

**Modern Experiences (of the Islamic World)
in Interaction with the Western Civilization**

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The title of this paper contains four elements: modern experiences, Islamic World, interaction and Western Civilization. Even if each of us may have a slightly different interpretation of what the “Islamic world” and “Western civilization” stand for, I assume in general we agree that these terms stand for two entities with specific religious, historical and cultural backgrounds and characteristics. In history “modernity” is also a specific term. In my paper however I shall not discuss only what happened in “modern times”, but I shall deal with three different phases of interaction: historical times, modern times: the post Napoleonic period and contemporary interaction: the post 9/11 period.

Coming to the word “interaction”, we must see that two entities - like e. g. the Islamic world and Western civilization - can relate to each other in many different ways: military wars, economic competition, intellectual discourse. When we speak of war, of course we do not speak of interaction, we speak of aggression and defence, or in other terms of action and reaction, but not interaction. In the field of economics we may find both: economic aggression if we have dominant economic players or interaction if there are rules which internationally are giving equal chances to all players and if every player sticks to them. Lastly in the intellectual field there can be dominant behaviour if we have one strong lead culture or true intellectual discourse: the interaction of equals.

In other words: Interaction is not: fight and oppress, interaction is not take and run – or better exploit and steal, interaction is a give and take of equal partners.

After September 11th it is more important than ever before that the Islamic world and Western civilization find ways to interact. There has been a lot of what is called dialogue, but in most of these events there was more affirmation of one’s own point of view, than listening to each other. There were many meetings, but we have to see that there was also little understanding. And we must see that today there still is very little going on that can be truly called interaction.

A prerequisite for interaction is to find a basis of communication: We have to know who we and what are we talking about in order to interact. Therefore:

We have to meet and talk to come to a common ground, but we also must not forget that we have to have some common ground in order to be able to talk.

I Three periods of interaction: history, modern times, the present

Historical times: not black and white

Modern experiences of interaction cannot be evaluated and an outlook into the future cannot be made without an understanding of the past. Let us therefore look shortly at history: We usually learn in school that the relationship between the Islamic world and the West was a history of wars. Little is said in our textbooks about trade and economic interaction, even less about cultural impulses and cross fertilization.

It is bad that we know so little about the economic and cultural interaction, but what is even worse is that the black and white picture of continuous warfare is mostly fiction. There were wars, but not always as we are told for religious reasons, but because of power politics. And even if we take the religion of the fighting parties into account, it was not always Muslims versus Christians or vice versa, but there were many floating borders and shifting alliances.

In the book "Europe and Islam: History of a Misunderstanding", recently published by the Italian professor Franco Cardini we find many elements that show that the confrontation between Europe and Islam did not happen in the way we have been told. Two short examples:

In Al-Andalus Muslims and Christian rulers did not only fight against each other along the lines of their religion, but they also made alliances across the religious divide if they thought they could benefit from it, so Muslim-Christian coalitions fought other Muslim-Christian coalitions.

The rulers of the port towns in Italy and Turkish generals did also fight in different coalitions disregarding faith if it served their purposes.

Cardini even mentions that the "Song of Roland", one of the icons of Western culture is based on a falsification of the facts: That it was not Muslims that fought the retreating army, but non-Muslim mountaineers.

So we can say that history is not black and white, instead we have to watch carefully what really happened.

Modern times: action and reaction

I think that there is consent that modern experiences of the people in the Islamic world with people from the West start with the arrival of Napoleon in Egypt. And from this point on we see

less of an interaction but action and reaction: After Napoleon's arrival, Muslims have reacted in two different ways:

The first group of Muslims looked at the achievements of the West in awe and tried to imitate and copy what they thought was useful, like a reform of the army or bureaucracy, something that was not really to the benefit of the people and nations and did not create sustainable nations and governments. These Muslims did not rethink what they took from the West in the terms of Islam.

The second group of Muslims started looking back to their own history, and their line of thought was: The invasion by the forces of the West and the downfall of Islamic civilization could only happen, because Muslims strayed from the right path. Therefore Muslims will have to go back to the fundamentals of their religion and do it right, then God will reward them.

Looking back at one's history and towards one's roots is nothing bad or wrong. However some Muslims did not only look back at history as it happened, they re-invented their own history. Other Muslims did not stop at re-inventing the history of the Islamic world they went even a step further. They came to the conclusion that Islam never has been practised correctly. In their imagination they came up with an idealized and purified model of an Islamic way of life. That in itself also does not necessarily cause problems, because everybody has the right to have his own ideas. However things start getting wrong, when in the name of a fictitious model people want to force their contemporaries into practising their religion in a way it was never meant to be practised.

Have these two reactions by the Muslims – imitation on one side, turning back on the other – been beneficial for the Ummah, have they advanced the Islamic world? I think that it is not wrong to say that this pattern has not carried positive results. Therefore I would like to suggest the following:

Muslims should no longer look back in history and close down, but instead Muslims should look forward to the future and open up.

Present times: finding a foundation for interaction

Today, just two hundred years after Napoleon's intrusion into the Islamic world we have seen the collapse of the socialist empire. This however was not the end of history, as we have been told. Instead it was the beginning of the promotion of a new enemy worldwide: Islam. Once again true interaction has been made difficult, this time by the adherents of a philosophy that proclaims the "clash of civilizations". Once again prejudices and uncertainty reign and there is a genuine lack of knowledge and information. People in the West still look down on the Muslims,

who do not give up their religion, a religion which is considered medieval and without reformation and enlightenment. Muslims for their part despise the West, because they think it is only about colonialism, exploitation and that its people are morally degenerate. Both sides are wrong. Concerning the foundations for interaction H. E. Minister Hamdi Zakzouk made a very important statement last summer in a lecture in Germany. He said:

“Especially the dialogue between Islam and Europe is necessary. For this Europe needs much more knowledge about Islam and the Muslims need more thorough knowledge about European culture and history.”

II The foundation for interaction: knowledge and understanding

Please allow me to give a very brief survey about the essentials of Western civilization and the Islamic world as the foundation for true interaction. My guiding principle will not be to say there are no differences, but to point out these differences, because you have to know the other side. But I shall also point out that these differences do not make it impossible to communicate, instead they can be used as a foundation for interaction.

To start with I would like to point out the basic differences between the Western civilization and the Islamic world.

- The history of the Western civilization is a history of rebellion.
- The history of the Islamic world is a history of submission.

- The culture of the West is a culture of disintegration.
- The culture of Islam is a culture of integration.

Western Civilization: foundations and activities

Let us begin with some information about the history of the West: The message of Christianity, on which Western civilization was based, says: Man is born guilty, he is burdened with “original sin”, i.e. the sins of his forefathers, because of this he is inherently bad, guidance alone cannot help him, he needs redemption. To show His love with humanity, God sent His “son”, Jesus Christ, into the world, who by dying on the cross, took the sins of mankind onto him and opened the door for redemption.¹

¹ This analysis was offered in the booklet: Living with Muslims in Germany. A Guide of the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany, p. 33/34)

In Christianity people always rebelled

- People rebelled in the name of emancipation against the religious message - maybe only subconsciously – because why should man, being part of God's creation, be burdened by something like original sin?
- People rebelled against the thought that they could not be as powerful and wise as God. One of the fundamental myths of European culture is Dr. Faustus, who even made a contract with the devil to gain knowledge.
- People rebelled against a body of religious clergy who developed, defined the religion.
- People rebelled in the name of liberation against their superiors: princes, kings and emperors. These ruled the Christians, but not as people equal before God, based on rules given by God to everyone on earth, but as leaders who claimed their power was bestowed on them by God.

Looking for a model to set things right, people in the West looked back into history to pre-Christian times and discovered that in old Greece people discussed on the forum and then came to a decision. This procedure was called democracy, government of the people. (At this time of course only a small group of privileged men.)

With the American Declaration of Independence, people in the West brought together their understanding of religion and their visions of government and stated with regards to their religious beliefs, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness;..."

And with regards to the way they would organise their affairs they continued: "...that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, (laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness...)"²

² Let us deal here shortly with the question of Human Rights and Islam. Last year we had a discussion during the conference whether Islam and Human Rights are compatible, and opinions went in very different directions. But are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness really alien to Islam? We may not speak of rights, but is it not forbidden in Islam to kill and are we not born free of sin? Coming to the pursuit of happiness: Muslims are entitled to live a good life. They are entitled in their own way to the pursuit of happiness. It is not true that Muslim life is only about rules, about "does" and "don'ts". All the books about what is forbidden and what is permitted may do serve a good purpose, but Islam is not about rules, it is about the direct relationship of the believer to Allah s.w.t., without any intermediaries, no "son" of Allah s.w.t., no clergy. No self appointed clergy should usurp this function of telling Muslims what to do. It was the Mufti of Bosnia who recently said, "we imams are making a big mistake, we always tell the

As far as development of society and science are concerned it is not by accident that the division of labour has been invented in the West. In the past centuries it has been the basic principle of the West to separate and divide, in other words to disintegrate:

- religion was separated from politics
- things were broken up into molecules and atoms and atoms were split
- human beings, fauna and flora were reduced to genes and now we practise genetic engineering
- in society, families were disintegrated, parents separated from children, man from women (in Germany one third of the households are single households)
- but there was also the separation of powers for the benefit of the people.

The Islamic World: Foundations and actions

In the Islamic world there is only one message, and this message was given to humankind by God. The message of Islam says: man is born with a clean slate. He has the potential to live a life according to the will of God, if he follows God's guidance, which was sent to mankind through a succession of prophets and the final revelation of the Qur'an. Of course man also has the potential be a sinner, who at the end of time will have to face God, take up responsibility for his deeds, but man also can hope for the mercy of Allah God.

The message of Islam also says: all Muslims are equal: men and women, white and black, Muslims are being taught that the difference of the people is a sign of God - a message that leaves no room for racism.³

And finally the message of Islam says that everybody is bound to the same rules, caliphs and emperors in the same way as the individual Muslim. Indeed the first constitutionalism in the world was the Islamic community.⁴

believers what they have to do and what is forbidden, we should instead preach that Islam is about the grace of Allah s.w.t. and living a good life."

³ Norman Davis is summing this thought up like this: „Islam, meaning ‚submission‘, was a universal religion from the start. Although it has always clung to Arabic as the sacred language of the Koran, it appeals to all nations, to all classes, and to both sexes. One of the most basic precepts is that all Muslims are brothers and sisters. In his lifetime Muhammad denounced the economic privileges of the ruling élite, the subordination of women, and the ‚blood laws‘ of the semitic tribes. His call for social, economic, and political equality threatened the foundations of traditional societies. His insistence on the rights of the oppressed and of women and on the duty of charity and compassion, spelled liberation for the masses. Here was a revolutionary creed, whose almost instantaneous military power derived from the fervent devotion of the faithful. It enjoined that soldiers were the equals of their generals, subjects of their rulers, wives of their husbands.“ Norman Davies, Europe - A History, Pimlico, Random House, London 1997, S. 252

With this Divine message as a foundation is it really astonishing that Muslims did not rebel against the message of God, that the key word of their behaviour is not rebellion, but submission? Is it not the most natural thing on earth to submit to the will of a beneficent and merciful God, who sets you free to act according to His rules, unburdened by an original sin? Is it not natural not to make a revolution if the message you have received from God is in itself revolutionary?

Is it really so difficult to understand that Muslims follow God's rules in their private lives, but also in society and in government? That they live an integrated way of life?

However we have to understand that there is a serious shortcoming as far as civil society and governments are concerned: It what may be wonderful for family life, that generations do not get separated, that family life is integrated. But this "integration" may not be beneficial in public life as far as governments are concerned: governments do need control, there needs to be a separation of powers and there need to be institutions of government, which in the Islamic world never have been developed. Most important of all: Muslims need rules on how to abolish governments, because killing the khalifa is not a solution (and we know that Muslim rules can be quite cruel). And here I think Muslims by interaction from the Western civilization can actually learn something for their own benefit, by rethinking they way they govern themselves.

As for science an analytical mind is the prerequisite for any successful research. Looking at history we cannot deny the fact that Muslims for centuries were on the forefront of scientific research. Following a saying to search for knowledge, even if it meant going to China, their inquisitive minds researched in medicine, geography, mathematics and came to astonishing results. Looking at history we also cannot deny that fact, that after a certain time, Muslims submitted more to imitation than to a creative approach to their religion, that they stopped looking and closed their eyes in science.

⁴ Philip Mansel focuses on this thought, when he writes: "Islam is a religion with revolutionary implications. Rulers are considered legitimate only if they enforce the *shariat*, the holy law of Islam based on the teachings of the Koran. The *shariat* was considered above, rather than a product of, the state. The French maxim, *Si veut le roi, si veut le loi*, would have been unthinkable in the Ottoman Empire." (Philip Mansel, *Constantinople – City of the World's Desire, 1453 –1924*, John Murray, London 1995, S. 27).

III One world: strategies for interaction to solve our common problems

After having learnt what both sides are standing for, we have a choice:

Muslims, being convinced that God has given them His final revelation and people in the West, being certain that they have elaborated for and by themselves the best blueprint for organising civil society and government, can stay for themselves, be proud and look down on the other.

But Muslims and the people of the West have no reason to be proud or feel superior over one another: Both have continuously acted against their revelation and their principles. Muslims have slaughtered their caliphs, even though the Qur'an forbids explicitly that one Muslim kills another one, Muslims have not kept the Ummah together and today among Muslims you find the fiercest nationalist.⁵

Looking at reality we must come to the conclusion: Muslims are not always as religious as others assume or they pretend. And people from the Western civilization are not always so rational and enlightened as they claim. (By the way they also not as saecularised as they pretend.) So it is better for both Muslims and non-Muslims to be devout and quiet. Muslims and non-Muslims should remember that a good message only becomes reality if one is acting accordingly.

Muslims who are called the best Ummah, still have to prove that they can also be the better community. The people of the West still have to prove that they are really living according to their values nationally and internationally.

Lastly we have to deal with the fact that people in both worlds do not only neglect their holy principles, but that crimes and atrocities are committed in the very name of religion on one side and in the name of freedom and democracy on the other side.

⁵ Allow me a short detour: The fact that Muslims and Christian forgot the principles of their religion only too often, when it came to questions of power – I already mentioned this, when I spoke about history writing – should also help us to carefully examine another element of the relationship between the Islamic world and Western civilization. Was every military expansion really a religious djihad – or not just an action of expanding power, like any other warfare in the world? I know it is important for Muslims and non-Muslims to keep up this fiction: Muslims need it to prove they are more religious than others. The people in the West need it to prove to the world that once djihad means always djihad, and that therefore Muslims are a danger always and everywhere. I think those Muslims, who reinterpret their own history are as wrong as those non-Muslims who interpret the history of Muslims purely in religious terms. Both sides contribute to keep prejudices going and both sides are continuing to build walls, instead of tearing them down. (Concerning the crusade, we also know today that there may have been a religious motivation, but the underlying cause was purely political.)

However it is not right, if non-Muslims identify Muslims in general as terrorists as much as it is wrong to call e. g. America and the Americans the land and the forces of evil.

Muslims commit atrocities in the name of Islam, and Western leaders commit war crimes in the name of freedom, but that does not disqualify the principles, it disqualifies the actors!

As a foundation for true interaction we must not identify human actions with their basic texts. Criminal actions do not render the underlying message as invalid or unimportant. We must learn to separate and understand: a good message does not necessarily lead to good actions, good intentions do not necessarily create good results, but also bad actions do not render the underlying principles a bad.

This having been said, we can now come to the conclusion:

First: True interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims will only be possible, if each side knows, understands and accepts the spiritual and theoretical foundation of the other side.

Second: In the title two “worlds” are being mentioned: The Islamic world and Western civilization: As a starting point for the development of strategies of interaction we should ask ourselves if today we still can speak about the Islamic world on one side and Western civilization on the other. I think instead we have to recognize that the Islamic world is split into over fifty nations in the modern understanding of the word where Muslims are in the majority. Western civilization is organised likewise in many nations in which for example the separation of religion and politics has found many different ways of expression. Furthermore, in the age of migration, many Muslims live in the West and a lot of people from the West live in the Islamic world. From this I come to agree with the recommendation of one of the greatest Islamic scholars of today, the President of the Fiqh Council of North America, Taha Jaber al Alwani, who recommends to give up the medieval division of speaking of “dar ul Islam” and “dar ul harb”, because it is outdated. Both worlds have come together in One World.

Therefore I come to the conclusion that it is wrong if one side focuses on its problems and the other on theirs and both sides blame each other for these problems.

We have to accept that the problems of this one world are indeed “our” problems. And we must work out solutions together.

Let me name some of these problems:

- We are facing the evil consequences of financial globalisation.

- We are wasting our resources, instead of focussing on a way of living that conserves energy and does not waste it.
- Everybody tries to get richer and richer, not enough are concerned with sharing wealth.
- Everybody tries to become more and more powerful, instead of starting to share power.

These problems may look insurmountable, but to end on an optimistic note I would also like to mention some steps of true interaction in order to solve these problems, which have been undertaken by the two countries to which I personally have a close attachment: Germany and Egypt:

The German government has contributed large funds to a project by an international agency "Idea" to help building democratic institutions in Arab countries.

The German government is working closely with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and on the foundation of UNDP's "Arab Human Development Report" on the project of "Creating the Arab Knowledge Society".

Both projects are being executed in close cooperation with the target groups, in other words in the form of true interaction.

Lastly I would like to show you a small book which however I think is a big step forward in the German educational system: I have here the copy of a book called "The Islamic World and Europe". It contains unprejudiced information about both worlds and was written with the participation of a Muslim consultant. It is a schoolbook for teachers with the help of which they are supposed to plan their lectures. This way a new generation in Germany will finally learn something about interaction between the Islamic world and Western civilization and not only the old war stories.

From the Egyptian side we also saw some remarkable initiatives during the last year:

H. E. Minister Hamdi Zakzouk last summer in Germany gave a brilliant speech about "Islam and Europe – No Future Without Dialogue".

H. E. Madame Dr. h. c. Suzanne Mubarak received the Medal of Honour of the Free University in Berlin and in a brilliant speech outlined her initiatives (and I might say her great achievements) for education and literacy in Egypt.

H. E. President Mubarak made the proposal for an international conference of dialogue and interaction.

For a long time we have been talking about “making people understand”, “building bridges”, today we can say this is not enough: We must bring two things together, form a new synthesis, (which is not the same as syncretism). We must stick to our foundations, but we must interpret them in an open way.