Religion and Media

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I believe all those who have had "religion" or "the media" as their field of study or area of experience, in recent years, especially after the bitter catastrophe of September 11, are faced with two essential questions:

Why have the borders of religious "difference" become more prominent and why have the identity factors become clearer?

How can the media diminish religious alienation and support inter-religious dialogue?

On account of my personal experience in the media (radios, televisions, the press and weblogs) and also my involvement and employment in "the dialogue of cultures and civilizations" and "interfaith dialogue", I am trying to account for these two questions.

1. September 11 signaled a new danger to our world: the danger of legitimizing identities transforming into resistance identities. Legitimizing identities can be constructed by influential cul1tural institutions such as religion, and be spread by social activists and through rational synergies. However, resistance identities are normally formed in dangerous unstable situations by excluded groups. Resistance identity is, in fact, a kind of extremist violent self-expression in circumstances where the possibility of peaceful and dialogue-based relations is denied. What the event of September 11 is a consequence of is the expression of resistance identity or more appropriately the reflection of violence and terrorism in the cast of

fundamentalism. Such a type of fundamentalism can be explained and analyzed within the framework of the same process mentioned regarding identity.

Divine religions, by reason of their strong bonds with man's nature, can construct his legitimizing identity both in his individual and social sides. The issue has started from where, instead of fulfilling this critical role, religion has taken form as "resistance identity". "Resistance identity" is a social construction and is a product of unjust political, economical and cultural changes worldwide.

"Resistance identity" can be constructed with religious, ethnical, national and even gender-related bricks. In today's globalized world we are seeing violent extremist types of alienation, narcissism and fundamentalist religious, national, ethnic gender-related phobias which, near and far, have tightened the ring of dialogue, tolerance and coexistence in the world. These alienations, phobias and narcissisms, although more dangerous when religious, are not limited to religion in the first place and moreover are not limited to a specific religion. The roots of their construction and aggravation cannot be narrowed down to religion in general or any particular religion. September 11 proved that the most advanced parts of the current civilization is prone to harm from its most marginalized parts and the source of this vulnerability should be found in different layers of politics, culture and economy. The power of "identity", if understood clearly, is a destructive one under any given title including religion, nationalism, ethnicity or gender.

Globalization and inclination towards universal features is only one of the directions of today's world. The other direction is localization and the growth of particularistic features. Religion, politics, culture and economy should think up

solutions between these two worlds. Inclusivism and exclusivism are two different approaches that can involve religion as well as politics, economy and culture. The first approach does not view its borders of difference as closed and rigidified and believes in a flexible dynamic identity. However, the second approach defines its borders of difference as separation and distance from the others and relies on a violent fundamentalist identity. The world can have a dominant inclusivist direction, whereas after September 11 it has unfortunately had an exclusivist direction. The media can work to weaken or strengthen any of these directions as well.

2. After September 11, most media have functioned to strengthen the points of difference or violent identity-forming aspects. Such a function can be the consequence of various factors: firstly, the violent frightening voice of fundamentalism has been a very loud voice which has reached ears more quickly and clearly than the soft peacemaking voice of religions. Secondly, religious fundamentalists, unlike traditionalists, have made wide use of new technology and media and, as a result, the level of dominance of fundamentalist leaders such as Bin Laden and Zawahiri over the new media spaces and tools has unprecededly increased in the recent years. Thirdly, international media, due to their press methods, have looked for "oddity" and "conflict" and have, therefore, paid more attention to religious differences than similarities. Fourthly, the media image of the East in the West and the West in the East has been a distorted, caricatured, or at least collaged one than a realistic image in natural proportions. An analysis of the contents of the news conveyed by world's most effective news agencies, the press, radios and televisions very well proves that Islamophobia, heterophobia xenophobia and other forms of alienation have been their dominant characteristic. Nevertheless, in this approach, the role of the element of politics and especially, the lobby of extremist religious-political groups can be considered prominent and effective.

3. In spite of this distorted image of the element of religion in the contemporary world, we can signify the role of inclusivism and inclination towards openness and dialogue, which is embedded in religion. Basically, religious texts have always provided the grounds for opening doors to dialogue, both in content and form. What religion considers a rule is dialogue and forgiveness and what it considers an exception is conflict.

However, fundamentalists and the fundamentalist image of religion are against this old deep-rooted tradition. Human beings, on account of being of the same kind but having differences, turn to dialogue to find their points of similarity and it is natural that the system of religion recognizes this intrinsic disposition. Both in the holy Bible and the Koran we repeatedly see that we are addressed as "humans". This address elevates us from "individuals" to "persons" or parties of dialogue who are addressed by the holy voice. As said by the Koran, people of hell and torture are those who have been denied the blessing of "listening to the truth and turning to rationality" ([67:10] they also say, "If we heard or understood, we would not be among the dwellers of Hell!"). In the Islamic outlook, inviting others to the truth and guiding them is basically of a dialogue nature. The holy Koran states, ([16:125] you shall invite to the path of your Lord with wisdom and kind enlightenment and debate with them in the best possible manner) – best in wisdom.

Even in other eastern religions we can

extensively see the dominance of the wisdom of dialogue over the manner of force and violence. In the book "conversations", Confucius includes different examples of religious grounds for dialogue. In his fourth book "the art of teaching and learning" he states, "he who possesses ethical virtues speaks softly … this softness and quietness in speech is not an easy thing. In this world, most people are aggressive towards one another. Restraining oneself from excitement, grudge or aggression is a very difficult task, to relieve oneself from such difficulty there is no other way than speaking quietly and softly. Dialogue, in its modern usage, which is the result of a number of changes in the modern man's epistemological outlooks, also has a privileged status in modern religious literature and in humanistic and democratic versions of religion. Therefore, many contemporary Muslim, Jewish and Christian theologians have paid a lot of attention to it. Formulation of the idea of dialogue, in its modern sense, can extensively be seen in the works of Muslim thinkers and modern reformists from Iran or other Muslim countries. Christian and Jewish religious philosophers and thinkers have also been effective in the design and promotion of the idea of dialogue.

Can this religious approach not be an indicator of inclusivism and inclination towards dialogue in religions? Why has the rough rootless voice of the fundamentalists shadowed the noble soft voice of the dialogue? Replacing this voice of violence with a soft voice is the task of religious media in our current world. But unfortunately there are not so many media that care about this important duty and those which do care are rarely heard.

4. Can international dialogues, considering the political restrictions they have, give open, pluralist, multi-minded behavioral patterns a chance to be expressed? My answer to this question draws upon the new role of the media in the communication age and the manifestation of a positive network society.

Turning to "dialogue" with an all-inclusive humanistic approach is considered the dominant argument in the cultural domain. This argument is mostly based upon common global issues and "collective fears and hopes of man in today's society". In this assemblage of dialogue, although there is little reliance on "state-nations", there is far more reliance on "humanity" in its universal sense, units smaller than a government such as civic societies and units larger than a government such as cultures and civilizations. The culture in this pattern has taken a basic role and there is more emphasis on cultural bonds than on political ties. The cultural turn to the pattern of dialogue and the stress on "networks" instead of monodirectional vertical relations has created the possibility of dialogue and manifestation of the inclusivist direction of religions.

In fact, reorganization of the global order is beyond dialogue in the real world and will not occur unless the world is viewed as different cultural and social networks.

5. In order for us to reach "communicative understanding" we should put more emphasis on "communicative competence". By communicative competence I do not only mean the techniques of the media and competence in the communicative language. Communicative competence means finding enough cultural competence in communication with our surrounding world and different minds and purposes. We are required to understand each culture internally and from within that culture in order to discover the language of dialogue with it.

This communicative competence is required for the fulfillment and maintenance of equal

dialogue between religions, cultures and civilizations. The dialogue nature and features of each religion, civilization or culture are important. However, the way this nature and these features are interpreted, explained and, most importantly, understood by the parties is of more significance. "Communicative understanding" and "communicative the Muslims to overthrow the Soviet Union during the Cold War and meanwhile nature and these features are interpreted, explained and, most importantly, understood by the parties is of more significance. "Communicative understanding" and "communicative competence" are among those synergies that can be used by the media in a way to pinpoint and strengthen dialogue values and traditions that are embedded in each religion, and to fortify the ethics of dialogue.

6. Global communicative media and tools, contrary to the universal human disposition that is against violence, have raced each other to aggravate violence and have practically been in the service of the growth of religious violence. Violence-seeking religious leaders have also used this possibility to organize extremist religious forces and introduce exclusivist figures, who automatically find the required charisma and attraction, as models and profited from the media that constantly prefer violence to other news and tend to expand the radius of violence. In the West, exclusivist churches took advantage of the media and made Islamophobia the main seat of the western mentality and in the Muslim society, as well, extremist movements profited from the media and aggravated the fear of the West. This race has escalated to pose the future of humanity a much higher danger than that of September 11.

At this juncture, as religion strengthened and formed bonds with the media, extremist religious leaders found it easier to make instrumental use of religion. Nevertheless, making instrumental use of religion and

religious emotions to the political advantage of the strong is neither so complicated nor new. Although this dangerous game has always been started by political planners, it has never ended by its initial starters. An example of this would be Afghanistan, where the West organized the Muslims to overthrow the Soviet Union during the Cold War and meanwhile talked of Afghan guerilla fighters (the Mujahedeen) with high reverence. However, when political goals of the West were fulfilled the movement of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan gave birth to the Taliban and al-Qaeda and this trend was not ended until the catastrophe of September 11.

Religious authorities and owners of the media should work hand in hand to replace the exclusivist religion with the inclusivist religion. Because advertising violence under the name of religion, more than anything else, causes religious values to lose color and is to the disadvantage of the shared religious essence, which has been sent down by God to carry the message of peace and life. Because most of the people who are interested in staying religious as well as living without violence will almost certainly sacrifice religiousness for better living.

7. The ethics of dialogue do not suggest negative tolerance but positive opposition and this is the essence of divine religions and the spiritual disposition. Only for the sake of observing dialogue ethics one should not just bear the others but work with them. Dialogue ethics, however, is a part of the current world's urbanization and the foundation for democratic ties. This urbanization enables members of the society to listen to one another, and drives the political culture towards mutual respect, social and political contribution, freedom and observing the essential rights of the others.

Such urbanization requires powerful civic institutions, media and ties directed towards dialogue. In this approach, relationships have a "dialogue-opening" direction which means increasing the channels of communication

between the listener and the speaker and deepening mutual understanding and democratic outlook and behavior.

"The communication age" as said earlier can become "the dialogue age" and the "Network society" can organize network order, on the condition that it can hear the silent voices of the world in cultural and urban domains. Life in the mediated world is not the need of our age. We can on one side see the virtual dominance of reality but on the other side there is possibility for speaking and listening in order to see the truth and turn to objectivity. Religions, also, can turn to the second side and the media, as well, can adopt fast, cheap and abundant distribution of information and knowledge in this direction.

So, there is a new vision for illustrating the role of the media and religion in promotion of inclusivism. And as Sohrab -Iranian poet- put it, we just need to wash our eyes and look in a different way.

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