The Uniqueness of Islamic Culture[1]

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Abstract

This paper examines the main reasons behind why Islamic culture is different than other cultures. In the introduction part of the paper, the usage area of the words culture and civilization were tackled. In the first part of the paper, an evaluation of the uniqueness of Islamic culture was made and examples about this were given. In the second part of the paper, evaluations about how Islamic culture has struggled with modernization and secularization and how it has shaped itself as a result of this were made. In the third part of the paper, the situation in which Islamic civilization has regressed against the Western civilization causing emerging arguments and the current situation in Islamic civilization have been addressed by making evaluations on culture and civilization. In the final part, evaluations on thesis this paper has used were made.

Keywords: Civilization, Culture, Islamic Culture, Umran, westernization, globalization.

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Introduction

Culture and civilizations are two words that sometimes mistaken for each other even though they are two completely different terms. Sociologists and historians still have not reached a settlement on the scopes of these words. The word "Umran" famous Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun had used means both civilization and culture. On the other hand, Ziya Gokalp inserted that the word "Harth" meant culture, making a differentiation between the words culture and civilization and supported that a culture in the circle of Islamic culture can join the circle of Western culture.

Gokalp has taken the word "harth", which he had used to define culture, from Qur'an: "And when he is in authority, he runs about in the land to create disorder in it and destroy the crops and the progeny of men; and Allah loves not disorder (Al-Baqarah, 206). In this verse, the word "harth" stands for "crop". The crop of a population is its culture and if the culture of a country were to decline a disorder or chaos takes place.

It seems a better approach to say that civilization has a wider usage range than culture does considering that a civilization brings different people from different cultures together. The word culture refers to the material products and spiritual values of a population. Then, in this situation, the values which were produced by societies with small population and even small groups could be classified as culture. On the contrary, the world "civilization" has a broad usage area and could include all the cultures that show common characteristics in a civilization.

When we accept the broad spectrum of the words culture and civilization, we could say that it is possible for Islamic civilization to house more than one culture under its roof. Therefore, different societies and groups that have different languages, cuisine culture, birth and death customs, and etc… could live in unity under the Islamic civilization.

However, in today's globalized world, it is clear that cultures affect each other more and more and Islamic societies have started to show more similarity and

adoption to Western cultures. In this situation, we have to discuss the possibility of Islamic culture transferring some characteristics from other cultures. In the following parts of this study, the relationship between Islamic culture and Western culture and the unique values of Islamic culture will be focused on.

Islamic Culture and its Qualities

The Islamic Culture is different from all of the other cultures, and it is a unique culture. The reason of this is its challenging to the all of the cultures with the claim of being the representative of the justice and truth. There are some verses indicating the uniqueness of the Islamic Culture in the Quran. We can exemplify the following verses: "Do They seek a religion other than Allah's ….. (Âl-e Imrân, 84); "And who seeks a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the life to come he shall be among the losers (Âl-e Imrân, 86); He it is Who has sent his Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it prevail over all other religions (Al-Fath, 29).

When we analyze these verses, we cannot see a word bringing culture or civilization to mind in them. The common point of these verses is their putting emphasis on the truth and uniqueness of Islam. Even if the word "religion" does not have a meaning bringing the meanings of culture and civilization to mind, this word has an important relation with culture and civilization. When we look at the culture and civilization classification of sociologists and historians, we can see that there is no agreement between them. However, when we look at the valuation criteria of those categorizing culture and civilization, in addition to the main factors as geography, language, ethnicity, and common history, religion is definitely involved in these criteria. Moreover, it can be said that religion is the most important one among these factors. It is expected that people sharing the same geography resemble each other. However, a person's living in any place does not mean that he/she adopts the dominant culture of that region. Today, the regions especially allowing immigrants can be exemplified for this. Similar things can be stated for common language and common

ethnicity origin. However, even if their residence, language and ethnicity are different, it is expected that people having the same religion resemble each other.

In fact, the statements we have made thus far set forth the uniqueness of the Islamic Culture. As the verses mentioned above indicate that Islam is the only valid religion, the Islamic Culture should also be the only valid culture among the other cultures. It is also possible that we can evaluate this claim according to rules of logic. According to rules of logic, an inference has more than one truth values. The inference's having only one truth value in all of the truth values means that it is true. However, in order for this inference is considered valid, all of the truth values should be true. Similarly, in order to consider any cultural factor as Islamic, it should not conflict with the rules and values established by Islam. On the other hand, it is certain that the other cultures conflict with The Islamic Culture in some aspects. This is what causes the Islamic Culture being unique among the other cultures.

The claims stated here bring the question to mind that in case the Muslims behave improperly according to Islamic spirit, how this case can be explained by means of the Islamic Culture. In order to overcome this problem, we need to distinguish the Islamic Culture and the cultures of the Muslims.

The Cultures of the Muslims and the Islamic Culture

Even if the statement of "The Cultures of Muslims" seems like the statement of "The Islamic Culture" at first glance, in fact; it is not correct. Just as the other people who do not believe in God, the Muslims are human beings too and they sometimes may make individual mistakes. However, the mistakes that the people had made individually concern themselves and other members of their groups or the religion that they believe in cannot be held responsible for those mistakes; because Allah would not order people to do wrong. There are a lot of verses expressing this case. This is one of them: "Verily, Allah enjoins justice, and the doing of good to others, and giving like kindred; and forbids indecency, and manifest evil and wrongful transgression (Al-Nahl, 91).

And so, although culture is stated as set of material and moral values that a society produces, cultural values that Muslims have produced noncompliantly to the spirit and the rules of Islam cannot be described as Islamic. Therefore, some western journalists' effort of harmonization of Islam and terrorism is an injudicious one. This effort is a rhetoric form of dispraising Islam by combining the word of Islam and with a negative meaning word, terrorism. However, it is nothing more than fallacy when analyzed.

To be able to keep away from this fallacy, it is required to differentiate the concept of Islamic Culture and the culture of Muslims. Of all the cultural values of the Muslim societies have produced, the ones not contrary to the spirit of Islam and compatible with the rules of Islam are Islamic Culture. The cultural elements that are seen in Muslim societies, but are against the rules and spirit of Islam can be called the culture that belongs to some Muslims not Islam. Therefore, in the overall assessment of the culture of Muslim societies, it should be preferred to use the concept of the Muslim Culture or the cultures of the Muslims instead of the concept of the Islamic Culture.

The concept's being used in this way also paves the way for cultures' being different and various in the face of oneness and universality of Islam. When we take The Prophet Mohammad's (s.a.w.) statement "The dispute of the Ummah is God's compassion." into consideration, it comes forward that being different is not an obstacle for being Islamic, and cultural factors belonging to the Muslims having different mentality can be assembled under the same roof. The best method to explain this situation is the usage of the words 'culture and civilization' together. Here, civilization corresponds to religion and Islam. For this reason, just like the religion, which is indivisible, the civilization is also the same and unique. In that case, it is possible for us to mention that there are Turkish Culture, Arabic Culture and Persian Culture under the umbrella of Islam Civilization. This situation will be studied in detail below.

Relationship between Culture and Civilization

We want to evaluate the relationship between culture and civilization based on the thoughts of the founder of sociology in Turkey, Ziya Gokalp. Gokalp is known in Turkey as the founder of sociology. The time in which he lived was the time period in which Islamic societies have shown the greatest decline against the Western Societies around the World War I. Not only Gokalp but also other intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire were looking for a solution to this decline. Arguments they had were focused on modernization, westernization and Islamization. While some of the thinkers suggested that the society should hold on tightly to their Islamic values to end the decline while some suggested that the society should take western countries as examples.

The main focus of the arguments they had in those times was how Western culture and Islamic culture or Western civilization and Islamic civilization could blend together. Those who were in favor of Islamic values clearly knew that this blend could never happen. In addition, they did not think this was necessary. However, those who were in favor of westernization thought that being Muslim could in no way act like a barrier to westernize. One of the greatest representatives of this argument was Gokalp, who expressed his opinions by saying" I am from the nationality of Turks, the Ummah of Islam, the civilization of West. Gokalp has tried to explain the westernization process of his time with the division of culture and civilization. According to him, a culture belongs to a nation, but a civilization belongs to the nations or societies.

With the establishment of the republic in Turkey (1923), governors in Turkey started to put this idea into action. However, as this idea was being put into action, it was come out that what Gokalp had suggested was not possible. Because, according to Gokalp's hypothesis, it was possible to be from the ummah of Islam and be attached to the western civilization. However, as the time passed, the traits of Islamic culture started to fade away. Abolition of caliphate, changing of alphabet and adopting secularism were all signs of Islamic culture fading away.

Furthermore, with the establishment of the republic in Turkey, as it started to become modernized, it also became westernized. Modernization actually has the same meaning as westernization. The main reason why western civilizations have succeeded over the past two centuries is that they had exported their culture into other nations. This cultural export has happened because of people adapting to western culture values, whether forcefully or willingly, as they start to adopt western culture as a role model. Thus, nations that are not a member of western civilizations have westernized as they having modernized.

Then we have to discuss how a culture could be affected by another one and is this possible or not. In order to do this, we first have to talk about the theories of disappearance of cultures and civilizations over time. Because, some sociologists think that this is possible but the other not.

O. Turkdogan, after asserting that nations having weak cultures will join the circle of nations with strong cultures, says that Turks have changed their circle of civilization twice in the history. Turks, firstly, were a member of the Far-East civilization after which they had jointed the circle of Eastern civilization (Civilization of Islam). Lastly, they have tried to join the circle of Western civilization. (Türkdoğan, 1988). Even though, saying that Turks have tried to join the circle of Western civilization would be inappropriate for Turkish society, we cannot deny that first governors of Turkish Republic carried this aim. However, after nearly a century had passed, today we can see that it has not happened. Because, Turkish nation had left the circle of Far-Eastern civilization because they converted to Islam. However, they could not join the circle of Western civilization, because they were not converted to Christians. This problem of cultural incompatibility is one of the main reasons why Turkey is not being accepted into European Union, considering its high potential labor force and strong economy.

Scientists like Toynbee, Danilevsky and Spengler analyze cultural change on the basis of civilization. However, their approach is being criticized by Sorokin. Sorokin claims that these three sociologists have mixed up civilization or culture with various social groups. Social groups have a finite lifespan. Their lifespans, according to their

characteristics, can last as short as only a few centuries, or, in some rare cases, a few millennium. However, a social group disintegrating does not mean that its members are dead or that the civilization it was a part of has collapsed. Culture or a part of civilization can be passed down to other social groups (Sorokin-Toynbee, 1964). Sorokin asserts that even though Ancient Egypt, Sumeria, Babylonia and Roman Empire had collapsed, the civilization and culture these countries have developed is still visible in the sociocultural world in an original or modified way.

We want to examine the arguments about culture and civilization with the current situation of Islamic culture and civilization under a different headline.

Modernization and the Challenge of Islamic Culture

Modernization is a general term which points out to the social processes like industrialization, individualization and secularization which western societies experienced before all other nations of the world. Modernization began with the western societies; then other societies, including Muslim societies, experienced the same processes more or less.

When Muslim societies began to modernize then they imitated western societies. But the religion of Islam would not accept the similarity to Christian societies. This verse is very deducible: "O ye who believe! Whose among you turns back from his religion, then let it be known that in his stead Allah will soon bring a people whom He will love and who will love him…" (Maidah, 54). And the prophet Mohammad (s.a.w.) says: "Whoever resembles to a society then he is from them". Islam is the religion of truth and would not accept elements contrary to its main principles. Consequently, during the last two centuries which the western culture was the dominant culture, Islamic culture has severely resisted to the western culture. The most important part of it was about secularism.

At the end of this challenge, many cultural and social changes took place. Some of these new elements accepted by the Islamic culture because of their adaptability to

the Islamic culture and some of them rejected. These changes do not mean that Islam is changing. But these changes show that Muslim societies and groups are changing. If we have a look to the Koran, then we can find out that there were some verses pointing out some groups which abandoned their true beliefs and customs. Here is one of them: "Then there came after them descendants who neglected prayer, and followed evil desires. So they will meet with destruction." (Maryam, 60). But we can find some other verses showing that this is a temporary process and Allah (C.C.) will make His Religion prevail over all other religions. "…And Allah is Self-Sufficient, and it is you that are needy. And if you turn your backs, He will bring in your stead a people other than you, then they will not be like you." (Muhammad, 39). We can deduce from this verse that Muslims ultimately will turn to their own characters.

Consequently, the civilization of Islam and different Muslim cultures which taking part under this civilization, even if they were affected by the western culture and civilization, have not lost their own characters. Yet, in the last few decades the speed of this process gradually decreasing and even in some Muslim societies has ended. Today Muslim societies have begun to seek their bases and hold on their own customs. The most important example is the case of Turkey.

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