing Muslims, but only elicits a snort from most non-Muslims. Non-Muslims want us to address honor killings, forced marriages, and forced seclusion.

The Muslim discourse has suffered from an evasion of specifics. This evasion has been very harmful to the health of Islam. The harm goes beyond merely perpetuating the alienation of non-Muslims. It leads to the alienation of Muslim youth. Jeffrey Lang poignantly draws our attention to this problem in his new book *A Call for Help: I'm Losing My Religion*. Muslim immigrants have foolishly squandered time and effort attempting to “protect” their children from Christianity and Judaism, unaware that the real competition in Western society is atheism and agnosticism. In attacking the other Abrahamic faiths they have merely assisted the secular society in undermining their children's *fitra*. For example, parents will put forth the generality that Islam is completely

in agreement with modern science as a distinction to Christianity, but then condemn evolution using arguments identical to those of the Fundamentalist Christians.

The West's philosophical misconceptions arise from compartmentalism. This is a psychological phenomenon in which someone believes two contradictory notions by never entertaining them at the same time.

Westerners are divided among themselves, and most Westerners are inconsistent in their personal commitment to liberty. In America, freedom of expression is considered an absolute, yet Americans are indifferent to the bans on religiously motivated headscarves in France and Turkey and livid at the mandated headcoverings in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Yet most Americans do not apply the freedom of dress absolutely. For example, European-style nude beaches are not tolerated here.

The debate in America over the right of privacy is instructive. Given the centrality of individual rights to American democracy, it is revealing that the individual's right to privacy has been a controversial issue. No right of privacy is enumerated in the U.S. constitution. Many have therefore interpreted the Supreme Court's justification of the right of the people to use contraceptives as a recognition that privacy is one of the unenumerated rights protected by the Ninth Amendment. Against this view, Robert Bork has argued that there is no right of privacy and interpreted the Court's ruling as rooted not in the Ninth Amendment but in the "penumbra" of other rights.

Even more extreme is the claim of Justice Antonin Scalia in *Boerne v. Flores* that the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment applies only to the federal government and that the states and local communities are free to establish a state religion if they wish. This is in opposition to Sandra Day O'Connor's view in the same case that freedom for religion is in effect a fundamental human right recognized by the Constitution "no less important than the right to free speech."

A very clear, if emotionally charged, example of the double standard is the American position on polygamy. Americans who insist that freedom of choice in lifestyle is so important that they demand that fornication, homosexuality and even adultery should be legally sanctioned, nonetheless defend the prohibition of polygamy. There can be no explanation for this hypocrisy except that cultural conditioning has desensitized them to a woman having an affair with a married man while at the same time that it has made the prospect of a woman entering into a sanctified relationship with an already married man repugnant. Given the imbalance of the genders (marriageable women outnumber men in every state except Alaska) the prohibition on polygyny is worse than hypocritical, it condemns many women to choose among celibacy, fornication or lesbianism.

Conclusions

In a practical sense, culture and values are inextricably mixed. Yet, intellectually, we must disentangle our culture from our fundamental values, lest those values be compromised. If we accept the Hayekian definition of liberalism, there is nothing in

Islam that contradicts it. On the contrary, the denial of partners to Allah is a declaration for human freedom from all the false gods, including the idol of the omnipotent state. A liberal wears, or does not wear a tie, based on his individual choice. A Muslim state that relies on a morals police to enforce the wearing of headscarves sins in making itself a partner with Allah.² The genius of liberal theory is the realization that physical coercion is only justified in the defense of one's values, not in the process of attaining them. Westerners betray that realization when they impose their culture and their merchandise on others. Muslims fail to realize this fact usurp the authority of God and commit *shirk*, the only sin the Qur'an says Allah will not forgive.

² "Leave me alone (to deal) with the creature I created (bare and) alone." 74:11.