



The Arab Culture and other Cultures

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- ISESCO -

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The Arab

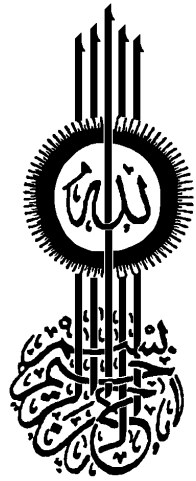
Culture

And

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Introduction

Culture is the spirit of a nation and the mark of its identity. It is an essential pillar in the founding of nations and their progress. Every nation has its own culture from which it derives its elements, components and attributes, by which it is characterized and to which it belongs. Every society has its own culture that characterizes it, and each culture has its own features and characteristics. Human history has known many a culture: Greek, Roman, Hellenic, Indian, ancient Egyptian, and Persian. When the Arabs held the reins of thought and culture in their hand for the whole of humanity during the seventh century A.D., a remarkable position which they occupied until the fifteenth century, the world witnessed the Arab-Islamic culture at its apogee. But no sooner had the Arabs and the Moslems dropped down from the top position as leaders of world culture, and no sooner had weakness began to creep up in their existence, and had they waned in creativity in the fields of thought, science and human enlightenment than the expansion of their culture began to shrink. They were conquered by inactivity and imitation, and they grew enfeebled in the face of the mighty currents of the Western culture which had a tremendous impact on their literatures, arts, and way of life.

Culture is a deeply-rooted word in Arabic; it means “to refine the soul, speech and intelligence.” *Al-Muhit* gives the following definition of the word culture: “to become intelligent, agile, and smart; to straighten the lance, to make straight.”

In modern times, culture has been used to mean the intellectual, literary and social progress of individuals and communities. However, culture is not just a collection of ideas; it is also a perspective on behavior that charts the way of life on

the whole, and reflects the general character of a particular people. Culture is a set of aspects of the components that distinguish a nation from other communities. These components include such singularities as beliefs, values, language, principles, behavior, sacrosanct things, laws and experiences. On the whole, culture is a complex whole that includes enlightenment, beliefs, arts, ethics, laws and customs⁽¹⁾.

The characteristics of culture are many:

- a) it is a human phenomenon; that is, a specific separator between the human and all other creatures, because it expresses his humaneness, and because it is the ideal way for him to meet others.
- b) it defines the human himself and his relationship with the people of his kind, with nature and with metaphysics through his interaction and relationship with it in the various fields of life.
- c) it is the basis of social life in terms of both function and movement; for no social, artistic or aesthetic, or intellectual activity can humanly take place outside its scope. It is culture that puts at man's disposal the ways of interacting with his environment: matter, people and institutions.
- d) it is a regenerated creative operation that contrives the new and the futuristic through the talents that represent and express culture. Interaction with the real world, whether to make adjustments to it or to go beyond it towards the future, is one of culture's dynamic functions.

1) Anwar al-Jundi. *Maalamatu al-Islam*. Vol.1, pp. 524-5. Al-Maktabu al-Islami. Beirut, 1996.

- e) it is a quantitative and historically continuous achievement; that is, the more accessions it accumulates, the more protective it is of its former heritage. Culture renews the spiritual, the intellectual and the moral values of former heritage, and standardizes along the way the identity of the new, in terms of spirit, course, and model. This is one of culture's principal engines and one of its fundamental dimensions⁽²⁾.

The sources of Arab culture, its components and characteristics

The Arab-Islamic culture has two main characteristics: constancy with regard to the conclusive sources and all the beliefs, legislations, values and programs which these sources brought along with them, and change with regard to the Moslems' judgements and their innovations, which can be right or wrong, hence the difference in opinion. The conclusive aspect in the Arab-Islamic culture shares the same characteristics with Islam as a religion and as a program of life. These characteristics are: **universality, inclusiveness, moderation, realism, objectivity, and diversity in unity**⁽³⁾.

The sources of the Arab-Islamic culture are the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet. The Holy Qur'an is the principal source of Islamic sciences and the Arabic language. It is the reference in which the Moslem seeks guidance in his quest for truths in the fields of knowledge, existence, values, thought, reality, philosophical speculation, and behavior.

(2) *Al-Khutba al-Shamila li-thaqafa al-Arabiya*. The Arab Educational Cultural and Scientific Organization. 2nd Edn. Tunisia, 1966.

(3) *Cultural Strategy for the Islamic World*. ISESCO, 1997.

The Holy Qur'an is the principal source of the Arab-Islamic culture owing to its religious, moral and social teachings, and to the fact that it is valid for every age and place, and can keep pace with the requirements and the new developments of every age.

The Sunna is the second fundamental source of the Arab-Islamic culture. Just as they relied on the Qur'an and its call in their intellectual, scientific and civilizational renaissance, Moslems also relied on their Prophet's Sunna, after they had compiled, recorded, and divided it up into chapters, and after they had invested it in their scientific efforts and in their way of life. The Arab-Islamic culture, which originally stems from the Qur'an and the Sunna, is a broad-minded culture which preaches coexistence, dialogue and understanding⁽⁴⁾.

We can conclude from all this that the Arab-Islamic culture differs from other cultures in terms of components. The Arab-Islamic culture has an Islamic source and owes its existence to Islam, the Qur'an, the Arabic language and to the independent judgements of the 'Ulama. Western culture, on the other hand, draws on Greek thought, Roman law, the Latin language, and on the Christian explications⁽⁵⁾ which have reached it.

The Arab-Islamic culture has struck a balance between mind and emotion, rejecting the Mu'tazila's elevation of the mind and the Sufi exaltation of feeling, thus preserving the whole, integral meaning of the concept. Likewise, the

(4) *Cultural Strategy for the Islamic World*. pp. 52-53

(5) *Ma'alamatu al-Islam*, p. 525.

Arab-Islamic culture has always been intent on preserving a strong link with the first and second sources - the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna - throughout its stages⁽⁶⁾. Cleavage between mind and feeling in the Arab-Islamic culture took place only in this age. This cleavage is one of the factors of its present-day weakness.

The language of the Arab-Islamic culture is Arabic. The roots of this culture strike deep into Islam, and it has humane objectives. Like any other culture, it is made up of fundamental components: intellectual, spiritual - the most important of which is faith, that is Islam - the Arabic language and literature, history, sameness of mentality and temperament. It has been established that no culture can develop unless it is related to a religion, because it is religion that gives meaning to social life and provides it with the framework in which it can chart its course and mold its hopes⁽⁷⁾.

One fundamental component of the Arab-Islamic culture is the Arabic language. The latter is not only a vehicle, it is primarily a language of thought and intellect. Even though they have preserved their national languages, all the peoples and nations which embraced Islam have adopted the Arabic language as a means for cultural and intellectual advancement, and have used Arabic alphabet to write their languages.

One potent component of the Arab-Islamic culture is the belief and trust in the Umma. This belief must draw its strength from the belief in Allah, because belief in Allah is the basis upon which faith should rest. One of the aspects of this faith is that one should believe in one's Umma, that the Arab and

(6) Ibid. p. 530.

(7) Ibid. p. 532.

Moslem should believe that their Umma is “the best of peoples, evolved for mankind.” As is the case with divine religions, faith in Islam preaches love and brotherhood. Particularly in Islam, faith teaches equality among people, and giving before taking. This is why religious education must be the basis of the Arab-Islamic culture⁽⁸⁾.

The Arab-Islamic culture is not an abstract culture, for it is not enough for us to examine in it the origin of things or their true state of affairs; nor do we carry out abstract research in it, because culture is an integral part of the human. If the mind nourishes culture, the latter does not sprout from the mind alone. It germinates in the human soul, in the heart, taste, and more so in the feelings. Indeed, culture is also intimately linked to conscience, one of the human’s most important aspects that distinguishes him from the animal. Conscience is more profound and more marvelous than the mind⁽⁹⁾. Islamic conscience is the source of the Arab-Islamic culture; that is why it is the culture of the human feeling.

The Arab culture is the culture of the Arab nation which is the Umma of Islam. It is from Islam that the Umma acquired its character, its peculiarities, and its nature. Before the advent of Islam, this Umma did not exist; it was many tribes and clans disunited in faith and without a shared divine message. However, when Allah sent His messenger, Muhammad - peace be on him - with the message of Islam, this religion became the eternal message of the Arabs.

(8) Suleiman Hazzin. *Ardu al-Uruba (The Land of Arabdom: A Civilized Vision in Space and Time.)* Chap. 10: “The Components of Arab Culture and its Role in Our Ancient and Modern Life.” p. 255. Dar as-Sharq. Cairo, 1st edn., 1993.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 256.

If the spirit of the Arab culture is Islamic and its message divine, it has, nonetheless, embraced all nations and peoples that have flocked under the banner of the Arab-Islamic Umma, and encompassed all the cultures with which it coexisted. In this way, the Arab-Islamic culture became the culture of the Arabs and the Moslems, the culture of Arab Christians and Jews, and that of the people of other denominations and creeds, who incorporated themselves into the Arab-Islamic entity, and lived in the Arab-Islamic state throughout the ages.

The spread of the Arab-Islamic culture in the various lands which embraced Islam helped many of the characteristic traits of the existing local cultures to adjust to the components of the Arab-Islamic culture. Thus the rites, traditions and customs were most of the time compatible with the constants of the Arab-Islamic culture, even if they differed in terms of practice and application. Nevertheless, this difference never extended to beliefs, values and objectives as was the case with ancient and modern non-Islamic cultures⁽¹⁰⁾.

Therefore, one main characteristic of the Arab culture is its blending with other cultures which were prevalent in the early days of Islam, and its acceptance of the contributions of other races, peoples, and followers of other religions and faiths which coexisted with the Arab-Islamic society. This has made it a rich culture with many feeder reservoirs and varied sources, but with one soul and one unique identity.

Another characteristic of the Arab-Islamic culture is its openness on cultures of the East and the West while jealously preserving its immutable origins. In its long history, the Arab-Islamic culture confronted many challenges: those of

(10) *The Cultural Strategy for the Islamic World*. p. 56.

philosophical orientations, those of denominations and those of the various religious calls. During the advent of Islam, the world abounded in such calls: Buddhism, Mazdaism, paganism, Hellenism, Zoroastrianism. These religions and philosophies turned into forces of invasion. They all tried to cast doubt, distort the fundamental values, and disserve the Arab-Islamic Umma and state, and its intellect⁽¹¹⁾. However, the Arab-Islamic culture triumphed over all these challenges in the past thanks to its solid components and its unique characteristics.

As a result of this intermixing and mutual enrichment, the Arab-Islamic culture acquired tremendous resources and sophistication, and strength and immunity; such a characteristic is unique in the human cultural history. The main source of this diversity that marks the Arab-Islamic culture is the nature of the principles upon which it is based, and which stem principally from the essence of the Islamic message, the main characteristics of which are: to awaken in its members the desire to seek knowledge, to probe and reflect; to exhort them to acquire wisdom from any vessel or source; to urge the peoples and nations that have embraced the Islamic message to get to know one another; and to refrain from applying compulsion in religion. The latter is a Qur'anic principle which can serve as a basis for cultural and intellectual coexistence within the framework of the oneness of the human origin. This original principle sums up all the meanings of the freedom of thought which is the opposite of intellectual chaos. The latter spontaneously leads to a distressed mind which, in turn, leads to a distressed culture.

(11) Maâlamatu al-Islam. p. 534.

The interaction of the Arab Culture With other cultures

The Arab-Islamic culture interacted with the cultures of other nations and peoples that embraced Islam or flocked under its banner, or those with whom Moslems established contact. This open-minded and flexible cultural interaction was one of the most powerful elements in the Arab-Islamic culture, and a driving force towards openness on other cultures which it had digested, assimilated, and adapted to the spirit of the Arab-Islamic culture. Likewise, this element motivated interest in other nations and peoples and in understanding their characteristics, in probing the depths of their nature, and in pursuing wisdom in their civilizations, in realization of the Qur'anic principle of acquaintanceship and in confirmation of the deeply established Arab-Islamic civilizational and cultural identity.

The interaction of the Arab-Islamic culture with other cultures was a means of freeing peoples and nations from superstition, paganism, tribalism, and injustice, and a way of arousing awareness and feelings and of liberating the mind and the soul. As a result, these cultures embraced the true religion of Islam, and drew their fundamental values from the Holy Qur'an: religious observances, cohabitation, morals, social system, and a way of life that reconciles mind and heart, soul and body, religion and science, this world and the hereafter⁽¹²⁾.

The result of the interaction of the Arab-Islamic culture with the cultures of other nations and peoples was that this culture had many feeder sources and various branches at its

(12) Ibid. 528.

disposal, which was yet another potent source of interaction in the Arab-Islamic culture. Indeed, cultural interaction was a characteristic of Islamic civilization. Never in its various epochs had human history witnessed a triumphant and dominant culture accept interaction with conquered cultures, establish communication with falling civilizations while safeguarding their sources and traces, and be so tolerant with their religions and beliefs.

Interaction with other cultures opened the door for the Arab-Islamic culture to scoop directly from the sources of these cultures, the centers of which were in Damascus, Egypt and Persia and from their original source in Greece. This extremely rich cultural environment produced the cream of men and researchers, of schools of thought and culture that nourished the mind and enriched the feeling. The coming of Islam provided this rich environment with good seeds which Islam never ceased to nourish through an inexhaustible flow of thought and knowledge. Hence the emergence in such a flourishing environment of groups of eminent men of science and philosophers, whose numbers were in the hundreds, not tens. Having interacted with the Arab-Islamic culture, these schools produced the kind of soil on which Moslems could plant the seeds of a new culture, a philosophy, religious sciences, medicine, and mathematics, etc., from which they acquired well-founded and flourishing sciences⁽¹³⁾.

The interaction ability of the Arab-Islamic culture was one element that helped to disseminate it, to expand its branches and to strike its roots in various environments and numerous societies. This interaction took on diverse forms and shapes, all

(13) Ahmed Shabli. *Encyclopedia of Systems and Islamic Civilizations*. Vol. 1, pp. 37-8. Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriya. Cairo, 3rd. Edn. 1971.

of which crystallized into patterns of behavior, schools of thought, and styles of expression. All of these reflected the general demeanor of the Arab-Islamic culture. These various aspects were the natural outcome of the interaction of other cultures with the Arab-Islamic culture which, while clinging to its sources and origins within the framework of a distinguished civilizational and cultural identity, was characterized by flexibility, tolerance, and openness.

The impact of the Arab Culture on European Renaissance

In his article “The Cultural Contribution of Islam to Christendom,” T.C. Young says: “The great cultural debt we have for Islam since we, Christians, used, within this millenium, to travel to Islamic capitals and to Moslem teachers to learn from them arts, sciences, and the philosophy of human life should always be brought to mind. Amongst this is our classical heritage which Islam preserved in the best way possible until Europe was once again able to understand it and to look after it. All this must blend into the spirit with which we, Christians, turn towards Islam, carrying to it our cultural, spiritual gifts. Let’s then go to it with a feeling of equality to pay Islam an old debt. We will not overstep the bounds of justice if we pay back what we owe Islam by winning it over. We will be true Christians only if we forget about the conditions of exchange, and we give for the sake of love and gratitude⁽¹⁴⁾.”

(14) This quotation is taken from a long article entitled “The Cultural Contribution of Islam to Christendom.” Quoted in *The Impact of The Arabs and Islam in The European Renaissance*. p. 5. Published by the Egyptian National Division of Education, Science and Culture, Cairo, 1987.

The Arab-Islamic culture played its leading part in the best way possible in building world scientific renaissance. Arab and Moslem scholars translated Greek heritage and other kinds of scientific heritage which had preceded them in history into the Arabic language which was the language of science and culture. Arab and Moslem scholars left their mark on the European Renaissance. The imprint of the Arab-Islamic culture was predominant, noticeable and effective in many scientific, intellectual and cultural fields. Arab and Muslim scholars invented the numerical system; the figure Zero; the decimal system; the theory of evolution - one hundred years before Darwin; pulmonary circulation - three centuries before Harvey. They discovered gravity and the relationship between weight, speed and distance - several centuries before Newton; they measured the speed of light, calculated the angles of reflection and refraction, computed the circumference of the earth, and determined the dimensions of heavenly bodies. They invented astronomical instruments, discovered high seas, and laid down the foundations of chemistry.

One might say that, in general, the Arab-Islamic culture was at the center between ancient sciences and cultures and the European Renaissance. The Arab-Islamic thought and the Arab-Islamic culture are chains of connected links extending from ancient civilizations - Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Chinese to the civilizations of Greece and Alexandria - all the way to the Islamic era whose scholars were influenced by their predecessors and who, in turn, influenced those who followed them, namely the scholars of the European Renaissance. These scholars studied the works of their Arab counterparts in their books which were translated into Latin and European languages⁽¹⁵⁾.

(15) Ibid. p. 231.

The Arab-Islamic culture preserved the Greek culture and safeguarded it from loss and destruction. Had it not been for Arab intellectuals and scholars, people would not have been able to get hold of many Greek works, the original version of which was lost. These works were preserved in Arabic. The West had been very busy studying the Arab culture even after its prestige declined in Spain, two or more generations later, until it reached modern times. The Arab-Islamic culture fascinated a great many Westerner, for translation from Arabic did not cease during and after the Renaissance in spite of the direct contact with the Greek world and civilization as of the middle of the thirteenth century A.D. when Greek books began to be translated directly into Latin without help from Arabic translations. The Arab culture had its own worth and personality. It produced many a thing which the Greek culture could not produce in all fields: additions, commentaries, inventions, and Arab discoveries unknown to the Greeks⁽¹⁶⁾.

The translation movement from the Arab-Islamic culture, which helped Europe pull out of the dark Middle Ages into the modern enlightened age, was not confined to the translation of ancient knowledge only - Greek, Indian, Babylonian, and Egyptian - from Arabic books into Latin. Christian Europe also translated purely Arab knowledge and transferred patterns from Islamic civilization and from Islamic faith into its public and private life. Had the Catholic Church not put its weight behind the Europeans in the Battle of Tours in 114 A.D. (732 Hegira), the Islamic civilization and the Arab culture would have been prevalent in Europe since that early age, and church would have spared the world a long, grueling and bitter conflict⁽¹⁷⁾.

(16) Simon al-Hayek. Taarrabat ... wa tagharrabat: Or the Transfer of Arab Civilization to the West. pp.13-5. Al-Matbaa al-bouliyya. Beirut, 1987.

(17) Omar Farrukh. Islamic Culture. p. 105. al-Maktaba al-Asriya. Sidon, Beirut, 1988.

The Arab-Islamic culture spread in the Western world. European scholars quaffed from authentic Arab sources, and discovered that they were a great scientific heritage. So they studied and analyzed it. The Arabs and Moslems were the epitome of modern science in every sense of the word. They were the pioneers of modern scientific methods. From the Arab-Islamic culture, European intellectuals and scholars acquired more than just information. They acquired scientific mentality, with all its empirical and inductive character, for they found in the Arab-Islamic heritage the object of their long-cherished wish; they were, therefore, bent on spreading it⁽¹⁸⁾.

It was the dazzle of the magnitude of influence which the Arab-Islamic culture had on European Renaissance, culture and sciences which prompted a German thinker and scientist to come out openly with the truth and say: “That flourishing civilization, whose enlightenment had inundated Europe for many centuries, is truly amazing; for this civilization was not an extension of the vestiges of past civilizations, or of local civilizational skeletons of some importance, or a borrowing from, or an imitation of an existing civilizational mode, as was the case with other cradles of civilization in other countries in the East. It is the Arabs who, with their culture, contrived this magnificent civilization⁽¹⁹⁾.”

While Europe was buried in the darkness of the Middle Ages, the Islamic civilization (the cradle of the Arab-Islamic culture) was at its apogee. Islam greatly contributed to the advancement of science, medicine and philosophy. As Will Durant said in his book, *The Age of Faith*, “Moslems

(18) Abdulfattah M. al-Ghunaimi. *Islamic Civilization and the Challenges of the 21st Century*. p. 53. Maktabat Madbuli. Cairo, 1995.

(19) Zigrig Honika. *God Is Not Like That!* p. 54. Dar al-Sharq. Cairo, 1995.

contributed effectively in all fields. Avicenna was one of the greatest scientists in medicine, al-Razi a most eminent physician, al-Bayruni a most distinguished geographer, Ibn al-Haitham a most celebrated optics scientist, and Ibn Jabir a most famous chemist.” Besides, the Arabs were the pioneers of education and teaching. On this point, Durant had this to say, “When Roger Bacon presented his theory in Europe five hundred years after Ibn Jabir, he said that he was indebted to the Maghrebis in Spain who took their knowledge from the Moslems in the East. European Renaissance thinkers and scholars owed their advent, genius and progress to the giants of the Islamic world⁽²⁰⁾.

The sources of strength of the Arab culture

Within this broad and comprehensive perspective, we may say, based on the preceding background, that the Arab-Islamic culture is a culture of strength and might, not weakness and impotence. Strength leads to order, harmony and concord whereas weakness can result in disorder, conflict and clash. Therefore, the Arab-Islamic culture is the culture of dialogue, mutual understanding and communication. Never did it keep aloof from mutual enrichment, intermixing and interacting with

(20) Richard Nixon, the former US President, *Seize The Moment*. p. 138. The Arabic edition. Translation: Ahmed Dadqi Murad. Dar al-Hilal. Cairo. No date. *The Age of Faith* is the 2nd Part of 4th volume in English. Translation: Mohammed Badran. Volume 13-14 in the Arabic translation of the encyclopedia *The Story of Civilization* by the American author Will Durant of the Arabic edition which contains 42 Parts (12 volumes) published by the Cultural Section of the Arab League (The Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science Today). This encyclopedia, which was translated into several languages, contains fair testimonies of the influence of the Arab-Islamic culture on the European Renaissance.

other cultures, while all cultures of ancient nations and peoples tended to lean towards isolation and detachment, racism and bigotry. On the whole, they were not open cultures, willing to give and take.

Culture is an effective force in the civilizational building in its comprehensive, philosophical, literary, political, social, economic, and developmental import. It is a creative energy in many fields of human activity. Moreover, a constructive, purposeful, and effective culture must be in the service of policies that seek to enhance the human's feeling, purge his soul, refine his talents, and utilize his energies and faculties in constructing and innovating so as to achieve progress, advancement, and prosperity⁽²¹⁾.

Culture cannot acquire strength and immunity, and shoulder its responsibilities in the most desirable manner unless it has fulfilled three conditions. These are considered not only as sources of strength in the Arab-Islamic culture and as basic elements of its functions, but also as the basis of cultural renaissance. The conditions are:

First, culture must have solid foundations and must rest on sound principles. It should not grow roots; nor should it be with no specific identity or distinctive characteristics.

Second, culture must have a wide range of vision and a comprehensive outlook, with a disposition to interact with other cultures and a latent readiness in its origins to interact with human cultures from these bases.

Third, culture must have a human approach with which it can transcend local and regional spheres towards international

(21) Dr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwaijri. *On The Civilizational Building of The Islamic World*. Vol. 2, p. 265. Rabat 1997.

horizons, without affecting its own particularity or nature. In this way, culture would be one of human communication and discussion, of understanding that would lead to coexistence among nations, and of cooperation that would achieve solidarity among peoples⁽²²⁾.

When it has fulfilled these conditions, the Arab-Islamic culture not only acquires strength and immunity, it also achieves the potential for glory and progress; for a strong culture, capable of building, is the one that can elevate the human to the loftiest station. As President Alija Izetbegovic says: "The bearer of culture is a man as an individual, and the bearer of civilization is society. Culture means gaining power to rule oneself whereas civilization is power over nature through science." Culture tends to reduce human needs or to keep the degree of satisfying these needs in check. In so doing, culture widens the scope of the human's inner freedom⁽²³⁾." This is the kind of spiritual, psychological and intellectual strength that enables the human to perform his functions in life in a way that satisfies his Creator first, and him second.

In our view, stressing these traits and characteristics, unique to the Arab-Islamic culture, is crucial in any talk about the Arab culture and other cultures, whether for the purpose of comparison which seeks to draw similarities, to bring out correspondences, and to bring to light points of convergence and discrepancies, or which draws the limits of the relationship that is supposed to hold between the Arab-Islamic culture and other cultures.

(22) Ibid. p. 266.

(23) Alija Izetbegovic. *Islam Between East and West*. Vol. 2, p. 96. Trans. Mohammed Youssef Adas. Mu'assasat al-Ilm al-Hadith. Beirut, 1994.

In both cases, the bases for a search for the sources of strength of the Arab-Islamic culture, for its characteristics, functions, message and objectives, and for its aspects, rest on three fundamentals:

Fundamental One: the Arab-Islamic culture, through its principles, foundations, concepts, and symbols, expresses the essence of the tolerant message of Islam. This makes it a human culture, in the real sense, as it opens up to the cultures of nations and peoples with which it is impregnated, assimilated, and infused. Unique in human cultural history, this characteristic is the source of the wealth, strength and immunity of the Arab-Islamic culture.

Malik Ibn Nabi has defined four pillars of the Arab-Islamic culture. They are:

1. Moral constitution
2. Aesthetic taste
3. Scientific logic
4. Craft (technique)⁽²⁴⁾

The culture which Westerners generally call Man's Philosophy Malik Ibn Nabi defines as "a set of moral characteristics and social values which the individual acquires since his birth as an initial capital within the milieu in which he was born," that is to say, the environment in which the individual's character and personality are shaped. On this basis, culture is more of a theory on behavior than a theory on

(24) Malik Ibn Nabi, *The Question of Culture*. Trans. Abd as-Sabur Shahin. p. 117, quoted in "The Fundamentals of Progress in the View of The Thinkers of Islam in The Modern Arab World," by Dr. Fahmi Jadan. 2nd Ed, 1981. Al-Mu'assassa al-Arabiya li-ad-Dirassat wa an-Nashr. Beirut, pp. 417-8.

knowledge. The difference between culture and science lies in this definition; culture is behavior whereas science is knowledge. In this sense, culture is closely related to history and education. A nation that has no culture has no history, and a people that have lost their culture inevitably lose their history; for culture is the milieu in which a society's historical characteristics take shape: genius, customs, tastes, and feelings. Also, culture, with its educational content is "a code required by public life with all its modes of thought and social diversity⁽²⁵⁾."

This unique characteristic contains the elements of strength in the Arab-Islamic cultures, the sources of vitality and energy, and what we may call self-powers which make of it a strong culture deeply-seated in the environment and in the milieu, effective and affecting both the individual and society.

Fundamental Two : In its essence, the Arab-Islamic culture is a culture of struggle, not of conflict. Struggle is one of the norms of life whereas conflict, or fighting, is a concept that belongs to Greek, Roman and Hellenic heritage whose mythology is replete with conflicts between the gods, and which does not express human nature and innate character. Struggle is another source of strength and vitality, and of the ability to be present in the cultural arena. Cultural struggle is a source of strength whereas conflict, or cultural conflict, is a source of weakness. It weakens the self, bears upon capabilities and faculties, and runs against the noble human aims.

Its being averse to conflict does not mean that the Arab-Islamic culture suffers from a weakness in its constitution or a defect in its fundamental components. It is a civilized way of life and a sign of maturity, awareness, and health. The trait of

(25) Ibid. p. 120.

leaning towards struggle instead of conflict has most certainly enabled the Arab-Islamic culture to withstand cultural, intellectual and sectarian whirlwinds which it confronted throughout the ages.

Fundamental Three: At its current levels and in its present state, many of the aspects of the Arab-Islamic culture do not unfortunately express the identity of the Arab-Islamic society, the reason being that these aspects are weak and that there is an apparent discrepancy between the sources and the novelties. By this we mean that the basis of these aspects is not wholly derived from the original sources, and that this phenomenon is the source of the general weakness from which the Arab-Islamic culture suffers today.

The Arab-Islamic culture is a culture of continuous diligence and creation within the framework of the legitimate norms and moral values that distinguish the civilization of Islam and assert the identity of the Umma. Therefore, this Umma's contribution is regenerated according to situations and to the diversity of issues and acts.

We should not be deceived into believing that culture is first and foremost a creation and an innovation; that creative power springs from an intellectual creative mind and from its imagination and feelings; and that no relationship holds between all this and the values and components. This is one of the illusions that prevail in our intellectual lives and in our cultural spheres. The Arab-Islamic culture cannot face the dangers that threaten it and the challenges that confront it unless it draws its strength from its origins and sources and from the Umma's values and components. In this there is no prohibitory rule against creativity or ban on thought and expression.

The nature of the relationship between the Arab-Islamic Culture and other cultures

The age in which we live is one of cultural hegemony which is an integral part of economic hegemony, the control of capital and markets, and of the structure of international financial sources. In this atmosphere, international cultural relationships take on a particular significance proportional to the importance of the conflict around cultural communication. In his book, *Communication and Cultural Domination*, Herbert I. Schiller says that cultural imperialism thrives in a world order that has one single market. It is necessary that the sector of cultural communication develop in the world order in harmony with the goals and objectives of the general order and with the means that would ensure their realization. Therefore, the informational and cultural production is determined to a large extent, if not wholly, by market needs which control the products and services produced by the general order. The writer concludes: "Cultural imperialism is the set of operations used to usher a given society into the New World Order and to draw the dominant class in it, to pressure, force and sometimes even bribe the social dominant class, so that it can set up social institutions that are in harmony with the values of the dominant center in the order and its structures, and sometimes the dominant class even promotes these social institutions⁽²⁶⁾."

Schiller's statement, which is an awakening of conscience, unequivocally confirms that the courses taken by the New World Order imposed on the international community in the field of culture have led to effacing cultural identities and

(26) Herbert I. Schiller. *Communication and Cultural Domination*. Trans. Wajih Samaan Abdel-Masih, p. 21. Al-Alf Kitab al-Thani Series, No. 135. Al-Hay'a al-Misriya al-Ammah lil-Kitab, Cairo, 1993.

obliterating the civilizational traits of nations and peoples. Needless to say that this is a clear violation of the principles of international law, because all charters, agreements and international declarations lay stress on the respect of the cultural identities of nations and peoples in all cases.

In the face of such a complex and intricate situation, the Arab-Islamic culture must take a stand and put its house in order. This means adopting clearly defined positions that most credibly reflect the realities of the Arab-Islamic world, on the one hand, and that truthfully translate the wishes, dreams, and aspirations of the Umma, on the other. This is a two-dimensional issue: a cultural dimension and a societal (political, economic, social) dimension, in the manner in which there is an overlap of responsibilities and urgent tasks that ought to be carried out to effect change and reconstruction.

Culture is the mirror of society; it reflects all aspects of public life, its state and circumstances. We owe it to ourselves to say truthfully and in all fairness that the Arab-Islamic culture, given the present circumstances of the Arab homeland and those of the Moslem world, derives its frailty from the weaknesses of the Arab-Islamic societies, and acquires its pallid traits - this is a truth that must be told - from the general state that prevails in the Arab and Moslem countries. This is why this culture is unable to compete on the international market of offer and demand at the level of creativity and innovation, and of inventiveness and industry - in fact, at all levels. All this is attributable to the weakness and negligence that prevail in public life in the Arab homeland and the Moslem world, and to the extreme carelessness in embracing real progress in all fields.

So long as many aspects of the culture that is now prevailing in the Arab-Islamic societies are not in harmony with

the Umma's components and fundamental values, and so long as this culture does not express the realities of the civilizational message which it carries, this culture will not be able to engage in any competition that requires balance in the components of power. However, this does not mean that this culture will remain frozen and static, and incapable of participating in the international cultural arena.

The great powers want the age in which we live to be the age of conflict in all fields of life. In spite of this, we do not believe in conflict; we believe in civilizational struggle. If faced with conflict, we oppose it from the basis of our own values and notions, motivated by the desire to safeguard our own interests. We are quite certain that the conflict which is being promoted nowadays by some Western spheres is illogical, and that it is a conflict between power and weakness, and wealth and poverty. The choice of the tools, the means and potentialities employed in this conflict is not subjected to any moral values, but to the law of the jungle - if the jungle has laws. As such, it is a hysterical conflict that sweeps every barrier in front of it.

We firmly believe that the strength of the Arab-Islamic culture lies in its roots, origins, and basic components. At the same time, we believe that this spiritual strength is the essence of civilization; for civilization can only rise on the basis of spiritual strength latent in the human soul and represented by the creative mind that is capable of effecting change, construction, and development. The relationship between the Arab-Islamic culture and other cultures must stand on this solid foundation.

One of the truths that we must always reveal, because it is concealed, obscured, and falsified, is the fact that the weakness of the Arab-Islamic culture in this day and age has not affected its roots. This is why this culture is still capable of giving and of

standing in the face of other cultures, not only in the arena of conflict, contest and challenge, but also in that of dialogue, communication and struggle. This culture possesses the components of survival, influence, and infiltration to all positions, because it is a rich culture, not because of its own heritage, but because of its values, principles and message. Hence the need for the Arab-Islamic culture to establish relationships with other contemporary cultures on the basis of a reasonable degree of balance and parity if not at the level of form and appearance, then at the level of profundity and essence.

It is dialogue, not conflict, between cultures that is in keeping with the spirit of this age in which humanity has undergone tremendous progress in making general rules that govern the relationships between individuals, societies, and nations and peoples. Under international law, conflict between cultures and civilizations has no sense, unless if it is a deviation from all the things human disposition has agreed to during this period of history; that is the bases of international law and its provisions which is supposed to organize international relations on the basis of cooperation, coexistence and joint action for the purpose of establishing peace and security in the world.

The features of the International Cultural Map

If one examines the cultural map of today's world, one cannot fail to notice that most of the contemporary cultures originated from Greek and Roman heritage or intermixed with distorted Christian or Jewish teachings, or sprang from ancient Eastern heritage based on Buddhist and Zoroastrian teachings. Like Western and Eastern Marxist cultures (even in the aftermath of the collapse of Marxism), Western liberal culture

also sprang from Greek and Roman heritage. All in all, the history of the great system of thought that is now prevailing all over most of the modern world has its roots in the ancient heritage of Athens and Rome. But as we already know, this heathen heritage is not related to divine teachings at all.

The cultures which prevail in this age express in many ways the spirit of the modern Western civilization which lays a heavy emphasis on technology (as a means of control) instead of emphasizing elucidation, and widening the scope of understanding and communication among people. This has led to a marginalizing of contemplative, critical and aesthetic orientations in the human soul. This one-way focus (which in its essence is a supremacy of the instrumental mind) means that the human being does not use all his human potentials (critical, aesthetic, etc.) in organizing society. This kind of focus puts a great deal of emphasis on directing along the right path the requirements of administrative, economic, and political systems which are expected to increase man's control over reality. Naturally, all this leads to a weakening of man's life, and guidance becomes a sort of "colonization of life"⁽²⁷⁾.

All contemporary cultures draw from modern Western civilization which discarded religion from life and removed it from thought, literature, art and cultural creative work in general. Western civilization is a technological civilization which emphasizes such values as profit, competence, achievement and progress at any price, material or spiritual. It believes in the survival of the fittest, and disregards many of the traditional values, such as kindness towards the weak, noble-mindedness, piety, and kindness towards others⁽²⁸⁾. It is a merciless civilization that breeds ruthless cultures.

(27) AbdelWahhab al-Massiri. *Zionism, Nazism and The End of History: A New Civilizational Perspective*. p. 251. Dar as-sharq, Cairo, 1997.

(28) *Ibid.* p. 13.

Amid these clashing waves of cultures, the Arab-Islamic culture acquires particular significance because, whatever its nature, it is founded on prophecy, a divine message, a call for doing good and an appeal from a sound human nature. However, the Arab-Islamic culture has not been spared from the influence of today's cultures. Sometimes this influence may reach a point more or less closer to the sources and origins. But in most cases, this negative influence manages to strip the Arab-Islamic civilization of some characteristics of its identity.

Dialogue between the Arab-Islamic culture and other cultures

Amid this battleground which imposes conflict and represses in the human the will to do good, to love, and to appreciate beauty, the necessity to reinforce dialogue and communication among cultures, civilizations and divine religions becomes manifest so as to uphold the survival of, and the coexistence among the peoples of the world.

As the market culture and the culture of consumption becomes so predominant, the international community must free itself from the shackles of cultural imperialism which is imposed by the New World Order led by one world power. Edward Said says, "We must not lose sight of the plain truth that the United States is consolidating a strong bond around the world, and that the matter cannot be traced back to Reagan (or Clinton today) or to a group of people such as Kirkpatrick only. The matter has a great deal to do with cultural discourse, with information industry and with the production and marketing of texts. In short, it does not depend on culture as a general

anthropological field that is routinely analyzed and discussed in cultural studies, but on our culture strictly speaking.⁽²⁹⁾'

However, in spite of all this, we can conclude from the enduring experiences through which humanity has lived that the civilized relationship which ought to prevail among contemporary cultures is that of real dialogue. The antithesis of dialogue is conflict, because dialogue aims to understand the other party and to appreciate it on a cultural, moral and rational basis. As for conflict, it seeks to invade, crush, conquer, and defeat the other so as to control it.

The components of dialogue among cultures can be complete only if the conditions of equality, rivalry, joint determination and mutual respect have been met. Regardless of the level and the topic, dialogue cannot take place unless two parties are involved, and only if they possess the will to hold it; otherwise, dialogue becomes an imposition and a dominance, both of which are a first step towards cultural invasion.

It has been said lately that cultural invasion is nothing but an illusory belief. We believe that this claim is a reaction to the much exaggerated assumption of cultural invasion and to the overstated warnings and dangers.

Through our analysis of the nature of the relationships between nations, peoples and civilizations of this age and those of other periods, we have arrived at a truth that confirms to us the fact that cultural invasion, with both its positive and negative aspects, is but an undeniable aspect of these relationships.

(29) Edward Said. *Comments on Orientalism*. p. 78. Trans. Sobhi Hadidi. Al-Muassassah al-Arabiya li-dirasat wa an-Nashr. Beirut, 1996.

Let us, therefore, examine the concept of cultural and intellectual invasion. Is invasion always a bad thing, or is it good sometimes? Is cultural and intellectual invasion always negative, or can it be positive sometimes?

In our view, the matter is relative, as it can be seen from quite different angles. Did not the Arab-Islamic culture, during the period of its apogee, invade the ancient world? Was not the Arab-Islamic cultural invasion a legitimate and positive one that served all too well the noble human objectives?

The Arab-Islamic cultural invasion receded right after the Arabs and Moslems became a secluded, introvert people, and after they had lost their sway. They fell prey to the Western cultural invasion which differed in terms of its basis, means and goals from the Arab-Islamic cultural invasion whose main characteristics were humane nature, tolerance, and broadness of horizon.

It is the strong culture which invades the weak one. Strength here is not material only, the kind of which cultures draw from material potentials and capabilities available to the society which these cultures represent; strength is also that of the culture's source and of its spiritual drive, that of the ideas which it expresses, and that of the goals which it seeks to realize.

This is how we see the relativity of cultural invasion. Invasion is not always evil; there is good invasion, too. The Arab-Islamic culture is today facing all kinds of invasion. This situation should not scare us; nor should we abandon ourselves to despair because of it. We must, however, be aware of the nature of the age in which we live, and be prepared to defend our culture through serious, civilized and purposeful action, through giving a good example of our deeds and attitudes, through effecting

change within ourselves by means of knowledge, work, faith, and a refined and civilized consciousness, and through adhering to this age and being an active and influential part of it, but always with a penchant for harmony and dialogue. In this way, we can breathe new life in the Arab-Islamic culture, rejuvenate it, and provide it with the means that would enable it to compete in the international cultural arena.

The Moslem thinker Rajaa Garaudy says: “In an age in which humans can practically annihilate humanity, the only choice we have is a mutually assured destruction or dialogue. There can be no real dialogue unless all parties are convinced that there are things to be learned from others⁽³⁰⁾.”

Contemporary cultures must all talk to one another. Rather, the future of humanity is contingent upon holding a civilized and reasonable dialogue among civilizations and religions.

The relationship between the Arab-Islamic culture and other cultures must, therefore, rest on a sound dialogue, on civilizational and cultural coexistence, and on the desire to learn from anything new and useful.

If established on this basis, dialogue among cultures leads to what is known today as acculturation which, in its most accurate definitions, is a form of civilized cultural coexistence. Acculturation is a result of constructive dialogue among humans to ward off a disaster.

In this day and age, dialogue is the responsibility of every rational intellectual. “In every age,” says Michael Carrithers,

(30) Rajaa Garaudy, *The Origin of Fundamentalism and Salafi Fanaticism*. p.73. Maktabat as-Sharq. Cairo, 1996.

“people live an emotional, scrupulous and intellectual life thanks to the relationships holding between them. The culture in question, here, is the one which is concerned with intellectual elements and with the forms of knowledge and values which we practise in our lives or with those which we have learned or established, but which we recognize only when other people have used them. As for others, cultures presuppose the existence of relationships⁽³¹⁾.”

Cultural diversity, under the wing of human unity, compels cultural coexistence from humans, and establishes the concept of acculturation so firmly that it has become a fundamental element in the civilized international community. Cultural diversity is a historical and social necessity and a guaranty for progress. The enhancement of human life in many societies and throughout history is dependent upon cultural diversity, interaction between cultures, difference in visions and opinions, and upon the availability of social mechanisms that secure free and positive interaction⁽³²⁾.

The recognition and preservation of cultural diversity has today become a Human Rights principle. Article 1 of the Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation says that “Every culture has its own dignity and value that must be respected and preserved. It is the right and

(31) Michael Carriers. Why Is Man the Only One with Culture? Human Cultures: Beginnings and Diversity . p. 59. Trans. Shawqi Jalal. Silsilatu Kitaab Alamu al-Ma'rifa. January 1998. The National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature. Kuwait.

(32) Ibid. From the translator's introduction : Cultural Diversity and Human Oneness. p. 7.

duty of every people to develop their culture. All cultures constitute, with their rich diversity and mutual influence, part of the heritage which belongs to all humans⁽³³⁾.”

Existence on this earth and the necessity to live in peace and security enjoins on the international community the coexistence of cultures, civilizations and religions and the establishment of a serious and purposeful dialogue among them. This is the only way for the international community to preserve the legality of the law that governs the relationships between individuals, nations and governments. There will be no future for humanity if it goes in the opposite direction.

It is from this perspective that the Arab culture must achieve internal coherence on the level of content and full complementarity in terms of stance and outlook. The Arab culture must build on its identity that best reflects its true origin and noble goals. Only then can it stand steadfast on the arena of international cultural competition, and interact with the modern cultures from a position of might and merit, not dependence and sterile dazzledness.

(33) The Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Cooperation. Article 1. Issued by the General Conference of UNESCO in its Fourth Session on November 4, 1966. (see *Identity and Globalization: The Perspective of Cultural Diversity*. By Dr. Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri. ISESCO Publications, Rabat 1997; and *Identity and Globalization*. Publications of the Academy of the Kingdom of Morocco, Rabat 1997.