

Overcoming the East-West Divide

By Ibrahim Kalin

When Muslims were ordered to pray for the first time in Makkah, they turned to Jerusalem. This practice continued for about a year and a half after Prophet Muhammad migrated to Madina in 622. Then Muslims were ordered to turn to Kaaba in Makkah for prayers—a practice they have been keeping up ever since. When people asked about this change, the Quran answered with the following verse: “*To God, belongs east and west; wherever you turn, you will see the face of God. Behold, God is infinite, all-knowing.*” (Baqara 2:115) In the seventh century and in the centuries that followed, the words “east” and “west” did not have the same meaning they have today. For the followers of Islam, Kaaba is not in the east. The same holds true for Jerusalem for Muslims and Jews. Sacred places are above geographical limitations. Beyond east and west, they are the “center” for those who turn to them for prayer and blessings.

Before the rise of modernity, the universalist language of Islam did not produce cultural categories such as east and west to understand the world. East or west, all belonged to God, which meant only one thing: there is a higher order of reality that transcends east and west, south and north. In their quest for knowledge, Muslim scholars, scientists and philosophers turned to the earth as a whole and took knowledge from the Greeks, Indians, Chinese, Africans, Sasanids, Jews, Christians and others. They sifted through ancient lore and took what they considered to be essential and appropriate for them. There was no stereotyping, discrimination or demonizing in regards to religion, race or location.

Al-Kindi, considered to be the first Muslim philosopher, famously

expressed his debt to “all those who preceded us and produced knowledge for the good of humanity.” Later thinkers made critical studies of the works of ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophers, Chinese sages and Indian scientists but did not see them as “eastern” or “western.” Disregarding their ethnic or religious background, they focused on what was essential in their works. Muslims today have mostly lost this universalist outlook and succumbed to the temptations of binary oppositions. In their praise of the east or condemnation of the west, they miss out the essential element of any serious intellectual debate and scholarly pursuit. Binary categories cloud our minds and create confusion, distance and ignorance.

Interestingly enough, the verse quoted above caught the attention of European thinkers during and after the Middle Ages. The German poet Goethe referred to the verse to overcome the east-west divide and named his book of poetry “West-östlicher Diwan,” the East-West Diwan. Joseph Hammer-Purgstall, the prominent Austrian historian and orientalist of the 18th century, was so impressed with the message of the east-west verse that he frequently cited it in his works. But he also did something dramatic and had it engraved on his tombstone.

For traditional Muslim scholars, it would have been strange to be called “eastern.” Just because Ibn Sina lived in what is now called the Middle East today does not make him an “eastern” philosopher. Likewise, the fact that Ibn Rushd lived in Andalusia in what is now Spain, does not make him a “western” philosopher either.

East and West are modern categories that have clouded the minds of both Muslims and non-Muslims since the 18th century. They have turned into a-historical categories with clusters of homogenous beliefs, attitudes and perceptions. They have erected barriers of misunderstanding. Muslims need to draw a lesson from this. In dealing with issues of political injustice, cultural imperialism or economic exploitation, they have to avoid irresponsible generalizations and shallow categorizations. The sense of dispossession and denial needs to be channeled into a constructive discourse for justice, equality and dignity. The “us-versus-them” stance is harmful whether they emanate from American, European or Muslim corners.

The key challenge is to overcome Euro-centrism without falling into the trap of “occidentalism.” It is to produce a critique of imperialism

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