Knowledge, Justice and Conflict Resolution: The Relevance of Islamic Perspectives and Traditions

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The belief that social science could contribute to conflict resolution hides several layers of presuppositions. First of all there is the assumption that there must be some kind of ideal order for things, in our case for human relations, which science can discover. Science could also then guide men about how to achieve this order. There is, in addition, the moral judgment that peace is good, and that peace and justice are compatible and reinforce each other. Thus conflict resolution - meaning ending conflicts by mutually agreed means, rather than by sheer force - is both good and practicable.

The briefest glance on the course of human history would immediately cast doubts on all of these assumptions. Looking at societies that enjoy peaceful existence, one does not see a neat arrangement where justice had been achieved and people live happily ever-after. On the contrary, peaceful co-existence is a messy web of compromises and half-solutions. More often than not, justice and equality are the first casualties of peace. In most peaceful and stable societies, racial and cultural prejudice would be found enshrined in the very laws supposed to guarantee equality and freedom, and even more so in actual institutions and practice.

Examining conflicts would also cast doubts on the desirability and possibility of ending many of them peacefully. A compromise resolution for the American Civil War would have allowed slavery to linger on, in some form or other. Some might say, not without justification, that it did linger anyway. "Peace in our Time", the dream that eluded opponents of Nazi Germany, would have meant the acceptance to live with racism, albeit in some watered-down form. Again, it could be argued that this was what happened anyway. But with less justification this time. In our time, if more evidence is needed, the rather inconclusive peace-making in former Yugoslavia may also point to a fundamental limitation on peace efforts in the traditional sense.

We do not need to marshal too many examples to demonstrate that peace is messy,[1] and that war is not always undesirable. There are no neat formulas which could ensure the avoidance of conflict nor magical formulas that could end it with minimum of pain and tears.

But if the map of peaceful co-existence is messy and unstructured, how can we find our way around it? How can we discern patterns in this chaos, and draw pictures and maps which would help us to avoid minefields? In other words, how can social science contribute to enlighten man in this area, and what can it contribute?

One obvious suggestion that had been made is that it should not. Sir Karl Popper (1952, 1964) had offered such an answer, posting up as he did some famous warning signals in his criticism of the search for a "perfect society" started by Plato and continued by Hegel and Marx, among others. This line of thinking, he affirmed, inevitably leads to totalitarianism. In social science, therefore, we are better off eschewing grand theories and prescriptions, restricting ourselves to what he calls "peace-meal engineering." It is incontrovertible that social science espoused by Marxist ideology had led human thought and practice along a very slippery road. This may justify a firm recommendation against any such indulgence.

This wisdom notwithstanding, the urge to construct maps based on whatever fragmented knowledge we possess is both understandable and irresistible. I will try to illustrate the dilemma this situation poses by the following treatment of Islam´s possible contribution to conflict resolution.

1. RELIGION, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND CONFLICT

Any treatment of this subject must be aware of the inherent contradiction involved. Modern social science has risen in opposition to religion and in conflict with it. The atmosphere in which it emerged tended to blame religion for most social ills, in particular conflict and wars. In later stages, social science did the reverse, blaming social ills for religion. In a line of thought opened up by Ludwig Feuerbach and elaborated on by Karl Marx, religion became the sedative which assuages the pain of social deprivation, and the litmus test for the breakdown of rational society.

Methodologically, modern social science is closely linked to attempts by thinkers like Ibn Khaldun, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hume and others to develop a more "realist" kind of thinking, one which, in Hume´s terms, attempts to separate the "is" from the "ought" (El-Affendi, 1991b). This means that one should examine the workings of human society as it actually operates, not as moralists and religious preachers would like it to. This may explain the tension created

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[1]   Cf. Niebuhr (1932:233), who criticises "moralists" who fail "to recognise the elaments of injustice and coercion which are present in any contemporary social peace". Thus the advocacy of peace for its own sake might threaten to accept traditional injustices as final.

when writings like those of Machiavelli were found distasteful by the religiously minded, for understandable reasons. Both Machiavelli and Hobbes have suggested strict control over religion and openly recommended its exploitation in the interest of ruling authorities.

The evidence which could be martialled to support the claim that attachment to religion tends to generate conflict is rather strong. Religious wars had dominated most of history until recently. And in modern times, whether in Palestine, Bosnia, Tibet, Northern Ireland, India or Sri Lanka, religion appears to be a strong factor in conflict.

Further examination of the facts would reveal the equation of religion and belligerence to be too simplistic. The most horrific conflicts of this century, the two world wars, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Korean wars, the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions, etc. were all wars of the post-religious era in their respective areas. Even the Arab-Israel conflict, the conflict in Bosnia and that in Northern Ireland had been instigated and are being fought by avowedly secular groups. What is true is that men have always been ready to fight for things they felt strongly about. In the past they used to feel quite strongly about religion. Today, most of them do not. But they have not run out of causes to go to war about.

It is true that some causes are more likely to ignite wars than others. In general, causes that espouse inequality of men or some form of injustice inherently generate conflict. However, most of the mainstream world religions espouse equality of men and justice. But opposition between competing religious visions and between religious and other sets of values (modern secularism, for example) still continues to generate conflict.

Thus although religion has long been officially banished from public life in most parts of the world, it is easy to underestimate the strong influence it continues to exert. Social Science is not constructed on thin air, but starts from some basic presuppositions, which it then modifies or confirms. To adduce Popper (1976) again, knowledge is the process of modification of inborn responses and inclinations. Or, to modify Popper slightly, knowledge is the evolution of prejudice. Cultural heritage is thus a significant component at the basis of all the social sciences. And this includes religion.

2. ISLAM AND CONFLICT

From a social science perspective, examining some of the presuppositions inherent in major cultural systems may thus reveal how they might affect the attitude to conflict resolution in their pre-critical state. Thus if we compare Islam and Christianity for example, we find the latter advocating peace as a paramount value, even at the expense of justice. The former, however, advocates the sacrifice of peace to justice.

The basic Islamic principles regarding human relations condemned all forms of aggression and recommended fighting back only when attacked.[2] Once aggression had been repelled and its causes eliminated, peace should immediately prevail.[3] In case of conflict between two Muslim groups, the relevant authorities should attempt mediation. If this failed and fighting continued, the party committing aggression should be fought until it is forced to see reason. Once it does, then an equitable settlement should be achieved.[4]

Within the Muslim society therefore, the overarching principle appears to favour peace with justice. When peace and justice became in conflict, the rule is that justice must prevail, even at the expense of peace, but once justice was restored, so immediately should peace be.

In intercommunal relations, the approach recommended was to seek peaceful co-existence. Initially, Islam offered the same advice as Christianity: that aggression should not be fought back. Later, permission was given to fight back.[5] This remained the dominant principle. Aggression should be fought back with just enough force to repel it and cause the conditions of peaceful co-existence to prevail. The fight for justice rested on a permission to fight injustice given to those on whom it was directly imposed, coupled with a duty on the rest of humanity to come to their aid. If the enemy sued for peace, this should be accepted, even if treachery was suspected.[6]

From the above, one may expect the practice of Muslim societies to reflect in some way these values. But some complications arose which made things actually work out the opposite way. It is of course similar with Christianity. Just as one looks in vain for Christian communities which practised turning the other cheek so, by the same token, we find that, in Islamic history the inclination which prevailed was not to sacrifice peace for justice. Rather it was the reverse. Islamic theologians and political thinkers, after bitter experiences with conflict in the early years of Islam, tended to favour peace, even at the expense of justice. In this they

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[2]   "And fight in God's cause against those who fight against you, but do not commit aggression, for verily, God does not love aggressors" (Quran, X:190).

[3]   "And if they desist, no more attack is allowed, except against transgressors." (Quran II:193)

[4]   "Hence, if two groups of believers fall to fighting, make peace between them, but then, if one of the two [groups] goes on acting wrongfully towards the other, fight against the one that acts wrongfully until it reverts to God's command; and if they revert, make peace between them with justice, and deal equitably [with them]: for verily God loves those who act equitably." (Quran, XLIX:49)

[5]   "Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged, and verily, God has indeed power to succour them: those who have been driven from their homelands against all right for no other reason than saying, 'God is our Lord'." (Quran, XXII:39-40)

[6]   "But if they incline to peace, incline thou to it as well, and place thy trust in God: verily, He alone is allhearing, all knowing. And should they seek to deceive thee [by their vow of peace], behold, God is enough fo thee!" (Quran, VIII:61-62)

did not depart from the inclination towards messy compromises which characterized human history.

Thus while there was a unanimous opinion among Muslim thinkers that the political systems existing after the year 40 AH (the end of the so-called Righteous Caliphate) were far from perfect, there was a similar, if lesser, unanimity that the cost of changing them was prohibitive. So compromise was advised. There was less tendency to compromise when it came to relations with foreign communities, but even here convenient arrangements were worked out.

The draw-back was that this compromise formula did not completely guarantee peace. Idealists who insisted on justice and strict adherence to puritanical values frequently disrupted the system. However, the "realists" who accepted whatever status quo presented itself also frequently fought over less elevated objectives. The result is that Islamic history has witnessed prolonged periods of turmoil alternating with periods of repression.

3. THE REBIRTH OF ISLAM

The legacy bequeathed by this history remains one of quietest pessimism. The revolutions and upheavals characterizing the Muslim world today are, ironically, a reflection of a renewed hope and optimism. The birth and flourishing of democracy in many parts of the world over the past two centuries had reignited the yearning for the golden era of Islam, and dissipated the earlier pessimism which despaired from ever reforming Muslim societies and bring them to embody the ideals of equality and justice which characterized the first few decades of Islamic history.

The dilemma posed by this new development, and the yearnings for democracy and self-determination by myriad groups all over the world which had exploded in recent years, is how far can one go in disrupting existing structures in search of better ones? And at what cost? Even more to the point for our present discussion, to what extent must Islam remain a disruptive force in its current awakening?

In order to answer this question, again we must address yet others, relating to some of the basic directions and assumptions of modern social science. Radical social scientists have been criticizing traditional social science ever since Marx branded all intellectual outlooks with inescapable class bias. Most recently, critiques of western social science from a similar perspective had produced more solid evidence regarding the inherently flawed perception of the Islamic world by western observers. Edward Said´s Orientalism (1978) has become a classic in its own right for its incisive and shocking revelations in this regard.

In my own critique of Said (El-Affendi, 1991a), I have claimed that his criticism did not go far enough, being itself firmly embedded in an inherently western perspective, albeit a dissident western perspective. He thus incorporates too many western prejudices into his own critique.

With the demise of Marxism, this danger is becoming even more serious. At the "End of History", dissidence is dead, and academics feel much less an urge to challenge the establishment. We will find less and less tendency to challenge anything, and much more enthusiasm to join in. Convinced that the sole occupation of western regimes is now to spread democracy, prosperity and the respect for human rights, it is no longer such a bad thigh to "join the troops".

I bet the missionaries and orientalists of the last century felt the same way, but that did not justify their stance any more than the current "new world order" euphoria justifies their successors.

To go back to our central question, we can ask it this way: To what extent is the disruption of an existing order justified? And the answer would not appear as simple. If we look at the hot-spots where Islam is involved, we will have much food for thought. Why did the Palestinians, the Afghans, the Bosnians etc. take up arms? Was it humanly possible for them not to?

And then the more pertinent question becomes: why was it necessary to invade, oppress and uproot Muslims for no reason other than who they are or where they lived? And can any just order be based on such oppression and denial of rights?

The more basic issue is therefore, not what Muslims can or cannot accept, but what human beings can tolerate. It just so happens that Muslims are more attached to their religion and take it more seriously than the average resident of planet earth. This makes them harder to oppress and less amenable to change their beliefs and lifestyles. Muslim solidarity is also much more palpable, if not equally effective. Thus the Palestinians did not melt away as the American Indians did. The Afghans did not succumb to communism like the Chinese, the Vietnamese or the Cubans. The Algerians did not assimilate French culture the way many other African nations did. That simply reflects the way Islam shapes people. But does this make Muslims any less human? And does this mean that they should not be granted rights of self-determination until they learn better?

Well, it is certain that a system which denies rights on this basis is not just. That it cannot stand is another matter. Injustice has an unwelcome tendency to survive for too long. However, if Islam becomes disruptive of unjust systems, then this is a strong recommendation for it. A good solvent for despotic orders is certainly a sorely needed chemical ingredient for any order that aspires to be humane and just. What is to be regretted is that the forces of Islam could disrupt unjust orders, but may not necessarily overthrow them. And if they succeeded in overthrowing them, the alternative may not be an improvement. That is another fact of life. But it could mean that for social scientists, any turmoil connected with Islam could serve as an index of a living injustice.

CONCLUSION

Humanity, in our time, has entered one of those cycles of great hopes and anticipation. The atmosphere and expectations border on the messianic. This kind of atmosphere is not entirely new. There were similar feelings in different eras. The danger with this one, like that with 1789 and 1917, is man's intoxication with his own power, and his belief that he could recast the world and himself anew, a belief that invariably portends of disastrous consequences.

Times of hope are also times of turmoil. Great hopes plus miserable conditions is the perfect recipe for horrible explosions. The world of Islam lives in a time of expectations unparalleled in the past, but under conditions which has never been more miserable or humiliating. And the question is: should social science help cure the hopes of the misery?

The muddle engulfing much of modern social science is that it seems to seek to cure the hopes even when it points to the misery. *Homo Islamicus* is himself seen, after Marx's prescriptions, as the product of misery and its expression. Nowhere is the question asked: why could he not be the product of the hope?

In any case, a social science for the future must attempt to work with man as he is, not to remold him or analyze him away. *Homo Islamicus* is an abiding reality of our time which looks like enduring for a long time to come. It is not the job of social science to try to seek for solvents and "philosophers' stones" to perform the alchemy of transforming this creature into a more "acceptable" form. Nor should it be its business to serve the purposes of those who want to manufacture an "Islamic danger" to serve new and outdated imperialist and hegemonistic designs.

On the other hand, we must not glorify science too much. After all, Joseph Mengelle was a scientist in the true sense of Machiavelli and his successors: he did not allow extraneous ethical considerations to interfere with his "quest for truth." The scientific method is ultimately a technique which permits itself to be exploited for any number of contradictory objectives. It is thus conceivable for scientists to be tools for despots, imperialists and a host of other unworthy causes.

However, even if I were to don my Machiavellian "scientist" cap for a brief moment, I would not recommend for any one to link the survival of any cause he cherishes to the demise of Islam. The risk might just be too great.

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