

Introduction by Jakob Köllhofer:

Let's give a similar applause to the other recipient of the Erasmus Prize. And we know humanism is an ideology of optimism. You believe in improvement. And if you look into the biography of the next speaker, of Prof. Al-Azm, I think it is a demonstration of decades, of a true commitment to this belief. So, we cannot wait for your word.

Welcome to Heidelberg.

Sadik Al-Azm:

Thank you Jakob. I would like to extend my gratitude to the German-American Institute for privileging me with this invitation and of course to return after many, many years to Heidelberg. The title of my talk tonight, this evening, is "Islam and Secular Humanism" and it falls within the category of those conjunctions that Stefan Wild spoke so enlighteningly about. But I hope to avoid some of the traps involved by being specific and giving careful definitions of what I mean by these abstractions. I also hope that some of the things I will say will dovetail with what Soroush said. Probably some other things I will say may not sit very well with his point of view. Maybe later on we can debate these matters.

I would like to start my argument by asking a seemingly simple question: Is it possible to construct universalizing notions of such principles as human rights, freedom of conscience, religious toleration and the rest from a particular tradition? My answer is an emphatic and historically-based yes.

For though the notion of human rights and its accompaniments, such as civil liberties, citizen's rights, democracy, freedom of expression, civil society, separation of state and religion, are of modern European origin and provenance – conventionally attributed and traced back to the enlightenment – they have indisputably come to acquire by now a universal significance that has turned them into a common human good and into today's compelling and pervasive normative paradigm on all matters pertaining to rights, citizenship, human dignity, democracy, civil society, government accountability and so on.

This is what I call the secular humanist paradigm which comprehends both the set of values recognized above as well as the social and political institutions, practices and attitudes embodying and supporting those values. (Let me emphasize that what is important here is not the name "secular humanism", but the values, practices and institutions named, and you may choose any name you wish as long as you remember that a rose still smells just as sweet under any other name.)

Let me emphasize as well, first, that the modest localized European origins of this modern paradigm do not detract, in my view, from its later paradigmatic universality anymore than the humble rise of Islam in two insignificant desert towns on the edge of the Roman Empire, detracted from its consequent universality and sweep. Similar things may be said about the relationship of Christianity's equally modest and localized origins in a neglected and despised district of the same Roman Empire to its subsequent paradigmatic universality, hegemony and comprehensiveness. And second, that the common good represented in this "secular humanist model" did not come about free, but had to be painfully, slowly and very imperfectly conquered over several centuries and at a very heavy price in terms of wars, revolutions and much sacrifice and human suffering. This is one very good reason why it deserves to be defended, elaborated and expanded along with the other human goods that we know of and have come to take for granted.

This is why today the serious struggles over the principles of human rights – to take one example – are waged within societies, cultures and polities, both East and West, and not just across civilizations, cultures and states, i.e., not so much between Islam and the West, Europe and the Middle East, the Orient and the Occident as inside France, inside Germany, inside China, inside the United States, inside the Arab countries, inside Iran, inside Indonesia, (inside Pakistan) and so on. This is why also we find that even in those parts of the world – Muslim and otherwise – where human rights and the other values and principles attendant on them are most flagrantly violated and/or ignored, some public and official lip service has to be paid to them, or at least to some version of them, by offending governments and political regimes and forces in search of self-justification and self-legitimation both nationally and internationally. This, again, testifies to the legitimacy, strength and efficacy that the secular humanist paradigm has universally acquired by now, even in the eyes of its enemies. In fact, experience has shown that the moment these enemies fall prey to the persecution of their own enemies, the first thing they appeal to in self-defense is, for example, the idea of an independent judiciary and the recognized universal principles of human rights with plenty of emphasis on their universality and inclusiveness. In fact, the very production of such schemes as the Charters of Islamic, African, Chinese and Hindi Human Rights forms an added testimony to the truth that the original secular humanist paradigm has acquired the dual status of a common human good and of the compelling normative model for passing judgement on all these matters and issues.

I would like to emphasize this point in opposition to the currently fashionable, convenient and expedient post-modernist position in the West and elsewhere to the effect that such values as free expression, religious toleration, respect for human rights, are the

West's deepest values from which the contemporary Muslim world, for example, is excluded on account of its own deepest cherished values which are antithetical to the core to free expression, democracy, tolerance, human rights, secularism and so on. This condescending, static, ahistorical and exclusive juxtaposition of a set of reified Western values against another set of reified supposedly incompatible Muslim values amounts to, first, a re-affirmation of the nihilistic mentality which sees the contemporary world in the simple terms of the West versus the rest, and second to a re-affirmation of the cynical apologetics, excuses and pretexts for which the repressors of democracy and the persecutors of free expression all over the world delightfully reach for and successfully employ to justify continuing to do what they are so good at doing anyway.

For example, it was quite a sight at the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna in 1993 to see the spokespersons and representatives of some of the most absolutist regimes and governments around the globe suddenly and most cynically adopting what looked like a relativist, post-modernist, avant-gardist European sensibility and outlook on life, politics, history, culture, free speech, women's rights, human rights, the sanctity of cultural differences, (to justify, in the name of a conveniently discovered authenticity, nativism, particularism, multiculturalism the death of the grand narratives of emancipation and the sacredness of tradition and inherited custom, I said) to justify their own government's violations against human rights, civil liberties, freedom of conscience and so on.

(Suffice it for me to remind all concerned at this point that the deepest values of the West were not always what they are taken to be today. And the supposed most authentic values of the Muslim world need not remain what they are currently perceived to have been and continue to be. For – given this tendency towards historical amnesia, along with the current monopolistic discourses and fundamentalist attitudes about the deepest values of this or that part of the world, of this or that culture on the surface of the globe – one would think that the West had never known the bloody practices of intolerance, persecution, religious bigotry, had known nothing but the fanaticism, dogmatism and suppression of free expression characteristic of Mullahs and tyrants.)

Now, is Islam compatible with this modern secular paradigm? (Again, I think the answer has to be complex and historically-based one.) But, first, it should be made immediately clear that this question has been, in a whole variety of formulations, idioms and ways, on the agenda of modern Arab and Muslim thought and history since at least the last quarter of the 19th century. Certainly, the Arabs have been interrogating themselves, in many a way and manner, about its implications and applications for themselves and for their relationship to the rest of the world for at least the last 150 years. Second, instead of dealing with the question abstractly I shall approach it through an account of certain concrete processes and current cases.

(For example, we all know by now that the last quarter of the 19th century witnessed the start of a great movement of liberal reform and latitudinarian religious interpretation in Arab life and thought, variously called by ourselves as well as by Western scholars, as an awakening, a renaissance, a religious reformation, the liberal experiment, Muslim modernism, the liberal age of modern Arab thought, and so on. And in fact, this movement compressed in itself all at once a theologico-legal reformation, a literary-intellectual renaissance, a rational-scientific enlightenment of sorts and a political and ideological *aggiornamento* as well.

Now, anyone taking his cues at present from this great movement of reform and regards himself as its descendant and as an heir to its intellectual, social and religious achievements will have no problem at all answering such questions as: Are Islam and secular humanism compatible, are Islam and modernity compatible? His answer would be a categorical and unproblematic, yes, they are.

On the other hand, and as is natural and expected in human affairs and the processes of history, this great movement of reform provoked a counter-reaction in the form of a counter-reformation and a Muslim fundamentalist movement to go along with it. This reaction crystallized at the moment of the establishment of the Muslim Brothers Movement in Egypt in 1928, the mother of all fundamentalisms in the Arab world as well as in some other Muslim countries and societies. The fact that this counter-reaction witnessed the birth of its formal organizational structures in 1928 was no accident. For, just 4 years earlier the Muslim Caliphate had been abolished by Mustafa Kemal in Turkey, while the initial reform movement had made massive advances at highly accelerated speeds in Arab life, society, economy, politics, culture and law, during the 20's of the last century and particularly after the famous 1919 Egyptian revolution against British colonial rule. This is why in Nagib Mahfouz's trilogy of novels about Cairean life in the first half of that century the male dominated and dictatorially run traditional Muslim household in Cairo collapses beyond the possibility of rescue at the exact moment of the eruption of Egypt's great revolution of 1919.

This religious counter-reaction naturally defined itself substantively, not formally, as an anti-reformation, an anti-renaissance, an anti-enlightenment, and an anti-*aggiornamento*, all at one and the same time. Now, anyone taking his cues at present from this counter-reformation, regarding himself as its descendant and intellectual heir, will have no big problem answering such questions as: Are Islam and secularism compatible? Are Islam and democracy compatible, etc? His answer takes the form of an emphatic and unqualified, no, they are not.

What are we to make of this impasse between the no-faction and yes-faction within the house of Islam and often outside of the house of Islam as well? In the following I shall put before you what I regard as a realistic conceptual scheme for making sense out of that impasse, and for sensibly answering the question about the compatibility of Islam and secular humanism.

In my attempt at explaining my position here, I shall raise another question, namely: was the simple egalitarian and unadorned Islam that arose in Mecca and Medina about 14 centuries ago and that was presided over and managed by the Prophet himself and his first four successors, known as the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, was that simple Koran-Prophetic Islam compatible with the hereditary dynastic kingships of such complex empires, stratified societies, and hierarchical polities as the Byzantine Empire and Sasanid Persia at

the time when the Muslim Arabs conquered and dominated those mighty realms. The accurate and realistic answer is: dogmatically no, the two were completely incompatible; historically yes, the two became very compatible and in an incredibly short period of time. In this instance the historical yes issued them in the imperial hereditary Muslim Caliphate that lasted through the thick and thin of history until its formal abolition soon after the First World War. In other words, the early Muslim dogmatists, literalists, purists, scripturalists were absolutely right at the time of the first Arab conquests in insisting that nothing in the Muslim orthodoxy of the day could make the simple Koran-Prophetic Islam of Medina and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs compatible with the hereditary monarchy of the imperial sort. But the historicists won the day and prevailed as we all know by now.

By the same token I would argue that today the accurate and realistic answer to the question “Is Islam compatible with secular humanism and its components?“, is: Dogmatically no, they are not compatible; historically, yes, they are compatible. I would also add that in general, whenever the dogmatic no in Islamic history, correct as it may have been scripturally and literally in its own time, came in outright conflict with the historical yes, incorrect and unorthodox as it may have seemed at its own moment, the historical yes tended to prevail over the dogmatic no. This victory used often to reach the point of completely obliterating and supplanting the purist no of the moment.

Let me restate my answer in a somewhat different and perhaps clearer form: Islam as a coherent, static ideal of eternal and permanently valid principles is, of course, compatible with nothing other than itself. As such it is the business of Islam to reject, resist and combat secularism and humanism to the very end, like any other major types of polities and varied forms of social and economic organisation that human history produced and threw up in the lives of peoples and societies. From kingship to republic, from slavery to freedom, from tribe to empire, from ancient city state to modern nation-state. Similarly, Islam as a world-historical religion stretching over 14 centuries has unquestionably succeeded in implanting itself in a whole variety of societies, a whole multiplicity of cultures, a whole diversity of life forms ranging from the tribal-nomadic to the centralized-bureaucratic, to the feudal-agrarian, to the mercantile-financial, to the capitalist-industrial.

In light of these palpable historical facts, adaptations and precedents it should be clear that Islam has had to be very plastic, adaptable, malleable and infinitely reinterpretable and reversible to survive and flourish under such contradictory conditions and widely varying circumstances as referred to above. This is why I would conclude that there is nothing to prevent historical Islam in principle from coming to terms and making itself compatible with such things as secular humanism, democracy and modernity. Whether it actually does and/or evolves in that direction is a historical contingency and a socio-cultural probability, depending on what actually living and kicking Muslims do as historical agents.

Let me present another very contemporary example of what looks to me like a preliminary implicit triumph of the historical yes over the dogmatic no. The Iranian Ayatollahs in their moment of victory did not proceed to restore the Islamic Caliphate, and there was a Shi'i Caliphate in Islamic history as is well known. Nor did they erect an Imamate or vice-Imamate but proceeded to establish a republic for the first time in Iran's long history, with popular elections, a constitution, which is a clone of the 1958 French constitution, a constituent assembly, a parliament where real debates take place, a president, a council of ministers, political factions and a supreme court of sorts. All of which has nothing to do with Islam as history, orthodoxy and dogma but plenty to do with modern Europe as history and political institutions.

It is also clear for all to see right now how in present day Iran the secular republican principle of popular democratic sovereignty and rule is actively challenging and seriously battling the opposite theocratic Islamic Shi'i principle of the sovereignty and rule of the Faqih or Jurist. We stand at the moment before the spectacle of a deadlock in contemporary Iran between the principle of the vilayet of the Faqih on the one hand and the principle of the vilayet of the people on the other.)

As for the Arab world, a quasi consensus has been emerging in key Arab countries and societies – accompanied by a wide-ranging debate and sharp controversies – over the importance and relevance of such values, practices and arrangements as, some respect for human rights, a measure of democratic rule, an active civil society, citizenship, the secularity of the state and its apparatuses, the freedoms of conscience, thought and expression for breaking out of the current predicaments of stagnation, arrest, corruption, decay and further civil strife that evidently engulf the entire Arab World at the present time.

As a consequence, the traditional Arab left, including the communist parties, has by and large come to rally around these humanist secular values and to give them pride of place in all their programmes, demands and manifestos. The rational center, represented by the middle classes, think of themselves anyway as the natural bearers and implementors of this kind of consensus. Even the Muslim Brothers organizations, the right wing of the political spectrum, have reluctantly come around to make themselves openly a part of this consensus.

For example, Egypt's Society of Muslim Brothers, after decades of insisting – like the Saudi monarchy – on the claim that the Qur'an is their constitution, on the imperative of restoring the Muslim Caliphate and on the immediate application of Shari'a Law, make public recently (March 2004) its official initiative and formal programme for the comprehensive reform of the Egyptian state, society and economy. Calling for the rejection of the idea of a religious state and government in favour of what it now calls a “civil government“ – its euphemism for a secular or at least a religiously neutral kind of state and state apparatuses. This reform project announced by “the mother of all fundamentalisms“ in the Arab world and beyond, has come around to call for: popular sovereignty, representative democracy, the circulation of power, free, honest and transparent popular elections, the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, the empowerment of civil society, the empowerment of women, respect for human rights, citizen's civil rights and liberties, freedom of conscience, freedom of religious belief, worship and practice for all and freedom of thought and expression.

This account is not meant to be a judgement on either the Muslim Brothers' sincerity or earnestness or good faith in genuinely adhering to such a programme in the foreseeable future, but only as an added testimony to the increasing inescapability and continuing effectiveness of this secular humanist paradigm in, and with, such most unlikely quarters as the Egyptian Muslim Brothers.

Recent developments in Turkey form an equally instructive instance: it is certainly noteworthy that Turkey, the only Muslim country with a developed and explicit secular ideology, tradition and practice, should be also the only major Muslim society to produce a democratic Muslim political party – something like Europe's Christian Democratic Parties – capable of ascending to power without a catastrophe befalling the whole polity, as has happened elsewhere.

This novel development generates the following most interesting paradox: as is well known, the currently ruling Islamic party in Turkey is the most eager proponent and promoter of Turkey's membership in the European Union – a "Christian Club" as Valéry Giscard d'Estaing once called it. At the same time, the Turkish military establishment, traditionally the staunchest guardian of Turkish secularism and the bastion of its Kemalist experiment, is now the most important opposer of Turkey's membership in the secular European Union.

What are we to make of this paradox? It is clear to me that this Turkish Muslim democratic party hopes that EU-membership will help put an end to the military's traditional meddling in the affairs of the Turkish state. The army generals know this very well and react accordingly by doing their best to delay and obstruct the process for as long as possible. This is why I think the EU would do all parties concerned a great favor and an enduring service by taking Turkey by the hand and helping it through this difficult and risky transition period – pretty much the way it had aided Spain, Greece, Ireland and Portugal to overcome their troubled fascist, militaristic and authoritarian pasts respectively. Certainly, Turkish membership in the EU would make it almost impossible for the military there to revert to type and distort their country's fragile democracy. It would also make it just as difficult for any Islamic party or coalition of such parties, to revert to type in the future and ruin Turkey's promising experiment by one form or another of Muslim fundamentalism, scripturalism and literalism.

Both the Arab world and Islam in general are in dire need right now of a reasonably free, democratic and secular model that works in a Muslim society. Turkey is at the moment the most likely place for such a model to develop and mature, given the assistance of the EU-membership and the safeguards it provides. In other words, what we need here is a credible functioning counter-example to the failed Muslim Taliban instance that the Americans left us with in Afghanistan not so long ago, with all its horrors and deformities.

Not to be missed either, are the very significant reactions to the current Turkish paradox and example in the Arab World, the heartland of Islam. Allow me to explain myself: it is well known that the Arab left traditionally hated Turkey on account of (a) its close alliance with the West throughout the Cold War, (b) its full membership in NATO, (c) its staunch opposition to the Soviet Union and to communism in general and (d) its recognition and friendly relations with Israel. This same Arab left has come around now to see in Turkey the only Muslim country where some of the values of the secular humanism that the left has come to strongly emphasize and promote have taken root, appear to function comparatively well and seem to have a future. I have certainly watched with wonder, recently, Syrian leftist friends, colleagues and old timers, publicly praising the Turkish democratic experiment and looking up to it for possible benefit, insuccion and emulation, while knowing fully well that these same persons had spent their entire careers denouncing the Turkish states' politics, alliances, programmes and all that it once stood for during the Cold War. This instance is particularly telling given the fact that the old Arab animosities towards Syria's northern neighbour remained most acute, persistent and frank in Syria itself.

Similarly, the mainstream Arab Islamists, who traditionally despised modern Turkey and denounced it for its abolition of the Caliphate, its Kemalism, secularism, nationalism and Westernism, have also come around to see in the evolution and maturation of contemporary Turkish political Islam – to the point of democratically and peacefully assuming power – as a model for the direction in which the "Arab World" failed political Islam should now go. For example, I have noted the phenomenon of outspoken Islamist critics and commentators publicly castigating the Muslim Brothers Organization in Egypt for its total mental laziness, political sterility and organizational inertia over the last 30 years, all in light of what political Islam has been able to achieve in Turkey. Furthermore, I am confident that, had it not been for the Turkish example, the Muslim Brothers would have never had the will, and the cheek, to produce the kind of advanced programme of reform for Egypt that they recently announced, as I pointed out earlier.

The Arab nationalists traditionally condemned Turkey not only for many of the reasons adduced by the leftists and Islamists, but also on account (a) of lingering resentments against the Young Turk's early policies of turkification in the remaining Arab provinces of the old empire, and (b) of their eagerness to blame Arab backwardness and failings on what they call the long retrograde Turkish occupation of Arab lands. They don't even call it Ottoman. This condemnation has always been more severe and vociferous among Syria's Arab and other kinds of nationalists, because of the loss of some northern coastal territories to Turkey, annexed under the French mandate regime shortly before the Second World War.

Even these Arab nationalists have come around to a new and different look at present day Turkey. For, they see now that, unlike their own brand of nationalism, the Turkish variety proved to be a success story on the whole. They have come to admit that the earlier strategic Turkish decisions and historical choices, that the Arab nationalists, once despised so keenly, seem, at the moment, to have served reasonably well the Turkish national interest, something that can in no way be said about comparable Arab nationalist choices, decisions and outcomes. They are actually jealous of the fact that all the things they had wanted for their own nation seem, at present, to be much better fulfilled in a neighbouring Middle Eastern Muslim society for which they had no use before. But now I find them giving open and public advice to themselves and to others about the lessons to be drawn and learned from the overall Turkish nationalist experience and experiment in state, society, economy, culture and law.

During the United States' preparations for the invasion of Iraq in the spring of 2003, the Turkish Parliament rejected an American request to station troops on Turkish soil. The US administration had to swallow that rejection because it emanated from a genuine Parliament, freely and democratically elected and not even the angry and bellicose Bush administration and team could raise any doubts about that parliament's legitimacy and representative credentials. In the Arab world, this Turkish position was highly esteemed and admired at the popular level and the following telling argument was put forward: what Arab king, president or ruler could go to the President of the United States and tell him my Parliament rejected your government's request without the American president either laughing him off the stage, or even yelling back at him: Go to hell you and your Parliament, we know what kind of an assembly you have at your disposal.

Even Islamic Iran is instructive on the score. For the Iranian Ayatollahs in their moment of victory did not proceed to restore the Islamic Caliphate. And there was no Shia Caliphate in Islamic history as is well known. Nor did they elect an Imam or deputy Imam but proceeded to establish a republic for the first time in Iran's history, with popular elections, a constitution which is a clone of the 1958 French constitution, a constituent assembly, a parliament where real debates take place, a president, a council of ministers, political factions and so on. All of which has nothing to do with Islam as history, orthodoxy and dogma but plenty to do with modern Europe as history and political institutions. It is also clear for all to see right now how in present day Iran the secular republic and principle of popular democratic sovereignty and rule is actively challenging and seriously battling the opposite theocratic Islamic Shia principle of the sovereignty and rule of the Faqih. We stand at the moment before the spectacle of a deadlock in contemporary Iran, between the principle of the Velayat of the Faqih on the one hand and the principle of the Velayat of the people on the other.

Now, it is my considered view that the continuity of the reconciliation of historical Islam, at least Arab Islam, with the historical "yes" of secular humanism as against Islam's dogmatic "no" is not a mere choice, or a casual option, or just a point of view but a vital necessity, if at least some Arab countries are not to end up tearing themselves to pieces after the tragic example of Lebanon. In fact, the alternative to not taking seriously the historical "yes" of secular humanism at this stage of history may be too bloody and horrible to contemplate.

One such horrifying alternative may be illustrated by looking at the present situation in Iraq and asking: can this tortured Arab country stay intact without somehow reaching an agreement – explicitly or implicitly – among the religious communities, sects, factions and fractions forming its population that accepts without reservations a state and form of government that could be called by some secular, by others civil, and still by others, religiously neutral? My answer to this question is a flat no.

Let me share with you the following hypothetical, mental experiment: suppose that the people of currently occupied Iraq had a general assembly – under the tight supervision of the United States and its allies there – through real and genuine representatives of all the communities of faith and ethnicities making up the people of Iraq, Shi'is, Sunnis, Kurds, Christians, Zoroastrians, Sabaeans, Majus and what have you, to save the unity and integrity of their country, to prevent it from sliding into a ruinous confessional civil war and to agree on a form of state and government that is minimally acceptable to all the parties involved as well as to the majority of the Iraqi people.

Let me ask, then, what kind of concessions the parties to this assembly have to make to each other, to the supervising power and to the rest of the watching world in order to save the new Iraq from the worst case scenarios. I suggest the following:

The Muslim communities have to explicitly retract all the Shari'a Law rules and regulations governing the ahl al-dhimma in the country, the protected minorities of traditional Islam, mainly Christians and Jews, retract them de jure one and for all and not just de facto as is presently the case in most Arab societies and states. This will involve the frank and open admission that the Shari'a principles governing the protégés of Islam have lapsed and become inoperative just like all those other Shari'a rules and regulations that once governed slavery in Islam and in Muslim societies and polities. Short of such a measure the Iraqi state will never become a state for all its citizens.

The Muslim communities have to abolish once and for all the archaic Islamic penal code inflicting such punishments as flogging, death by stoning, the amputation of limbs and similar forms of bodily torture and mutilation. This is all the more urgent now, given the revulsion generated in the country and beyond by the barbaric penalties meted out even to minor transgressors by Saddam's regime and his henchmen such as plucking out eyes, cutting off ears, removing noses and pulling out tongues.

The Muslim communities there have to shun and reject in no uncertain terms the kind of Islam that is obsessed by a view of the outside and inside worlds as full of nothing but damned infidels, kafirs, unbelievers, pagans, apostates, polytheists, mushriks, heretics, atheists, hypocrites, zindiqs, rawafed, rejectionists, all to be dealt with accordingly, including such smaller offshoots of Islam as the "Alawis, the Imailis, the Druzes, the Bahais, the Ahmadis" and so on. This means putting an end once and for all to the now resurrected exclusive traditional Muslim division of the world into the House of Islam as against the House of War, the House of Faith and Belief as against the House of Kufr and Unbelief.

The Shi'i community has to retract everything pertaining to the Imamy form of rule, Velayat al-Faqih type of government, deputy of the Imam kind of theocracy with all their implications and possible applications, otherwise the Iraqi government will never be a government of and for all Iraq's citizens.

The numerical Shi'i majority has to acknowledge and commit itself to the principle that democracy does not mean majority rule only but majority rule and minority rights at one and the same time, with all the built-in mechanisms, checks and balances that help prevent any

majority from turning into a tyranny against itself, against its own people in general and against its minorities in particular.

The final Muslim abolition, de jure and not just de facto, of the status of women as „Aura“ in Islam, i.e. as something to be ashamed of, to be hidden and covered like a scandal, or else all official and formal declarations of the equality of women and men in the new Iraq will remain fundamentally flawed and shamefully hollow.

Finally, having seen the Russians apologize to the Polish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak peoples for past wrongs, having seen the whites in South Africa apologize to the black majority for the past injuries of apartheid, having seen the Japanese apologize to the Koreans for past persecutions, having heard of Arab petitions submitted to the Pope pleading for an apology to the Muslim, Arab and Eastern Christian worlds for the wrong of the Crusades, and having learned of the Pope's positive responses to such petitions, I plead in my own terms with the Sunni religious leadership in Iraq and everywhere else to apologize to the Shi'a of Iraq and beyond for the unspeakable crime of the murder of the Prophet's grandson Al-Husayn in the Karbala massacre in the year 61 of the Muslim calendar. And just as the Pope had absolved and forgiven Jewish posterity from the blood of Jesus Christ, I plead with the Shi'i clerical establishments in Iraq and everywhere else to absolve and forgive Sunni posterity from the blood spilled in Karbala, that mother of all Islamic crimes.

(Finally, what about the clash of civilizations prediction, considering that some important quarters, both in the secular West and Muslim East, have come to think and operate on the assumption that the September 11th assaults and the resulting global war against Islamic terrorism form a sure confirmation of Huntington's thesis about the inevitability of such a clash between an archaic Islamdom on the one hand and a modern advancing secular West on the other?)

I would like to submit this Huntingtonian prophecy to some further critical examination by asking the question: is such a clash really underway and unfolding right now? My simple and direct answer is twofold: first, in the strong, serious and dramatic senses of „clash“, the answer is no; second, in the weak, more casual and standard senses of „clash“, the answer is yes.

I read Huntington's basic thesis as saying, first, that after the collapse of world communism at its very center, the main sources of grave international conflict (and possible wars), ceased to be the hostile rivalry between two incompatible totalizing economic systems (or modes of production and distribution, if you prefer) and, second that these sources have now come to reside in the antagonistic self-contained systems of fundamental beliefs and values that dominate the post-Cold War world scene, such as traditional Islam, on the one hand, and triumphant western liberalism, on the other.

I can make the same point differently by saying that according to Huntington, now that the historical challenge of communism, socialism, working class movements and third worldism to western capitalist hegemony has definitely come to an end, we have to look for the sources of international danger, conflict and tension in the existing major belief and value systems that are inherently incompatible not only with capitalist liberalism but with each other as well.

For Huntington, civilization seems to reduce itself to culture and culture to religion and religion to an archetypal constant that, in the case of Islam, is bound to produce the phenomenon of Homo islamicus propelled on a collision course with, let us say, the West's Homo economicus and his instinctive liberalism as well as with India's Homo hierarchicus and his natural polytheism.

It seems clear to me that Huntington's thesis involves, first, a reversion to old-fashioned German „Philosophie des Geistes“ and, second, a rehabilitation of the classical orientalist essentialism that Edward Said demolished so well in his book *Orientalism*. What comes immediately to my mind in this context, for instance, is the famous concoction of spirit and the system of Protestant ethical beliefs and fundamental values used by Max Weber to explain the rise of capitalism in Europe. Here, we already have the spirit of capitalism clashing with the prevalent spirit of feudalism and the new Protestant ethical belief-system clashing with the antecedent adjacent and rival Roman Catholic one.

Weber's rivalry, clash and struggle of the two spirits and two ethics turns global and international with Huntington. This vying of spirits and belief-systems is not simply historical, sociological and/or evolutionary, but essentialistic, ontological and static. This kind of a-historical and anti-historical reasoning sets the stage for the clash of civilizations by exclusively juxtaposing a reified system of basic western beliefs and values against another reified but incompatible system equally basic Muslim beliefs and values.

At a more practical level, this means that such values as liberalism, secularism, democracy, human rights, religious toleration, freedom of expression etc., are to be regarded as the West's deepest values from which the contemporary Muslim world is permanently excluded on account of its own deepest cherished values that are antithetical to the core to liberalism, secularism, democracy and the rest.

The interesting irony in all this is that the Islamists find themselves in full agreement not only with Huntington's basic thesis but with its theoretical implications and practical applications as well. Their theoreticians and ideologists also reduce civilizations to culture, cultures to religion and religions to inherently incompatible archetypal constants that vie, clash and struggle with and against each other. For them, Islam will emerge triumphant in the end.

To temporarily relieve the harshness of the clash of civilizations thesis, president Khatami of Iran called for a dialogue of civilizations instead. The president's main concern, here, is naturally a dialogue between Islam and the West in general and Iran and the United States in particular. Is Khatami sincere or hypocritical in his call? In the long run he is hypocritical, because the Islamist version of the Huntingtonian logic to which he is strategically committed, requires a clash of civilizations and the ultimate triumph of his own. In the short run he is sincere because dialogue is not a bad momentary tactic for the much weaker side in this confrontation.

I think the clash of civilizations between the Islam and the West is already there in the weak and normal senses of “clash”, but is not about to happen in the strong and more dramatic meanings of the term. Islam is simply too weak to sustain in earnest any challenges and/or confrontations that are seriously threatening to an obviously triumphant West. In fact, contemporary Islam does not even form a “civilization” in the active, enactive and effective senses of the term. It may be said to form a civilization only in the historical, traditional, passive, reactive and folkloric senses and no more.

The two supposedly clashing sides are so unequal in power, military might, productive capacity, efficiency, effective institutions, wealth, social organization, science, technology etc., that the clash can only be of the inconsequential standard sort. For, as one literary metaphor says: if the egg falls on (clashes with) a stone the egg breaks and if the stone falls on (clashes with) the egg then the egg breaks, too. This is why from the Arab-Muslim side of the divide, the West seems to discerning eyes, so powerful, so efficient, so successful, so unstoppable as to make the very idea of an ultimate “clash” seem fanciful.

As for the current problems, difficulties, tensions, suspicions, confrontations and enmities that characterize the relationship of Islam to the West, they are part of the normal affairs of history, power politics, international relations and the pursuit of vital interests. They are certainly not affairs either of the pure spirit, or of mere clashes or religious ideas, or of conflicting theological interpretations or of mere matters of beliefs, values, images and perceptions.)