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Deconstructing a Dilemma: Democracy versus Islam?

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It has been a complicated issue to discuss the relationship between religion and democracy, and specifically the relationship between the concepts of democracy and Islam. Does it make sense to relate Islam with Democracy? Why is it a problematic question and an intricate problem? The so-called questions have obviously many aspects including historical, social, and economic and the ideological ones. Wouldn't it be an arbitrary perspective to argue that Islam foresees democratic governance or not?

It is possible to make conceptual distinctions between religion and democracy or specifically Islam and democracy and, it is indeed a way of making "science" in the modern sense, although making distinctions in philosophical and political texts would not always be clear-cut. Here the obvious fact is that in decisions about distinctions including the relationship between Islam and democracy does not follow a rule or a conceptual schema. The reason for the mentioned case is, as Derrida stated, that there exists always undecidability, which never disappears once the decision is made (Derrida 1990). The problem here is about some critical decisions and distinctions that cannot be marked and rationalized. In this sense, political and theoretical critiques would not establish firm concepts on the relationship between Islam and democracy. Instead, it could be put into question. For instance, Derrida, rather than identifying its essence, takes the concept of democracy as to to-come (à-venir) which means that democracy as an ideal or Avenir has not yet been realized. By the same token, the actual democracy as theory and practice is constantly being questioned.

The problem here is related to the traditional view of the method which consists of some firm rules about how to pursue knowledge about the reality. The object as the reality is considered having an essence that can objectively be known. However, in the act of deconstructing a text as a meaningful totality includes religious, philosophical or economic practices, institutions, and structures. In this sense, a comparison between Islam and democracy or the East and the West cannot be meaningful if it is produced in a closed and coherent whole since meaning is fashioned by tensions and contradictions. Thus the objects of deconstructing the dilemma between Islam and democracy cannot be constituted with an essence that can be appropriated or known. In the act of pointing out differences or consistencies between Islam and democracy would bring about a text which is not a coherent whole that can be known since it would contain many parts.

Islam as a religion has its principles related to human being, the world, and the universe. Islam is the call for men how to be a "good" living being. In this sense, Islam has ethical, religious and social codes by which men could reshape a better world. On the other hand, democracy as an offer of unique modern and contemporary way of governing has no essential connection with any religion. Besides, the modern appreciation of religion and that of Islam has been shaped by the discovery of modern science that takes reason as the mere core of knowledge.

A careful and objective evaluation of the history of ideas and scientific knowledge will make us be aware of the fact that, although progress in science and knowledge has been paradigmatically changed in specific periods of history, Islamic science and philosophy lay under the nascency of the modern science that has reconstructed the social and political order in the West. Indeed, the search for virtue, happiness, and scientific knowledge comes from the ancient Greek, passing through the Islamic filter and successively shaped the modern mind of the West including democracy, liberty, tolerance, and loyalty. Throughout of this process, some crucial institutions are becoming established in Europe so that occurrences of modern science and establishment of modern democracies came to exist. However, while the Islamic world has declined, the results of that process make radical shifts in Europe and the West. This is a crucial point that should be taken into consideration. Why has the Islamic world been declined? This is not an easy question to be answered. It should be noticed that the word "Islam" or "Islamic" does not only refer to a mere religion, it is also an expression of a world where many men and woman live with their own unique identities. I think that, except for many historical, religious and political reasons, the main problems behind the decline of Islamic civilization are the lack of liberty and the network collapse of scientific imagination.

We all should pay attention to the fact that democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, liberty and the like are mainly modern concepts, just as the totalitarian model of governments and dictatorships in faces of socialism or fascism. Those are created by and in the West as an outcome of modern ideas in the name of the Enlightenment and modern scientific imagination. The second crucial point is that the modern dictatorships as contrary to democratic governance have been established in the Islamic world as final movements of westernization and modernization.

Now we will dissolve and deconstruct the totalitarian political and social perspectives and reshape our liberal democratic governments based on liberty in our own way. Indeed, for a sound understanding of democratic transition in the Muslim world, we need scientific descriptions of the historical developments of each Muslim nation or society in many respects including economic mode of production, ethical values, social order and political imagination. In order to achieve such a goal, it is obvious that we need both normative and descriptive studies on democratic transitions in the world and in the Muslim world comparatively.

A normative study of democracy theory related to Islam and the Muslim world would provide some normative conclusions, that is, conclusions about what things are good or bad and what actions are right and wrong. Here a normative study of democratic or economic study aims to discover what should be done in the Muslim world. This is about how universal normative democratic standards could be adopted in action. Indeed, there is another side of the story: the need for actual conditions in which the Muslim world exists. To apprehend the Muslim world as it is, there should be more descriptive studies that attempt to explain the Muslim world without reaching a judgment whether Islam or the Muslim world is as they should be. We need to interpret, understand and then apply democratic standards to our own situation only by critical investigations about our history, religion, science and the world simultaneously. Here it is crucial to overcoming some basic mistakes such as pseudo discriminations as the West and the East, etc.

Islam, Liberalism and Civil Society

Religion is crucial for civil society since it provides the context for personal relations with reference to the moral principles and market exchange. It could be argued that religions, particularly Islam are against market economy or private property while considering the Islamic principles of usury. But, on the contrary, the market is celebrated by Islam and private property is man's right to have to shape privacy or mahramiyya.

Actually, "the rudiments of civil society have been developed in religious context" (Barry, 3). Indeed, religions manage to construct a social order akin to civil society by ordering some divine laws and limitations on the sovereign history. Whereas in time it turned to be a legitimizing factor for a Hobbesian powerful state in different forms as the church or sultan systems.

Here it should be mentioned that "the idea of rule of law is the basis of civil society". The rule of law is the respect for the law for the rights of individuals. In this sense, we could expect a protection from the law before the state so as to man will be free in the sense of absence of coercion. It is true that freedom of speech, worship, religious performance is possible only when the rule of law prevails. This is constituted only under the conditions of liberty. Different cultural and moral codes and religious practices could sustain their existence in social order that gathers the principle of rule of law.

In this sense, there is a close and strong connection between civil society, liberalism, and democracy. It is clear that individual rights, group rights, freedom, minority rights, a free market and a legal system that based on the principle of rule of law are the major constituents of a free society. Here, the spontaneous order in which individuals work freely, determining their own personal goods is essential in the sense that rights are prior to any conception of 'good'.

It is true to say that in a civil society there should be a separation between religion as a public institution like church and a state in a liberal perspective. However, that separation works in the favor of the state at the expense of the religion in modern times. This separation has turned in to an apostasy against religion and religious groups especially in the late 20th century. The atheistic movement enforced by totalitarian regimes has imposed a specific form of secularism –ironically in a form of state or official "religion"- over the society in a totalitarian way through the apparatus of education.

Both civil society and liberalism have similar concerns towards democracy. Here the differences between procedures and outcomes are to be considered in terms of the liberal perspective. The majority rule principle, the domination of majority over minority should be checked. Otherwise, protection of the civil rights against the majority's good, would be impossible. In this case, semi-religious doctrines like communism could easily become the "spiritual" source of a new kind of totalitarianism backed up dogmas that bring about blind devotion. This is actually what happened in the modern Islamic world at the service of self-colonization.

A 'mass society' is going to be pernicious for the democratic institutions. In this form, the atomized or alienated

individuals tend to desire a kind of totalitarianism in case of the loss of traditional in Nisbet's words intermediary associations (Nisbet, 2014). Is it a result of free market namely liberal social order? Namely, the private property itself became the mere protective element and a shelter substituted the absence of intermediary associations.

> The reverence of private property, then, as much a modal foundation in civil society as it does an efficiency rationale (although the allocated effectiveness of the market was never denied). The existence of private property provided a further barrier against the state and made it possible for individuals to exercise their freedom and autonomy, even though doubts were expressed about the ruthless individualism that capitalism might entail (Barry, 10).

The liberals and believers of civil society in the West presume that Islam foresees a religious authoritarianism or a totalitarian social order in terms of its political, ethical and economic implications. Indeed, many scholars in the West similarly assume that Islam seems to order to its followers with unchanging and stable codes of conduct so that it would be impossible to make a democratic and liberal transition in the Muslim world. Hence, pluralism as a form of civil society and skeptical character of liberal perspective about ethical and political norms does not suit Islam. Moreover, for them, Islam has reshaped man and society and the state through its absolutist conceptions of social, political and judicial values. Therefore, a Muslim is intolerant of others who have different religions and ideas.

The above-mentioned consideration is strictly a superficial, if not a consequence of bad intention, interpretation of Islam. This understanding of Islam and Islamic values, on the contrary, stems from a totalitarian and absolutist consideration of Islam. Such image of Islam does not reflect the only opinion of some western intellectuals but it is also the reflection of secularist and totalitarian believers of ideologies in the form of socialism, fascism, and scientism in the Muslim world.

It is a fact that Islam, as a religion with its holy book like some other religions, has some basic stable, unchanging principles and norms. Otherwise, to speak about Islam or any doctrine would be impossible. A text including religious scriptures and works of art and even nature has mainly two dimensions: normative and historical. While the normative expresses unchanging, a historical aspect; the historical represents the idea of adaption of the text to the given situation. That is, the historical aspect is the application of the meaning derived from the normative being of the text to a concrete situation (Gadamer, 1991).

So to speak, the formation of 'Islamic mind' through history is mainly based on the interpretations of Quran. However, as a matter of fact, interpretations differ while time is passing over history. As much as interpretations, understandings and applications differ. In this process, we first interpret a given text then understand it. Finally, we are going to apply it in accordance with our own particular situation. Meaning of the text includes the process of interpretation, understanding, and application. In the so-called hermeneutical process, scholars produce meaning from Quran through their own historical presence of being. Not only Muslims but all other interpreters establish their ethos or Lebenswelt in a similar way. Accordingly, relating Islam to liberal democracy, to human rights or freedom, at a first glance, is arbitrary, because Islam has its own unique conception of the universe, man, society, state, justice and the like as any religion has.

Here my thesis is that it is a matter of interpretation to argue that Islam is compatible or not with the context of liberal or non-liberal ideas related to justice, freedom, and democracy.

Besides, there is the historical context of the Muslim world in the sense that cultures, civilizations, and nations have their lives in close relations with one another. In this context, Islam, Christianity, Judaism and other religions have been developed in close relations, and confrontations so that one influenced the other. On the other hand, it is historically known that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can be classified in the same category in being monotheistic, heavenly and Abrahamic. Roughly speaking, the believers of Quran regard that Islam is the last step in the chain of revelation. In this sense, for Muslims, Judaism and Christianity came into existence through revelation before Islam. In fact, all theologies are products of interpretation of the scripture. In the theological perspective, all these religions are to be deliberated in the same context of tradition. The question here should be 'how they differ in terms of not only theological but also in their historical practices'. This is the key question in understanding some crucial differences and clashes among them. While talking about 'West', we always undermine a mere truth that the West has also a religion, namely Christianity. It is not true to say that the main character of the West is that they are secular without Jesus. It may be only argued that in the West, religious conception is based on more secular values and so the Church is more secularized than the Mosque.

The mentioned question about how and why the Muslim world is different from the Christian one is a matter of

interpretation. There have been important differences between the West and Islamic world in terms of scientific, technological, economic and political developments, which are referring to some historical reasons. I mean it is a rough and unfair approach to say that the Muslim world does not make progress because of the Islamic values that exclude free market, freedom of thought, secular values, human rights, scientific imagination, etc. The argument implicitly states that the development or the progress of the West results from Christian values. If religion is considered as an obstacle against progress, the argument will pave the way for the reflection that scientific imagination and social progress is just the result of the emergence of secular values that have omitted religion from the mind of individuals and public life. Here, a transformation of public life in accordance with secularism is graded.

The argument that secularism or 'the secular interpretation of religion' has led to progress in the modern world is an actual-historical interpretation. However, the approach indicates a kind of integration of religious thinking in a new form, which does not necessarily exclude religion. Indeed, religious, social and political interpretations and practices have emerged in contradictory sectarian forms in the history of Christianity. Similar developments have also occurred in the history of Islam. Rival schools of thought have emerged in Islam and they have consequently established new and different sects. All these differences have brought about intellectual debates among Muslim scholars. Besides, prominent political and humanitarian tragedies have been experienced in the history of Islam due to sectarian conflicts. All these differentiations are themselves indicators of the pluralistic interpretations and conceptions.

Contrary to the popular perception, an examination of these facts in the history of Islam will indicate that Islam has many political, moral and economical features to establish a free society. In economic issues, for instance, Islam has proposed a free market order that has constituted 'a liberal standard both for the West and East'.

> A difficulty in understanding the political theory of Islam is that there is no one authoritative text that deals with exclusive forms of government or even with the political obligation in general. It is the case that the prophet did not prescribe any specific form of government and no specific political prescription laid down in the Quran. Furthermore, the fragmentation of Islamic society in the modern world means that the basic principles of Islam have had to adjust to a variety of local circumstances (Barry, 12).

Islam, Law, and Democracy

In Islam, justice is one of the main virtues of society and it is the basis on which state exists. This is the point considered as the constitutive idea of "well-ordered society" provided by Islamic theory of law. For instance, Hallaq recognized the fact of justice as the core sense of Islamic position, when the relationship between Islam, law and the modern democratic state has been evaluated. According to Hallaq, there is always a tension between law and the state in the history of Islam. The decisiveness of Shari'a upon the state and society has been changed, and it has been replaced by customary implementations in time. Considering the relations between Islamic law, state, and society, he contends that:

> The "Islamic state," judged by any standard definition of what the modern state represents,1 is both an impossibility and a contradiction in terms. Until the early nineteenth century, and for twelve centuries before then, the moral law of Islam, the Sharīʿa, had successfully negotiated customary law and local customary practices and had emerged as the supreme moral and legal force regulating both society and government. This "law" was paradigmatic, having been accepted as a central system of high and general norms by societies and the dynastic powers that ruled over them. It was a moral law that created and maintained a "well-ordered society," to borrow John Rawls's effective expression.2 However, beginning in the nineteenth century, and at the hands of colonialist Europe, the socioeconomic and political system regulated by the Sharīʿa was structurally dismantled, which is to say that the Sharīʿa itself was eviscerated, reduced to providing no more than the raw materials for the legislation of personal status by the modern state.3 Even in this relatively limited sphere, the Sharīʿa lost its autonomy and social agency in favor of the modern state; Sharīʿa was henceforth needed only to the limited extent that deriving certain provisions from it—provisions that were reworked and re-created according to modern expediency—legitimized the state's legislative ventures(Hallaq, 2014. pp.8-9).

The relation between Islam and democracy has been widely discussed in the last decade in the West and Islamic World. The question is whether Islam is compatible with democracy. If it is compatible with democracy, then the question is in what sense and by whose rationality? It should be stated that Islam as a religion has its unique law which is called Sharia or Islamic Law. Sharia is referring to the position of Muslim great jurists as the concrete understanding of justice.

In order to understand the relation between Islam and Democratic governance, we need to comprehend some basic political and juridical notion of Islamic thought.

The absence of a pluralistic approach in Muslim World does not stem from the moral structure of Islam. Clearly, I mean the lack of pluralism, liberty, and tolerance cannot be based on Islamic principles springing from Quran. In this sense, democracy or the theory of democracy is not basically an outcome of religious interpretation. As a modern phenomenon, democratic theory has been established as the result of different ways of justifications one of which is religion.

The notion of natural law, freedom, and equality before God are the core of all monotheistic religions including successively Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Indeed, some other religions such and Buddhism bear the same core ideas. The democratic theory presupposes the equality of individuals in terms of political rights such as the equal right for voting. However, the liberal democratic theory specifically ignores the economic equality, since it is neither just nor possible to establish a society with equal individuals by means of law or political force. However, to have equal rights for voting is possible in theory and practice as the concept of the priority of law entails, which can also be enforced. A poor or a rich human being as man or women has, in this sense, equal political rights in a community only through establishing the government with democratic standards.

Some equal rights such as voting are the starting point to establish a democratic government. Although it is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient to establish a liberal democratic state. The rule of law in accordance with liberal merits and periodical democratic elections are also necessary to establish a "good" democratic government. But on the other hand, an intention to adopt equality to the whole universe of the human condition will rise to a totalitarian regime or dictatorship in different forms such as socialism or fascism.

The idea of equality before God in the process of revelation has strong affects over equal political rights. The affinity between religion and liberal democratic theory in this sense is obvious. The rule of law, natural (divine) law or rights and men's being equal are concepts that should be considered as the main motivations behind the establishment of liberal democratic thought. This is one aspect of the story. There are some other interpretations too. In the west, some socialist interpretations are based on Christianity. In the writings of Christian Socialist writers such as Earnst Bloch, a socialist communal life is based on religious ideas. Indeed the socialist experiment in ex-Russia and ex-East Germany was experienced in mainly a Christian community. That socialist tentative had also influenced Latin-American republics and the Muslim states. The rhetoric of "equality" which stems from revelation has been comprehended and accordingly applied mainly in two different senses: the liberal or the totalitarian.

As for every mode of thought, religion, art, science, and ideology, Islam has also rival interpretations. The notion of interpretation itself foresees the sense of "difference". Amendments, rules and divine propositions are explained, interpreted and applied differently according to the interpreter, tradition or the historical era. In this sense, Islamic political thought has been represented by two main schools: Sunni Islam and Shia Islam. In regard to the political structure of the State, it is obvious that Sunni Islam differs from Shia Islam in many respects. Naturally, the vice versa is true.

Islam, in this context, addresses to the universal community including individuals, groups, tribes, nations and the like, who have their own identities, customs, races, and languages. The addressee here is all humanity. Islam has brought a universal law stemmed from the will of God (Allah). In Islamic doctrine of law, which is similar to the "Christian Commonwealth", considers a universal community on his constructed basis of moral truth. This conception of the Islamic doctrine of law has affinities with the concept of "natural law" which is derived from "stoicism" and incorporated in the antique Rome, and Christian and Islamic Middle Ages.

It is a matter of fact that Islam has some unique and distinctive features. One of the major differences is about the content of Islamic law, which is binding for every follower including the rulers. In Islam, the final authority and the ultimate source of law is Allah, not a person, group or an institution. In this sense, every human being is equal before God, and there is no priority of anyone over another except for piety or takwa. In my opinion, this principle of authority and law could serve as the basis of a free society where political equality and the priority of the rule of law become one of the basic principles. Indeed it becomes a norm to establish a free social order and set limits to the will of rulers and the state

By the same token, Islamic law is not made but discovered, which seems to contradict to liberal theories. Indeed, the law

is discovered through revelation. However, while considering this separation of law as "made" or "discovered", Norman Barry compares the Islamic notion of law with that of Hayek.

> This is, of course, a distinction made famous by Hayek and it is remarkable how Islamic conceptions of law bear a close resemblance to his jurisprudence. Of course, Hayek's jurisprudence is not quite of natural law type, his liberal skepticism deters him from a commitment to absolute and universally binding principles, but his rejection of specific command as the sole source of law (indeed the sovereign's order are a minor part his jurisprudence) bears a close resemblance to Islamic legal thought. In the latter, the true meaning and interpretation of the Shari'ah is discovered by legal scholars just as for Hayek common law judges do not create law, they find it through an exploration of cases and customary practices (although the legal activism of judges in America has prevented this idea of discovery in the common law) (Barry, 14).

Consultation or Shura as the democratic way of making decisions had generated by the Prophet in Medina. In this respect, a ruler should get the idea of the citizens of the community about decisions related public affairs as appropriate with universal principles of Quran.

Conclusion

Theoretical issues and empirical cases always cover close connections and tensions between method and application, which need deep insights to be resolved. Indeed, there is no a necessary logical contradiction between religion and democracy. In order to overcome the difficulty between democracy and religion or Islam, we need to adopt a new vision which excludes traditional methodology of reading texts. This approach bears negativity in itself in the sense that it conveys an idea of negation and destroying. It is not a kind of methodology but, rather, a strategy to eliminate such pseudo movements that situate religion and democracy in contradiction. Deconstructing the idea that Islam versus democracy has both negative and affirmative dimensions. While the strategy omits a wrong comparison, it is, on the other hand, reaffirmed the sense that the ideals of justice and democracy have been proceeded by putting conventional notions of religion, justice, and democracy into question.

Under these considerations, I argue that depending on interpretation, there is a consistency between Islam and universal liberal principles related to human rights, democratic governance, and political integration of individuals, freedom of speech and the priority of the rule of law. In the process of shaping political regimes in the Muslim world, there have been many factors including historical, political, economic and religious ones. Indeed in the establishment of modern states, ideological preferences have dominated the structure of social order in Muslim majority countries.

As much as religious political movements, some other ideological, social and political groups have had powerful influences in the constitutions of a modern state and society. The decline in economic and technological developments has been the main motivation behind an ardent discourse for progress. It is a matter of fact that Muslim societies desire to be developed like the Western ones. However, in some cases, the desire for progress in a form of westernization has become the source of totalitarian regimes itself in the Muslim world. While considering totalitarianism, we have witnessed that it stemmed from the idea of modernity or Enlightenment.

Authoritative and non-democratic forms of government in the Muslim world is the result of modern totalitarian ideologies like Marxism, and the idea of scientism like positivism as much as many complicated issues in their own world. Totalitarian ideas and positivistic conception of science exclude the history, religion, tradition and also morality. This has been a danger not only to the Muslim world but for all the humanity. Indeed, totalitarianism is a modern and contemporary form of political regimes stemmed from the secular imagination of "world-views". On the contrary, a liberal, universal and humanitarian interpretation of the world, community, history, and religion could serve against the establishment of a uniform and totalitarian form of power. In this sense, Islam with all its particularities may be considered as a fertile spring of interpretation.

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