

# The Dialogue of Identities

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**SUMMARY PAPER**

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In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

Peace and blessings be upon the most honourable of the prophets and messengers, Muhammad (s) and his pure and noble family. God says,

*O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most Godwary among you. Indeed Allah is all-knowing, all-aware.<sup>1</sup>*

Our research is focused on the dialogue of identities. It consists of the following points.

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<sup>1</sup> The Holy Quran, 49:13.

## DEFINING IDENTITY

In the Arabic language, *hawiyah* (identity) is “what a thing is.” That is, it is what makes a particular living being a human being. Or what makes a particular fluid water. According French Philosopher André Lelande’s philosophical dictionary, identity is ‘what indicates a fixed trait in the self.’

There are several different definitions of identity in different academic disciplines. The philosophical definition of identity is ‘the unchanging moral awareness of the self.’ The sociological definition of identity, as Miller mentioned, is ‘a type of attribute that can be observed in order to allow a person to know oneself.’ Miller divided identity into the individual and collective, and the first to study individual identity was Eric Ericson in 1950s.

Individual identity is an individual's sense of individuality and distinction from others.

On the other hand, the Quranic definition of identity is something behind the changing elements of an individual – such as the cells of the body and the element of thoughts, tendencies, and feelings. There is a constant element expressed in the Quran: the soul which is defined through four features.

The first feature is the ability to discern. God says, “So give good news to My servants who listen to the word [of Allah] and follow the best [interpretation] of it.”<sup>2</sup>

The second feature is divine inspiration. God says, “By the soul and Him who fashioned it, and inspired it with [discernment between] its virtues and vices.”<sup>3</sup>

The third feature is carnal power. God says, “Yet I do not absolve my [own carnal] soul, for the [carnal] soul indeed prompts [men] to evil...”<sup>4</sup>

The fourth feature is the power of the subconscious mind, which involves warning and reprimanding. God says, “I swear by the Day of Resurrection! And I swear by the self-critical soul!”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Holy Quran, 39:17-18.

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Quran, 91:8.

<sup>4</sup> The Holy Quran, 12:53.

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Quran, 75:1-2.

## INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Individual identity is what psychologists have been interested in through the study of developmental and biological characteristics of each individual. As for the collective identity, it is the manifestation of the self with the group resulting from the individual's awareness of his belonging and his feeling of belonging to specific groups.

## DIVERSITY IN COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

The need for identity, as stated by Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, lies in the need for belonging and the need for appreciation (that is, self-esteem). Identity satisfies both needs.

### THE FOUR BASES OF IDENTITY

The first basis is the homeland. An individual's feeling of belonging to their homeland is the first basis of identity. It is expressed in identification with their citizenship.

The second basis is that of language. Arabs feel a sense of belonging with speakers of the Arabic language, and this is what is expressed as national identity.

The third premise is heritage, which is expressed as an ethnic identity.

The fourth basis is religion. God Almighty says, "O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah with the wariness due to Him and do not die except as Muslims."<sup>6</sup> He also says, "Indeed, with Allah religion is Islam."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Holy Quran, 3:102.

<sup>7</sup> The Holy Quran, 3:19.

## COMPARING IDENTITIES

There is a difference between real identity and nominal identity. A real identity is the one which does not differ according to the differences of thoughts and views. For example, a human being is a human being, and that is an unchanging fact. On the other hand, nominal identity is one which differs according to different views. The way of dressing varies between societies. The etiquettes of social relations, customs and traditions differ in different societies. Thus, there are real and nominal identities.

We will discuss primarily religious identity and national identity. Both identities are rooted in a real basis, which is human innate tendency. An individual has an innate tendency and an emotional inclination towards the land in where he lived his childhood. Likewise, the origin of religious identity is a real and not a nominal one. It stems from the human conscience includes four tendencies: longing for truth, the instinct of self-love, the inclination towards beauty, and the inclination of reverence towards metaphysical power. If a person becomes aware of true metaphysical, they will naturally revere it. That is the true and real basis for religious identity.

The difference between religious identity and national identity is in the details. Religious identity retains its being real even in the details. The details of religion are all unified and return to a real basis, which is the rule of reason with evidence – all based on the innate tendency towards metaphysical power. On the other hand, national identity – when it comes to the details of laws, policies, institutions, and norms – is nominal in its details. These details as they pertain to each country will differ according to different views and considerations.

## THE ISLAMIC AND CAPITALIST IDENTITIES

Differences exist between the Islamic identity and the capitalist identity on the intellectual level and the behavioural level.

### INTELLECTUAL DIFFERENCES

Differences on the intellectual level are represented by several elements.

Firstly, is centrality given to man or to God? The Islamic identity sees the centrality of God and that humankind is just a caliph. God says, “Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on the earth.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Western civilization places humankind at the centre of its worldview.

Secondly, is freedom a value or a means? In Western civilization, freedom is a value and a principal. However, in the Islamic worldview, freedom is just a means, and the true value is human dignity. God says, “Certainly We have honoured the Children of Adam.”<sup>9</sup>

Thirdly, there are differences between what is fixed and what is variable. There is a clear difference in the list of laws and legislation – in regards to what is fixed and what is variable – between the Western and Islamic worldviews. That is why, when it comes to women’s rights, for example, they differ in the list of legislation according to each worldview.

Fourthly, what are the dimensions of a human being? A human being in the materialistic view has two dimensions: a body and a psyche – the latter being a mixture of thoughts, feelings, and tendencies. The Islamic civilization, on the other hand, believes that a human being has three dimensions. Beyond the dynamic aspects of body and psyche, there is the eternal soul. This soul needs nurture and nourishment, which comes only through worship and a relationship with the divine.

### BEHAVIOURAL DIFFERENCES

As for the behavioural level, one of the most important differences between the two civilizations is the responsibility of enjoining good and forbidding evil – which can be expressed as the responsibility of reform. God says, “There has to be a nation among you summoning to the good,

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<sup>8</sup> The Holy Quran, 2:30.

<sup>9</sup> The Holy Quran, 17:70.



bidding what is right, and forbidding what is wrong.”<sup>10</sup> The Islamic worldview puts a responsibility on the shoulders of all of its adherents, which is the responsibility of reform, enjoining good, and forbidding evil. This was not an issue of concern for Western civilization.

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<sup>10</sup> The Holy Quran, 3:104.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITIES AND CIVILIZATIONS

What is the relationship between the identity of Islamic civilization and the identity of Western civilization? Is it one of clash and conflict, as portrayed by Huntington? Or is it one of dialogue as numerous other thinkers believe?

The reality is that there is no conflict between the two civilizations. Rather, there is complementarity between them. That is, the dialogue between the two civilizations earns each civilization maturity and perfection in behavioural and applied outcomes. This is seen on the economic, political, and social levels. At the level of self-education and preservation, the relationship is not a conflict relationship.

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, and may God's peace and blessings be upon Muhammad and his pure and good family.