

Islam is incompatible with Democracy

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Democracy is a popular phenomenon currently embracing political and governmental systems throughout the world. An increasing number of countries are or have been shifting toward open elections, improved human rights, granting of free assembly, freedoms of speech, and other seemingly-Western concepts of how populations of people should be governed. We've seen this trend increasing in countries like Russia, after the fall of the Soviet Union; Iraq, currently being forcefully converted to a democratic state with the aid of the United States; and it doesn't seem to be stopping. Countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and other traditionally-Islamic states have been seen as targets for Western-style Imperialism. Here the primary objective of the most Western states seems to be the acquisition of economic resources in the arrogant guise of freeing the worlds' people under tyrannical governments often founded upon secularist, dictatorial regimes (the Iraqi War of 2003 would be a prominent example). Here we see the beginnings of conflict between civilizations.

Samuel Huntington is one of the most popular authors of our time who's contemplated the idea of a conflict between civilizations, particularly between Western and Islamic states. In his book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" (1996) he argues that cultural differences between, for instance, Islam and Western cultural values are clearly in opposition to each other and that differences between these two cultures occur not along ideological lines but "civilizational" (ie. Western, Hindu, Islamic). He managed to determine that to understand the idea of conflict, we must comprehend the cultural cleavages and that culture must be seen as the centre of war. Huntington (1996) argues that, because the Koran rejects the distinction between religious and political authority, Islamic civilization cannot easily coexist with democracy. In addition, Kedourie (1994) maintains that mass egalitarianism, elections, and representation are "profoundly alien

to the Muslim political tradition" (Kedourie, 1994). Moreover, Shariah Law - to which the very foundation for the legal system borne for both secular and religious lives of Muslims - not only covers religious aspects of their lives but also many day-to-day dealings of life including politics, economics, and social issues.

Here we see direct conflict with the fundamental virtues of democracy wherein liberal democracy affords everyone to the same rights, freedoms; right to life, liberty, security of person; and that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Islamic law, on the other hand, declare women to be essentially inferior to men; that immigrants or non-islamic people living in Muslim countries are declared inferior; those of the atheistic tendency are also thought to be inferior (violating freedom of religion under Article 2 of UNCHR); and lastly, Sharia recognizes slavery (which also violates UN declaration of human rights). How then, would those practicing Islam be able to peacefully co-exist with those exercising secular ideals as outlined in most Western-state constitutions and Charter of Rights? Given these short contrasts, those of Islamist and democracy-driven ideals cannot – and will not – be able to peacefully co-exist with one another.

The first problem with the claim by some that Islam would be able to co-exist with liberal, democratic ideals would surely be the issue revolving around the separation of Church from State. Indeed, one of the fundamental bases of democracy has been the separation of the two because of the inherent problems when governments attempt to adopt non-secularist laws and customs. Given a country as the United States or Canada, where the populations essentially descended from immigrants of differing backgrounds, coming to a

consensus revolving around which religion to adopt would have been a feat in itself. Claiming to officially support one religion over another would undoubtedly lead to accusations of discrimination in countries like Canada where equality rights are deeply entrenched¹. The foundations of such ideas of separation came as early as John Locke and other philosophers of the enlightenment. Locke gave many reasons for this separation of Church and State in his “A Letter Concerning Toleration”: First, because souls are not committed to the state [magistrate] any more than other people; secondly, because the care of the spirit cannot belong to the state because its power consists only in external matters (not of the soul) (Locke, 1689). In summation, what he’s describing is the business of the state has no right to interfere with the conscience or thought of its citizens; a fundamental, liberal-democratic ideal. The Founding Fathers of one of the greatest democracies in the world defended religious freedom in adoption of a Bill of Rights where the rights of religious minorities were outlined, among other things², to avoid discriminatory practices by Government. Looking toward Canada we see similar traits in the Court ruling of *Canada v. Big M Drug Mart Ltd* [1985] where it ruled that a 1906 statute required most places to be closed on Sundays did not have a legitimate purpose in a “free and democratic society³,” and was ruled an unconstitutional attempt at establishing a religious-based closing law. Here we see the successful separation of Church from State. Islamic societies, on the other hand, have had much harder times in separating religion from state operations mainly because the very idea of Islamic society is the integration of religion and state.

¹ Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 15.

² Not only were religious minorities protected by this Bill, but also those with differing opinions; essentially democracy.

³ Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Section 1.

The separation of Church and State in Islamic societies, as it's already been mentioned, is a much more difficult matter and only a couple states have been "successful" in implementing such strategies⁴. The reason Islamic societies have not been very successful in co-habiting with other religions is due to its' inherently xenophobic and intolerant teachings toward other religions and beliefs such as those associated with the countries of Sudan, Libya, and Afghanistan (NY Times, 2000). From the perspective of Westerners, Islam presents a structurally intolerant religion (Hofman, 1998, p. 142) as demonstrated by the strict Shariah law that forms the basis of these societies. Undoubtedly, the usual Muslim view has been that Islam does not allow distinction between the temporal and the sacred or between religion and state that has been the defining feature of the secular West (democracy) since the beginning of the Enlightenment. Whereas Islam stands as a religion and fundamental way of life for those living under its rules, democracy and its propensity toward individual choice leaves much to be desired in the eyes of Islamists. Democracy could never be considered as such a strong unifying force than Islam could ever aspire to be. The main point being that Islam, with its strict Shariah law, is of no recognizable match to the ideals of liberal democracy. Where democracy promotes equality, and the separation of religion from state is tantamount, Islam has no such separation. Moreover, based upon the law of Shariah, Islamic law teaches Muslims to apply scripture to the real world (Lewis, 2001, 56). Dr. Idris (2001), a prominent scholar in Muslim relations, confirms this view in that he believes that Islam cannot be separated from the state due to the fact that it guides Muslims through every detail of running not only the state, but also their lives. Ultimately Muslims have no choice but to reject secularism because it excludes the laws of God (Idris, 2001, p3). Going back, we see that the fundamental principle of Democracy is the separation of Church and State

⁴ Turkey has been "successful" in this area by their secularist state policies. Critics would argue that Islam is only able to exist with others because of the army which keeps the mixed system in line.

(recall the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms; The American Bill of Rights) and that we see in Islamic societies there is no such separation, but instead we have what is called “the adulterous connection of church and state” outlined by Thomas Paine (1988, p.500) in his book *The Age of Reason* (1794) where he outlines the Church-State complex which has the capability of controlling populations just as confessional-Islamist Governments do⁵. Looking through this lens we must ask that if the Muslims are sincere in the cause of democracy (since many live in Canada⁶), then they must learn the reasons (outlined above) underlying the separation of Church from State. Indeed, Kramer (1997) confirms that Muslims have fallen away from the essence of Islam, personified by the example of the Prophet Mohammad and codified in Islamic law, the *shari'a*, a code based on supposed direct revelation from God. Muslims will remain in their wretched state until they purify themselves by reinstating this law (Kramer, 1997).

Our second argument revolves around the issue of Islam and human rights, with special attention paid to the concern of women in Islamic societies. The claim is that Islam essentially supports gender inequality. Islam has always considered women as creatures inferior in every way: physically, intellectually, and morally. Indeed, the Koran outlines the marginalization of the female sex through the *hadiths* (popular sayings attributed to Muhammad):

4.1 17. They invoke in His stead only females; they pray to none else than Satan. Other verses tend to show a misogynist side. 4.34. Men are in charge

⁵ Shariah (Islamist) law prohibits certain forms of expression, speech, or other forms of artistic display.

⁶ Indeed, the Ontario Government in 2005 stated that “there will be no Sharia Law in Ontario” concerning family matters of Muslim-Ontarian residents. See Canadian Press: McGuity rejects Ontario’s use of Shariah law and all religious arbitrations (September 11, 2005) or <http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/09/09/sharia-protests-20050909.html>

of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women).

Indeed, the very foundation of Islam relies on the Koran just as Christianity relies on the Holy Bible. Islamic holy-scripture relies on the view that women are full of guile, deceit, and cannot be trusted. A woman's traditional role in Islamic society essentially fulfills the divine teachings contained within the Koran. Here are some examples of such teachings provided through the hadiths:

- The woman who dies and with whom the husband is satisfied will go to paradise.
- If anything presages a bad omen it is: a house, a woman, a horse.

Sourced from "Why I Am Not a Muslim" by Ibn Warraq (Prometheus Books, 1995).

It's clear that women under the powerful veil of Islam are essentially declared as second-rate citizens when compared to men. The Koran condemns anything otherwise and those thinking otherwise are not true Muslims. For "what dismays the fundamentalists," Mernissi writes, "is that the era of [postcolonial] independence did not create an all-male new class. Women began taking part in the public feast" (Mernissi, 1987). Newly urbanized and newly-educated young men singled-out modern women with diplomas and careers as the worst traitors to Islam. Indeed, these Zealots saw offences against "real" Islam everywhere (Weiner, 2004). How do these facts add-up to the democratic ideal of equality between the sexes? Not well. It seems that Islam will never achieve democracy and human rights compatible with Western countries if the application of the Sharia (outlined previously) and so long there is no separation of Islam from the State. Undoubtedly, it runs counter to the

previously-stated Universal Declaration of Human Rights set-out in 1948 where in Article 1 it states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations, 1948). A final point in this argument reflects the inequality of women in marriage where women in Islamic societies are not afforded equal rights in that they are not free to marry whom they wish and the rights of divorce are not equal. Indeed, the concept of the dowry⁷ is a simple confirmation of the man’s claims over the woman in matters of sex and divorce. Furthermore, in reality the woman does not get to use the dowry for herself (Warraq, 1997). Women in democratic societies, given the fact that they are allowed to choose their own religion, are not under such harsh regulations concerning marriage. Going back to the Declaration of Human Rights (1948, article 16) we see that women shall be entered into marriage only with free and full consent of the intending spouses (section 2). Furthermore, section 1 outlines that women, of any age - without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion – have the right to marry and found a family and they are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution (United Nations, 1948). Looking further we see that most philosophers of modern-time would agree that the notion of human rights, with the accompanying notions of self-respect, involves idea of moral choice, and the right to equal concern and respect. Displayed by John Locke in his writings (A Letter Concerning Toleration, 1689) concerning such ideals that the above-mentioned rights are fundamental in the sense that without them there could be no specific rights grounded in the specific circumstances in which people live. Under Islam no such developments have taken place and furthermore there are no such phrases in Shariah law concerning “the right for all men [and women] to be free” (Ibid).

⁷ A dowry (also known as trousseau) is a gift of money or valuables given by the bride's family to that of the groom to permit their marriage.

The final argument rotates around the democratic ideal of freedom of speech. Whereas democracies covet the notion of being able to voice any opinion without fear of arrest, detention, or harassment by Government, in Islamist societies the “basic premise of [Islamic law] is that no one, and especially no non-Muslim, may openly discuss certain subjects” (Pipes, 1999). Again, looking at the Declaration (1948), we see that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (United Nations, 1948). Whereas the basic premise of democracy revolves around this right, Islamic law strictly forbids changing one’s religion. Freedom of thought is also discouraged in various forms and any innovation on these forms would be considered “blasphemy” which is punishable by death. In section 4.148, the Koran further explains that “Allah does not love the public utterance of hurtful speech unless (it be) by one to whom injustice has been done; and Allah is Hearing, Knowing” (Holy Qur’an, 1983). Taking a look at the United States, a supposed staunch supporter of democracy, we see that where the concept of freedom of speech is sturdier than elsewhere, the First Amendment still prevents Government from fining or failing anyone for offensive speech. In contrast, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a Professor of literature in Egypt who wrote that certain references in the Kuran were supernatural phenomena and should be read as metaphor, found his marriage dissolved by an Egyptian Court on the grounds that his writings proved him an apostate⁸ (Pipes, 1999). A more recent case would be the scandal created by the cartoon published by a Danish Newspaper depicting Islam in a comical light; insinuating that Islam would lead to World War 3, and so on. Critics claim that the cartoons were insulting, “islamophobic⁹,” and blasphemous. Had this happened in a Muslim country

⁸ According to Islamic law, a Muslim woman may not be married to a Non-Muslim. In this case his writings led to the belief that he abandoned his Islamic faith, therefore calling him an ‘apostate.’

⁹ "Islamophobia" is a neologism referring to a fear, and accompanying hostility, towards the religion of Islam and its adherents, or by extension to predominantly Muslim cultures.

the cartoonists and/or editors surely would have been put to death. Since this happened in a democracy, however, the cartoonists were not punished by the Government, but have been hounded by Islamists and fired by their employers.

In conclusion what has been covered in this essay has been the improbability of Islam ever becoming compatible with the goals of democracy. In hindsight, Islam and democracy are not compatible due to their ideological and theoretical differences. Whereas Islam (as a religion), it's been said, cannot be separated from the State, democracy has been on the forefront of such an effort to disconnect religion from the operation of the state. Indeed, the usual Muslim view has been that Islam does not allow the distinction between the temporal (state) and the sacred (religion), which has been the defining feature of the secular West since the ideas proposed by popular Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke. Hadi Hawang of Partai Islam (PAS) in Malaysia makes the same point more bluntly: "I am not interested in democracy. Islam is not democracy, Islam is Islam" (Pipes, 1999). Islam is not a choice in Muslim countries, it's a requirement. On a short side-note, some democratic-Islamic institutions exist, such as those of Turkey where a secular government was formed and where Islamic sects are allowed to co-exist, but must share power with secular partners. The prospect of conflict between Islam and these secular forces is always present and as a result armed forces were implemented to 'keep the peace.' On a similar vein, secularists share a simple fear: they believe that once an Islamist politician gets themselves into a position of control, they will never let go. The Islamists themselves feed that fear when they preach of power coming from God, of religion and state being one, and the separation of the two a secular aberration (The Economist, 2000). Could this type of system exist in other countries? Not likely because Muslim countries founded their system of government, society, and

system of human rights upon the Kuran and its system of laws titled Sharia where secularism was not permitted. It has always been the same and will in all likelihood never change. Democracy, on the other hand, has been evolving steadily from the earliest forms of such beginning in Ancient India. Huntington argued that waves of democracy involved the deepening legitimacy problems of authoritarian governments; the burgeoning economies of many countries; changes in religious institutions which have made them more prone to oppose governmental authoritarianism; the push to promote human rights. Indeed, for religion to be involved in the state it must contain certain “liberal” ingredients, and that without these democracies would slide toward malfunctioning forms of democracy (Tapie, 2002). Islam is clearly one of those religions which could never be considered “liberal” enough to be embedded within the notion of liberal democracy because it’s more likely to look down upon independent reasoning (a pillar of democracy), instead of advocating for strict adherence to particular and comprehensive moral and ethical codes for society (As Islamic law commands) (Tapie, 2002). Indeed, religion and democracy are compatible depending on the form of the democracy and the form of the religion. Therefore, Islam, in regards to human rights (in particular women’s), freedom of speech, and the idea of the separation of the Church from State is not compatible with democracy. It is clear that both will be at each others proverbial throats for the foreseeable future and that a “clash of civilizations” is inevitable.

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