Barriers to Social Cohesion in Western Societies and their Manifestations in Islam-West Relations

Introduction

- It is important to address core issues that hinder social cohesion at the root.

- There are four concentric issues prevent the establishment of a genuine social cohesion and the advancement of multicultural society.

- These particularly manifest in Islam-West relations

- Muslim minorities in Western societies is a chance for these issues to be addressed.

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1- Lack of Large Minorities in History

- First, in Western societies, there is no historical experience where large populations of religiously and culturally different people having lived amongst dominant population.

- Since the Roman Empire from 4th century onwards, European populations have been largely Christian.

- Partnership between Charlemagne (d. 814) and the Catholic church has created the Christian Carolingian Empire.

1- Lack of Large Minorities in History

- Crusades and Reconquista of Iberian Peninsula were intolerant of any non-Christian populations in Europe, Muslims and Jews were driven out of Spain and American colonies.

- 16th Century Europe was hostile for not only non-Christians but also to Christian denominations.

- In the last 50 years migration of Muslims as minorities were allowed out of economic necessity.

- Hence, Western political history and social theory does not take into account large minorities of culturally and religiously different people.

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2- Judeo-Christian Civilisation?

- Second, Western civilisation is defined sometimes as secular and sometimes as a Judeo-Christian civilisation. In both cases, Islam and Muslims are seen alien to it.

- Habermas says that the Western liberal democracy comes from the Jewish ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.

- To Habermas there is no alternative to the Judeo-Christian legacy, "Everything else is just an idle postmodern talk".

2- Judeo-Christian Civilisation?

- It is assumed that since Christianity is a continuation of Judaism, the Western civilisation is essentially Judeo-Christian.

- The result of this approach is that Islam and Muslims (as well as other religions) are seen foreign and incompatible with the Western Civilisation.

- According to Nader Hashemi in *Islam Secularism and Liberal Democracy* this tension is at the heart of current debates on immigration, multiculturalism, citizenship, foreign policy.

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2- Judeo-Christian Civilisation?

- Richard W. Bulliet in *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilisation* argues that the Western Civilisation was influenced by the Islamic civilisation directly whereas Judaism "as a civilisation" has minimal to no influence.

- The work of George Makdisi, George Saliba and others have shown that Islamic civilisation has direct and major influence on Europe.

- David L. Lewis in *God's Crucible: Islam and the making of Europe 570-1215* argues that the idea of Europe emerged in response and influence of Muslim presence in Iberian Peninsula.

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3- Duality in Western Appearance

- Third, Western societies dominate the world culturally, economically and politically. In this domination, it displays two contradictory faces – one at home and one abroad.

- Jean-Paul Sartre in his introduction to *The Colonizer and The Colonized* says European colonisers had different standards at home country and at the colonized world.

- He argues that the economic interests and objectives were the main drivers of this duplicity of standards.

3- Duality in Western Appearance

- Dualism in foreign policy were evident in the first Gulf War when Kuwait was to be liberated at all costs but Bosnia conveniently ignored.

- The lack of convincing rationale for war in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, Extraordinary Rendition, and others suggest that the duality persists.

- We are finding it hard to understand why people around the world are antagonistic to Western domination when they usually see is the second face.

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4- Miscommunication

- Forth, there are usually two channels of communication – Media and political authorities. In both cases, there are groups and institutions who stand to benefit from a clash between Islam and the West.

- "The West's 'conversation' with Islam has always been one sided affair, essentially a dialogue with itself... The very idea of Islam reflects a Western discourse **perpetuated by those social groups and institutions that stand to benefit from its survival**." (Jonathan Lyons, *Islam through Western Eyes*, 2012)

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4- Miscommunication

- The propaganda during the Crusades has left a lasting legacy of Muslims as the evil enemy in the European psyche.
  - Also in Muslim memory of Europeans as invaders
- Song of Roland was enormously popular 12th to 14th centuries.

- Dante (d, 1321) in Divine Comedy put the Prophet Muhammad at the lowest level of hell.
  - Ironically, Prof Miguel Asín Palacios showed that Dante took many features and scenarios from Muslim mystic Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240)

4- Miscommunication

- European travellers helped inform Europe about Muslims but reduced Muslim societies to the tales of *Arabian Nights* and lustful imaginations about Ottoman *harem*.

  – See Asli Sancar's *Ottoman Women: Myth and Reality* (2007) about the reality of women and *harem* in Ottoman Empire.

- In time, Orientalism took over the role and according to Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), it gave a grotesque and monolithic view of Islam and Muslim societies.

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4- Miscommunication

- In modern times, media has continued the negative discourse about Islam and Muslims.

  - *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* by Edward W Said (1981)

  - Numerous studies point to the bias of media and its sensationalism in case of Islam and Muslims.

"She spoke for our country" **– Tony Abbott**

4- Miscommunication

- Whenever Muslim leaders and state officials meet each side is trying to convince the other of their version of the main problem.

- For state officials the main problem is radicalisation. They want Muslims' help in addressing it.

- For Muslim leaders the main problem is Islamophobia. They want authorities' help in addressing it.

- In meetings, each side is trying to convince the other of their version of the main problem.

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4- Miscommunication

- These produce two negative outcomes:

1. There is a major **gap in understanding** between what comes to awareness through media and what is actually known about Islam and Muslims.

2. There is an **communication impasse** in the relationship between Muslims and political authorities.

   - Boycott of AFP dinner in Sydney most recently is a reflection of this frustration.

What are the solutions?

1. Presence of Muslims in Western societies should be accepted and diversity should be genuinely embraced as richness.

   – Muslim presence enables Muslims to appreciate the positives of Western civilisation and pass this on to other Muslims around the world.

   – Muslim presence enables Westerners engage in a first hand dialogue and start to clarify the blind-spots.

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What are the solutions?

2. Accept the reality of the contribution of Muslims to the building of Western Civilisation and make this part of the educational content in high schools.

   – Muslims get out of the inferiority complex and stop seeing Western civilisation as totally anti-Islam.

   – Westerners attain a sense of respect for Muslims and get out of the superiority complex.

What are the solutions?

3. Begin addressing the duplicity problem by genuinely recognising the relationship between what West does abroad and social cohesion at home.

What are the solutions?

4. Support dialogue initiatives that involve education and social interactions.

   – Dialogue gives an opportunity for Muslims (and others) to voice their concerns in a democratic way to Western public, intellectuals, religious leaders and politicians.

   – Western religious and secular circles find out about who Muslims really are rather than just media sources and intelligence reports.

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Conclusion

- All four entrenched issues are at the heart of Western history, worldview and identity.

- Recognising them and addressing them will not be simple and quick but their persistence does and will curb advancing socially cohesive societies.

- The presence of Muslim minorities in Western societies offers more solutions than problems and assist in addressing these issues.

Thank You

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