

# Islam and the West\*

**Akeel Bilgrami**

The Chairman of the World Public Forum has asked me to speak on the relations between Islam and the West and to consider this from the point of view of the framework of a 'world order' as well as to consider whether such a framework provides prospects for more peaceful solutions involving a dialogue between civilizations that seem to be at odds. I am not sure I can manage to bring these diverse topics together in an entirely coherent way in the few minutes I have but let me make an honourable stab at it.

'World order' is an expression used primarily in the discipline of International Relations and, as such, it is mired in a whole range of doctrines that emerged in the cold war to shape the social sciences as they are now practiced at least in the English-speaking world. It has also more recently been extended from its initial moorings in IR theory and political science to include issues around the question of global governance in the wake of financial globalization. All these theoretical contexts come with a set of assumptions which are highly questionable for their ideological bias as well as their selective grounding in empirical data and all that affects both what the term 'world order' means and how it is deployed. They also come with a specialist jargon that strains to elevate perfectly straightforward concerns, as with most concerns in the social sciences, into a sort of hermetic secular priestcraft of professors advising the prince, and experts thinking in tanks. None of this should be allowed to intimidate us from coming to grips with the issues that surround the term 'world order'. In fact, allow me to say --with only the merest polemical exaggeration-- that unlike in the physical sciences, a degree in the social sciences, or a job in a social science department, gives no one any more qualification to speak about world order or more generally matters of society, politics, and international relations, than anyone in this room or anyone on the street outside this room. Lay people are fully equipped to think about and investigate these matters and may often in fact be more insightful than those who wear the masks and illusions and jargon that degrees and jobs in the social sciences bestow on one. In other words, in what follows, I will not take seriously in the slightest, the high-sounding theories and slogans and vocabulary of these social sciences, an expression which, in any case, as any person with a genuine interest in the social and the slightest respect for science will recognize to be an oxymoron.

Now, though the term 'world order' began to be deployed with the rise of IR theory in the cold war, obviously the phenomenon that the term describes has a more longstanding history and conceptual history. But long though that history is, it still falls distinctly within the modern period. It makes no sense to talk of there being a 'world order' prior to modernity, when, for instance, Venice was, informally speaking, the capital of the Western world and when international or global relations were defined by maritime trade rather than the relations that emerged in the modern period in which, say, London replaced Venice as the capital for some centuries and then later New York and Washington may be said to have replaced London, in turn. It is only since the rise of nations and the centralized states which integrated the hitherto scattered locations of power in the period since the Westphalian peace that the question of an order issuing from the distribution of power among them could be relevant. Yet the modern state, which came to be seen in hyphenated conjunction with the rise of nations in Europe since Westphalia, by itself, was not quite sufficient to oblige one to think of a world order, as we come to have. What else was needed?

Let me take my assigned theme of Islam, and religion more broadly, to bring out what other crucial element was needed, an element which still persists, even if in hidden forms, in all talk of world order.

We speak much today of Islam, indeed do so obsessively, and we speak of its relations to the West, and when we do, we do so in two quite different registers. First, by contrasting Islam with the liberal ideals of the West. And in this register there is much self-congratulation about these liberal ideals. We often then switch to a different register that is frequently critical of the West's attitudes towards Islam, seeing in them a hate-mongering phobia of Islam. I will argue that if we understand the notion of a world order as the modern idea it is and without any illusions about what it is, both these registers are highly misleading of what is really at stake.

Prior to modernity, the relations between Islam and the West were for centuries understood more simply as the relations between Islam and Christendom. And in those centuries, Islam and Christendom bore enmity towards each other in the most vilifying terms, both in word and in horrifically violent deed. But throughout these centuries, they each nevertheless displayed a respect for one another, trading in diverse material products, and engaged in a prolonged and fruitful mutual intellectual and artistic collaboration and influence ---all of which when viewed from the thoroughly revised circumstances of modernity, can only seem enviably robust and healthy. For those many hundred years, both cultures were feudal and pastoral, and, despite local difference in religious doctrine, which was in large part the avowed ground of the antagonism, there were shared intellectual premises that governed these differences. In fact it is the shared element that was the real source of the hostility. The more ancient religions of the East, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, were not only more removed in space, but were intellectually too remote to be palpably threatening to Christianity, in the way that Islam with its many shared assumptions, was. In fact, I think it is probably right to say that the crusades were fought against a form of heresy represented by Islamic civilization in Arabian lands rather than against some wholly alien presence there.

Napoleon's campaigns in Egypt and the British conquest of India, however, gradually gave rise to an era defined by a quite different tone of relations, a tone of relations that reflected the relations of power which for the first time contained the rudiments of what we would now dress up and domesticate with such terms as a 'world order'. Conflict was of course still said to be there, but it would be wrong to think that it was the key to future relations. It was the new tenor of colonial mastery that mastery required attitudes of condescension and superiority, and was felt to be so by the subject people, breeding in them not so much a robust sense of conflict any more, but rather a sense alienation and resentment. This new moral psychology that accompanied colonial relations was of course undergirded by an altering of the material relations that had held for centuries. It is those material relations that began to constitute the first semblances of a world order.

The growing mercantile and industrial forces of the most powerful Christian lands were, as we well know, steadily destroying the pastoral societies in their own terrain, but their effect on the lands and economies of the colonial subjects was altogether different. What feudal structures it destroyed to recreate new and vibrant economies in its own midst, it left well alone in these other lands, taking only that which was necessary for its mercantile and industrial requirements. By transforming its own political economy while extracting surpluses but leaving structurally unchanged its conquered lands, European colonialism thereby laid the foundation for an abiding material differential, which would continue until today to be the underlying source of the ideological rhetoric of superior progress, not only material but also civilizational. The health of conflict by more or less equal foes had, by these material agencies, deteriorated to the alienating effects of condescension and defensive resentment among increasingly unequal ones and this is precisely what persists today in revised forms, whether it is in whole national populations subject to embargoes and invasions or stateless fugitives fleeing the chaos and suffering that is either a direct or an indirect fallout of those embargoes and invasions. It is the increasing complexity that accompanies these material relations and the relations of power in our own time that has prompted social scientists to summon the term 'world order' to describe a patchwork form

of governance to be found in international bodies, whether they be international credit agencies, trade organizations, treaty and defence organizations, or the Security Council of the United Nations.

So one lesson to draw about religion from all this would be that the so called clash or conflict between civilizations is not nearly as bad if it is a genuine clash as it was for centuries prior to modernity, rather than as it became in modernity a conquest passing off in neutral terms as a 'clash'. It is this sleight of hand, this neutral idiom of 'clash' and 'conflict' to describe a situation which should be rightly described as a conquest that is Huntington's most insidious contribution to these issues.

The point of these potted historical remarks is to suggest that what the notion of world order describes is something that could not have application in those earlier centuries where Islam and Christendom fought the crusades, even as they influenced each other deeply in a wide range of spheres of mind and culture as equal foes and partners alike. A world order only emerged when these relations were transformed in the way I described above in the modern period and the very much later coinage and deployment of the term 'world order' is really just a complex form of updating of these set of relations of an earlier period that were preserved in revised forms after formal political decolonization in the aftermath of the second world war.

If I were to shed my assigned focus on Islam and religion, I would simply describe these relations, as is often done now, as relations holding between the North and the South. That is the one constant since the colonial era began until now in all the renewals and transformations of the idea of a world order. To put it more elaborately, the fact of a world order existed in the modern period in the form of colonial relations of power and dependency in the North's relations to the South but because of formal decolonization and more particularly because the cold war intervened to complicate things, the term 'world order' was coined to make it seem as if things were not a matter of such domination and dependency any more but rather a bipolar arrangement in which a complex form of deterrence existed between two different ideologies and visions of political economy and governance.

To some extent, of course, what happened during the cold war is a departure from the colonial paradigm of North South relations. Though there was talk of 'the Soviet Empire' this idea of empire did not have the familiar form to be found in the relations that Western Europe bore to the countries of the African, Asian, and Latin American continents, and, in fact, the Soviet Union even though it maintained an atrocious and tyrannical stranglehold over its satellites, often pored money into its satellites. But the real continuities with the colonial paradigm consists in the fact that prior to the drawing of the Iron curtain, the various parts of the Soviet Empire used to have relations with the West that were subtle versions of the colonial relations that the West bore to the countries of the South. And now with the passing of the Soviet Union, there is an increasing trend of return to those relations of dependency, with the NATO powers pushing constantly on the frontiers where such dependencies have not yet returned. The entire theatre of controversy around Ukraine cannot be understood without placing it in this framework of understanding. The motives are clear: that Eastern Europe will contain populations that provide a form of labour that had intolerably been undermined in the Western part of Europe due to the bargaining strength labour had gained there in the post-World War II period, in other words a form of labour that was not indulgently possessed of high wages, wide-ranging benefits, truncated working hours, refusal of enforced mobility.... In short, Eastern Europe could now be viewed in the world order as a field of force in the European continent where an Anglo-American capitalist ideal would emerge in Europe, so that corporations could resist taxation imposed on them and resist the social programmes that had privileged the labour of their Western European counterpart, not to mention a geo- political field of force that would be much

more pliant to the United States' ambition to impede European moves towards an independent role in world affairs. That independence was something both the US and Soviet Union worried about during the Cold War years. For the US, that anxiety still exists and now extends to countries such as China as well. Those are the aspirations of the post cold war world order.

Several questions remain: can one continue to speak of a world order that maintains imperial relations of the past in disguised current forms when the elites of the South are so much more powerful now than they were in the past and are in alliance with the elites of the North and West? In other words is 'imperialism' a relevant category of analysis in a period of globalized financial capital? This is a matter of lively debate at present, even within the political economists of the Left, and the outcome of the debate will have no small impact on how to understand the idea of a world order. Another question is how much does the increasing presence of China (it's most current downturn apart) and its economic power in other countries of the South (most vivid in African countries) constitute the possibilities of a new reconfiguration of world order. If its (and perhaps even India's) presence in the other regions of the South develops more intensely, might we see a future of inter-imperial rivalries of the form that defined the period prior to 1914? Should that happen, let's not forget that Lenin described inter-imperial rivalry as the cradle of radicalization that led to the Bolshevik revolution, but here I am prematurely speculating far beyond anything that the facts on the ground presently allow.

Let me conclude, then, with a word about how what I have said about world order relates to the scope of dialogue between the West and the Islamist tendencies in West Asia. Suppose what I have said is right: that the very idea of a world order is a falsely bland descriptive as well as prescriptive label for longstanding colonial relations of power and dependency between the North and the South (relations that are evident to this day in the unequal representation of the South and its interests in what I described as the 'patchwork form of governance' that comprises the world order in institutions such as international credit agencies, international trade organisations and the Security Council). Suppose I am right too that the very idea of a clash of civilizations, though it described the pre-modern period well, in the modern period is a misleadingly domesticating label for a centuries long conquest of one civilization by another which continues in revised but abiding form.

First of all, notice that if all this is right, then declaring honourably as some critics of the North have done that such a dialogue is preempted by the pervasive Islamophobia in the North is completely beside the point. Anyone with elementary powers of observation will notice that when it comes to a world order, the question is about power among states not about attitudes among populations and when it comes to states there is absolutely no Islamophobia. The United States government suffers from no such phobia. Indeed it supports to this day the most despised Islamic state in the world. The main point of world order is to have control of a region, its natural resources and its geopolitical advantage. It has nothing to do with attitudes towards religion and ethnicities which are all (not so) niceties that can be left to ordinary people so as to manipulate their fears for statist ends in the maintenance of world order as I've described it.

And if these relations of domination and control, conquest not clash, are acknowledged to be what is really at stake, I would think that the very idea of a dialogue simply lapses. Why? Because one cannot have a dialogue with a master! Dialogues can only occur between relatively equal foes and that scenario of equality among foes has not existed basically, as I said, since the crusades except for a brief and essentially illusory caesura of the cold war. The point, by the very nature of the case, is this: one can only resist a master not colloque with him. One may of course have a dialogue within the framework of a resistance. But the resistance must be the prior and the frameworking notion. Obviously, I don't mean violent resistance, not only because violence is intrinsically immoral, but because it has brought

nothing but further domination and an endless cycle of self-perpetuating further violence. How to construct and develop a moral and an effective resistance for our time in a world order governed by globalized finance remains the most pressing question of our time.

\* [This article is based on a talk at the Rhodes Forum in September 2015.](#)