

Divided World, Divided Religion: Western Roots, Muslim Problem

Yamin Cheng

Abstract

The idea that religion is one segment of a total dimension of human existence, or that it is a product of the human mind and the human condition, is an idea of recent times. This idea could be traced to the Enlightenment and the Social Sciences, two Western intellectual movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. Contemporary Muslim intellectuals attributed to Western imperialism and colonialism for the introduction of an idea of religion nurtured in Enlightenment thought and the Social Sciences into the Muslim understanding of religion. If we are to gauge to what extent this Muslim attribution is true it is then instrumental for us to understand the fate of religion in Western history.

Introduction

Today, everyone is well acquainted with the word 'religion.' Mention the word 'religion,' and one would utter the name of one or more of the great religions of the world – Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism. Repeat the word for clarification, and one would point to a mosque, or a church, or a temple, or a priest, or a monk, or a nun. No one would point to a school and then say that it is a religious building; or to a schoolteacher and then say that the teacher is a religious person. Must learning be considered a religious act only if it means studying the Qur'an, or the Bible, or the

Vedas? Must a person be called a religious person only if he or she puts on attire that is often associated with religion, but not if he or she wears a traditional costume or in the case of man, a modern-day coat and tie?

Muslim intellectuals of recent times have attributed to Western imperialism and colonialism for introducing into the Muslim mind a modern Western understanding of religion that is divisible into two halves, one sacred and the other profane.¹ Such an understanding of religion is rejected as alien to the Muslim experience of Islam as religion. Its consequence is that, two kinds of Muslim personalities were produced, one religious and the other secular.² The religious person would be identified with concerns for otherworldliness, and the secular person with this worldliness. The religious person is usually seen as anti-progress and anti-West, the secular person as a friend of progress and of the West.³

How much of our perception of religion today has been influenced by the dualism of the world into the religious and non-religious that is the outcome of this meaning in Western history cannot be judged

¹ See, for example, Ahmad, Khurshid. 1983. 'The Nature of the Islamic Resurgence.' Esposito, J. L. ed. *Voices of Resurgent Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press. 218-29.

² Ahmad, *Resurgent Islam*, 218-29. For a Christian response to the idea of the secular, see Cox, Harvey. 1965. *The Secular City*. New York: Collier Books. For a Muslim response, see al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. 1993. *Islam and Secularism*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC.

³ The 'West' is a conceptual imagination about a people, their land, and culture. It is generally taken to mean those people who originally inhabited the geographic continent called Europe, and those who migrated from Europe to other parts of the world but formed the majority people in terms of population and dominance, such as North America, Australia, and New Zealand. These people share a historical bond in terms of their identity. Apart from being a people originating from Europe, they have a common identity in terms of religion and cultural legacy. That religion is Christianity, and the cultural legacy is the Greco-Roman, Latin, and Germanic cultures. See, for example, McKay, John P, Hill, Bennett D, and Buckler, John. 2006. *A History of Western Society*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 8th edition, 191. For a Muslim definition of Western civilization, see Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 134.

precisely. Nevertheless, to understand what happened to religion in the course of Western history is pertinent to understanding what bearings it has on the fate of religion in civilizations other than the West.

Two periods in Western history are relevant in this regard. These are 'The Enlightenment'⁴ and 'The Social Sciences.'⁵ The Enlightenment is an eighteenth century intellectual movement that aspires to elevate reason as the benchmark of reality and truth. However, reason as understood here is not the reason of the medieval scholasticism nor is it the reason of Cartesian rationalism. Rather, it is the reason of scientific thinking that regards reality as discernable by a systematic method of inquiry called the empirical method, and truth as objective and universal. The Social Sciences, a nineteenth century intellectual movement, aims at the application of the scientific thinking in the study of social phenomena. Religion too is regarded as a social phenomenon. The distinguishing mark of the social sciences is that it ties reason in its scientific character to environmental, demographic, cultural, and historical factors to account for an object of investigation, and has no regard for any transcendental and supernatural factor.

The Enlightenment And Natural Religion

From the seventeenth century onward, a new wave of thinking appeared that was to alter the way religion is perceived in the West. This is not to say that suddenly everyone had adopted a new view of religion that was different from the one held during the medieval period.⁶

⁴ For a description of the Enlightenment, see Immanuel Kant's essay '*Was ist Aufklärung?*' or 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant appears at the end of the Enlightenment era but his ideas are the culmination of the Enlightenment ideals.

⁵ For a broad discussion of the Social Sciences, see Manicas, Peter. 1988. *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. London: Basil Blackwell.

⁶ The medieval period is also known as The Middle Ages. Scholars of Western history divide Western history into three periods. These are the Ancient or Classical Age, the Medieval Age or the Middle Ages, and the Modern Age. The Medieval period is also called the 'Dark Ages.' This is because the medieval period is seen as a period dominated by blind faith and the censorship of reason and individual will. See McKay, et al., *Western Society*, 419.

This new view of religion arose among an elite group of intellectuals who had little regard for the Church and for the Church's teachings on Christianity.⁷ Many of them were skeptics, people who doubted the truth of the Church's teachings. Their skepticism stems from their contention that what the Church taught could not be proven rationally or scientifically, such as claims to miracles found abundant in the Bible. Also, around this time, the world had opened up for the Western people. Religion was no longer seen as the sole possession of Christianity. Truth was no longer the prerogative of Christianity alone. But above all, religion must be placed under the purview of reason to verify every claim it made.⁸ This period, characterized by which reason reigning supreme over religion, as against reason being the handmaid of religion as it was during the medieval period, came to be known as 'The Enlightenment.'

Prior to the seventeenth century, the world that the Europeans envisaged was still a single world where God stood at the centre of everything - from the view of reality, to the view of Nature, knowledge, society, daily life, life after death, and personal image.⁹ All things in the world were interconnected in such a way that they became analogies for one another. For instance, the sun, the lion, the king, the human heart, and gold all stood for bravery and glory. The world was arranged

⁷ These groups of intellectuals are known as *philosophes* and Deists. The *philosophes* are a group of French intellectuals. Notable figures among them include Diderot, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Condorcet, and Rousseau. Deists are of two groups, American Deists and Continental Deists. American Deists include such notable statesmen and figures like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Thomas Paine. The Enlightenment saw its greatest accomplishment in the American Deists who were instrumental in the founding of the United State of America. The most important Continental Deist is perhaps John Locke. Locke became one of the most important referents in the founding of America. See especially his *Two Treatises of Government*.

⁸ For example, Locke said, 'Whatever God hath revealed is certainly true...but whether it be divine revelation or not, reason must judge. See Locke, John. 1959. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Fraser, A. C. (ed.). New York: Dover, 425.

⁹ Perry, Marvin *et al.* 1985. *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics, and Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, Second edn. 230-233.

in a hierarchical order in a great chain of being, top bottom from God to human, denoting the gradual move from superiority to inferiority, and from purity to impurity.¹⁰ Theology and philosophy were the two intellectual tools that acted to keep faith, mind, life, society, and culture together as an organic but hierarchical unity. Scholasticism,¹¹ a form of rational justification of faith, played an extremely significant role in harmonizing revelation and reason through a systematic approach to Nature, as Nature was thought to contain mind-provoking questions that allude to theological answers. For example, the 'Cosmological Argument' was used to argue for the existence of God. According to this argument, everything that exists in this world must have a maker. The chair's maker is the carpenter. Similarly, the universe has a maker. This maker is God.

Another example is the 'Argument by Design' that argues for the harmonious relationship between parts of a thing, such as the watch or clock. Likewise, the universe is also a harmonious relationship between the different parts of the universe. The watch or clock cannot think on its own to form a harmonious relationship among its respective parts. It is the watch or clockmaker who arranges them in such order so that they find their proper place in the make-up of the watch or clock in order for the watch or clock to function. The universe is not an intelligent designer of its own make-up. It is God who designed the universe.

The 'Argument from Logic' is employed to clarify the doctrine of Trinity. The argument likens the Trinity to water that could exist as liquid, solid, and vapor. Water is the substance, whereas liquid, solid, and vapor are its forms. Similarly, God is substance whereas Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are His forms. A well-known example of this kind of approach in using Nature as the medium to provide rational

¹⁰ See, for example, *In Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571)*, cited in Richard Olson. 1993. *The Emergence of the Social Sciences*. New York: Twayne Publishers. 7-8.

¹¹ Price, B.B. 1992. *Medieval Thought: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers. 119-144.

justification of theological doctrines is Thomas Aquinas' 'Five Arguments for the Existence of God.'¹²

As the Western world inched toward the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment era, Western people were beginning to witness a disintegration of the Christian-centric unified worldview. Two movements, one theological and the other intellectual, were to play important roles in the culmination of the Enlightenment. The Reformation, a theological movement that emerged from within the Church, and the Scientific Revolution, the contender to philosophy for the intellectual interpretation of Nature, marked a watershed in Western history as it signaled the gradual collapse of the medieval worldview.

The Reformation¹³ sought to correct what it thought were heretical doctrines and practices introduced by the Church, such as the 'indulgences' as payment to free oneself from purgatory (a waiting place to enter hell) and to be able to enter heaven.¹⁴ The Reformation sought to bring Christianity to its orthodox or correct teaching. First, the Reformation taught that the only authority that would decide the Christian faith and practice is the Bible, not the Pope or a group of priests who enjoy the privilege of being able to decide for others. Because the Bible is now regarded as the authority of the Christian faith, everyone should be able to have access to it. Prior to this, only the priests were the ones who were learned in the Bible as they were the ones who could read and write. Moreover, the Bible was written in Latin, the official language of the Church and of the intellectuals at that time. Because of this, the majority of the population had no recourse to the Bible and their only recourse to it was the priests. With the Reformation, things changed. The Bible was translated into the

¹² For a description of Aquinas' five arguments on the existence of God, see Melchert, Norman. 1999. *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company. 278-284.

¹³ Spielvogel, Jackson J. 2000. *Western Civilization*. Belmont: Wadsworth. Fourth edn. 366-91.

¹⁴ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 366.

vernacular, the language spoken by a people of a certain locality, such as German and French.

Although the Reformation tried to bring every believer to be an active participant in the faith with an ability to read the Bible in the vernacular, it did not allow reason to be exercised in the likeness of medieval scholasticism in matters of doctrines, beliefs, and practices. In other words, the Reformation shut the door on the rational justification of faith. Thus, for the Reformation, to read the Bible means to read it to strengthen one's faith, not reason it with one's mind.

For the Reformation, it is belief alone that guarantees salvation, not any intermediary such as the sacraments, or the veneration of the saints, or even good deeds. Calvinism,¹⁵ a branch of the Reformation Church, introduced a more radical understanding concerning belief and salvation. According to this understanding, which was to become the cornerstone doctrine of the Calvinist Reformation Church, every living person on earth has been elected either for salvation or for damnation, and therefore each person's fate for the afterlife has been predetermined and predestined. This doctrine is known as 'double-predestination.'

The return to the Bible as the sole authority of the Christian faith, along with the belief that faith, and faith alone saves, were the two cornerstones that would mark the difference between the Christianity of the Catholic Church and that of the Protestant Church. These two cornerstones came to be known as *sola scriptura* (scripture alone saves) and *sola fide* (faith alone saves) respectively.¹⁶

One consequence of the Reformation is that Nature no longer serves as a useful medium for the human mind to contemplate on the existence of God. The double-truth theory claiming revelation and reason as two different but complementary channels to God no longer

¹⁵ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 382-84.

¹⁶ Besides these two *solas*, there are three other *solas*, making it a total of five. These are *sola gratia* (Grace alone saves), *solus Christu* (Christ alone saves), and *solus deo Gloria* (glory to God alone). The five *solas* summarize the Reformers' basic theological beliefs in contradistinction to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. See 'Five solas.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_solas. Accessed on July 1, 2008.

became tenable. Needless to say, in its attempt to protect the faith of the believer, and believing that reason can in no way establish faith, the Reformation had indirectly sowed the first seeds of secularism. Faith and mind, or religion and reason began to go separate ways, echoing the Biblical passage that 'Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's.'¹⁷ The full blooming of secularism was to occur some one to two hundred years later with the Enlightenment and was to continue until today.

If the Reformation theologized Christianity and in so doing, sowed the early seeds of secularism, the Scientific Revolution¹⁸ brought secularism to its fruition by pushing Christianity out of the human sphere so that there were now two distinct spheres of existence, the sphere of God that is eternal and spiritual, and the sphere of Nature that would be temporal and physical.

The most devastating attack of the Scientific Revolution on Christianity was on its geocentric onion-like closed universe and its layers of fixed 'stations' that has the earth as the centre of the universe. This model of the universe, that was not original to Christianity, was adopted from the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic model of the universe to fit into the Catholic teaching of the 'Great Chain of Being' where earth as the fallen place of human beings is placed between Heaven above it and Hell below it. The Scientific Revolution turned this hierarchical closed structure of the universe into an open, flat, horizontal and unending universe that has the sun as the centre of the universe, not the earth. Worse, God has no place in this universe.

This new view of the universe, known as the heliocentric view, brought serious consequences to Christianity and its notion of religion. The most serious consequence of this view is that it now created two kinds of universe, the physical universe and the spiritual universe. A person who is a Christian now has to contend with living in two universes, hence with two personalities. On the one hand, he is a physical being occupying the physical space and living a physical life,

¹⁷ Matthew, 22: 15-21, *The Bible*, 1996. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers. 959-60.

¹⁸ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 460-85.

doing all the activities that would ensure his biological and organic survival. On the other hand, he is a spiritual being concerned with moral activities and preparing for the afterlife. Christianity as a religion has now to contend with only moral and after-life concerns.

Reality and truth have been two major concerns of the Western mind. As for reality, the Scientific Revolution has split it into two spheres, the physical and the spiritual. As for truth, the Bible and Church dogmas, which had until now held sway over the hearts and minds of the medieval European, were relegated to only the hearts, while the minds were oriented toward a new method of knowing. This method came to be known as the 'scientific method.'¹⁹ According to this method, the surest way of arriving at the judgment of a thing is to follow a sequence of steps beginning with observation followed by description, experimentation, repetition, and comparison. Only when an object of study, called a hypothesis, produces similar results after several attempts of the test, can the statement made on the hypothesis be said to be conclusive. For example, if one were to ask which is heavier, 1kg of iron or 1kg of feather, the usual answer would be the 1kg of iron. This logical conclusion is reached in the mind through one's experience that iron is heavier than feather, so that even without verifying it, the answer is taken as an obvious truth. Scientific thinking does not allow this way of arriving at a conclusion. It requires that what we know of a thing must be put to test for verification. Thus, in the case of the one kilogram of iron and the one kilogram of feather, the two samples would be dropped from a certain height from a building to see if they land together at the same time, or whether one or the other would land first. This test would be repeated several times at different heights and in different places to see if the original result repeats itself or if there is a variance with the subsequent results. Scientific thinking is therefore considered the pinnacle of the human mind and manifests itself as the highest achievement of human civilization. This method was applied by those scientist-astronomers who studied the structure of the universe and arrived at the conclusion that the geocentric theory of the universe was erroneous.

¹⁹ Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 478.

The Enlightenment adopted the foundational beliefs and the thinking method of the Scientific Revolution to fashion a new philosophical outlook. The Scientific Revolution gave four things to the Enlightenment to fashion this outlook. These four things are autonomy, reason, Nature, and progress.²⁰

If the medieval era put God before everything else so that theology became the basis of intellectual activity, the Enlightenment put reason before everything else and made God an object of its inquiry. The Enlightenment was so optimistic with the achievements of the Scientific Revolution that it saw in the human person his full potentiality to determine his destiny and the course of history. There was no need for recourse to the Bible or the Church authorities for knowledge of the world. On the contrary, thanks to his reason, every person is an authority unto himself. His reason also gives him the autonomy to be free from being subject to any person or institution.

Reason is not only viewed as independent of all forms of inquiry but also as the most valid instrument of inquiry. However, the rational method of inquiry favored is not the deductive but inductive method of reasoning. It is not the speculative reasoning of the ancient Greek philosophers, or the medieval scholastics, or even of the Cartesian rationalists. Reason as understood here refers to the cognitive power that is necessary to the discovery and use of the physical and mechanical laws of the universe and mathematical formulae established through the empirical method.

The context in which reason operates is none other than the natural world that human beings inhabit. However, the natural world, rather than being an object of contemplation and awe of God's majestic creation, now became a reservoir of resources that was waiting to be exploited for the use and fulfillment of the human needs and wants. The scientific and mathematical methods were intended to accomplish this end.

Progress cements the philosophical outlook of the Enlightenment. Progress here means material progress. The intellectual accomplishment of reason through the scientific and mathematical methods would

²⁰ Livingston, James C. 1971. *Modern Christian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Vatican II*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co. 1-9.

enable the human race to venture into the deepest corners of the universe to discover its hidden laws and extract its abundant resources for the betterment of human life.

Meanwhile, the two universes of the Scientific Revolution still needed to be reconciled. While God has been displaced from the physical universe, there was still the unsolved problem of the place and relevance of the spiritual universe. The Enlightenment turned to human reason for the answer to this problem. It believed that when God created the world, He also created human reason to govern it. In its view, it would be meaningless for God to create reason if it was not intended to be put to good use but instead one had to rely at all times on scripture and dogmas coming from human beings acting on behalf of the Almighty.

Reason is viewed as capable of understanding God's plan through discovering the laws underlying the universe. This understanding of religion where God, the Bible, and Church dogmas play a subordinating role to reason in the destiny of humankind came to be known as 'Natural Religion.'²¹ It was called 'Natural Religion' because reason was the instrument to understand God and creation through an understanding of the natural world, which provides the basis for rational thinking about religion.

The Enlightenment had shaped a perception of religion that is highly rationalized. The Reformation tried to make Christianity a religion strictly of belief and not of reason, but in the course of its development, the Reformation shattered the unity that the Catholic Church had created between faith and reason through Nature. This turned out to be an advantage for the Enlightenment as the way was prepared for it to launch an offensive against the Church and Christianity that, in the end, created a version of religion that subjects God to the dictates of reason.

²¹ For a fuller account of Natural Religion, see Byrne, Peter. 1989. *Natural Religion and the Nature of Religion: The Legacy of Deism*. London: Routledge.

The Social Sciences: Religion As A Human Product

The period between the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries saw two major developments that would further deprive religion of its transcendental or supernatural dimension and detach it from the divine reality traditionally understood as God. These were evolutionism and historicism. The Enlightenment paved the way for evolutionism and historicism to view God as a product of the human mind. At least in the Enlightenment, God was still thought of as an objective reality though He was no longer concerned with the running of the universe. With evolutionism and historicism, religion no longer enjoys its traditional status as a revelation from God. Instead, religion came to be seen as purely a product of the human mind in response to the human conditions on earth, particularly the human need for survival. In other words, it is human beings who give birth to religion.

Evolutionism is the theory that the origin of the human race did not begin with God. God did not create the human race. Rather, the human race came about as the result of a long process of change and transformation that took millions of years to happen, beginning from the earliest life-form in the cells that dwell in the waters and gradually changing and transforming into more complex life-forms that would eventually become the human species.²²

Evolutionism postulates that human beings evolved from the animals. As such, the earliest human beings had qualities and characteristics very much like the animals, lacking in their thinking capacity and behaving according to their instincts. Even though human beings had advanced from being *homo erectus* (standing human) to *homo faber* (tool-making human) and then to *homo sapiens* (thinking human), the animal or bestial qualities and characteristics have remained inherent in their nature.

The fascination with evolutionism has excited many Western thinkers of the nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries to the extent

²² The most well-known proponent of this idea who helped to turn it into a worldwide belief is Charles Darwin. The idea of human descent from the primates is not found in Darwin's *Origin of Species* but rather in his later book, *The Descent of Man*.

that they attempted to chart the growth and development of the human race from the beginning of their emergence until their own modern times which coincided with the Industrial Revolution. According to them, the criterion of human progress is the development of the human mind in its thinking ability. Religion, which at one time was the determining factor in human life, is now relegated to being *an element* and *a stage* in the development of the human mind. Religion is regarded as the most rudimentary stage of human thinking usually associated with preliterate and primitive societies. This stage is followed by philosophy, and finally by science.²³ Science is regarded as a product of the highest form of human thinking that is free of supernatural influences.²⁴ For example, when a person is sick, science would ascribe it to some physiological problems in the body, and not because the person is possessed by some unseen spirits or ghosts that require a priest to cast away their evils.

Religion is seen as providing vital information on the earliest form of human thinking to the extent that many intellectuals who were trying to develop new forms of knowledge in the study of human behavior and human civilization all made religion an important topic in their study. Anthropology, sociology, and psychology were among the new disciplines of knowledge that made religion an important part of their study of human beings and society. They ask questions about what religion looks like—whether religion is about things that are non-human in nature and having to do with supernatural powers. If that is the case, then God is only one of the objects of religion in addition to such things as spirits and dead ancestors. They also ask how these things that are non-human in nature could appear in the human mind. The human thinking about these things, their emotional needs or their insufficient ability to understand the causes of things were seen as among the possible reasons for the emergence of religion.

²³ Auguste Comte, regarded as the father of modern sociology, was one of those who held to this view. He proposed the 'Law of Three Stages,' to account for the progress of knowledge. The three successive stages are the theological, the metaphysical, and the scientific.

²⁴ Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet. 1955. *Progress of the Human Mind*, Barraclough, June, trans. Westport: Hyperion Press. See also Conrad, F.M. 1991. *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation* New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

They ask if religion is useful and in what ways is it useful. They ask whether religion helps human beings to comprehend the world around them, or whether it is useful in bringing people together as a group and in helping people to cope with the uncertainties of events. They want to know why there are so many religions in the world, and if they are in any way related to one another. They want to know, for example, if Christianity was originally a simple, primitive religion that worships spirits but has evolved to being a more complex religion. In short, the view of religion as reality and truth has shifted to a view of religion as merely meaningful and useful. The concern with religion now turns to its nature, origin, function, and development. Nothing pertaining to religion should be taken for granted. Everything has to be investigated. But more significantly, religion is no longer about Christianity. It is not about God as a reality but about an idea of God coming out of the human mind. It is not about God as truth but about God as an imagination.²⁵

If at one time Western people associated religion with Christianity alone, their understanding of religion now includes references to such beliefs as totemism, animism, spirits, naturism, dead ancestors, magic, witchcraft, shamanism, voodoo, and séance – ideas that would be regarded as blasphemous, heretical, and unthinkable to the generations before. The reference now is not to God, but the sacred.²⁶

The sacred is generally taken to mean anything that somehow possesses the ability to become an object that has to be treated with reverence and respect and that should not be harmed but has to be protected, for otherwise undesirable consequences would come upon a people. What exactly is the sacred has invited many different kinds of views, ranging from the psychological to the sociological. A

²⁵ See, for example, Geertz, Clifford. 1968. *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press.

²⁶ See, for example, Otto, Rudolf. 1950. *The Idea of the Holy*. London & New York: Oxford University Press. See also Eliade, Mircea. 1959. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Trask, Willard R., trans. New York: Harcourt; and Durkheim, Emile. 2001. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Cosman, Carol, trans. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

psychological explanation may say that religion came about from fear and hope. In their quest for survival, primitive people relied heavily on their good relationships with the natural environment. The moon, planets, stars, forests, rivers, stones, and earth all contain important guides that are essential for the survival of the primitive people. They believe that natural objects and forces have guardians that must be appeased if they were to avoid disruptions to their dependence on the natural world or to not invite the wrath of nature.

A sociological explanation may say that religion came about out of the need of human groups to be socially intact for the sake of survival. The social cohesion results from the collective conscience that will keep the group intact through having an entity. This entity is viewed as sacred because it has the power to unify the conscience of individuals into a collective conscience shared by all individuals. This entity is known as the 'totem.' The religion of the totem is called 'totemism.'²⁷ The totem is usually portrayed through an emblem, whether of plants or animals, to show the identity of the group. The idea of the totem is akin to a soccer team that is recognized through the name of the club and the emblem it carries. Manchester United, for example, has many followings not only among the English fans, but also among fans all over the world. Despite the club being an English club, its fans include non-English supporters. The club itself is akin to a totem, pulling together people who share the same affiliation to the club. The name Manchester United is the emblem by which the club is recognized. Fans of Manchester United will put on the club's t-shirt to show their collective conscience of a common identity of belongingness to the club. The flag of the club, for instance, is treated like a sacred object by its members. Any attempt to desecrate the club by burning the flag will draw strong reactions from the members.

Evolutionism also evoked the idea that religions could evolve from one another, from simple ones that have no specific form, to complex ones that have well-organized structures. This belief led to the idea of taxonomy of religions, where religions could be grouped, arranged, and classified in a sequential order to determine their progress from

²⁷ See, for example, Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

one religion into another. Thus, Christianity could be seen as a more developed stage of religion since it has a sophisticated structure of belief, worship, and practice. As such, there must have been simpler and more homogenous forms of religion from which Christianity had evolved.²⁸

Historicism,²⁹ like evolutionism, denies the transcendental or the supernatural in religion. If evolutionism sees religion in terms of the progress of the human mind, historicism sees religion in relation to the here and now, where everything has to be explained in terms of what we can see and experience in this world. Whatever happens, happens because of some causes that can be found in this world, and not because there are some supernatural interventions. Thus, in the view of historicism, Jesus can only be regarded as a charismatic leader, not one who can work miracles. Jesus should be seen as a historical figure, not a divine being. The ten plagues of Egypt can only be explained in scientific terms and not as supernatural occurrences. Thus, in the case of the Nile River turning into blood red, one scientific explanation given is that it was as a result of pollution caused by volcanic activity, specifically of Santorini, which erupted around 1500 BCE and whose ash is found in the Nile region. The silt could have made the Nile turn blood red.³⁰

²⁸ de Vries, Jan. 1967. *The Study of Religion: A Historical Approach*. Bolle, Kees, W., trans. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World. 99-133.

²⁹ Historicism has two possible meanings. One refers to the Hegelian sense of a universal history along the lines of philosophy and science. It is with this meaning of history that Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* was concerned when he visualizes liberal democracy as the arrival of mankind at the end phase of history. The other meaning takes on the phenomenological sense where history refers to events happening in the 'here' and 'now' and is within the cognizance of sense-experience. The Chicago School of the History of Religions undertook to study religion as historical phenomena and regarded religion as an element of human consciousness. It is to this sense of historicism that this essay sees to refer.

³⁰ 'Plagues of Egypt.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagues_of_Egypt. Accessed on July 1, 2008. The Hollywood movie, *The Reaping* (2007), brings this depiction to the silver screen.

Historicism is also opposed to the idea that human events have predetermined patterns and directions. It is of the view that it is human beings who create history, rejecting outright the idea of a divine history. For example, history from the Christian perspective is equated with the struggle between good and evil, the first historical event being the killing of Cain by Abel, and the final historical event being the Apocalypse.³¹ Historicism sees events happening as a result of the combination of many factors – personal ambitions, political struggles, economic pursuits, religious ideas, cultural meanings, and social conditions. In this vein, the rise of capitalism in the West is seen as the result of a new response to traditional Christian beliefs that led to a certain social behavior. This new response is called the Protestant ethic and the spirit of Capitalism.

A group of Christians believed that a person's life and destiny has been pre-determined. A person's good works in this earthly life will not contribute to his or her salvation. However, good works can be indications whether the person has been elected into salvation. This is most evident in the commercial world where profits can breed greed, deceit, selfishness, and forgetting the purpose of one's existence in the world, which is to seek salvation. However, the commercial world can also be a most viable place for a person to practice self-restraint from the temptations of making profit for one's self. By practicing self-restraint from the temptations of profit-making, the person could steer his or her devotion to God. Through self-restraint, the person is considered as one of those elected into salvation. In the new belief, profit is regarded not as an end in itself, but as a means to create more wealth. In other words, the profit created is treated as a capital for further investment not for self-consumption but rather for self-discipline of the carnal soul. This is what the spirit of capitalism is about. The Protestant ethic of disciplining oneself in regard to the temptations of wealth in hope for election into salvation is the driving force behind

³¹ See, for example, Schweitzer, Albert. 2005. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Montgomery, W. trans. (New York: Dover Publications).

capitalism viewed as the idea of wealth for self-discipline, as against the idea of wealth for self-consumption.³²

Evolutionism and historicism have stretched the meaning of religion for the Western mind to a point where it is treated as an object that could be observed, dissected, analyzed, and explained in rational, scientific, and historical terms.

Western people had at one time in their history looked at religion as something real that gives them the sense of doing, meaning, being, and living. Religion was present everywhere in their life. Then, religion became split into two realms, one spiritual and the other rational. The rational began to be viewed as synonymous with the spiritual because reason is created by God to comprehend Him. To understand creation through reason is akin to understanding God. The dualism of the spiritual and the rational soon became a problem as the two realms were each identified with certain things. The spiritual was identified with beliefs, worship, and rituals. The rational was identified with reason, Nature, and progress. Thus, secularism was born. Space and time now have a religious and non-religious dimension, both existing simultaneously. Finally, religion came to be seen as a purely human phenomenon, a product of the human mind and human condition.

The Bifurcated Meaning of Religion and The Muslim Dilemma

The word 'religion' is now a commonly used term. Religion here however has been understood to mean the sacred dimension of the world, as opposed to the profane dimension. Thus, when one steps into a restaurant and eats his or her meal, the only thing religious about the meal is when the person says a prayer of thanks to God or the like. The place, the food, the manner of sitting around the table, the manner of eating, and the manner of interaction between the people in the restaurant are hardly seen as having anything to do with religion. As such, when one steps into a restaurant and says that it is a 'religious place,' in the sense that the place has everything to do with religion,

³² Weber, Max. 1976. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Parsons, Talcot. Trans. New York: Scribner.

that statement would have stunned anyone hearing it. The reaction is not surprising since religion has lost its original meaning of something that holds together every aspect of human existence whereby eating would be considered a religious act. In a holistic view of religion, even things such as where the eating takes place and the way in which the eaten food is prepared and consumed all have a religious significance.

But such is not the case today. Human activities have become organized according to the dualism of religion and non-religion. Any activity that has to do with the supernatural – be it gods, spirits, dead ancestors, magic or cult practices – is designated simply as a religious activity. Any activity that does not and could not involve the supernatural, such as work, play, and leisure, is not considered religious. Many people would never think of education as a religious activity. Any thought of a religious education could only mean studies devoted to beliefs and practices in relation to the supernatural, and the only vocation having to do with religious studies are persons acting as guardians and vanguards to keep the religion alive, such as the priests, theologians, religious teachers and professors. No one today would think of learning economics, or engineering, or medicine as a religious activity, nor would these subjects be thought of as religious subjects.

It is no surprise if some religious groups make persistent calls for human beings to return to 'religion' as 'a complete way of life'. The Muslims are a case in point. For them, to regard 'religion' as only one out of the many dimensions of human life is not acceptable. Religion to them should not be identified with only certain things, matters, and occasions. Religion should not be thought of and invoked only in times of birth, marriage, and death, nor should it be relevant to human life only at certain times of the day, week, month, or year. Religion, to these people, is needed at every moment of a person's life, and it concerns every aspect of a person's existence. One's body, attire, speech, and manners, and one's socialization and commercial transactions with others as well as the education one receives, all these are permeated with religious connotations. Today, we hear of Islamic economics, Islamic banking, Islamic insurance, and Islamic financial practices. More significantly, non-Muslims are also actively engaged in these practices. Muslims would cite these practices normally viewed

in the West as secular or irreligious as examples to show the relevance of religion to modern human life and social institutions.

Contemporary Muslim intellectuals have been quick to blame the West for the agony of Muslims living in a world of religious meaning inherited from the Enlightenment, made possible through Western imperialism and colonialism. Education was singled out as the most effective target of this colonial operation.³³ Through this operation, two streams of education were introduced into Muslim schools, one religious and the other secular. Religious schools taught the fundamental knowledge of Islam, subjects like theology (*'aqidah*), Islamic law and jurisprudence (*fiqh and usûl al-fiqh*), ethics (*akhlaq*), biography of the Prophet (*sîrah*), *Qur'an*, and *Hadîth*. Secular schools taught subjects like mathematics, science, language, geography, and history. Education, vocation, and lifestyle were intertwined. Those who went to religious schools could hope to become at best religious teachers in rural areas, living a modest life. For those who went to secular schools and more advanced stages the door was open for recruitment into the civil service or to enter into such professions as doctors, engineers, and lawyers. Moreover, the successful ones in secular schools were often sent abroad to obtain Western education. Western lifestyle was seen as a symbol of progress while traditional lifestyle associated with Islam was seen as backwardness.

It is arguable whether the dual Muslim education system just described has been a major cause of the bifurcation of religion in the Muslim mind into the religious and the secular. But one Muslim scholar believes that the educational system in Islam was responsible for this dilemma. According to this view:

“The most fateful distinction that came to be made in the course of time was between the ‘religious sciences’ (*al-'ulûm al-naqliya*) and the ‘rational sciences’ (*al-'ulûm al-'aqliya or ghayr al-shar'iyah*), toward which

³³ Al-Attas. *Islam and Secularism*. For the Muslim experience in Malaysia, see Hashim, Rosnani. 2004. *Educational Dualism in Malaysia: Implications for Theory and Practice*. Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press.

a gradually stiffening and stifling attitude was adopted. There are several reasons for this perilous development. **First** of all, the view is expressed recurrently that, since knowledge is vast while life is short, one must fix priorities; and these will naturally be in favor of the religious sciences, upon whose acquisition one's success in the hereafter depends. It is extremely important to appreciate the psychological attitude, which does not reject the 'rational sciences' as such but discounts them as not conducive to one's spiritual welfare. The spread of Sufism, which – in the interests of cultivating an internal spiritual life and direct religious experience – was generally inimical not only to rational sciences but to all intellectualism, is again of great importance.

Despite several reminders by men like the seventeenth-century Haji Khalifa that the Qur'an untiringly invites men to 'think,' 'ponder,' and 'reflect upon' the created universe and its extremely well-ordered and firm structure wherein no dislocations or gaps can be found, owing to the widespread opposition of the ulema and their madrasa system to this attitude, the drift toward rejection of 'rational sciences' continued. The **third** important reason for the gradual decline of science and philosophy was, of course, that while degree holders of religious sciences could get jobs as *qadis* or *muftis*, a philosopher or a scientist was limited to court employment. **Fourth**, but not least important, was the attitude of certain extraordinary important religious personalities like al-Ghazâlî.... In his work *Mîzân al-'Amal (Criterion of Actions)*, al-Ghazâlî also invokes the argument from priorities and inveighs against those doctors who want to give priority to the medical sciences over the religious and mislead the simpleminded public by

clichés such as ‘look after your health first and then your faith’ (*badanaka thumma dīnaka*).³⁴

The above statement points to the Muslim division of knowledge into the religious and the rational sciences,³⁵ and their attitude toward them as the reason for the bifurcation of the Muslim personality into the religious and the secular. Is it true that in Muslim intellectual history, the religious sciences were favored over the rational sciences on grounds that the former sciences were more important to the soul than the latter and also more rewarding in terms of job opportunities? Or could there have been a stronger reason to explain the bifurcation?

One way of looking into this issue is perhaps to examine how the two categories of sciences had been studied vis-à-vis each other. Were there common denominators between subjects in the two categories that could reflect their relevance to each other? Perhaps the realms of ontology and epistemology, or metaphysics and the theory of knowledge, could help in this explanation. Ontology and epistemology are branches of inquiry in philosophy about ‘things as they are.’ The former is about the nature or the ‘look’ of things ‘as they are.’ The latter is about the method of establishing the state of things ‘as they are.’ For example, if a student were to study mathematics and theology, how are the two subjects to be taught to show their relevance to each other? How can the idea of number explain the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the one and the many to explain their unicity in relation to each other, and in turn to explain the relationship between the unicity of God and the unicity of existence? How can the theory of probability explain the idea of predetermination or predestination (*qada’ and*

³⁴ Rahman, Rahman. 1984. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 33-34.

³⁵ For the division of knowledge into the religious and the rational sciences in Islam and its discussion, see Bakar, Osman. 2006. *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*. Kuala Lumpur, ISTAC. 3rd impression; al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. 1999. *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 3rd impression; and Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1968. *Science and Civilization in Islam*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

qadar) to account for the question of the human will and his moral responsibility and accountability?

Philosophy, however, was not so much favored in Muslim education in the past. It was a subject pursued in the royal courts and in private tuitions. It was the preoccupation of a few. To make the interest in philosophy even more dampened, philosophy was cast as a foreign science, an import of Greek thought that could pollute the Muslim faith.³⁶ In addition, influential Muslim intellectuals like al-Ghazâlî did not encourage the Muslims to pursue this branch of knowledge, especially the laypersons. On al-Ghazali's reservation for philosophy, Fazlur Rahman says: 'Al-Ghazâlî, also asserts, rightly, that metaphysical speculation does not possess the certainty or demonstrative force of mathematical propositions. But he goes on to say, wrongly, that since the philosophy of these men (i.e. Fârâbî and Ibn Sînâ) is harmful to faith so must their scientific works be shunned – since the latter tend to create goodwill in the students toward the philosophers (who were of course scientists too) and predisposes them to accept their philosophy.'³⁷

If philosophy could have brought the religious and the rational sciences into a unified system of knowledge but was sidelined in the general education of the Muslim public in the past, why didn't the issue of the bifurcation of religion in Islam happen in the past as it does in the present? The Muslim civilization in the past surpassed its Western counterpart in knowledge, technology, and material progress. More importantly, Muslim leaders in the past, the *khalifa* or the *sultân*, acted as the patron of religion and knowledge. These leaders encouraged the translations of foreign works into Arabic, supported men of knowledge with honors, positions, and facilities to carry out their work, and built schools, colleges, laboratories, and libraries in vast number. Religion and knowledge were seen as vital for the progress of the Islamic civilization. More importantly, the pursuit of knowledge is seen as a religious obligation. Even if the religious and the rational

³⁶ Makdisi, George. 1981. *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 281.

³⁷ Rahman. *Islam and Modernity*, 34.

sciences did not have a common denominator to hold them together as a unified system of knowledge, political leaders, religious leaders, men of knowledge, and philanthropists were always there to provide the pillar needed to keep the Muslim identity intact.³⁸ On the other hand, when the Western world surpassed the Muslim world in these same pursuits, Muslim leaders and intellectuals not only welcomed the achievements of their Western counterpart, but regarded religion as the stumbling block of progress. This attitude is akin to the Western attitude of the post-Christendom era. This attitude was made possible by those in control of power and knowledge who had strong reverence for the West and little regard for their own religion, culture, and history.

When Western imperialism and colonialism reached Muslim shores, the grounds were thus prepared for the bifurcation of religion in Islam. The separation between the religious and the rational sciences appeared not to have harmed the former. To further separate between them the two sciences were taught in distinct schooling systems. Those who graduated in the religious sciences had little prospect in government services. They were not seen in a position to contribute anything useful to the material progress of their society. Those who graduated in the rational sciences, on the other hand, were sought for their expertise. If *muftis* and *qadhis* were highly regarded at one time in Muslim society, and scientists and philosophers were restricted to the royal courts, the reverse is now true. Western imperialism and colonialism is not the original cause of the Muslim bifurcation. Rather, it is a catalyst. The Muslims have been overwhelmed by modern Western achievements in science and technology, promises of good vocations and good material life. The support by ruling groups for Western knowledge and lifestyle and the lack of a unified system of knowledge in Muslim education only helped to exacerbate the dilemma of Muslim bifurcation.

A more direct impact of the Western view of religion on the Muslim mind is perhaps the rise of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. The social sciences have two aspects that keep them together as a unified system of knowledge. These are their foundational beliefs (epistemological assumptions) and their methodology. The fundamental

³⁸ Makdisi, *Rise of Colleges*

assumption is that man and societal phenomena, including religion, should be studied in purely human terms. The methodology is the empirical method, the scientific method of the natural sciences. Through the approach of the social sciences, religion becomes reduced to a branch of human activity just like politics, economics, culture, education, law, and history. This is in contrast to the view of religion as the axis of knowledge and all other forms of knowledge as the rims. Muslim students in Western countries who take religion as a course learn about religion as a purely human phenomenon. The study of Islam is treated in the same way. Islam as a religion is studied as a human phenomenon in the light of evolutionism and historicism. Thus, a student sees Islam's relation to Judaism and Christianity in terms of its evolution from the two earlier religions. Prophet Muhammad is at best seen as a social revolutionary and a charismatic leader, and the Qur'an as an exceptional literary work rather than as a divine revelation from God.

Conclusion

The world today is bifurcated into the religious and the secular or the non-religious. There are those who insist on maintaining such a kind of world; but there are those who oppose such a world. There are those who tolerate such a world as long as harmony and peace prevails. We cannot escape the tensions arising from the different perspectives on religion and its place in human society. Nevertheless, we must have some clue as to why these varied perspectives exist and try to understand in what ways we are affected by them. Is the Western historical experience of religion to be blamed for the fate of religion in other civilizations? The impact of Western imperialism and colonialism on the non-Western understanding of religion can only be gauged if and when the fate of religion in Western history is carefully studied and examined. It would be worthwhile for present-day Muslim intellectuals to look at the taxonomy of knowledge that was devised and formulated by Muslim scholars of the past and see if such taxonomy could have contributed to the bifurcation of religion in the modern Muslim mind. Studies should be made with regard to the division of knowledge into the religious and rational sciences, and how the method

of their dissemination and learning could have triggered the bifurcation. Studies should also be made with regard to the discipline of knowledge called 'The Study of Religion' that was borne out of the Social Sciences. There is an urgent need to examine the consequences of this discipline on the field of religious studies in general and the study of Islam in particular.