

A Vision of Inclusivity: Islam and the Common Good of Humanity

The future of Islam will certainly be determined by its traditionalist interpreters. Will they stifle any chances for Islam to become a source of universal ethical reflection in forging a global community?

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A disclaimer is in place before I proceed to predict the future of millions of Muslims from various cultures and nationalities who adhere to Islamic tradition. I cannot claim to be comprehensive in my assessment, since I am dealing with different manifestations of religiosity among Muslims. My field work in various Muslim cultures warns me against overgeneralizations that can take away the peculiarities of different peoples that make up the Umma -- community.

I am both an "insider" and an "outsider" to the tradition and to the community. As an insider, I face specific challenges in my assessment because of an inclination to look at my inherited perspectives and allegiances uncritically. The major challenge to me is to step outside my own community in ways that allow me to explore normative Islamic tradition and evaluate its ability to expand its hermeneutical horizons. How supple is the retrieval and interpretations that are sometimes implicit and at other times explicit in the scriptural sources for application in the modern age? How much of the tradition is relevant to the contexts in which the community finds itself? As an "outsider" academician, I am able to transcend my ties with the Muslim religious establishment and offer honest assessment of the future of the tradition and the community.

My extensive field work, which stretches for more than four decades, forces me to search for the future of Islam in peoples who profess that religion, that is, those men and women who have throughout history kept the flame of their hopes alight and have trusted the truthfulness of their creed and practice. And yet, I am cautioned against presenting them as a monolithic group. I must consider their differences in light of the religious practices and culture that suggest some kind of unity in their appropriation of the 7th-century Arabian religion. I cannot gloss over the diversity that exists among Muslims and their religious leaders about the special claims of Islamic scriptures on Islam's adherents, societies, and those states that claim to be founded upon its political values. The future of Muslims will be determined by the aspirations and expectations they maintain regarding historical Islam -- the religion and the culture that shaped its civilization. What is important to understand today is the relevance of this rich heritage that can speak to the Muslim peoples living under markedly different circumstances than their ancestors.

In order to speak about the future of Islam as appropriated by people who call themselves Muslims, I have identified three variable categories of inherited Islamic tradition that appear

to determine the way Muslims adapt to or reject modernity and its accompaniment. To consider what Muslims hold important for their future, it is important to recognize what kind of Islam Muslims appropriate for their public discourse.

First, it is common to hear about Islam as a civilization and its influence as a culture throughout the regions of the world where it spread as a religious tradition. As one of the successful civilizations and major cultural traditions, Islam is acknowledged as an influential component of a political order founded upon some sense of justice and inclusive spirituality. It continues to motivate moral conduct through its normatively founded emphasis on equality in creation, thereby establishing norms for the universal human cultural heritage. Essentially, Islam as a world-embracing tradition inspires and sustains a civilization based on a civil religion that embraces pluralistic ideas and concern for those who are not adherents of its creed and practice. This kind of Islamic understanding provides legal-ethical grounds derived from its scriptural sources that enable the faith community to establish relations with other communities. Furthermore, this genre of Islam seeks to avoid raising historical contingencies to the status of authoritatively normative models by accepting the role of time and place in interpretive relativism as part of general progress toward necessary adjustment of Islamic beliefs and practices in contemporary society. This acceptance of relativism in Islamic understanding allows these Muslims to actively participate in modern societies as a necessary part of their social and political progress.

Second, there are those Muslims who see Islam as a religion and philosophy for humankind. Their vision of Islam is universalistic. They do not regard Islam as the only repository of human salvation, and in this sense, it cannot make exclusive claims. The major source of their connection with all humans is their belief that ethical knowledge is grounded in human nature informed by intuitive reason. Islamic morality is derived through conventional wisdom and moral insight discerned in the process of living with others in society. This genre of Islam affords centrality to the overlapping consensus in the matter of moral commitments that not only affect communal bonds but also advance intercommunal relations in the public forum. Many in the Muslim world today find this renewed emphasis on shared religious-secular ethical commitments for the public good relevant to their future in the ever-shrinking national and cultural boundaries and the emergence of global universalism at many levels of their material and cultural relations with larger human communities.

Third, there are many people in the Muslim world who regard Islam as the unique and exclusive experience of the truth. This genre of Islam is popular among Muslim seminarians and their followers among Muslim masses. Moral progress is achieved insofar as secular morality comes to conform to religious morality. This is the traditional perspective of Islam that recognizes external forms of religious rituals as secure and sufficient means to effect salvation without any need to relate them to moral progress of the individual or the community. Traditional Muslims do not regard interfaith dialogue as an intellectual and sincere endeavor to understand the non-Muslim other. In fact, the majority of them do not believe even in the internal dialogue between different schools of thought and sects among Muslims (for example, between the majority Sunnites and the minority Shi'ites).

Throughout history the phenomenological integrity of Islamic tradition has remained dependent upon the ways in which scriptural sources were retrieved and manipulated to justify one interpretation or another. One can detect reformist or "return to the fundamental teachings" agendas among various groups stretching from the shores of Atlantic to the areas in Central Asia. Needless to say, whether pursuing reformist or traditionalist agendas, these

interpretations impacted the reality of religious diversity in terms of interfaith relations or freedom of religion in Muslim societies. The traditionalist interpretations of Islam have led to religious conflicts in the Muslim world. These interpretations pose the most significant threat to the public forum that aspires to bind persons apart from any religious commitments. The related problem in this traditional discourse is that it disregards the historicism of the normative sources, which leads to many misunderstandings and unjustified accusations about Muslims and their scriptures among non-Muslim powers. It is for this reason that I believe that in order to advance democratic governance in the Muslim world there is a need to sit in dialogue with the third kind of Islam that regards religious considerations as critical in shaping the consensual politics in Muslim societies.

Historically there has not been any other time than the 21st century for the traditionalist Muslim leaders to do more than pay lip service to human dignity as the sole criterion for respect and tolerance of the cultural and religious 'other'. Globalization of world economy has led to the intense search for some stronger bond than the existing system of international relations assumed under a world body like the UN. Even the moral commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has fallen short of the actual promotion of the inherency doctrine that undergirds this noble effort to promote the rights of religious or ethnic minorities who continue to labor under various forms of discrimination under national governments. In some ways it is the traditionalist interpretations of Islam that have provided sanctions for the majority Muslim governments to continue to stifle all endeavors toward improving the state of flagrant violations of human rights of all citizens. So far international agencies like the UN have not considered their essential role of bringing the main players -- both political and religious -- to the table to negotiate a better understanding between militant and traditionalist Muslim leadership and those Muslim governments whose claim to political legitimacy is challenged by their own citizens.

A broader understanding of Muslim political culture is needed to garner the support of Muslim peoples to various forms of democratic participation for their better future. Political constitutionalism is a key element in getting Islam to become a partner to universal notions of democracy, pluralism, and human rights. Muslim political culture is informed by certain religious beliefs about political participation that support or reject a political sphere dominated by the regimes and the traditionalist leadership that has rationalized or legitimized the existing order. There is a correlation between religious and cultural aspects that intersect various forms of political participation in Muslim societies. These aspects have influenced the ways in which Muslims have conceived of their political space and their participation in them. And, although the Muslim world has increasingly blurred the line between religion and politics with major implications for political consciousness and participation in modern times, some sort of functional secularity has always predominated in negotiations about political space independent of religious presuppositions about its management.

The core problem in admitting traditionalist interpretations of Islam as having a legitimate place in the public forum is that various religious considerations of public discussions about political activity -- ranging from individual Muslims on religious grounds publicly condemning such acts as homosexuality or collective Muslim denial of women's right to marry outside the community in accordance with the religious duties in the Shari'a -- deny the public discourse an integrity of its own. This secular presupposition about independent public discourse is founded on the premise of universal reason, which actually excludes making moral and metaphysical claims bearing on political choices in terms understandable only in the context of religious guidance. Traditional Muslim leaders, who exercise enormous

influence in the public sphere, have a problem with the position that rejects the right of the people to decide political questions by what they regard as the best reasons rooted in a transcendent sphere of Islamic scriptures. The issue of proper public discourse and choice is of concern for all religious communities who must share a public forum with other religious groups, without insisting on the idea of whole truth connected with their own truth claims. It is in this connection that the religious perspectives of Muslim traditionalists become critical in assessing the future of Islam.

The problem with individual political action informed by religious commitments and desiderata is the potential for the entanglement of these commitments with public discourse and public choice that affect other individuals, whether religious or not. There are certainly boundaries in the public sphere that must be recognized, without insisting others agree with particular choices made, individually or in a group, on the basis of religious reasons that necessarily apply to only those who have declared their commitment to abide by its dicta. Thus far, the attitude of hostility, intolerance, and militancy against those who reject a particular response to the political issues has been the main source of conflict in Muslim societies.

There is something in the public theology of Islam that can mitigate this hostile attitude by clearly demonstrating the classical heritage that recognizes the existence of a private realm separate from the public one to allow for ethical pluralism to determine interhuman relationship without diminishing the role of religious commitments in developing a social democratic constitutional polity. The future of Islam will certainly be determined by its traditionalist interpreters: they can stifle any chances for Islam to become a source of universal ethical reflection in forging a global community, maintaining the narrow vision of the Shari'a-oriented public order that divides the world into believer and non-believer, thereby rejecting the inclusiveness of human associations. This inclusiveness is the vision of the future global community in which a religion like Islam with its experience in forging a pluralistic religious and cultural society has a lot to contribute for the common good of humankind.

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