"The OTHER"

A Restructuring of the Islamic Concept

Dr. Fathi Osman

The Other

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by

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The Other
In the Contemporary World

In the perspective of a Muslim – as a believer in the One God and Creator – the **"***other***"** is represented in humankind through its extensive diversity, be it based on gender, race and ethnicity, or religious faith. According to the Quran, all human beings are equal and enjoy equal dignity determined for the entire human species through its successive generations by the Creator Himself: "*We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and have borne them over land and sea, and have provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and have favored them far above most of Our creation*" (17:70). The Quranic reference to bearing the children of Adam "*over land and sea*" emphasizes the universality of the human species, and indicates that all places in this world are open to humans for their residence and activities, and that all humans are equal in enjoying these qualities granted to them by their Creator.

Such an open universal perspective needs to be well-represented through the Muslim intellectual heritage and political-military history. But instead, expansion into others' lands by force and subjugation of their peoples has occurred at the hands of Muslims throughout the centuries. The use of force entailed ceaseless attacks and counterattacks from both sides of the conflict. Such a climate influenced the jurisprudence of "*jihad*" and affected its dealing with "the other." Thus war was considered a permanent obligation for Muslims. It might be an obligation for *every individual* in case of a defense against aggression, *fard 'ayn*, or a *collective* obligation for the entire Muslim people wherever any group of them may enjoy the power to bring more land and people under the Muslim authority.

Accordingly, an idea developed that beside "the land of Islam" (*dar al-Islam*) where Muslims live, all the *other* world is a "land of disbelief" (*kufr*), and of potential war if its authorities may obstruct by force the propagation of Islam in their land. The Shafi'i school added a third division for the land that accepts the sovereignty of Muslims through a peaceful agreement and has not been annexed by force, calling it a "land of treaty" (*'ahd*). Within this system arose the idea that the "others" in the "land of disbelief" all over the world cannot be taken as allies, *awliya'*. Similarly, the belief spread that "the others" under Muslim authority could not be considered equal to the Muslims, who had annexed their country in which they and their ancestors had been living for centuries.

Today, such a political-military practice and a condescending view are not conceived by Muslims as mere history. Rather, such a human Weltanschauung, or world view, that was related to a particular time and is therefore alterable as circumstances change, became a permanent Islamic standpoint. Even when Muslims became weak and lacked any political or military superiority, but on the contrary came under "the other's" political and military domination during the colonial period, such views about "others" were revived to motivate and mobilize the Muslim peoples for survival and struggle. When Muslims encountered the democratic trend in modern times, some reservations were raised against equal citizenship and equal political rights with regard to non-Muslims, as well as to women. International relations with non-Muslim world powers always raise questions, suspicion, and even resentment, which might be justified because of neo-imperial and exploitative global plans, but should not be based on religious grounds.

Such feelings and concepts might not have greatly affected Muslims in their relations with others in a pre-globalization era, but now advanced technology – with its network of mass communications and transportation – means that universal interrelations are inevitable and crucial for all parties throughout the entire world. A split with an "other" hurts both parties, as well as humanity as a whole. Advanced technology may be used or abused in spreading violence through hidden or open hostilities, which have accumulated through history and may have been fuelled by certain mistaken views about "the other" that are improperly attributed to Islam. As the concept of "sacrifice" for the common benefit or for the cause of God is deeply rooted in the heart and mind of the believer, it may hurt the different parties and the entire world if it is abused and wrongfully directed to certain others. Contemporary globalization is a concrete reality that cannot be ignored or obstructed by any party. It has its practical positives and negatives, and all of humankind has to cooperate in order to benefit from the positives and avoid the negatives. Thus, a restructuring of certain Muslim essential concepts about "the other" that have accrued throughout history, have now become urgently required.

It is of great importance to keep in mind that understanding "the other," accepting and dealing with him/her as an equal human being who has the full right to have differences from us, does not mean that we want to *imitate* the other or to repeat the other's model of thinking or living. We also have full rights to choose our way of thinking and living, but this should not signify any feeling of our superiority or others' inferiority. Holding different views is necessitated by human nature itself, according to individual difference in thinking and free choice: "*And had your Lord so willed, He could surely have made all humankind one single*

community, but [He willed it otherwise, through allowing individual thinking and free will and choice, and so] they continue to hold divergent views, [all of them] save those upon whom your Lord has bestowed His grace" (11:118-119). Those who are blessed with the Lord's grace are those who realize how to tackle the natural and legitimate human differences, thoughtfully, ethically, and behaviorally, not those who ignore or deny them. Understanding "the other," means the acceptance of human nature, and equal human rights for all humans. It removes the assumption that human difference denotes antagonism and confrontation, but never means implying any need to lose the individual and communal identity, or change one's own self for the sake of the other.

An essential and legitimate question has to be raised: What does "*identity*" really mean for Muslims? Does it mean the faith and the moral values nurtured by it, to which the Muslims are committed and by which they should be characterized? Or has it been taken to mean something else?

Prophet Muhammad, before receiving the divine revelation at the age of forty, had been known among his people for his honesty, and that moral identity provided a solid base for his message when he received God's revelation. His patience, firmness, care and compassion for his Companions and others presented the Islamic human model to the Arabs and to humanity in its entirety. The Prophet's genuine and obvious identity was in his morale and morality. However, he was like any reasonable and respectable Arab in his dress, food and living, except in what was prohibited in his message such as alcohol, pork, or any extravagance. The Quran characterizes Prophet Muhammad as: "a Conveyor of [God's] message *from among yourselves*,

heavily weighs upon himself *what you might suffer, full of concern* for you, and full of *compassion and mercy* towards the believers" (9:128); "And it was by God's grace that you *deal gently with them* [the believers], and if you had been harsh and hard of heart they would have broken away from you. *Pardon them* [when they act wrongfully], and *pray that they be forgiven*, and *take counsel with them* in matters of common concern, then when you reach a decision about an action place your trust in God" (3:159), "And surely you are *of tremendous character and morality*" (68:4).

It is essential in characterizing the Muslim identity to distinguish between the *Arab physical, outward and external way of life* at the time of the Prophet, in which the Muslim men and women were relatively similar to their Arab fellow residents in Mecca or Medina at that time, and the essential and significant distinction in the faith and the morale, moral values and behavior. This was what was nurtured by the faith in God and the ensuing belief in the accountability of the human being. It is also essential to differentiate between the *history* of the message of Islam and *the teachings* of the message itself.

The message of Islam was the same message of all prophets and conveyors of God's message before it in its basics of faith in the One God, the accountability of the human being, and his/her requital in the eternal life to come. Through faith, moral values are taught and observed, with emphasis and specifics about certain practices according to the particular circumstances of the addressed people of a given time and place. Prophet Muhammad addressed by his message a tribal people, so he presented his message first to the leading persons in his Meccan tribe "*Quraysh*," among whom some believed, some did not follow but did not act in a hostile way, and others showed enmity and declared