

The Islamic Idea of Good and Progressive Life

Western civilization stems from an array of materialist, humanist, naturalist and evolutionist tendencies. It is by definition anti-spiritual and anti-religious, perceiving those provinces as backward, archaic, restrictive, inhibiting, and as limited to the compass of private and subjective experiences.

It is no wonder then that the West and its civilization are the home of religiophobia, particularly islamophobia. To many in the West, Islam as a complete way of life with an inclusive outlook and global aspirations, plus as the fastest-growing religion in the world, is seen as the only potential challenger and threat to the hegemony of Western civilization *qua* colonization.

That can explain all the former and current hullabaloo concerning Islam, Muslims, and Islamic history as well as culture. That also can explain why Muslims should not wholeheartedly welcome and embrace whatever is served through the agency of Western civilization. Instead, they must be prudent and selective. They should deal with the prevalent and questionable elements of Western civilization as something disliked but unavoidable to contend with on a temporary basis and for achieving particular results, until better alternatives are found.

According to the Islamic revealed worldview, things are the polar opposite of what Western civilization and its anthropogenic or man-made ideologies preach.

In Islam, man was not created except to serve and worship God (*'ibadah*), i.e., to submit to the will and authority of God alone, and to live life not of his own accord, but according to the divine plan and guidance of the Creator and Master of all life, including man (al-Dhariyat, 56). Man furthermore was created as God's vicegerent or viceroy on earth (*khalifah*) (al-Baqarah, 30), to whom and for whose needs and services everything in the heavens and on the earth had been subjected (*taskhir*) (al-Jathiyah, 13).

This worldly life constitutes only a single dimension of the multidimensionality of existential reality. As such, this world is but a prelude to the real and eternal life of the Hereafter. The physical reality of this world is transient and conditional. Its relative meaning and significance are tied to the more consequential meaning and significance of the metaphysical world. Yet, its sheer existence is contingent upon the existence of the latter.

On its own, this world is nothing more than a mirage and fantasy. It is a playground for befuddled man's fancies and whims (Let's just remember the endless and often boring philosophizing by infinite number of philosophers in the East and West, and their inconsistent as well as contradicting concepts and theories). Just as this world should not be pursued at the expense of the Hereafter, the Hereafter, in equal measure, should not be pursued at the expense of this world. Islam does not tolerate excesses of any kind.

There will be no this world without the Hereafter, no physics without metaphysics, no body without the soul, and no success and happiness on earth without the same in Heaven. The goal of man's existence on earth is to attain through the prescribed servitude and worship the satisfaction and approval of Almighty God, based on which on the Day of Judgement he will be admitted into Paradise (*Jannah*) where he will live happily *ad infinitum*.

It follows that God's pleasure and Paradise are the ultimate objectives of man's cravings, determination and all work. They are the end of all ends. They are the ends where all other ontological ends lead and where they all converge. Arriving there connotes the rationale of man's existence and assigned mission, the personification of true happiness, and the validation of actual success.

It is through the prism of this paradigm that this world and everything that transpires therein is to be observed and adjudicated. A good is good, a success is success, a delight is delight, a class is class, and a legitimacy is legitimacy, only if they all are part of and lead to the realization of the ultimate heavenly good, success, delight, class and legitimacy in the Hereafter.

A segment of man's honourable terrestrial purpose and mission is to inhabit, "colonize" and settle on the earth (*imarah al-ard*) (Hud, 61). He is to do so responsibly and sustainably. For his merits, man will be abundantly rewarded by his all-Merciful Creator, but for his shortcomings, he will be duly held accountable. The bigger and more detrimental shortcomings, the more serious consequences man will have to face.

The matter is so serious that it is correctly held that man's legacies on earth, coupled with the overall condition of the earth, testify to the quality of man's stay and operation on earth. If the earth and man's footprint on it are wholesome, his life and performances are wholesome too, commensurately with the former - and *vice versa*.

Man lives his earthly life submissively and respectably, taking from and giving back to it, albeit with his eyes permanently fixed on the Hereafter and its ultimate prize. Besides, man is an exceptionally capable, resourceful and creative being. However, whatever he creates - be it an idea, procedure, system, or a physical entity - it is meant only to promote and facilitate the fulfilment of man's existential purpose. Life is a test. It is a farm, or a meadow, which must be painstakingly cultivated. Harvesting will take place somewhere else.

Man creates means, ways, services and processes that should serve the given ends. Neither ends nor legislative powers are man's business. His are only executive powers within the context of his worldly status.

Therefore, it is of paramount importance in Islam that a demarcation line be drawn between the infinite authority of the Creator and the limited jurisdiction of creation, between the compelling pragmatism of life and the enticing idealism of man's mind, between the long-term objectives and short-term interests and means, and between the temptations of the convenience and imminence of the here and now and the "remoteness" of the afterlife. It by no means should be surprising that such transgressions as anthropomorphism, hylotheism, deism, pantheism, atheism, agnosticism, any form of veneration of man or nature, scepticism, etc., are most severely repudiated by Islam.

This way, man's total being and a compendium of his talents and flairs, including his own material creations, are placed at the service of the spiritual realm. Everything is thus geared towards the latter, pining for it, and steadily progressing towards a union with it and with its profundity and richness.

What is more, man is created as an innocent and pure being. He is born in the state of his (Islamic) *fitrah*, or intrinsic nature. He has free will and was furthermore given through holy prophets the divine guidance. This means that man is born on the right (middle and natural) path, and his task in life is just to stay the course without deviating and falling into the abyss of any extremity.

While keeping to his primordial disposition and self, man's individual and collective duty will be to amplify and diversify means, features and facilities, which will facilitate his recurring day-to-day tasks and functions, and will smooth the overall progress of his life mission. Against the background of this outlook, the ideas of development and refinement (civilization) would mean to keep placing and nurturing more abundant, better and more efficient facilities, support and help on the road to a total ontological self-actualization. Whereas backwardness, primitivism and savagery would be the opposite, that is, to keep placing

difficulties and obstacles on the same road and so, either considerably slow down or completely hinder the intended progression of man.

This applies equally to the material, ethical, spiritual, intellectual and psychological sides of man. The plan operates at all levels of his individual and collective presence and function. It is not bound by any constraints relating to time and space. Which means that all people, whenever and wherever they live, have equal opportunities to be developed and refined, or backward and primitive. Excessive physical development is not necessarily a good thing. It can be both good and bad, depending on how it is relatable to the spiritual kingdom and man's role in it.

The ultimate aim is to produce upright, good, content, dynamic, enlightened, creative and forward-looking individuals. Owing to their holistic goodness, they will be at peace with God, self, nature and other people. The order that they establish on earth will be a microcosm of a higher order of things, meanings and experiences for which they live and whence they derive inspiration and direction.

Surely, civilization is about people, not things; about spirit, not matter; and about the permanence, rather than transience, of life. It is about the truth and certitude, not about falsehood and doubt.

All people have virtually equal opportunities to succeed, or fail, in life (to earn - or not - God's pleasure and His Paradise). Certain material facilities and circumstances can be advantageous, or otherwise, but in no way can alter the fundamental uniformity and nature of things. Almighty God's justice, love, kindness and generosity preside over all. The Qur'an retells that nobody can frustrate or cause failure to God's will and plan.

Since the inception of his terrestrial stay, man always enjoyed the needed capabilities and facilities to live a decent and responsible life, was always exposed to right and wrong, knowledge and ignorance, light and darkness, and to guidance and misguidance, and was free to think and to freely make his choices.

Suffice it to say that the first man on earth, Adam, was a prophet of God. Like all other prophets - and such as followed in their footsteps - he and his life pattern served as the embodiments of all goodness, wisdom, honour and virtue. Inasmuch as Adam and all others succeeded in life, they were perfectly civilized. To theorize otherwise and dwell on the subjects of primitivism, backwardness, rudeness, inadequacy, prehistory, caves, etc., signify nothing but an impact of the

stifling materialist, naturalist and evolutionist thought. It signifies anti-civilization.

From the moment it was imposed on the Muslim mind and his cultural identity, civilization - and everything that goes with it - was supposed to mean precisely this. It was expected to be promoted only in this light. Which in most instances was the case, but the systematic interferences of the physical and virtual colonizers blurred the matter to such an extent that only their viewpoints became practically discernible.

If we have to talk about Islamic civilization, it must be in full accordance with the Islamic notions of good, honourable and progressive life. Concomitant with this, Islamic civilization's meeting and diverging thrusts with other civilizations ought likewise to be credibly expounded.

That said, in Islam, man is born civilized and is bidden to remain as such. In the process, he is expected to attend to the secondary and complementing aspects of his civilizational enterprise, such as art, architecture, science, technology, crafts, manners, socio-economic systems and norms, deeming them as no more than supplements to, and palpable representations of, what civilization really is.

The identity of civilization centres upon man's intellectual, spiritual and moral foundation and core. Everything else originates therefrom. Once accomplished, the outer branches and leaves of civilization are envisaged to return to the latter's soul for validation and acceptance.