

**TIME, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS:
AN ISLAMIC APPROACH**

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Abstract

For Muslims, Islam is time conscious and eternal, its wisdom and rules having emanated from High are not only constant but are, simultaneously, responsive to changing circumstances of every environment and culture or civilization. Its philosophies apply to all times and places. The religion establishes the moral guidelines for good behavior at all aspects of life on which legal rules can develop and it also orders humans to regulate their activities in worldly life according to their time, conditions and environmental backgrounds. Contrary to this, some people presume that the passage of time provides adequate ground for the need for new guidance. For them, a religion revealed fourteen centuries ago must have grown unfashionable and unsuitable to satisfy the needs of the new epoch, meet the challenges of scientific knowledge, and augment the excitement of modern civilizations.¹ This paper examines the Islamic perspective of time and the all-encompassing nature of its wisdom or knowledge (which is beyond the absolute restriction of time and space) and its approach to the clash of civilizations. The theoretical framework is Huntington's CoC-theory. It argues that the clash between the Islamic nations and Western powers, for

Muslims, is not a struggle for cultural identity as the theory postulated, but as a result of the desire of the West to obstruct the establishment of values based on Islamic religious wisdom which is dearer to the Islamic nations than the West estimates.

Introduction

One ambiguity challenging mankind in his attempt to understand his own existence is the nature of time.² The awareness of death, the experience of youth and ageing, the irrevocability of the past and the unpredictability of the future and even the planning of work all involve time.³ The word “time” has various meanings and categories. There is, however, unity of time but what justifies this unity can better be appreciated with a convoluted effort which is not the purpose here. According to Plato, “time is clearly posited as an objective measurable ordering of everything worldly.”⁴ For Aristotle, “time is the number [numbered number, measure] of movement according to the before and after.”⁵ He, like the Mycenaean philosophers among whom was Anaximander, posited that time was a medium or determinant of change.⁶ The cognition of time developed from a fundamental philosophical determination to comprehend the essential characteristics of the changing world to which humanity belongs and which is reflected in the body of modern knowledge.⁷ Time deals with the succession, progression, or the chain or better still, the sequence of events or their duration.⁸ It also connotes the mode of existence of man and his outside environment together with the development of the physical world.⁹ In the view of V.I. Lenin: “recognizing the existence of objective reality, i.e. matter in motion, independently of our mind, materialism must also inevitably recognize the objective reality of time and space....”¹⁰ The two concepts: time and space are, therefore, always correlated. In other words, there can be no space without time and vice versa. Space does not occur on its own, rather, within it and time. Man is able to classify the relation of point-instants to one another with that of persons to one another assured by each other’s mind.¹¹

In Islamic philosophy, the Arabic word, *zamaan*, used for time also means “era”, “an interval of time”, “period”, or “time space”. The Arabic word *aan*, which denotes a current time, “now”, can also mean a “season”. *Hin* also indicates “a time-frame” or “an epoch” or “a fixed period of time”. While *waqt*, *mawqit* and *miqaat*, all derived from the same root,

indicate the specific time of a neighbourhood or a particular space of land or environmental setting. The *miqat*, the plural of which is *mawaqit*, suggests spatio-temporal parameters of a memorable event reminiscent in the gathering of the magicians in the presence of Fir-aun indicated in Qur'an 26: 38.¹² In Islam, the barriers of time and space do not exist, owing to the limitation of the human senses and knowledge; man can not possess detailed knowledge of his existence. The world exists in a time-space-continuum.¹³ The origin of all things is one, Allah, who has the absolute knowledge of the limits of time (its space or epoch or parameters). All other things are only subject to a movement or are in a motion that can be the life cycle or the planetary trajectory which are subservient to constant changes already computed. In the Qur'an, Allah indicates thus: "the sun and the moon follow courses (exactly) computed" (Qur'an 55:5). In explaining this verse, A. Yusuf Ali indicates thus:

In the great astronomical universe there are exact mathematical laws, which bear witness to God's Wisdom and also to His Favours to His creatures; for we all profit by the heat and light, the seasons, and the numerous changes in the tides and the atmosphere, on which the constitution of our globe and the maintenance of life depend.¹⁴

The above quotation implies that there are many shades or structures in the atmosphere and worlds of existence (*alamin*: the *alimu-l-ghayb* and the *alimu-sh-shahadah* [the metaphysical and the physical worlds]), but only one of these becomes a reality for an observer at any particular period or space of time.

Islamic Knowledge and Time in Retrospect

The religion of Islam has been with mankind from time immemorial, and its knowledge or wisdom encourages and promotes the classification of things according to their import.¹⁵ Time is not static from the perspective of Islam and every particular period of time both past and present presents their own challenge. Islamic knowledge is all-encompassing, i.e. it pervades through time and space without any limitation of sight. This contrasts with human wisdom which is myopic in its vision. The Qur'an and the prophetic traditions, from the goggles of clairvoyance, made highly technical discoveries close to fourteen centuries ago that modern science has not been able to surpass from the view of the most powerful-lensed microscope.¹⁶ Certain happenings in life can never be predicted with exactness by man because he has no knowledge of such:

Verily the knowledge of the Hour is with Allah (alone). It is He Who sends down rain, and He Who knows what is in the wombs. Nor does any one know what it is that he will earn on the morrow: Nor does any one know in what land he is to die. Verily with Allah is full knowledge and He is acquainted (with all things). (Qur'an 31:34)

Islamic knowledge, therefore, seeks to propound social, economic, political, cultural, and living theories that seek to provide a panacea for all entangling problems of humanity, both known and unknown. Islam has specific aspects of worship at every point of the year, month, week, the day, and even hours as well as minutes of the day. All these are units of time. The Qur'an and the prophetic traditions indicate clearly that Islam and its wisdom are sensitive to time: "By the time, surely man is in the state of loss." (Qur'an 103:1-2). Time has three principal characteristics: it is quick in movement; when it moves, it never turns back and, therefore, can never be compensated; it is a precious facility which has tremendous benefits when it is used profitably. Islamic knowledge puts events of the past in their proper perspective, explains the present, and makes sound projections into the future. Its basis is, therefore, applicable to all times. The Qur'an contains a myriad of verses that invite mankind to the use of his intellect in meditating about the purpose of creation of human life and to discover the truth, which is *ibaadah* (See Qur'an 3:190; 88:17-20). In history, Islamic civilizations have observed a veritable salutation to knowledge. During the Abbasid regime, many traditional Islamic cities possessed public and private libraries; and cities like Cordova and Baghdad boasted of libraries with over 400,000 books.¹⁷ Such cities also had bookstores, some of which sold a large number of titles.¹⁸ The impact of Islamic knowledge in shaping the attitudes of people, both in the past and at the present, and their cultural and socio-political advancement has been cited by various scholars. For example, Nadwi says:

The rejuvenating currents of Islam ran through the world, infusing men everywhere with a new life and an unparalleled enthusiasm for progress. The lost values of life had been discovered. Paganism became a sign of reaction, while it was considered progressive to be associated with Islam. Even nations that did not come directly under the influence of Islam, profoundly, though unconsciously, benefited by the freshness and vitality of the new creative impulses released by its impact on large parts of the world. Numerous aspects of their thought and culture bear evidence to the magic touch of Islam. All the

reform movements that arose in their midst, owed their origin to Islamic influences.¹⁹

The Western world, in its customarily copious character, has adopted so many doctrines of Islamic knowledge and built on them and has, cleverly, clouded this achievement of the Muslim world (the source of her pride) in mystery and turned to designate it as a collection of backward people whose wisdom only applied to the civilizations of the past, and as people whose legal systems are inhumane and encapsulated in lethal punishments. Yet, the West has succeeded in almost all aspects of human development through the metaphoric eyes of the Muslim world and her knowledge.²⁰ Islamic knowledge and its relevance to civilizations is a purely practical issue which relates not only to prophethood but also to the reality of life itself, the present and future of mankind and the historic role played by Muslims in the development of culture and the building of flourishing civilizations. It is, therefore, a matter that should be central to the attention of Muslim individual and bodies and does not suffice the single effort of an individual. In its depth and scope, it can be compared with any discipline of thought pertaining to the life of man. It covers a significant area in time and space, from the first century of the Islamic era to this day and from one corner of the world to the other. Islamic wisdom covers everything from creed to morals and behaviour, individual as well as social, and is linked with diverse phenomena, be they law, politics, international relations, arts, letters, poetry, architecture, cultural refinement, etc.²¹ The knowledge Islam has depicted about the growth of civilizations does not have any time tag. The Qur'an and *Sunnah* have put forward the principles of Islam. Yet, their explication and application are done in view of time needs and environmental circumstances. This perspective of informed interpretation of the wisdom of Islam in suiting the environmental needs of every group of people is known as *ijtihaad*. This can be defined as:

Competency or legal ability to deduce rules of law through juristic speculation from original sources where definite authentic texts are not available.²²

The applicability of the Islamic knowledge to all time and space can be summarized in the following story told of a famous jurist: A man went to a popular jurist and said to him thus:

You argue that the Qur'an contains every principle to cater for modern needs. If so, can you show me whether the Qur'an

teaches us how many loaves of bread can be made from a kilo of flour?’ The jurist’s answer is very significant to understanding the essence of the matter: ‘Yes, the Qur’an teaches us how many loaves of bread can be made from a kilo of flour. It enjoins us to refer to the people of expert knowledge for what we do not know ourselves. Allah Almighty says, ‘ask the followers of the reminder if ye know not’ (Al-Anbiya’ 21: 7) so, go and ask a baker about it.’²³

Islam is the only religion which established machinery for perennial progression and development of human society according to the basic principles and perpetual values of life in its entirety.

The Theory of Clash of Civilizations and the Islamic Factor

In a lecture in 1993, late Edward Said of the University of Columbia examined the theory of ‘clash of civilizations’ propounded by the late Harvard University Professor, Samuel Huntington. According to Huntington, there was a clear possibility of an inevitable conflict between Western civilizations and the non-Western civilizations, particularly, Eastern powers, after the post Cold War period, and this would be mainly a clash between the West and the Islamic world.²⁴ Huntington’s main thesis was that with the end of the Cold War, the ideological conflict between the East and the West would be replaced by identity-based conflict between groupings he referred to as civilizations.²⁵ He defined civilization as:

The highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of what distinguishes humans from other species. It is defined by both common language, history, religion, customs, institution and by the subjective self identification of people.²⁶

The striking aspect of this theory is the connection of civilization conflict with religion, of which a mention is made of Sino-Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-orthodox, Latin-America, and African civilizations, all of which include some aspects of religion in their definition and are, in fact, named after religions.²⁷ In other words, these civilizations are, for the most part, defined along religious lines. The debate was inaugurated in 1993 when the professor’s theory proposed in an article entitled: “The clash of civilizations” appeared in an authoritative journal: *Foreign Affairs*. This article, which was met with sharp criticisms,

was expanded in 1996 by the author in his book: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*.²⁸

The emerging conflict that Huntington predicted would observe a phenomenal foreign cultural clash with Western culture challenging the global dominance of the United States and threatening the very existence and preservation of Western cultural traditions.²⁹ The most controversial postulation made by this theorist (Huntington) was his hypothesis that: “the Islamic civilization will be the most violent civilization and the primary threat to the West in the post-Cold War era.”³⁰ This theory, which was first presumed to have been built on the Western philosophy of skepticism, did not appear to have inaugurated itself from a preponderance of evidences that warned of a grand scheme against the West, but, rather, it seemed to have falsely predicted the aggressive political cupidity of the neo-conservative faction of the Republican Party of the U.S. which Huntington himself later became a distinguished scholar of.³¹

In a prolific statement, Huntington indicated thus:

The West must exploit differences and conflicts among Confucian and Islamic states to support in other civilizations groups sympathetic to western values and interests, to strengthen international institutions that reflect and legitimate western interests and values, and to promote the involvement of non-Western states in those institutions.³²

This statement did not make sense at that time because the Islamic world, as he predicted, was not at loggerheads with the West, and he himself did not seem to have provided a clear framework for the expressions, ‘culture’, and ‘civilizations’, to ground the whole premise of his argument. Paradoxically, Islam is homogenous but it is also the most diverse entity ever known to humanity. It is not merely a religion. It is also a code of life and a culture, and, as such and most importantly, a political ideology, which is universal and inescapable in its socio-cultural effort. It pervades every aspect of social cooperation and culture and this makes it impregnable and organized in its approach to every aspect of human culture irrespective of environment. After the Cold War, the so-called “Democratic Liberalism” was deemed to have emerged victorious over its ideological opponents, the non-Western socio-political systems. They were deemed to have all been ideologically conquered. But unknown was one state ideology: a bitter rival, a perceived implacable opponent, a capable and a difficult-to-challenge contestant for world domination, and,

in fact a direct opposite of the West in every respect: Islam, which endured without the least injury.

Islam, brought into wake the notorious and forever regretted clash of civilizations, a conglomeration of Western superior artillery powers against a poorly armed but ideologically strong Islam. Amazingly, Western culture is inextricably intertwined with Islamic knowledge, teachings, and philosophy³³, and it is now accepted without the slightest measure of reservation that Islam is the fastest growing religion in America and the less one talks in respect of this in Europe, the better. Christian fundamentalists have more in common with the so-called Muslim militants than with the East Coast or French intellectuals.³⁴ From Spain to India, the incessant friction and fertilizing interactions with Islam shaped Western values, beliefs, doctrines, moral tenets, political and military institutions, including the arts, and the sciences.³⁵

Muslims have built a myriad of inclusivist civilizations in which non-Muslims have enjoyed a great level of autonomy both in terms of religion and law. In the very first written constitution of the Muslims: the Madinan Charter drafted as far back as the seventh century in the historic city of Madinah, non-Muslims, including traditional worshippers were granted freedom of worship.³⁶ In fact, Islam has condemned compulsion in matters of religion:

Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah hears and knows all things. (Qur'an 2:256).

In line with this, Muhammad did not force Islam on even those non-Muslims who accepted to live under the protection of the Islamic administration.³⁷ Even in recent times when extremism is so rife in several Muslim countries, there are still proudly significant number of non-Muslims who unrestrictedly worship in Synagogues. A clear case in point is the Coptic Christians in the Islamic Republic of Egypt. In fact, even in Saudi 'Arabia, the citadel of the Islamic civilization, a sizeable number of foreign and non-Muslim citizens are living there and are going about their normal duties, when in a country like the Vatican, Muslims can simply not live there and continue to practice their religion without intimidation.

The above argument goes to buttress the fact that Muslims do not mean any harm when it closes its social borders to the perceived rotten Western socio-political and economic idiosyncrasies. It only wants the best for its people. Nonetheless, Islam did not prevent its ideologies from

overlapping into the borders of the West. Even though, certain Islamic ideologies have been blindly criticized from Western spectacles as backward and irrelevant to contemporary times and their challenges, yet, they have, nevertheless, been incorporated without any genuine and objective notice. The success of this unnoticed incorporation is the fact that Islam, its knowledge and wisdom are applicable to every biota at any period of time.

The West-Islam clash is based on a futile attempt to ingenuinely thwart the effort of a divine determination, in the Islamic world, to

...establish God's authority on earth; to arrange human affairs according to the true guidance provided by God; to abolish all the Satanic forces and Satanic system of life; to end the lordship of one man over others, since all men are creatures of God and no one has the authority to make them his servants or to make arbiter laws for them.³⁸

This is a fair ground for the declaration of *jihad*.³⁹ In the view of Sayyid Qutb, Islamic *jihad* connotes the following:

... to secure complete freedom for every man throughout the world by releasing him from servitude to other human beings so that he may serve his God, who is one and who has no associates. This is in itself a sufficient reason for *jihaad*. These were the only reasons in the hearts of Muslim warriors. If they had been asked the question, 'why are you fighting?' none would have answered, 'my country is in danger; I am fighting for its defense', or, 'the Persians and the Romans have come upon us', 'we want to extend our dominion and want more spoils.'⁴⁰

Muslims fighting today in the so-called civilization clash would respond the same way as Huzaifah b. Muhsin and his colleagues answered the Persian General, Rustum when the latter demanded to know from them during the siege of Persia in the Battle of Qadisiyyah: "for what purpose have you come" Their response was:

God has sent us to bring anyone who wishes from servitude to men into the service of God alone, from the narrowness of this world into the vastness of this world and the hereafter, and from the tyranny of religions into the justice of Islam. God raised a messenger for this purpose to teach His creatures His way. If any accepts this way of life, we turn back and give his country back to him, and we fight with those who rebel until we are martyred or become victorious.⁴¹

Contrary to the belief that Muslims are in conflict with Western powers as a protest against their threats of aggression against their fellows or the occupation of their territories, the above extract indicates that the general wisdom of Islam aims at proclaiming universal freedom that will mitigate human conditions with relevant methods and at developing new resources for living at every period or stage of life.⁴²

The reason for Muslims' strive popularly known as *jihad*⁴³, in this case, therefore, exists in the nature of its message and the conditions of the society it finds itself and not merely in the necessity of defense, or struggle for cultural identity that may be ephemeral and limited in extent.⁴⁴ Islam exists to establish God's universal rule in the world and invites people to the concrete reality of its message in the form of a community that guarantees freedom from servitude to *jaahili* leadership and servitude to God in the ultimate subscription to His right ways, the *shari'ah*. To ensure this, Muslims must fight every barrier that serves as an insurmountable barricade to human right without interference from foreign political systems.⁴⁵ The civilization clash between the Islamic World and the West, therefore, exploded as an inauthentic by-product of an ingenuine desire of the latter to eliminate and obstruct the establishment of human values and morality based on the all-encompassing religious wisdom of Islam which was dearer to the former than the latter estimated. The standard of Islam and its knowledge of morality which the former sought to irrespectively protect under the auspices of *jihad* is not determined by cultural or environmental conditions, economic circumstances, or the stage of a society's development, all of which are trivial differences.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The paper discussed the Islamic approach to the concept of time, knowledge and the clash of civilizations. The paper advanced the argument that Islam as well as its wisdom is universal and applicable to all cultural surroundings irrespective of time. It also stresses the all-encompassing nature of its wisdom or knowledge (which is beyond the absolute restriction of time and space) and its approach to the clash of civilizations and proved the limitedness of human knowledge and vision which do not penetrate into the spectra of the future or eminence. This research indicated that the conflict or clash between the Islamic nations and Western powers, for Muslims, is not a struggle for territorial or cultural identity and aggrandizement as the theory postulated, or as a struggle for territorial self-defense, but a result of the desire of the West to

eliminate and obstruct the establishment of human values and morality based on the all-encompassing religious wisdom of Islam which is dearer to the Islamic nations than the West estimated.

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