The 'Outsiders of Islam'

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The Muslims of the West

Will the Muslims who live in the West be the future *outsiders* of the Islamic world? To be clear what we mean, let's accord this term the sense it has when a race is said to have been won by an 'outsider', that is, by a contestant thought before the event to have had very little chance of winning. The Muslims of the West, who are certainly outsiders in the primary sense of being *expatriates* (Muslims on foreign soil, living beyond the *Dar al Islam*, the 'realm of Islam'), are certainly not so in the word's secondary sense of *outcasts*, 'banished from' or 'stripped of' their Muslim identity, as Ayman al-Zawahiri [of Al Qaeda] was still recently claiming. But they could well take on the role of outsiders in the third sense defined above of those through whom, in a totally unexpected and unforeseen fashion, could come the progress – even the salvation – of an Islamic civilisation that is at present dramatically locked into a state of stagnation, or even into one of moral, social, intellectual and spiritual regression.

Will they be likened tomorrow to those Persians of whom Ibn Khaldûn spoke in the 14th century in a famous passage of his *Universal History*? 'It is remarkable,' he wrote, 'that with a few notable exceptions the majority of Islamic savants, whether in the religious or the scientific field, have been from outside of the Arab people' such as 'Sîbawayh and, after him, Al-Fârisî and az-Zajjaj. All of them were of non-Arab (Persian) descent' and this 'in spite of the fact that Islam is an Arabic religion, and its founder was an Arab' (Ibn Khaldûn, 1967: v. 3, 311–313) noting that, as did that writer himself in this quotation, we are taking the word 'Islam' here in the sense of the Islamic religion. This came about, he explained, from the fact that in the first few centuries of Islam the nomadic Bedouin Arabs were lacking in the arts and sciences which in contrast were flourishing in the urban centres of the Persian Empire. It was this circumstance of the immersion of Persian Islamic thinkers within a particularly rich cultural environment at a distance from the birthplace of Islam itself and outside of the 'Arab peoples' which stimulated the whole body of thought of that civilisation.

Could it then be that Muslims in the West are today in a situation comparable to that of those Persians of yore, since they too find themselves in a position which is outside of the heart of Islam, and equally immersed in a foreign but extremely stimulating culture, in effect a culture which for the last two centuries has been involved in a process of profound change of its religious dimension?

This is the hypothesis that I would like to examine here, by analysing the *unique* nature of the *situation* of the Western Muslim, not only on the geographic level but also on that of the *mind*, that is, incorporating at once the moral, intellectual and spiritual dimensions. The inherent paradox of this situation – the fact of examining the Islamic civilisation *from the outside while still being part of it* – could very well provide to such a Muslim awareness the opportunity to induce an upwelling of thought of exceptional fruitfulness for the future of Islam, by lending a direction and a value to those cultural mutations which it is undergoing in today's globalising world without yet being able to give them the slightest genuine direction.

The Muslim World and Human Rights: From a Logic of Competition to One of Contribution

The Muslim world is for the moment in a state of total schizophrenia – caught or torn between a frenetic process of material modernisation on the one hand – markedly in the economic, financial, scientific and technical sectors – and a near-total absence of cultural modernisation – in philosophy, politics, morality and religion – on the other. This cultural gap, which is yawning ever wider, derives from the Islamic world's introverted and irrational self-enclosure within a logic of the rejection, or at most of a merely outward and relativistic acceptance, of the ideals of Human Rights, which promote the development of a spirit of criticism, of individual freedom of conscience and thought, of absolute tolerance for differing world views, and of sexual equality. The adoption on the 15 January 2008 of an Arab Charter of Human Rights demonstrates once more this tragic self-enclosure within a civilisational cul-de-sac arising from a desire to set up a rival text to compete with the Universal Declaration. For this Charter, which claims to be simply an adaptive document allowing account to be taken of the cultural specificities of Islam, in fact contains statements that are in flagrant contradiction of that Declaration.

Two examples of such contradiction: the right to change religion is not allowed for by Article 30 of this Charter, which nevertheless seeks to promote the freedom of belief; Article 3 asserts equal rights for women and men, but immediately limits this equality by the reference to 'the light of positive discrimination stipulated by religious law (شَرِيعَة, *sharî'a*)'. On its appearance, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour (2008) declared that this document remained incompatible with existing international norms:

> Throughout the development of the Arab Charter, my office shared concerns with the drafters about the incompatibility of some of its provisions with international norms and standards. These concerns included the approach to death penalty for children and rights of women and non-citizens. Moreover, to the extent that it equates Zionism with racism, we

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reiterated that the Arab Charter is not in conformity with the General Assembly Resolution 46/86.

But what if, rather than adopting this logic of resistance along with its 'falsely genuine' adherence to human rights principles and its recurrent, vain accusations of Western cultural imperialism, Islamic civilisation were instead to engage upon a true logic of *contribution*? For in effect the ideals around human rights are doubtless not yet in universally 'ready-to-use' form, already fully formed and realised. They rather constitute what the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1992: 289–290) called 'inchoate universals', or 'potential universals' making clear that 'only a real discussion in which convictions are permitted to be elevated above conventions, will be able to state, at the end of a long history yet to come, which alleged universals will become universals recognized by 'all the persons concerned' (Habermas), that is, by the "representative persons" (Rawls) of all cultures'.

It is within the framework of this 'long history' that the other world civilisations must now make their voices heard in conjunction with the West and engage it in dialogue on the subject of the universalisation of values and the mutual construction of genuinely universal ones. It is henceforth urgent that instead of sequestering themselves within an assertion of 'Islamic values' or 'Asian values' which compete with the ones enshrined in the Declaration of Human Rights, the Islamic and Asiatic Easts should adopt a different posture in this debate, one that is no longer defensive but contributory – more precisely a posture of participatory and creative critique, rather than of a negatory critique.

For this to happen, it will require acceptance by them of two things: on the one hand, that it serves no purpose to continue challenging the position that the Human Rights Declaration constitutes the already shared framework for such reflection, and that the discourse of contestation or relativisation of these Rights should be definitively abandoned as being sterile and conducive only to polemic; and on the other hand, that all *Asian and Islamic values must henceforth take up the task of leading the thought on the dignity of those possessing such Rights much further down this path than the initial effort of the West has thus far managed to achieve.* In the words of the philosopher Daryush Shayegan (2001: 27), 'the West has neglected the spirit of questioning, it has made of its modernity a privilege and a concern which has caused a shaking to its very core', and, quoting the French intellectual Jean-Claude Guillebaud, 'it has ceased to exercise upon itself the capacity for criticism by which it was built'. This observation is no doubt a little excessive, but is nevertheless important in that it engages the *responsibility* of the other realms of civilisation to *extend the work* initiated by the West in terms of the formation of values, and so to take up in their turn the humanist project for the fulfilment of which the strength of the West seems today somewhat exhausted.

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Towards an Understanding of the Human Individual
further than the West has Taken it

History has not come to an end, and Human Rights as formulated by the West are not the final word on humanism centred on the individual. They are but the foundation stone. They are a *terminus a quo*, not a *terminus ad quem*, that is to say, they constitute a provisional point of arrival, an intermediate staging point prior to a new departure. Such is the direction of a history which, though not written in advance, could well turn out to be the most bountiful: a 21st century which could prove to be the moment when the inaugural step taken by the West in the affirmation of Human Rights – *making the dignity of the individual central in the world, declaring the individual person to be the most sacred of all realities, the true locus of the sacred* – will be reinforced and extended by the contributions that the civilisations of the world can draw from their broad and deep reserves of sacralisation of the human person, and by which they will become united in a global humanism built upon the image, elaboration and shaping of a human individual whose being will rise far beyond the point to which the West has already raised him or her on the scale of human individuality.

The tragedy of the modern West has been to have sacralised the individual without having been able to determine and discover the essence of the sacred within him. Mohammed Iqbal, a Muslim philosopher from Lahore, was already pointing this out exceptionally lucidly in the 1930s when he said that the West has not gone far enough in its effort to discern what was truly sacred in mankind, with the result that it had set at the centre of the world nothing more than the most ordinary of individualities, whereas there was to be found in the depths of ourselves a much more profound soul: 'the modern man has ceased to live soulfully, i.e. from within [. . .] he is entirely cut off from the unplumbed depths of his own being'. As a result 'he finds himself unable to control his ruthless egoism and his infinite gold-hunger which is gradually killing all higher striving in him and bringing him nothing but life-weariness' (Iqbal, 2008: 187–188).

But in this respect, what is there in each individual human person that is more deeply embedded within themselves than their own immediate self, and which therefore effectively deserves such sacred respect? To find this inner self is the *hidden task* of the discourse of the civilisation of human rights: we Westerners proclaim – correctly – the principle of the human person's sacred dignity, but since the 18th century we have never been capable of enabling the sacredness of that individuality to emerge, and hence we have simply delivered up to the world the expansion of our own most immediate and most superficial selves . . . *We have centred the world on a decentred self.* We have centred the world on the periphery of our ego, on its 'natural', instinctual and rational aspects. What we needed to do was to centre it on the spiritual heart of our being, that point deep within ourselves from which arises the source of that infinite creative power that preceding millennia have called God or the divine. But we in the West have missed this historic opportunity: though we have placed man at the centre of the world, that is, we have opened up to the light of day everything that all the wisdoms of the earth had held secret and occult within themselves, concealed behind the masks of the gods, yet we have not known how to construct a system of civilisation which might have developed the art of assisting the

sacredness of that human self to emerge. Instead we have been satisfied with placing at the centre of the world the most vulgar and primitive aspect of our self. We have delivered up to the world the least worthy part of that self, and for two centuries now we have been interminably paying the consequences of a world constructed purely by this ego of low level: totalitarianism, colonialism, imperialism, nihilism, materialism, consumerism, a whole range of diverse but homogeneous realisations of the absurd reign of this self that is bereft of any depth, this lustful and greedy creature driven solely by a will to power and a will to blind pleasure.

That is also why the freedom of expression granted the individual in our societies has not produced only positive results, far from it. Alongside its unequivocal advantages – rights of assembly and demonstration, the right to strike, democratic pluralism, independence of the media and so on – it has also produced a certain number of undesirable 'secondary effects', such as the release of our primary urges – the urges of 'individualism', of 'egoism' or of fundamental 'narcissism' in the words of Christopher Lasch (1979). What is the nature of the free person of the West in his most common and concrete form but that of an individual who to be sure does not suffer under any domination, but who, as Tocqueville was already pointing out, does not employ that freedom other than for the mediocre satisfaction of 'vulgar and petty pleasures'? The net result of the use of freedom in the West is thus highly variable. What have we really done with it? Has this right which we affirm as sacred really allowed us to transcend our animality? Has it made us better people? Nor in this is there anything which sufficiently corresponds to a genuine manifestation of a sacred dimension which we have accorded to man in purely *theoretical* fashion without ever having said or experienced anything of its reality.

That is what we in the West are genuinely lacking: we have stated loud and clear the principle of the sacredness of humanity, but we still do not know anything particularly fundamental about this 'sacredness in principle', and for that reason we are failing to bring any sacred dimension into our lives. We have put ourselves – and this is something that the rest of the world should have the intelligence to reproach us with, instead of contesting the Declaration of Human Rights – in an *impossible situation* because *we are demanding that a sacred respect be shown for a dignity and way of life which have not yet elicited their own sacred dimension* . . . I have already elsewhere put forward in respect of this the hypothesis that the often deplored impotence of the Human Rights Charter to effectively protect the human person from all the violations of which it is the victim arises precisely from this limitation: we proclaim the principle of sacred respect for a person whose sacred, transcendent or supernal dimension remains to be made manifest. The evil which continues today to be done to man despite the bulwark that his Rights provide may thus well have as its fundamental cause the fact that man remains in the eyes of all, and first and foremost in his own eyes, simply a creature of nature, an animal that is certainly conscious and capable of suffering but a mere animal nonetheless, who has not managed to radiate that higher aura that the sacred has always been able to create about itself and by which it has been able to protect its high places and servants through inspiring both a reverential awe and an irresistible attraction.

In relation to the above, what is at stake in what I am intending to discuss in the remainder of this article is how to make a contribution to bringing out the sacred ele-

ment in the human person. The issue for me here, as in a certain number of my previous writings, is to work in a direction along which a philosopher like Emmanuel Levinas has sought to proceed before me. When Levinas spoke of 'the epiphany of the face' in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), what was he seeking in effect to do if not – already – to locate in man that which effectively manifests his sacred dimension or his transcendence, his non-reducibility to the objects and creatures of this world? The face of the other, he said, is what limits 'the power of my power', that is, the manifestation which, through its capacity to express emotions and thoughts, alerts me that I am in the presence of a conscious entity and which should interdict me from causing it harm . . . But alas we know well that the face of a man pleading for mercy never has held back the executioner. That is why Levinas's earnest project – to find in man something which could truly inspire a holy respect – must be taken up again and extended beyond the insufficiently robust response of Levinas himself.

Considering the Foundation of our Dignity within the Bounds of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

It is *within the protective bounds* of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all civilisations of the world today must come together to consider this question: how to bring out the sacred dimension of human life? And if we define the sacred in terms of how it is most universally understood, that is, the concept of an infinite power of creation, this question then becomes: *how do we make each human being living on this planet the source of an infinite power of creation?* Our objective henceforth lies there: to become sacred individuals revealing in and through their lives that which is at the very origin of the universe, in essence that infinite power of creation from which the universe itself has come.

In this perspective, the Human Rights Charter provides merely the protective enclosure, the bulwark of which I spoke earlier. Its function is to protect this striving effort of man to bring to birth the sacred dimension of his individuality. It is only under the shelter of their guarantee that this second birth of humanity can take place, because by preventing man from having to suffer the violence of evil, they offer him a space within which his being can come to its full fruition in complete security. That is why the principles of Human Rights are at once indispensable, unchallengeable and insufficient: indispensable in providing a defensive rampart about man, but insufficient in that they do not deliver up any idea of man's future becoming, an idea that remains to be constructed within the shelter of their protective bounds.

To seek this sacredness together, that is, to unite in a search for the meaning of an individual's life beyond the individual as defined by the West, is what must be today the task of a humanism on the global scale. We must forge a path that is both concrete and sublime towards the sacralisation of human life, able to be shared by all on earth, translatable into all symbolic, ethical and spiritual languages. In this regard, as we shall see, the situation of Islam's 'outsiders' in the West is a privileged position for participating in this task, because they possess a *double heritage* – on the one hand the Western history of the elaboration of Human Rights, and on the other the resources of Islam on the question of the essence of human dignity. In relation to

this latter, they are to be numbered among whom Islamic tradition calls *isthmuses*, the mediators and interpreters who facilitate understanding between the discourses and wisdoms of two worlds. This image of the *isthmus (بَرْزَخ)* which both separates and links two spaces is one of the most beautiful of the Qur'an: 'He has made the two seas to flow freely (so that) they meet together. Between them is an isthmus which they cannot pass' (Surah LV: 19–20). And this isthmus will be finally opened so that the seas of the world and of the different cultures may meet and mingle their waters, which is symbolised in another verse of the Qur'an where it is said that men will cross the isthmus on the day of their resurrection: 'and before them is an isthmus [barrier] until the day they are raised' (Surah XXIII: 100). Could it be that this resurrection might correspond to the second birth that we can today glimpse in prospect for humanity: the awakening to the life of one's sacred individuality?

Analysis of the Value of the Actual Situation of Muslims in the West (1)

The first condition for Muslims of the West to dare to realise to the full the advantage their situation gives them is that they should more fully assume and give realisation to their difference and their singularity. To do so, they must dare to be themselves. They must bring about their own determination by distancing themselves from the tutelage and fascination of the models currently dominant in the Muslim countries in respect of doctrine and traditions. Western Muslims must literally *take their situation into their own hands*; they need to come to a full awareness of and full responsibility for it, so that they may have the opportunity to play an important part in the history of Islam.

The term 'situation' is here to be understood exactly in the sense that Jean-Paul Sartre gave to this concept in *Being and Nothingness* (1958/95: 481–489, 'Freedom and Facticity: The Situation'): the individual who desires to construct his or her freedom, to lead her life in autonomous fashion and to trace out his own singular destiny must do so by interacting with 'the various structures of their situation', that is, the whole of what determines 'my place, my body, my past, my position', in short 'my fundamental relation to the Other'. So it is that, for Sartre, 'there is freedom only in a situation', because it is only by learning to make use of what one's situation offers by way of strengths (a history, a culture, a childhood, a society etc.) that the individual will be able to act, realise his own self and contribute to the reconstruction of the world. Each situation is singular and unique: it is by drawing strength from this objective singularity that each person can derive both the means of affirming her or his subjective singularity and his or her own power to act upon reality.

Islam's Western 'outsiders' must therefore firstly reach an understanding of the singularity that is theirs, so as to subsequently be able to use it as a 'lever of existence', a creative instrument for a new understanding of Islam. In relation to which, what an initial analysis of this specific singularity of their life and intellectual experience shows is that it has two characteristics:

1. Firstly, it is *exemplary in value* and *future-directed in orientation* in that if it offers a proof actualised over several decades now that Islam can be lived in any type of society, even where it is a minority practice (as pertains in our Western and multicul-

tural societies), hence not only in those societies that are structured and governed by Islamic tradition. The experience of the West's Islamic 'outsiders' clearly establishes that the Islamic faith has no need of an Islamic state, or even of an Islamic society, that it has nothing to fear from globalisation, a mixed cultural and social environment, the dialogue of civilisations or their interpenetration. The implantation of these Muslims within societies which are at once Christian, secularised and multicultural often subjects them to a stern test: they are constantly questioned about their true identity (is their primary allegiance to their adopted state or to their religion, to the nation or to Islam?) and in their present environment there regularly arise the questions about the compatibility or incompatibility of Islam with democracy, of Islam with modernity, of Islam and Human Rights . . . Muslims in the West are also frequently requested to take part in broader debates in which these societies undertake self-questioning on their values and on their futures: how can we live together with all our differences? How to avoid the trap of communitarianism? What contributions can religions make to common moral and intellectual education, or to questions of bioethics? It is this dual experience, of facing up to the criticisms (even at times the wilful lack of understanding and hostility), and of participation in these more general debates, which has an exemplary value for the Muslim world. For it points the way towards a possible engagement by Islam in a logic of opening out to the world and of contribution towards the common elaboration of shared values between the civilisations. By facing squarely the other visions of the world, by accepting to be questioned critically by those other perspectives, Islam will be able to discern more clearly what it has to offer for the future, that is, what it has within it that is truly universal or able to be made universal, what it is capable of bringing to the table of a global project for world culture.

2. In the second place, the situation of Western Islam holds within it a *critical value* and an *opportunity for regeneration* which are without peer. Muslims in the West are literally constrained to invent new modes of expression for their religious culture in societies where the dominant social *mores* have been defined upon other ethical, political and religious bases that are different from theirs. They find themselves bereft in the West of all that in the Muslim world provides an objective framework for the expression of their faith, constituting it as a 'social fact' (Durkheim, 1895), beginning, if often only in symbolic form, with the recognition of Shari'a law as the foundation stone for the State Constitution. But it is also a whole set of institutions and signposts which they will lack, from the Muslim calendar to the public call to prayer and including dress codes and so on. In the absence of all such traditional supports to Islamic identity, Muslims in the West find themselves faced with two alternatives: either to cultivate nostalgia for and an unswerving cult of the lost identity, or else to re-invent almost from top to bottom their being-in-the-world. It is in this latter sense that the experience of these 'outsiders' naturally effects a re-opening of the *ijtihâd* (اِجْتِهَاد, the effort of personal interpretation of matters religious) along with presenting them with a challenge that is potentially generative of salvation though total reconstitution of their cultural and religious value-system. In contrast, within the Muslim world itself, the rigidity apparent in the areas of customs, values and institutions has no chance of being contested with the same breadth. The forces of reform emerging within this world itself – in relation to recognising freedom of

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conscience in religious matters, the establishment of the principle of equality between the sexes, of clear separation between the political and religious institutions of power – in no way benefit from the same context of freedom of discovery and the necessity for innovation, but instead come up against the extremely heavy resistance of the ruling order, and find themselves continually frustrated by the inertia of the forces of conservatism, as by the crushing weight of ancestral mental and social habits.

Being on the Outside as the Chance for Critical Distance

Let us now examine in greater depth the situation of these Muslim 'outsiders': in the West – these Muslims *from the edge* as they are termed by the Columbia University historian Richard W. Bulliet (1994). He points out that these Muslims of the edge have historically always been agents of progress and regeneration for a Muslim world whose centre (strictly speaking one should refer to its 'centres') has always been the victim of its own rigid immobilism. 'The edge situations have parallels in the other religions, but they have proved to be exceptionally creative in the history of Islam' (Bulliet, 2006: 181–182), notably, he explains, because in societies where Muslims are in a minority, Islam does not have 'official ecclesiastical structures', as a consequence of which no-one can impose on these Muslims any 'authority', leaving thereby room for personal initiative or for what one might call spiritual creativeness.

A priori however, the fact that the 'outsiders' stand outside of the Muslim world could appear as a crippling disadvantage for the formation and persistence of their identity: not being in a society ruled, or at the very least historically organised, by Islam their access to its religious culture seems more difficult – taking into account the thematics of exile, separation from one's roots and the acculturation that would have to be put into effect in support of this idea. But inversely, this situation on the outside offers the advantage of critical distance, the chance to displace one's view-point, something which is recognised to be highly stimulating and even necessary for the exercise of reflection. It allows for one's identity to free itself from the fascination of the identical, that is, from purely and simply repeating the past, and grants to it a dynamic dimension for the alteration and recomposition of the self. It thus corresponds to the very experience of the release of thought, since to initiate a thinking process requires as the first rational step the effort to stand outside of oneself and of what one thought one knew, hence the effort to become a self-spectator – it is thanks to this acquired distance vis-à-vis oneself that one becomes able, in the words of Bertrand Russell, to 'see the problem where others only see the obvious'.

Seen from outside, or from a distance, what was previously familiar and habitual becomes suddenly strange, because it is now foreign. Thus it is that what had been blurred by its immersion within an Islamic society, and so had seemed natural, obvious and normal, namely the whole cultural 'system', suddenly becomes a matter for questioning for Muslims on the outside – whether born in the West or having migrated there. They regard the system that is not their own as belonging to another world, where nothing is self-evident any longer. They have thus no natural understanding of it and will interrogate it in the attempt to determine what may be preserved, or not, as the roots of origin of their displaced identity.

Let us take a few examples, drawn from the situation of women, of something that is no longer an apparent normality for the 'outsider' in the West. The fact that a woman stays at home, that she will not sit alone on the terrace of a café (an absence that is customary in the Muslim world), or further, that her husband has been chosen for her and that she is not free to marry a non-Muslim – none of this, and more generally nothing of the customs which subordinate women to men, will be able to retain its 'natural' or 'inherent' character for Islamic identity, but will clearly become the object of a much more radical questioning on the part of a Muslim of the West, who has become accustomed to the fact that woman are in law and in practice as free as men.

In order for 'culture-bound' thinking to free itself from its presuppositions, its stock ideas, there is thus no better method than to quit one's place of birth and to discover that there are other ways of seeing the world, other ways of conceiving it, other ways of believing. There is nothing more conducive to this than to share the same soil, the same language, the same laws and the same daily life with a people who for centuries have remained the Great – and little-known – Other – that Westerner who was for so long the accursed *kâfir*, the hostile Crusader, the invading settler, the rival foreigner from the other shore. But then, within the space of a few waves of immigration, the Muslim found himself transported into the cities and the states of that Other who suddenly did not appear so alien, but who became the neighbour, the colleague, the friend and sometimes even the lover.

How favourable a situation this is for the self-directed efforts of Islamic minds . . . and of Western minds! For in such a situation of close proximity, necessity dictates and those who were strangers to each other of yore must learn to live together. But having become fellow-citizens, sharing the same vital space, the Muslim and the non-Muslim cannot for long go on being happy simply to coexist with each other: the more and more obvious failure of the pluricultural model of the Northern European countries shows that it is impossible to envisage for the long term a society made up of separated communities, where the Muslims would continue to live amongst each other in distinct quarters. On the contrary, the logic of the ghetto must be rejected in favour of attempting to *genuinely live together.* That requires, on the part of the Western states, a social justice which provides groups of immigrants with the economic and cultural means to live elsewhere than in the particular zones to which they have been relegated. That also requires on the part of individuals themselves, both Muslim and non-Muslim, a refusal to embrace the logic of turning inward, a need to resist the fascination of an identity fixed rigidly in the past, and to overcome the automatic reflex of the fear of the different. There is nothing more unacceptable in the West than those suburbs and those schools where you see only people of Arab, African or Turkish origin, and there is nothing sadder than to see the youth of these same population groups roaming together in the streets, without mixing with others. Where are the West's principles of humanity, when it grants no other social alternative to these men and women who have arrived from elsewhere than to remain among themselves? It is now imperative that Western societies squarely face the fact that they have changed and that they will never again be as they were before: they have become multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural, and within this great plethora of diversity can also be found Islam, not as a 'foreign body' or a new 'enemy within' but as a new component part of an over-arching identity.

The West must also come to realise that the Western Muslims are themselves Westerners and not imported foreigners. And instead of continuing indefinitely to be wary of them (as can be observed in all the debates around the supposedly radical 'difference' of Islam), the West must give the Muslims within it all the means necessary to carry through to completion the metamorphosis that they are currently engaged upon. There must be a common effort to build a new common identity and a shared vision of the universal. Western society as a whole must understand that, for the sake of its own evolution, the self-questioning being undertaken by its own Muslim citizens is a priceless piece of good fortune. For by reflecting on their own transformations, they are generating a living example of this cultural mixedness in which the West must learn to recognise itself. The critical and creative strength of the Muslims of the West, which is to the benefit of the whole of the society, is their experience of a complex, plural and dynamically conflictual identity, shaped by an otherness which constrains the culture to ceaselessly question itself and so to forge a regeneration.

The fact that they are also as much Westerners as they are Muslims and that the inner self of each one of them is a permanent laboratory in which cultural mixedness is being constructed is certainly a difficult situation to embrace, but it is an extremely fertile one both for itself and for all, that is to say, for the reflection by Western societies about themselves as well as for the Muslim world. For the questions that these complex interiorities are necessary drawn to ask of themselves are critical for the future of the Islamic identity within an ever more multicultural world. How and how far should one westernise without losing one's identity? What is there that is essential (i.e. non-negotiable) in my Islamic identity? What is there that is compatible with Western values? Is there anything incompatible? Is there in Western values anything which may enrich my Islamic culture? Is there in my Islamic culture anything which may contribute to enriching my Western culture? This is how, within each mind, the effort to construct the universalisable might begin . . .

The mention of good fortune also includes responsibility. If effectively it turns out that their position as 'outsiders' provides an opportunity for the Muslims of the West, then they will tomorrow have the immense responsibility of taking upon themselves a decisive part of the self-critical gaze and the dialogic activity that the Islamic civilisation must set in motion if it wishes to accord itself the means of contributing to the realisation of a cosmopolitan world order – that is, a global order founded on the mutual elaboration and sharing of values which we will all consider tomorrow as the pillars of our world.

Singularity and Fecundity of the Situation of Western Muslims (3)

Let us consider this matter in more depth. The generative potential inherent in the situation of Muslims as 'outsiders', which we might describe as that situation's 'fecundity', is to be found first and foremost in its *spatial singularity*. Each Muslim in the West is situated in a position of cultural complexity, which one might define as a position both of double exteriority and double interiority.

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1. Double exteriority, first in relation to the Islamic world, but also to the Western world, given that, though immersed in the latter, persons of Islamic culture still retain by reason of that cultural attachment an element of foreignness, of difference which singularises them. Being thus 'doubly on the outside', they are by the same process made doubly distant and accorded a double critical capacity: they are able at once to critique Islam and the West. And even more significantly, a critique of Islam by and from the West, and a critique of the West by and from Islam. A critique of the short-comings of Islam through the values of the West, and a critique of the shortcomings of the West through the values of Islam.

2. Double interiority. They belong simultaneously to the two cultures, which are theirs and which to differing degrees enter into the composition of their identity – an identity, which, it must again be reiterated, is complex, rich and, for better or worse, problematic because it is subject to the stresses and strains of 'internal alterity' (the experience of 'oneself as an other' according to the apt expression of Paul Ricœur). This being the case, such persons are thereby 'doubly on the inside': they are the heirs of Islam as well as the heirs of the West. They are able to perceive the potential for the universalisation of the values of the West in the light of how far these accord transculturally with the values of Islam; and also able to perceive the potential for universalisation of the values of Islam in the light of how far these accord trans-culturally with the values of the West.

Let us pause to sum up the fruitful advantage that this double exteriority and double interiority offers. It is apparent that it offers the Muslim 'outsider' of the West the means to undertake a double critique. From the experience of his exterior-ity in relation to the Muslim world and of his interiority in relation to the West, he is *ideally* able to conduct a critical examination of Islamic culture from the standpoint of another value universe to which he has become thoroughly integrated. And simul-taneously, from the experience of his interiority within the Islamic culture and his exteriority in relation to the West to which he does not exclusively belong, he is also in an ideal position to conduct a critical examination of Western culture.

In the present-day context of question marks hanging over the ability of the Islamic and Western cultures to understand one another, to enter into dialogue, to find some level of compatibility, it is thus clear that the situation of our 'outsiders' is *ideal*, for two reasons:

1. ideal in the sense that we have men and women in that situation whom their dual cultural attachment and their ongoing efforts to 'compatibilise' the two in their daily lives predispose to becoming 'servants of the universal', since they are effec-tively forging on a daily basis a synthesis between these two universes (proving thereby that such a synthesis is indeed possible).

2. ideal in the sense that this situation will be able to bring about this synthe-sis, but only on condition – let us repeat – that these Muslim 'outsiders' realise the opportunity that is theirs and that they grasp it, namely that they have the courage to take possession of their autonomy with regard to the Muslim world and its models of civilisation, which they might otherwise be simply tempted to reproduce. Which supposes that there occurs among Muslims a clear acceptance of their crucial role in the universal destiny of Islam. The Muslims of the West must assert their belonging to themselves as much as their belonging to the West!

And finally, just as much as having an ideal value, their situation has an unequalled *heuristic* value. Indeed, their expertise in life and thought is vital for a global world which is today asking more and more agonised questions about the worsening of the clash of civilisations between the West and Islam, and which fears that this clash may be insuperable. If one wants to know whether Islam and the West are compatible, one must put under the microscope, for its character as a laboratory experiment on a life-sized scale, the outcome of the adventure of the Muslims of the West.

Singularity and Fecundity of the Spatial Situation of Western Muslims (4)

It is a truism to say that every age is a new one. But in the novelty offered by the present era to the Muslims of the West today, the conciliation that they are obliged to attempt between Islam and the West is framed by a set of world circumstances that have never been met before. I will spell this out by saying that *the time for self-sufficiency is over for the different civilisations of the world*. As a result of the globalisation of interchanges and of information, of the standardisation or uniformisation of values, of aspirations and ways of living, the civilisations of the world are in a permanent and ever-increasing state of interpenetration and even of fusion. Gone then is the time when the Islamic civilisation or the Western civilisation – to mention only the two we are dealing with here – could remain 'in a chemically pure state', or at least maintain the fantasy of being able to go on developing purely from out of their own resources (even if in reality their heritage has always been augmented by elements drawn from other cultures, which is most especially the case for Islam, a religion of conquest which, as it islamised numerous indigenous cultures, has in its turn retained the imprint of them within itself).

An entirely and uniquely Islamic civilisation – founded exclusively on the Qur'an, the Hadith, Shari'a law and the theological, juridical, social and moral traditions which arose out of the Qur'anic origins – has certainly never existed in the past and just as certainly will never exist in the future: it has become impossible for any cultural realm, whatever it might be, to close itself off from outside influences. The Muslim world, whatever its present state of tension, however much its conservative tendency may have regrown in strength, in particular Salafism which aims at restoring Muslim societies to their purely Islamic origins, will not be able to cast out from itself those elements that it has derived from other cultures.

Consequently, there as well the situation of the Muslims of the West provides an opportunity for 'outsiders' – those who have been disregarded but who nevertheless win the race – in other words those who reveal the way of the future from the present time. For they necessarily nurture less passionately than the others the illusion or the myth of the self-sufficiency of Islam. Contrary to the 'Muslims on the inside' who can still imagine (and often so like to) that their society remains profoundly Islamic, essentially guided by its essential traditions – and that in doing so it *resists* the outside world and the dilution of Islam that they fear would occur in a globalised culture – the Muslims of the West find themselves in societies that are much more advanced down the path to multiculturalism, and as a consequence *they already see today what will be tomorrow the situation of Islam everywhere*, including in its historic

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heartlands: the mixing of cultures, a cultural hybridisation. And they are already hearing what one might state as the categorical imperative addressed to each culture by each of the others: 'Align yourself with all of us!' – or further 'Construct with us a universe of shared meaning, values and ends!'

In this regard, I do not think – contrary to the thesis of Samuel Huntington (1996) – that the future will be one of 'regulated exchange' between civilisations, in other words the maintenance of a situation of exteriority between cultural zones which would remain distinct and which would be concerned only with dialoguing with each other, tolerating each other simply to avoid making war on each other. It is no longer the time simply to find points of convergence or agreement between cultures. Our spiritual ambition must be reflective of the intermingled world in which we are all already living more or less: we must bring together the values of each culture and through an unprecedented effort of intellectual creativity unite them in a universal vision of man, of his rights, his dignity and his ultimate vocation.

Man as the Heir of God: A Humanist Proposal from an Outsider

How can the humanist heritages of Islam and the West be enabled to mutually fertilise each other in order to give birth to a new synthesis? What sublime image of human dignity can these two cultures form together? I attempted to sketch the outlines of such an image arising from a double inheritance in my previous work *L'islam sans soumission* [*Islam without submission*] – precisely from the position of an 'outsider' which is my own. I wanted to show that it was this which allowed me to find in the Qur'an the path of a new anthropology, of a new light to be shed on the human condition: a light 'neither of the East nor of the West' (Surah XXIV: 35) because it is to be found where these two merge together and it is born of their union, transcending what had been separately derived up till then by Islamic and by Western thought.

This vision of man, of his destiny or of his history, already was present in a sense in a latent state in the Qur'anic text, but *could only become readable through the eyes of an* outsider, *nurtured equally in the culture of the West as in that of Islam, and who stands between them at the point where they touch and are transformed the one by the other.*

Before however presenting this image of the dignity of man, I would like an aspect of my methodology to be noted in relation to this. If, both in this article as in my other publications, I do not hesitate to use 'I', that is, to speak in the first person of this situation of a Western Muslim 'outsider' by presenting it as 'mine', that is because my philosophical reflections are not intended to be elaborated from an abstractly objective point of view. The mode of objectivity that I am aiming at is rather an objectivity that is constructed by my own subjectivity through the effort that it undertakes upon itself (both from within itself and against itself at the same time) in order to think objectively about the engagement of the Muslims of the West in a particular historico-social situation which at the same time is theirs. The 'I' that I use is thus that of an 'outsider' who is trying to construct an objective philosophical discourse not by negation of his subjectivity but by a construction in itself of a critical space of objective subjectivity.

In the light of this clarification, let us pass on to explain just what is this sublime image of man the possibility of whose realisation the position of being an 'outsider' can reveal. What are we speaking of here? Up until now, the classic interpretation of the Qur'an formed its image of man on the basis of what one might call a 'static anthropology'. It rested upon a verse considered from the earliest as fundamental by exegetes of the text, verse 30 of Surah II (*Al Baqara*) in which God said 'I am going to place in the earth a *khalîf* (خَلِيفَة)'. The traditional exegesis has understood this as intending that the man-being was defined by the exercise of a function of lieutenancy of the divine sovereignty: he was created to be and eternally remains God's 'second-in-command', the servant or the administrator of God's justice. An anthropology that is static, therefore, and anhistoric, in the sense that man is immutably destined to this role of servanthood – as the highest creature of God's creation, the favourite and elect of God to represent Him, but a creature nevertheless and a creature *solely*.

In the English and French translations of the Qur'an, this idea of man as the representative of God has been rendered by the concepts of 'lieutenancy' or 'viceroyalty'. An important article which appeared in 1970 in the journal *Studia islamica* under the pen of the German philologist Rudi Paret (1970: 211) formulates on this subject the following synthesis: 'The Qur'anic expressions *khalîfa*, pl. *khalâ'if* and *khulafâ'*, have often been imprecisely translated. The singular form *khalîfa*, which is found only twice (surah II: 30 and XXXVIII: 26) is translated by Richard Bell as *vicegerent*, by Arthur J. Arberry as *viceroy*, by Régis Blachère (into French) as *vicaire* (see his remark on surah XXXVIII: 26) and by Muhammed Hamidullah as *lieutenant*. For the translation of the plural forms *khalâ'if* and *khulafâ'*, Bell passes from *successors* to *vicegerents*, Arberry from *successors* to *viceroys*, Hamidullah from *lieutenants* to *gerents*, while Blachère always uses the expression '*les derniers détenteurs*' ('*the last bearers*').

Now it transpires in effect, as already shown by the translations mentioned here which render the plural *khalâ'if* by 'successors' or 'last bearers', that *kha-la-fa* (خَ لَ ف) in Arabic, the triliteral root on which the word *khalîf* (خَلِيفَة) is formed, literally means 'succeed (another)', 'replace', 'substitute for'. This is confirmed in a highly important article on the meaning of this root, published in 1988 under the title 'The Term "Khalîfa" in Early Exegetical Literature' in the journal *Die Welt des Islams*. Its author, Wadâd Al-Qâdi, a Yale University professor and specialist in the political thought of primitive Islam as well as in Qur'anic exegesis, records five main meanings retained by traditional exegesis for the verb *khalafa*: '1. To succeed, to follow, to come after another'; '2. To replace, to substitute, to take the place of another, mainly in a temporary or supposed manner, to deputise for'; '3. To substitute, to replace, to take the place of another', but in contrast to meaning 2, 'normally after this other is gone (destroyed, dead etc.), thereby succeeding him'; '4. To inhabit, to cultivate'; '5. To govern, to rule, to be king' (Al-Qâdi 1988: 398–404).

Now this changes everything. In the light of the above, we have sound reasons for asserting that this verse 30 of Surah II calls on the human being to become infinitely more than the representative of God on earth. It is in reality the supreme ontological dignity of being God's successor that he is promised here. We can express this idea on two levels:

1. In religious language, man should be proclaimed as intended to become the heir of God. It should be added as well that the Final Judgement, which the Qur'an

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defines as the 'Day of Resurrection' (Surah II: 85), would then signify eschatologically that moment when man is transfigured into a new God of the creation – 'resurrected' precisely, as the text says, in this particular case to a new condition as creator. Religious prayer, faith and hope could thus find a new orientation: turning towards God to beseech his mercy in hastening this moment and thanking him in advance for granting to man his sovereignty over the universe.

2. In the language of philosophy, this verse would need to be understood as the idea that the concept of God stands for man in the full development of his nature. That is exactly the direction taken and developed by Mohammed Iqbal (2008: 110) when he wrote that in Islam the supreme name of the divine essence, Allah, designates in reality the most fully complete state of the human process of individuation, that is to say our full and total individuality, our infinite Self that far transcends our finite ego. He termed the 'Ultimate Ego' this deep Self of the human person, the state attained by the Sufi Hallâj when he exclaimed: 'I am the creative truth', which must be explicated as meaning 'the ultimate "I", which I experience, is the Power of creation'. Iqbal (2008: 62) wrote: 'In order to emphasise the individuality of the Ultimate Ego, the Qur'an gives Him the proper name of Allah.'

This verse thus conceals the idea of an anthropology that is no longer static but 'dynamic'. For the Qur'an does not ordain man to be the eternal servant of God, but his coming successor. In my book *L'islam sans soumission* I bring out the fact that the exegetical tradition of Islam has forever refused to accord this verse its full power of meaning: instead of understanding *khalîf* as 'successor', religious thought since Al Tabarî has drawn back – fearfully – from the consideration of what seemed unthinkable (how indeed can one come to terms with this theological and humanist UFO which is the idea of man as the heir of God?) and has preferred the error of considering the *khalîf* to be the simple 'lieutenant of God', the representative and minister of His justice, or as the English translations have it, his *viceroy, vice-gerent* or *deputy*.

There was in reality to be found in this verse an incomparably greater level of meaning . . . but it needed the situation of an 'outsider' such as we are in to have the means to take it up. The evidence of this meaning owes its becoming apparent, as always, to cultural conditions. Our reading of the Qur'anic text is that of a French Muslim philosopher for whom the idea of 'man as the heir of God' is meaningful because this idea is summoned by the whole moral, social, political, philosophical and spiritual context of this Western civilisation within which we, the 'outsiders', are immersed. We are in effect now in the time of the 'death of God' (say some), or of His 'vengeance' (say others), of discussion and generalised perplexity about the 'retreat from religion' and the future of 'secularisation' . . . In short, we are all witnesses and observers of a radical and definitive upheaval of the relationship which man has maintained with the divine for several millennia. Our deep conviction is that 'something is happening in heaven' (Corbin, 1981), that the fundamental relationship between heaven and earth is beginning to undergo a change of such proportions that it will surely bring an end to what Karl Jaspers called the 'axial age' of humanity, so as to open a new chapter of our vision of the human condition.[1]

The Consequence and Value of this Reading

To retain this way of understanding the verse – returning to it simultaneously its literal simplicity and its theologically cataclysmic character – not only sets off a chain reaction for the whole of the reading of the Qur'an, but allows Islam to progress in two ways, both of which are decisive in relation to its present state of stagnation.

1. It provides Islam with a theologically sound means of detaching itself from its image as the religion of the submission of man to God, whereas this erroneous image, widely disseminated among Muslims themselves, locks them into a religion of fatalism, dogmatism and the total absence of a spirit of criticism and freedom, by persuading them that the relationship with God is of its nature, and will always be, one of unquestioning and blind obedience.

2. Islam can engage a dialogue with the hypothesis that the West has been maintaining since the 19th century by which modernity must be defined as the 'exit from religion' and the 'death of God'. Through reading the verse in this way, Islam would be in a position to respond to the European hypothesis of the terribly nihilist and despairing 'murder of God by man' (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*) with a different vision of modernity: that of an 'age of heritage' when man born of the divine matrix acquires new and unforeseen powers and responsibilities towards the universe . . .

Therein lies the crucial interest of the image of a divine heritage for man today: it may assist him to keep under control the explosion of his power to act upon the world. For we are fearful that the aspiration formulated by René Descartes in the 17th century – 'to become as masters and possessors of nature' – may indeed be achieved, but for the worst. We are indeed well on the way towards dominating spheres of reality in which previously we were impotent: the genetic sources of life, the energies of nature, the production of wealth. But these powers, which have become colossal, escape us as much as they belong to us. It would therefore be extremely fruitful to act – as Immanuel Kant might say – '*als ob*', (as if) we were effectively in the process of becoming the heirs of God, that is, *as if we had no other existential and ethical choice.* For this One God represents the most perfect conception of the human mind to express the idea of *such supreme power associated with supreme wisdom*. In the situation we find ourselves in, this image is without doubt the one that is the most capable of leading us to *understand* and *take upon ourselves* what is occurring to us. *We have need of the idea of a divine heritage in order to learn to exercise our new power over being with the same wisdom as that for which God has provided the model.*

This idea of a divine heritage as the actualisation of a supreme degree of power in ourselves could prove indispensable today for two reasons:

1. Firstly, in order to provide us with an adequate means of representing the present reach of our power of action. This is literally 'extending to infinity'. We therefore need to avail ourselves of images of the infinite into which we are tipping after millennia of finitude. The ideas that we are the heirs and successors of God (as a concept of the infinite agencial power) is indispensable for us, for across the whole of our symbolic heritage it alone – by its breadth, its sublimity, its transcendence – enables us to *take the measure* of the transformation which is under way from a condition that is weak and wretched to a condition which is incommensurable, where our human capacities experience a progression towards a mathematical limit. The

image of the inheritance of such a state might help us to reckon and to assume this mutation.

2. Secondly, it can also grant to us the means of representing the supreme degree of wisdom which must direct this supreme degree of power. For in our present state we resemble young Cyclopean titans, lacking an ethic and a possible spiritual direction to correspond to their new-found strength. It is in order to render this human omnipotence creative and meaningful, and no longer blindly destructive, that we are constrained to represent ourselves to ourselves as the heirs of a God who has through his wisdom put his infinite power to the service of life. Without that, we will bear our future condition as a monstrous burden, through a failure to have recognised and clothed ourselves in the essence of what has made us human – an essence which I identify here as the creative power of life.

In the same way as God, we must direct our power towards the service of life. A central image of the Qur'an is that of the Garden 'the Eternal Garden' (Surah XXV: 15) 'a Garden whose width is that of the heavens and of the earth' (III: 133) . . . Becoming the heirs of God in this context would equate to *becoming the gardeners of being*. The gardener who indeed devotes himself to bringing into life the most beautiful and most fruitful forms. The image is a simple one, but it expresses well what we are seeking to express here: a situation of omnipotence coupled with a creatively wise omniscience.

This gardener may be taken as the whole of civilisation, if only it knew how to put all its strength – political, economic, scientific, technical, cultural, moral – to the service of the development of life. In this too, Islam has major symbolic resources at its disposal, which are capable of being universalised in the context and to the ends that I have just indicated. Within Islam, God is represented according to the principle of the *tawhîd* (تَوْحِيد, oneness), the only true divinity. To inherit from God therefore means to *inherit this oneness*, thus for humanity to become unified, *to become one as God is one*, in the service of a single task, the very one to which God devoted all his power, the creation and the love of life.[2]

We would obtain with this image another possible spiritual and intellectual blessing: a considerable deepening of our perception of human individuality, of its profound sacredness, of the ultimate ground of its dignity, and of the true dimension of the role that it is called to occupy in the universe. For, as I have pointed out above, the West has wanted 'to set man at the centre of the world', but it has succeeded only in installing in this central position a temporal and social individuality without any spiritual depth . . . And the whole world is suffering today from this fundamental ill. For all civilisations are being irresistibly drawn into the world that is opened up by this inaugural step taken by the West: tomorrow we will all live in a universe of which man is the centre, the master, the judge and the creator. But in this case, the universal question then becomes: *to what type of man are we going to entrust the sovereignty of the universe?* To an individualistic, materialistic, mediocre individual? Or else to an individuality endowed with sacredness whose existence we will all have known how to elicit within ourselves?

It is at such a point that the Islamic proposition considering man as the heir of God can so luminously come into play. In verses of exceptional sublimity, Mohammed Iqbal has described the moment when the human being comes to recognise him-

self as a co-creator whose task is to take over the action of creation from God. He discovers himself therein as the one to bring to its ultimate completion, or to its re-creation, the initial creation of God. From a philosophical and historical point of view, this can be understood as the idea that the evolution of man (his perfectibility, Jean-Jacques Rousseau would say) leads him progressively towards becoming the author of a universe which began without him, but which will not persist, once a certain moment is reached, except through the forms and models that emerge from human thought and hand:

> God:
> I made the whole world with water and with clay,
> But you have created Iran, Tartary and Ethiopia;
> I placed in the earth the ores of iron,
> But you have made of them the sword, the arrow and the gun;
> You have formed an axe from the tree of the garden,
> And a cage for the songbird!
>
> Man:
> You made the night, I have made the lamp,
> You created the lump of earth, and from it I have shaped the cup,
> You created the deserts, the mountains and the lowly places,
> I have fashioned the gardens, the meadows and the parks;
> He I am who transforms the stone into a mirror,
> And it is I who from poison distils a delightful and a tasty drink.

(Iqbal, 2000: 20)

Such a vision would blend with the West's elevation of the individual, but more especially would come to enhance it by conceiving of man not only as the material master of the world, but also as its spiritual master, because he acts as the worthy heir of God, that is, with the same harmonious concordance of power and wisdom that characterises the divine sovereignty.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, the West has considered its conception of the individual as a *terminus ad quem*, whereas probably the end-point was but a *terminus a quo*: a momentary resting point prior to a new point of departure. The Islamic image of man as 'heir of God' may thus constitute a possible extension of this initial sense towards a profound spiritual dimension.

It is also capable of furnishing us with a vision of modernity whose immense fecundity might be found in the way it differs from the Western vision of a secularisation characterised by its rupture with the age of religions. Where the modern West has been built on the rejection of the religious, on the conflict between faith and reason, this Islamic image of man as the heir of God projects the image of a modernity in which the religious comes to yield up all of its substance in the process of a transmission to and a rebirth in man of that which was previously in God. Modern man, or post-modern man – another benefit emerging from this humanist proposition – would no longer thus find himself in a world without God, abandoned to his weakness, his wretchedness, his finitude, but promised the burgeoning within himself of a power of being and acting that formerly belonged to the divine itself.

There could well be here substance for a genuine revival of the question concerning what constitutes the foundations of human dignity, a question thoroughly moribund in the West where it has become intellectually orthodox in recent years to proclaim the death of humanism (an outlook which is the ultimate avatar of the destructive nihilism of the 19th century) . . . But will the West understand the value of entering into dialogue with Islam over this hypothesis? In its turn, will Islam have the ability finally to confront its own truth by recognising that man will not remain indefinitely the slave of Allah, but that he is called to become God's potential heir? *And will 21st century humanity have the wisdom to realise that the mastery it is achieving over its own evolution could lead it to reach a situation of spiritual sovereignty over the very nature of its being, the symbol of which is furnished by this image derived from Islam, and more generally the divine concept of which has for millennia provided the model, thus allowing human beings to appreciate the true measure of the ambition that they should nurture for themselves and preparing them for it?*

Islam and the West would both have an enormous need of such a sublime image. The West because, as Fukuyama regretted in his *End of History*, the West insists that man has a dignity but it has become incapable of saying what this dignity consists of. Islam because it has become for the greater part an empire of subjection (of women to men, of the people to despots, of the faithful to the ulemas and mullahs) and what it needs the most is an image that *liberates* humankind. This is an example of the dual critical observation that Muslim 'outsiders' are especially well positioned to produce and to conduct.

But is the West ready to accept this proposition of Islamic humanism as to its future direction? To accept that Islam is able to come to its aid to enable the reconstruction of a sovereign image of man? Is Islam prepared for its part to accept that its humanism stands in complementarity with Human Rights as defined by the West, and not in replacement of these?

It is this possibility of mutual acceptance and conciliation within a common synthesis towards which I am personally seeking to explore the path through my writings. My work overall is attempting to create a *humanism that is shared between Islam and the West, and eventually a universal humanism that will one day be translatable into all symbolic tongues.* As the Prophet Mohammed said, '*Blessed be the strangers at your gate – Islam is born a stranger, and a stranger it will die.*'

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Notes

1. Jaspers (1953) called the 'axial age' the human era which began in the 8th century before Jesus Christ with the appearance of the first great religions founded on the paradigm of a divine dimension transcending the world. The characteristic of this age was thus one of determining the relationship of man with the sacred through the symbol of a vertical axis leading from earth to heaven. To reach the divine – that is, the source of infinite creative power – it was necessary to rise above oneself. But the whole history of the modern West comes down to replacing this axis, this necessity of rising out of

oneself and towards the divine, by the affirmation that infinite creative power resides in fact within ourselves.

2. God as One (تَوْحِيد) would thereby exist each time that a human being succeeds in unifying and actualising all the powers of his being by dedicating them to life. God as One will exist in even more intense form the day when a united humanity will manage to itself bring into convergence all its powers of acting, both individual and collective, towards this goal.

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