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Competing Visions of History in Internal Islamic Discourse and Islamic–Western Dialogue

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This paper explores the prospects of a proactive approach to historical thinking in relation to the paradox of human difference and interdependence in a global context. The dual premise of my analysis is the reality and permanence of cultural (including religious) diversity of human societies, on the one hand, and the imperatives of peaceful and cooperative co-existence in an increasingly globalized environment, on the other. Competing visions of history, I suggest, have always been integral to conceptions of self-identity and relationship to the "other," in individual and communal interactions. But the history of any society would have been mixed, containing peaceful and cooperative as well as confrontational and hegemonic types of elements in human relations.

Different visions of history may emphasize one or another element of the ethical norms, social institutions, economic relations, or political organization and processes of a community, or present one view or another of its relations, with other communities. For example, different visions of history may present a positive or negative view of women and their status and role in society, or of relations with neighboring or distant communities, may emphasize a tradition of tolerance or intolerance of diversity of religious or political opinion and practice within society, and so forth. Whether consciously or subconsciously, such divergent visions of history influence, and have been manipulated in political discourse to influence, individual and communal behavior. The fundamental question I raise in this regard is whether it is possible to deliberately differentiate between various visions of history with a view to enhancing and promoting certain policy objectives as suggested in this essay.

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I am also concerned with the role of historical thinking in cultural self–determination. Given the influence, and manipulation, of perceptions of history in the politics of communal self–identity, and intercommunal relations, how can communities articulate and realize the most relevant and constructive perceptions of self–identity in relation to other communities? To speak of cultural self–determination, it might be said, emphasizes difference and specificity, rather than similarity and universality, in human cultures. While appreciating the negative potential of the tension between the two, I do not believe that they are necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, I suggest that similarity and universality should be premised on the realities of cultural difference, instead of pretending that such differences do not exist. As I see it, the question is not whether universality is possible, but rather on whose terms and how should it be sought.

I will begin with a discussion of some of the general conceptual and methodological questions raised by the proposed proactive and constructive approach to history, followed by a discussion of the interaction between competing visions of history of time, place, and community in internal Islamic discourse, and in Islamic–Western dialogue. With respect to inter–Islamic discourse, I am concerned with the role of competing visions of history in defining (and manipulating) Islamic identity in the dynamic of the relationship between a historically presumed center and peripheries of the world community of Muslims (Umma). I will illustrate my argument with reference to Sub–Saharan Africa in relation to the presumed "centrality" of the Middle East in Islamic discourse, but a similar analysis can be applied, I suggest, to Southern, Southeastern, and now Central Asia. A different approach, however, may be necessary in relation to Muslims in the diaspora of Europe, North America, and elsewhere. I am also concerned with the ways in which that internal Islamic dynamic shapes and informs Islamic–Western dialogue, while the latter also shapes and informs the former. In this respect, I seek to clarify the present circumstances of encounter in relation to the possibilities of peaceful co–existence and cooperation based on mutual respect for cultural identity and communal self–determination.

Cultural Difference, Internal and Cross–cultural Communication, and Historical Thinking

The basic question I wish to raise in this section is whether it is possible to utilize the possibilities of historical thought in promoting and enhancing mutual internal and cross–cultural understanding and recognition while respecting particularities of different cultural identities. Given the reality and permanence of cultural diversity, how can different human societies cooperate in pursuit of peace and mutual economic advantage, and so forth, without encroaching on each other's right to cultural and political self–determination? How can possibilities

of mutual respect and cooperating be explored through an understanding of a community's historical thinking of its self–identity and relations with other communities?

This formulation of the issue assumes a dialectical relationship between historical consciousness and thought, on the one hand, and cultural identity, on the other. Perceptions of historical consciousness and thought are the basis of feelings of belonging to one self-identifying community in contrast to another, while cultural identity, in turn, determines perceptions of historical consciousness and thought about self and the other. People's perception of their history, and the way they think about it at any given point in time, are both integral to, and influenced by, their sense of collective self-identity and relations with other communities. However, perceptions of historical consciousness and thought themselves change in response to various factors and processes, including shifts in self-identity. Shifts in self-identity, in turn, contribute to transformations in perceptions of historical consciousness. Moreover, dominant perceptions of history and identity are constantly open to challenge and change at both the internal and external levels. The question is whether it is possible to understand and influence those shifts and transformations, and to what end?

To answer this question, a set of theoretical and practical issues need to be considered in relation to the dilemma raised by the ever growing and dense network of cross-cultural interactions and communications, on the one hand, and the body of scholarly disciplines and normative systems claiming universal validity, on the other. At the theoretical level, advocates of cultural autonomy argue that the integrity and particularity of cultures are in danger of being lost in a universalism of hegemonic cultures and their so-called rational methodologies, whereas universalists assert that an unreserved acknowledgment of differences of cultural identities threatens the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and moral judgments on the basis of universally accepted normative insights. An underlying practical issue, it may be added, relates to the nature and dynamics of power relations within and between cultures because this dilemma is often resolved through material and technical superiority of the proponents of one view or the other. If and to the extent that a people is capable and willing to defend the integrity and autonomy of its culture, it needs not worry about the universalist claims of others. Conversely, universalists can simply disregard the protests of others if they can impose their will on them.

In order to evaluate the reality, nature, and implications of the above-mentioned theoretical dilemma, it is necessary to question and seek to clarify both of its horns. Since there is no such a thing as abstract or neutral universalism of rational methodologies because both ''rationality'' itself and the methodologies it produces are culturally specific, what is at issue is the hegemonic ''universalization'' of a particular model of rationality and its own methodologies—whether within the same culture or of one culture over others—rather than an inherent contradiction between universality and acknowledgment of

cultural diversity. In other words, the issue appears to be primarily the attitude and orientation of the proponents of competing cultural perspectives, as they seek to define and manipulate the terms and circumstances of internal and cross-cultural interaction. If apparent compliance with normative insights is achieved through coercive imposition, it is unlikely to last, and the human and material cost of maintaining it may be unacceptable. In contrast, the acceptance of insights through internal and cross-cultural understanding and accommodation is not only more likely to last, but would also be based on more humane and morally defensible ground. Do existing power relations and terms and circumstances of internal and cross-cultural interaction permit, or can they be modified to allow, the emergence of genuine collaborative universality of normative insights?

For universalists to speak of "unreserved" acknowledgment of cultural difference implies the imposition of limits in order to create and implement universality of normative insights. This proposition raises the question: who will determine the type and degree of "reservation," and how will it be done? If one perspective within a given culture, or one culture in relation to others, assumes the mantle of an arbiter of degree or type of limitation on acknowledgment of difference between cultural identities, then the understanding and insights thereby proclaimed will be, by definition, culturally specific and not universal. Internal and cross-cultural consensus on the universal validity of normative insights is possible, I believe, but only through an open-ended and mutually respectful process of negotiation, discourse, and dialogue within and between all perspectives.

In my view, cultural particularities, in and by themselves, do not preclude internal and cross-cultural understanding and consensus on mutually acceptable normative insights. Rather, serious barriers to understanding and normative consensus can arise from the tendency or capacity of some elites, at certain stages of the history of their societies and cultures, to adopt a hegemonic, superior, and imperialist attitude toward their opponents within the same culture or peoples of other cultures. It is certainly possible that hegemonic tendencies may become deeply entrenched in some cultures over time, but I would suggest that, since that would be the product of human agency, it can be changed through human agency by identifying and enhancing those points of view, principles, and rules of communication within each culture that can effectively challenge and combat a hegemonic, imperialist tendency or capacity.

The fundamental justification and guiding principle of this effort should be the universal moral and political concept of reciprocity—the Golden Rule of treating others as one wishes to be treated by them—as the basis of peaceful co-existence and cooperation between the cultures of the world. This principle is not only universally accepted by all human cultures as a "moral impertive," but is also supported by pragmatic common sense and historical experience. All human communities and societies are inextricably bound by their common

environment and interdependent needs for survival and security in finite space and a world of increasingly diminishing resources. Hegemonic and imperialist relations and allocation of resources—used in the past at great human and material cost until they were defeated, as happened every time—have effectively been rendered redundant by the apocalyptic force of modern technology. Even so-called conventional warfare is no longer capable of achieving and sustaining hegemonic and imperialist objectives. Without peaceful co-existence through cooperation and mutual accommodation, humankind now risks total destruction, either immediately through nuclear war or gradually through serious environmental degradation.

To meet the imperatives of peace and cooperation in sustaining their increasingly fragile environment and managing its diminishing resources, human societies must acknowledge and respect each other's claims to human dignity and material welfare, that is, to treat other societies as they wish to be treated by them. Genuine and lasting reciprocity, however, must direct every conceptual and practical aspect of discourse and dialogue. Mere tokenism and superficial reciprocity will be seen as intellectually dishonest and politically patronizing, and therefore counter-productive. The search for common ground in a spirit of mutual respect and appreciation of the integrity and dignity of each culture must be, and be seen by all sides to be, the basis of all aspects of internal and cross-cultural discourse and interaction, in a genuine and meaningful sense.

For example, the achievements of the modern humanities, as organizing principles of human relations, should be seen as the product of a long history of continuing global human development, whereby civilizations and cultures build upon and integrate each other's experiences and achievements. In this way, each culture would see the modern humanities as a jointly constructed conceptual and methodological framework of mutual exchange and understanding, rather than the exclusive domain of European or some other culture. However, conceptions of the humanities for this purpose should avoid simplistic or sentimental proclamations that ignore or gloss over significant differences about the nature, and cultural and contextual framework, of notions such as "objectivity, rationality, critical analysis, empirical verification," and other conceptual assumptions and methodological tools of the modern humanities. In articulating and implementing these conceptions, participants in discourse within each culture, and dialogue among cultures, should also be open to understanding, incorporating, or adapting—as well as respectfully questioning and challenging when appropriate—epistemological and methodological systems of other cultures.

Similarly, physical sciences and technology must also be developed with a view to managing and protecting the global as well as local environments while maximizing the material well-being of all human societies. It should be emphasized in this regard that science and technology are always premised on a specific world-view along with the moral norms and economic, social, and political

systems it generates and legitimizes. Furthermore, I would add, the underlying rationale, as well as the actual principles of science and their application in technology, are the product of human agency and choice. Human beings are responsible for the social, economic, political, and moral objectives they seek through the science they produce and technology they use. What world-view, moral norms, and systems should inform and guide science and technology today?

To summarize, the approach of this paper to the concept of competing visions of history in cultural communication and understanding is premised on the following seven propositions:

1. While significant cultural difference is a permanent and fundamental feature of human existence, internal and cross-cultural understanding is imperative for peaceful co-existence and cooperation. Power relations between relevant actors (within and between cultures) is very important, but to take that as definitive and exclusive of human choice and responsibility is to surrender to a destructive determinism of circumstances. Human willpower has repeatedly been cultivated throughout history to overcome and reverse negative power relations within and between cultures. Since confrontation and hostility are no longer tenable as defining principles of intercommunal and cross-cultural relations, human willpower must be utilized to achieve an equilibrium of power in the interest of peace and mutual accommodation. People can, and do, make a difference through the visions they have and positions they take regarding the options of understanding and cooperation, on the one hand, or confrontation and hostility, on the other. The question is therefore whether it is possible to achieve such a strong reorientation of human societies in relation to the use and abuse of history, and if yes, how that can be accomplished.

2. People's perception of their cultural (including ethnic and/or religious) identity is a product of continuing dialectical process of conflict and mediation between competing visions of their history. But these visions are, in turn, affected by shifts and transformations in the people's perception of identity. These shifts and transformations reflect the interaction of a wide variety of economic, political, social, psychological, and other factors within each culture, as well as the exchange of cross-cultural influences. But this process is far from deterministic, and is constantly shaped and directed by human choice and behavior.

3. Intercultural understanding and agreement on universally valid normative insights is possible, indeed essential, for peaceful co-existence and cooperation, but only when seen as a genuinely collaborative project, on the basis of reciprocity and mutual respect, and not as the hegemonic universalization of culturally specific (relativist) models, institutions, and processes.

4. Cultural difference, including differences in historical thinking, as such do not preclude intercultural understanding, but can be manipulated to that end by ambitious elites for their own political and economic advantage. Given the dynamic of competing visions of history, alternative voices and interpretations of cultural identity and historical experience do exist, and can be mobilized to counter the negative forces of confrontation and domination.

5. These alternative voices and interpretations should be identified and engaged in internal discourse within cultures, and cross-cultural dialogue, on the basis of mutual respect, and a desire to understand others on their own terms and in their own self-image, through jointly constructed conceptual frameworks and methodologies.

6. The processes of promoting internal and cross-cultural understanding and agreement on normative insights should include consensus on normative premises and methodologies of the humanities, social as well as physical sciences, and technology. All these and related fields of human knowledge and action should be seen as the product of, and deployed to serve, a universal community of humanity advancing peace and co-operation, and protecting its fragile environment.

7. The key to the whole process of intercultural understanding is a willingness to question one's own assumptions and motives, an ability to identify and address legitimate interests and concerns of individuals and groups—to come to the arena of understanding in good faith and candor, in search of peaceful and constructive co-existence—because the negative forces and experiences that need to be overcome are powerful and deep-rooted.

In the preceding discussion, I was referring to both the internal and cross-cultural dimensions of the process of understanding and consensus-building. In the next two sections, I will outline the role of historical thinking in an "internal" Islamic context, as well as with respect to Islamic-Western relations today.

Visions of History and Internal Islamic Discourse

As to what might be called internal Islamic discourse about cultural identity, I would argue that there has been a subordination of the history of so-called "peripheral" Islamic communities (of Sub-Saharan Africa in this paper) to the presumed "heartlands" of Islam in the Middle East. This subordination, it seems, was self-imposed by those communities themselves as well as externally created and encouraged in the dominant discourse of the Middle East. I am not suggesting that an Islamic identity was always the only one claimed by Muslim communities of either center or periphery, or that an Islamic discourse was the only

one they practiced. Rather, my point is that, to the extent that some elites from those regions identified themselves and their communities as Islamic, and practiced an Islamic discourse to legitimize and internalize those perceptions, the relationship tended to be one of hegemony by the center over subordinated, unequal peripheries. I would also suggest that the general population of peripheral communities accepted subordination "voluntarily" whenever presented with it as a religious imperative, though they may not necessarily have perceived or articulated their own identities as exclusively Islamic at any given point in time. Visions of their own local and regional history were suppressed in favor of those from the more "significant" Islamic history of the Middle East.

From that perspective, "significant history" of time and place was represented by Islamic elites to have been that of the Middle East, especially of the seventh to the tenth centuries, as transmitted through Arabic oral traditions or recorded Arabic texts. With the Koran itself and records of the traditions of the Prophet and those of earliest Muslim communities rendered in classical Arabic, and the requirement that recitation of the Koran in prayer must be in the original Arabic, the cultural context of early Islamic time and place has come to acquire a sanctified religious authority. The authenticity and integrity of the religious experience of all Muslims came to be judged against the standards set by that "center" of significant time and place: the more closely a person or community is identified with the center, the "better Muslim" that person or community is deemed to be.

Thus, for example, most Muslim communities of the present-day Northern Sudan, despite their obvious African Nubian origins and complexion, claim direct decent from the tribes of Arabia, preferably that of the Prophet himself, and generally identify culturally and politically with North Africa and the Middle East, rather than with their own geographical region and historical origins in East and West Africa.[1] In my view, these features of Northern Sudanese consciousness are at the root of the chronic state of political instability and civil war, with the consequent economic weakness and underdevelopment that have afflicted Sudan since independence in 1956.

This phenomenon is also clearly illustrated by what are known as the Jihâd movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa and Sudan, where the concept of the state and society, and their underlying ideology, sought to reproduce, a thousand years later and in great detail, the model of the early Medina city-state of the Prophet in Eastern Arabia of the seventh century, and to imitate the rhetoric and discourse of classical Islamic theology of the Middle East of the eighth and ninth centuries.[2] Although those earlier forms of historical models were subjected to severe and sustained challenged by an alternative, "modern" European colonial and postcolonial hegemonic universalism, they have persisted in one form or another to the present time. These perceptions of identity and visions of history now appear to be poised to reclaim their earlier dominance in some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, with drastic con-

sequences for countries like Sudan and Nigeria today, and potentially serious implications for the whole of East, West, and Central Africa. The harsh and exclusive theology and politics of Wahhabism in West Africa are not only sustained by annual pilgrimage to Mecca and Saudi Arabian financial support; they are inspired by Islamic militancy in Algeria and also draw on a history of Jihâd radicalism in the region.[3]

By far, however, the most significant, pervasive, and enduring manifestation of Middle Eastern visions of history is the impact of that time and place on the conception and formulation of traditional Islamic Šarī'a law.[4] Because many of the Šarī'a concepts and principles were clearly derived from Middle Eastern customary institutions and practices of the seventh to the ninth centuries, the underlying customary social, economic, and political norms and structures of that time and place are now believed to have permanently acquired the sanctity of Islam itself. In particular, Šarī'a concepts of property, commerce, family, and status of women are clearly strongly influenced by customary norms and institutions of the Middle East of that time. Efforts to drastically reform and change those aspects of Šarī'a, or to replace them permanently by secular law, are seen as tantamount to apostasy (heresy) deserving the death penalty. If the law of Islam is believed to be as sacred as the normative dictates of the religion itself, why should the customary institutions and practices of the earliest communities acquire equal sanctity?

The underlying question, of course, is what is Islam, and how can it be distinguished from the community of believers, if at all? Any definition of Islam, from the believers' point of view, must begin with the Koran and Sunna (oral and practical traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), but the Koran was revealed to, interpreted by, and initially implemented by the Prophet, who was born, raised, and lived all his life in a specific community. To be understood and applied by that community, the Koran had to use the language and draw upon the institutions and experiences of seventh-century Mecca, Medina, and surrounding communities in Western Arabia. For subsequent generations of Muslims, the example set by the Prophet and his immediate community came to signify the ideal model of human understanding and practice of Islam. Nevertheless, as Šarī'a came to be developed by Muslim scholars living and interacting with their communities of Western Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt during the eighth and ninth centuries, the early Islamic model of the city state of Medina continued to enjoy great normative influence, although it was by no means definitive of Islam. The customary institutions and practices of the different "host" communities of the region, and indeed "alien" principles of Jewish, Persian, and Roman law, have all had their impact on the formation of Šarī'a. In other words, Šarī'a as it came to be known and accepted today by more than a billion Muslims, from Southeast Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond, is the product of the human experiences and understanding of the first and immediately following Muslim communities of the Middle East.

If that is true, what about the human experiences and understanding of subsequent Muslim communities of all time throughout the world? Is Islam, and any conception of its religiously sanctioned law, to remain forever defined by the customary practices and institutions of early Muslims? Assuming that those early Muslim communities, like all human societies, could not have been exclusively defined by Islam, is it possible to distinguish now between what was essentially Islamic and what was incidental to those founding communities but merely approved by Islam? Do these questions assume a separate existence of Islam, independent from the first and immediately subsequent communities of believers? Is that possible, given the fact that the fundamental sources, Koran and Sunna, were themselves expressed through a language and within the cultural context of a specific community, and that Šarīʾa was elaborated through the customary institutions and practices of that and other early Muslim communities? If it is possible to make the distinction, what makes the outcome Islam in any valid sense, as opposed to another new and different religion?

These questions indicate to me the nature and extent of historic hegemonic discourse within the Islamic context. For Muslims throughout the world today to submit to this hegemony of the history of a specific time and place is to surrender the validity and relevance of their human existence and experience, the essence of their responsibility for their own individual and communal lives. Subsequent generations of Muslim communities, especially in the peripheries of the Muslim world, submitted to the hegemony of the history of the founding communities in the belief that it was necessary to do so in order to attain Islamic authenticity and continuity. Consequently, the challenge for those who wish to redress that hegemony is not only to disentangle Islam from the history of the founding generations of Muslims, but also to persuade their own respective present communities that the outcome is as Islamic as the practices and institutions of early Muslims.

This is a paradoxical and extremely complex task for someone who believes, as I do, that Islam, or any other religion for that matter, is what the believers accept it to be within the parameters of the religion, that is, the Koran and Sunna in the case of Islam. It is paradoxical in that if Islam is what the believers take it to be, then what the founding and immediately following generations of Muslims heard and understood the Prophet himself to say, or approve, is the most authentic conception of the religion. The complexity of the task to a believer lies in the normative message of Islam being totally embodied in the language and human experience of early communities. How to rediscover and redefine Islam out of the sources of its early Middle Eastern history?

In my view, the paradox can be resolved by holding that what early Muslims believed Islam to be is exactly what it was for them, without that conception of a particular, albeit special, time and place being necessarily and conclusively binding on subsequent generations of Muslims. The Prophet to them was what they perceived him to be and understood him to say and approve, while he

remains Prophet to subsequent generations in the context of their respective time and place. Once that hermeneutical premise is accepted, it should become possible to disentangle the essential from the incidental in early history of Muslim communities by the direct interpretation of the Koran and Sunna in contemporary context, rather than exclusively through Middle Eastern historical sources. Although the Koran and Sunna are written in Arabic, a fresh and open-minded reading of them by contemporary Muslims will not lead to results identical to early interpretations because of the radical shift in the material and intellectual orientation of the modern reader and his or her local and global environment. Historical Middle Eastern sources should remain relevant and useful in this process of reinterpretation, without being definitive.

As to the question of Islamic authenticity of the new interpretation, the ultimate and only real safeguard will remain, as it has always been, acceptance by a living Muslim community of today. In all probability, I concede, the present living community of Sudanese, Nigerian, Senegalese, or other Muslims would wish to continue submitting to what I call historical hegemony, rather than asserting independent visions of their own history. In fact, contemporary Muslim communities will probably refuse to see the binding force of customary institutions and practices of early Muslims as historical hegemony at all, but rather as guidance and guarantee of Islamic authenticity. But I am not proposing that attitudes and perceptions would or should immediately change. Rather, I am calling for the possibility of articulating and advocating alternative visions of history, wherein the historical thinking of present Muslim communities includes their own independent history and other visions of regional and world history, instead of being totally determined by that of early Muslims. If that possibility is genuinely and freely open, I maintain, alternative visions of local, regional, and world history will gain acceptance and influence. Such alternative visions need not, and should not in my view, totally replace early Muslim history, but can simply be allowed to compete with it and modify its worldview and impact on some principles of Šarī'a relating to social, economic, and political matters, and perceptions of intercommunal and international (Islamic-non-Islamic) relations.

For example, I suggest, if alternative visions of history were taken seriously by Muslims today, their view of Muslim-non-Muslim relations would shift toward greater accommodation and acceptance of the non-Muslims on their own terms, instead of remaining locked in a framework of confrontation and hegemonic initiatives. Šarī'a law regarding the status and rights of women can be modified towards greater equality and justice on the basis of local experience and institutions rather than remain bound by customary norms and practices of the early Islamic Middle East.[5] Šarī'a law of property, commercial transactions, and international trade can be freed from the restraints of ancient and alien concepts of land tenure, enabling business associations and financial arrangements to become more responsive to local resources and needs, circum-

stances of global trade, and modern relationships of production and distribution of wealth.

I believe that the possibility of seriously considering competing visions of history is utterly indispensable if modern Muslims are to retain their confidence in the validity of Islamic precepts and their relevance to the practical lives of present and future Muslim communities who live in a globalized and interdependent world. In other words, introducing this possibility is imperative from an Islamic point of view. If early Islamic history is as vital and valid as conservative and fundamentalist Muslims claim it to be, it will withstand the competition and maintain its hold on Muslim minds. Otherwise, its influence should be modified and supplemented to the extent living Muslim communities of the present and future find necessary and appropriate.

Visions of History and Islamic–Western Dialogue

Islamic historical thinking is not the only type of hegemony seeking to dominate Muslim communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere. More recent European hegemonic colonial and postcolonial relationships to the regions sought to replace the previous Islamic discourse with a new epistemological and philosophical paradigm of nation-states that are incorporated into, but peripheral to, a global economic, political, security, and ultimately cultural system dominated by Western powers, including the United States in recent decades.[6] Not wishing to openly risk unnecessary Islamic opposition, European colonial powers did not openly support active Christian competition with Islam in strongly Islamic regions, preferring to undermine Islamic influence through so-called secular education, the establishment of European political and economic institutions, and the promotion of European culture and lifestyles, especially among the educated elites. In non-Islamic parts of Africa, however, Christianity was an explicit part of the colonial hegemonic package at the expense of traditional African religions and beliefs. After independence, the Western hegemonic project continued in a variety of ways, including grossly unfair trade practices, political manipulation of local elites through military and security alliances, and so-called political conditionality of aid in favor of promoting and implementing universal notions of democracy and human rights.

Western secular education was particularly effective, with colonial state support and funding, in challenging and replacing traditional Islamic education, thereby introducing a radically different conception of the physical and social sciences. Far from attempting to understand and incorporate at least some elements of traditional systems of education, and their role in social, economic, and political institutions and processes of African societies, the colonial state sought to repudiate and totally marginalize preexisting education. In time, Western education had a profound impact on defining the person, and his or

her value and contribution to the community, by controlling access to civil service, professional careers, salaried employment. Western education was also the foundation and controller of access to the mass media, the other powerful medium of social and intellectual transformation. Popular perceptions of the environment, economic and social relations, and political organization were all radically transformed.

Since the colonial period, and increasingly after independence, however, some "nationalist" elites advocated a resurgence and reassertion of Islamic identity in response and challenge to European colonial and postcolonial hegemony. That call had little impact in Sub-Saharan Africa as long as the Middle Eastern "center" did not present a viable alternative, and was itself subjected to the same European cultural and ideological hegemony, of either the liberal capitalist type or the Marxist, socialist, Arab nationalist variety. But with the failure of secular nationalist projects, collapse of Soviet Marxism, and general retreat of democratic socialism in Europe, among other factors, the dynamic of the whole situation appears to be changing. The success of the Iranian revolution and the strong emergence of political Islam throughout the Middle East, providing its own pan-Islamic funding and organizational networks, have now produced a purported Islamic alternative to the Western normative paradigm and its political, economic, and legal models and modes of international relations.

In light of this analysis, it is clear that competing visions of history were, and continue to be, of paramount importance in this ideological and economic Islamic-Western competition in the region, in Europe itself and elsewhere, with each side seeking to demonize the other and deny it any level or degree of legitimacy or credibility with the target constituencies. On the one hand, Islamic elites recall positive historical images of the Golden Age of Islam, which is really the history of the Middle East as appropriated by elites on behalf of their marginalized African communities. Islamic protagonists also invoke negative images of malicious and barbaric Christian crusaders of the past, and their modern European decedents whom they accuse of seeking to totally destroy Islam and Muslims forever. Their Western counterparts, on the other hand, relying on negative "orientalist" stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, seek to negate any value or relevance of Islamic visions of history and perceptions of cultural identity. Western-educated African elites who are believed to be unable or unwilling to adopt and support Islamic cultural identity and discourse are condemned by Islamists as renegades and traitors who have been corrupted and coopted by the West to promote its secular materialistic and exploitative agenda in the region. The struggle appears to be for total and exclusive victory, without allowing any room for compromise or seriously searching for common ground.

Ironically, the situation is complicated by the very success of Western powers in cooting the elites of colonized communities into a belief in universal modernity, which accords equality and justice to all. Significant numbers

of African elites from formerly colonized communities sought fulfillment in Europe and North America of the promise of "the civilizing mission of the White Man," only to face rejection and disappointment through exclusionary immigration rules, social intolerance and racial discrimination, harsh labor conditions, and so forth. Westernized local elites, both abroad and at home in Sub-Saharan Africa, feel betrayed and abandoned by their former European supporters, without being adequately prepared to compete in an Islamic or indigenous discourse at home. As the confrontation and resentment deepens, options for reconciliation appear to be diminishing, and the rhetoric of "clash of civilizations" gains credence in official governmental and intergovernmental circles, and with the public at large.[7]

More recently, popular perceptions of Western bias and failure in the Bosnian conflict appear to reinforce claims of the validity of an Islamic hegemonic discourse in "self-defense." According to radical Islamists and nationalists, if the so-called international community, being effectively the United States, Europe, and their allies, is unwilling or unable to maintain the rule of international law in Bosnia, Muslims have to assert Islamic solidarity and counter-hegemony throughout the world because that is the only way they can survive and maintain their communal and global Islamic identity. Failures of the international community in Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, and elsewhere in Africa and beyond are also quoted by Muslim protagonists in support of the need for self-reliance and confrontation.

Recalling earlier discussion, I suggest that more positive visions of Islamic, Western and global history must be articulated and deployed in pursuit of greater toleration, mutual respect, and cooperation. Colonial history in Africa certainly had its positive results in maintaining peaceful relations between ethnic and religious communities, improving economic conditions along with infrastructures and health conditions in general; Western colonial education also brought some benefits to the region. While colonialism itself most certainly had its own selfish motives, and was guilty of much oppression and exploitation of colonized peoples, it is untrue and unfair to dismiss the whole experience as totally and exclusively bad. A more historically valid and constructive approach would seek to identify and build on the positive contributions of colonialism, rather than unrealistically trying to repudiate all its achievements.

With regard to current international events, Muslims should also endeavor to fulfill their obligations as full members of the international community, and accept their share of responsibility for the severe crises in Muslim settings like Somalia and the Gulf, instead of continuing to blame the West for all the misfortunes of Muslims and others in the world. It is ironic that advocates of cultural and political self-determination should keep looking to the colonial and imperialist West for leadership and sacrifice, and yet expect that to be provided on their own terms and in the service of their specific objectives. If they wish an "international community" to emerge as a credible, if not totally impartial,

arbiter and constructive force throughout the world, non–Western peoples must take the initiative and make the contributions that make such a vision possible.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper on internal Islamic discourse and Islamic–Western dialogue, with special reference to Sub–Saharan Africa, should be taken as illustrative of similar issues and concerns that can be raised with respect to other parts of the world. Whether it is Hindu–Islamic confrontation in India, Chinese–Islamic relations in Malaysia, the Korean conflict, Chinese, Japanese, and Western competition over Southeast Asia, or another situation, the competing visions of the history paradigm can be useful in understanding and addressing questions of peaceful coexistence and cooperation, economic and legal reform, protection of the environment, and other matters of general concern. In each case, the basic issue is to define the terms and circumstances of historical thinking about self-identity and perceptions of the significant other. Useful questions to raise in this regard include: Which visions of history about communal self-identity in relation to other cultural, religious, ethnic, or political groups are recalled and deployed in daily politics, the media, the educational system, and communal, intercommunal, and international relations? Do exclusivist and hegemonic images of history prevail, and if so, is it possible to present and promote alternative, more accommodating and mutually respectful visions of the history of the community in relation to the other? How are significant events, like the conflict in Bosnia, or the treatment of relevant ethnic or religious groups in other parts of the world, seen and interpreted in local discourse?

I would also emphasize the economic and security context of hegemonic discourse throughout the world. Militant and confrontational visions of history often exaggerate and thrive upon memories of perceived or real events and current realities of economic exploitation, military conquest, and political domination. These images and perceptions must be taken very seriously by all sides in internal discourse and cross–cultural dialogue in the interest of building mutual trust and confidence, and not dismissed as groundless or exaggerated. Due regard should be given to the collective psychology of denial and rationalization on both sides of each issue. While self-criticism, and even conceding more than what one may believe to be justified by the "facts" of history, is more likely to assist the other side in reciprocating, denial and rationalization will probably produce a similar counterreaction by the other.

In conclusion, I suggest that even as it is possible, indeed imperative, to reverse the dangerous prevalence of hegemonic and confrontational visions of history, that can only be achieved through a clear and deliberate strategy of promoting alternative visions of history, and perceptions of identity, that are more conducive to mutual understanding and respect as means for peaceful coexis-

tence and cooperation. This should include, I maintain, redressing present local, regional, and global gross differentials in power relations, at least at the functional level, as well as struggling for the protection and promotion of human rights to create the political and social space for discourse and dialogue. Such strategies must also identify and challenge the forces and trends of hegemony or isolationism within all relevant cultures, whether Islamic, Western, Chinese, Malay, or any other. There is always the potential for good faith and peacemaking in every human society, but it is unlikely to materialize on its own, least of all in the face of strong perceptions of ambitions of hegemony. The ultimate and most practical guide for internal discourse and cross-cultural dialogue to promote peace and cooperation should be the Golden Rule, universal to all human cultures and religions and fully supported by common sense and pragmatic experience.

Notes

1. See, for example, Francis M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington, D.C., 1995), chap. 2.

2. On the jihad movements of West Africa see Ibrahim Ado-Khrawa, *The Jihad in Kano* (Kano 1989); Robert Sydney Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-colonial West Africa* (London 1989), chap. 3; J. B. Webster*, The Revolutionary Years: West Africa Since 1800* (London 1980), chaps. 1 to 3; Elizabeth Isichei, *History of West Africa Since 1800* (New York 1977), chap. 2. On Islam in West Africa in general, see, H. Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa* (New York 1984); Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam* (London 1982).

3. The strong connection between the Wahhabi revival in late eighteenth-century Arabia and the Jihâd movements of West Africa was suggested, for example, by Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (New York 1967), 56. See also Lansine Kaba, *The Wahhabiyya: Islamic Reform and Politics in French West Africa* (Evanston, Il., 1974), chap. 1.

4. See generally, Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford 1950). Cf. Muhammad Mustafa Azami, *On Schachet's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (New York 1985).

5. For an Islamic reform methodology that would achieve this objective see, generally, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Syracuse, NY, 1990).

6. See generally, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York 1990); and ibid., *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York 1988).

7. The heated controversy around the recent article by Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49, clearly illustrates the reality and serious consequences of these issues.