It is often claimed that Islam is not only a religion but a culture and a civilization. 'The Islamic world' and 'Islamic history' are commonly used terms, both in popular public discourse and in academic writing, suggesting some kind of coherent unity. At the same time, writers point to the diversity of Muslim countries from Morocco to Indonesia, from Nigeria to Turkey. Is there a unity behind the diversity, at least in the 'heartlands' of Islam in the Middle East and North Africa, as Ernest Gellner and others have claimed?

Muslim Societies
Unity or Diversity?

SAMI ZUBAIDA

Now, more than ever, with Islamic voices contesting politics, culture and society in practically every country with a Muslim population, Islam would appear to have a unity and a common purpose across political and cultural frontiers: to provide a common identity for Muslims who wish to live in a society of their faith and be ruled by their sacred law. This picture can only confirm in the public mind the idea of Islam as a common essence of all these societies, one that rules and determines their culture and their social and political processes.

The views asserting the uniqueness, unity and exceptionalism of Muslim society and history are all the more potent in the current intellectual climate which has seen the demise of universalist theories of historical causation and social analysis such as Marxism. The idea of cultural and civilizational essences and identities underlying unique histories of particular civilizations have been most prominently stated in Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis. Even though this has been widely criticized, the assumptions behind it are equally widely held, not least by many Muslim and Arab intellectuals.

Muslim exceptionalism and uniqueness and the centrality of religion to Muslim society and history are, of course, the pillars of Islamist political advocacy. Many 'secular' intellectuals, specially in Egypt, while challenging Islamist illiberal interpretations, would, nevertheless, wish to base their own advocacies on 'authentic' Muslim and Arab 'culture'. Many advocates of Human Rights, for instance, insist on deriving these rights from liberal (and strained) interpretations of the Qu'ran and the traditions. I have encountered strong hostility to my argument that the modern discourses of Human Rights are products of recent political struggles and ideologies, many of them against the establishments of state, church and dominant classes, and which have no ancestry in the much older ethical and legal discourses of any religion.

What is unique about Islam? I argue, alongside many colleagues, against this cultural essentialization of an exceptional 'Islamic world', contrasted implicitly or explicitly with an equally exceptional and totalized 'West'. Of course, every history is unique. The conceptual tools of social and historical analyses are however common, and are used to analyse diverse

unique histories. The question also arises of what is the object whose unique history is being told? Does 'Islamic society' constitute a unitary entity with a common and consistent history extending to the present and underlying the current 'Islamic phenomenon'? Many eminent writers such as the historian H.A.R. Gibb and the anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner, have advanced arguments to that effect. These arguments are the products of deep scholarship and often thorough familiarity with the histories and cultures of the region. The question however is conceptual: the essentialism rests on a totalization of histories and societies as 'Islamic'. This label cannot be denied: yet, what commonality does it entail? It can be argued for instance, that the modern history (from the eighteenth century) of Iran shows a totally different political and social structure to that of Turkey or Egypt, let alone Arabia. It can be plausibly argued that the Christian and Muslim shores of the Mediterranean shared many common features of popular culture: Tunisian coastal cities had more in common with Sicily and the Italian south than with Arabia or Iraq. The manifest reality, for instance, of women in southern Europe covering their heads in a similar manner to their Mediterranean Muslim counterparts seems to have escaped the notice of observers intent on totalized contrasts! Indeed, we can date the divergence from previous common elements between the two shores of the Mediterranean to the second half of the twentieth century as many Muslim Mediterranean cities, such as Alexandria or Algiers, became 'peasantized' by the great rural influx, and European Mediterranean cities increasingly integrated into a national culture dominated by the North, a process accelerated by the regional policies of the European Community.

I still have to deal with the question of what it is that lends credence to the essentialist arguments: what is the common denominator which makes diverse societies Muslim beyond the obvious fact of religion? Perhaps a good way of answering this question is by drawing parallels with European Christianity. The Christian world shares a universe of discourse referring to sets of institutions, doctrines and personnel: the church, the priesthood, the Holy Trinity, the Bible, the problems of salvation and grace. These are not restricted to the religious sphere but have involved many spheres of culture, law, morality and family. Divorce, homosexuality and abortion, for instance, continue to be issues in the politics of several Western countries. A good historian of Europe will tell

you however, that these entities of Church, scriptures, law and so on, have taken vastly different forms and social significance at various points in European history and in different regions. The Medieval Catholic Church, for instance, was a very different institution from the eighteenth century Church and with a very different role in society and politics.

Similarly, we find in Islam a common set of vocabularies referring to institutions, doctrines and personnel: the Qu'ran and Hadith (traditions of the Prophet), the ulama, the Sharicaa (religious law) and many others. These have similarly varying structures, forms of organization and social significance over the centuries and in different societies. Ernest Gellner in his characterization of a constant pattern of Muslim history and society, attributes a central role to the ulama and the Sharicaa. His model, however, crumbles before the many different forms of ulama organization, power, and institutions, not only in different societies and histories but even within the class structure of the same society. The elite ulama of late Ottoman times, for instance, were integrated into the ruling institutions and bureaucracies, while their Iranian counterparts of the same time constituted parts of local, decentralized power elites with their own revenues and institutions separate from the govenment. Both were distinct from the ulama 'proletariat' of their own time, the multitude of students, preachers, dervishes and mendicants, performing services for the poor. Similarly, Sufism and sufi brotherhoods, regular features of practically all Muslim societies display a great variety of manifestation and of relations to the mainstream religious institutions, from elite intellectual mystics counting the higher ulama in their ranks, to illiterate rural charismatic saints ruling peasant communities with magic, medicine and ceremony.

And how do we understand these social formations and their historical and geographical variations and transformations, the logic of their coherence and contradiction? Well, by the same repertoire of social and historical concepts and analyses which we use for Western or any other societies. It is by these means that we grasp the uniqueness of each manifestation, not of a totalized history with an Islamic essence.

Finally, does the current 'Islamic resurgence' vindicate the essentialist position that Islam remains the essence of Muslim society, which is peculiarly resistant to secularization and to separating religion from politics? I am more convinced by the opposite argument: that cur-

rent political Islam is partly a reaction and a defence against the secularizing processes that have inevitably come with modernity and which continue to have their effect on all societies in the region. Law, even where elements of religion have remained within it, has become codified state law, subject to political and social exigencies; education has been largely removed from religious spheres and authorities (that is why these authorities are trying, in vain, to hang on); religious authorities cannot, try as they may, control the manifold channels of information and entertainment of the modern media; modern economic exigencies have forced women into the labour market and the public spheres, subverting patriarchal authority and traditional values (associated with religion). Only in a society so thoroughly destroyed by successive wars such as Afghanistan can the religious reactionaries succeed in reversing these inexorable processes. Saudi Arabia, where wealth from petrol has partly exempted the authorities from the exigencies of modern socio-economic processes, has also partly succeeded in arresting these trends, but for how long? In Iran, the 'mullocracy' of the Islamic Republic has had to retreat repeatedly (but discreetly) in the face of these contingencies. Family planning, for instance, initially denounced by Khomeini as contrary to Islam and an imperialist measure against Muslims, was restored after a few years as government policy. Family law, after initial reversals, has now restored most of the Shah's reforms and more. Regarding working women, the level of employment in the work force was mostly maintained, and there is increasing participation of women in public life, politics, the arts, sport and even as junior judges. Crucially, Khomeini, faced with the exigencies of governance, ruled in 1988 that in the interests of the whole Islamic Umma, the Islamic government is empowered to suspend any provision of the Sharicaa, including prayer and fasting! Since then the category of 'interest' (*maslaha*) has been written into the constitution and institutionalized, opening the gates wide for pragmatic legislation and policy. I rest my case. ◆

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