Cultural Coexistence: A Product of Cultural Understanding and Interaction

Abdolrahim Gavahi

Introduction

To start with, I would like to welcome our distinguished Japanese guests and wish them a very enjoyable and fruitful stay in Iran. I would also like to thank them, and especially professor Shin Nagai and my friend Mr. Zakipour for the wonderful arrangements and hospitality extended to us during our last year’s visit to Japan and Toyo university.

For those of you who were not present in our last year’s meeting, let me emphasize that seminar was titled “Towards a Philosophy of Coexistence: A Dialogue with Islam” in which Iranian delegation presented the following papers respectively:

2. Hojjat ul-Islam Dr. Davoud Feirahi: “Shiite contemporary schools and the relation between different religious schools and civilizations”.
3. Dr. Bijan Abdolkarimi: “The Importance and necessity of Comparative Philosophy”.
4. Dr. Seyyed Hassan Arab: “Sohrevardi and Corbin: Dialogue between Iranian/Islamic thought and modern philosophy”.
5. Dr. Bijan Abdolkarimi: “Henry Corbin’s Heideggerian Inspired Insights”.

In return, our dear Japanese hosts delivered the following lectures:

1. Mizoe Morii: “Motoori Norinaga’s criticism on Han’yi (Chinese mind)”.
2. Toshio Kuroda: “Possibility of coexistence with Islam from the point of view of comparison with Buddhism”.
3. Shigeru Kamada: “Co-existence with others and Islam”.
4. Jun-ichi Ono: “Orient as pure phenomenon”.
5. Shin Nagai: “Henry Corbin’s Phenomenology”.

Our Japanese friends suggested that the theme of this year’s meeting be East (Orient) and West Philosophy and Culture and so it was decided that his excellency Dr. Davari, the president of the Iranian Academy of Sciences, and Dr. Aavani, member of the academy, discuss contemporary Iranian philosophy, and myself present a paper on culture and religion in contemporary Iran.

Another introductory point worth mentioning at this stage is the exact meaning of the terms “East” (Orient) and “West” (Occident) in contemporary world. Today, from cultural, political, industrial, economic, intellectual, and even geographical point of view, East and West have generally a different meaning than centuries ago, to
the extent that nowadays many scholars consider Japan to be a "Western" country, in spite of its geographical location in the Far East.

1. Religion in the West and East, Past and Present: the Case of Iran and Japan

No doubt, religion has always been somehow present all over the world during the course of the history, although the subject and modality of human worship has altered in the course of time. In other words, religion per se has been the same, yet its appearance and manifestation has changed. If we consider Iran and Japan as two examples of the more eastern (traditional) and western (modern, industrial, etc.) countries, we have to know that, in modern times, religion has had two completely different, if not contradictory, meaning and manifestation in these societies, any misunderstanding or misconception of which may lead to wrong conclusions.

Today, in the somehow western, industrial, modern, and to a large scale secular society of Japan, religion is considered as an internal, emotional, personal, traditional (somehow related to ancestors), ritual, ceremonial, ancestral, and de-sanctified (in fact temporal) matter much diluted and intermixed with the general culture of society, not claiming any social, economic, political, let alone military, effect on current functions of the society. In Japan, many people at most consider religion to be an extra means of social relaxation and tranquility. While in the very religious, traditional, yet un-industrial, and somehow not modern (in the western sense of the word) and extremely ideological society of Iran, religion is believed to be an external, legal, social, political, and most important of all, governmental means of governance, physically established at all corners of society, at times quite rigidly and dominantly. In this guise, at least near some sectors of society, not only religion loses its fine and gracious appeal, but is not, or does not seem to be, a means of mental and spiritual tranquility of the people at large, thus acting quite contrary to its very purpose.

Though the book is intended for the purpose of reading

It is also possible that you use it as a pillow!

Thus, if we want to compare the situation of religion in contemporary society of Iran with any period of Japanese history, it should be compared with the later part of Meiji Era (around the time of Amir Kabir premiership in Iran) when Shintoism was well established as state religion all over Japan, overshadowing Buddhism and the rest.

Another point worth mentioning at this stage is that when we say religious belief is weakened in a modern, laic, or secular society, one should not easily conclude that thus there is no firm spiritual and metaphysical belief in such societies. Indeed, one may say that traditional belief in religion has been substituted by similar belief in modern schools such as humanism, materialism, secularism, experimentalism, socialism, humanism, communism, etc. In this respect, a firm belief in any idea, concept, and ideology, divine or profane, acts as a "religion", though in a different form and manner.

Along the same line, in view of our emphasis on religious belief and practice, one should not assume that by that we mean religion has always been the source of religious attraction, compassion, and accord, spreading love, peace, and cooperation among different people throughout the world. The historical evidence does not support this assumption.

Furthermore, it is not correct to assume that tolerance and peaceful coexistence is the utmost one may expect from any religion. It is true that Qur'an, the holy book of us the Muslims, says that: "God does not forbid you to act considerately towards those who have never fought you over religion nor have evicted you from your homes to act fairly towards them" (60/8).
Rather, in our opinion, that is only the least of our expectations from the religion, and the ceiling of it is to feed the needy, benevolence, compassion, mutual cooperation and assistance, sacrifice, forgiveness, making peace among people, and promoting perfection and spiritual elevation of mankind.

2. Modern Man’s Expectations from Religion

At the dawn of twenty-first century, it seems that the modern man is quite tired of so much wars and blood-shedding, bigotry and fanaticism, petrifaction and sanctimoniousity, all in the name of religion and religiosity. It also seems that the modern man is no more ready to sacrifice its temporal happiness, progress, and comfort at the cost of a distant, (other-worldly), happiness promised by Taliban terrorism and suicidal acts, so much prevalent in the Muslim world and the middle-east.

This kind of animosity is not a commodity well sought by the modern man, in spite of a couple of hundred Europeans and perhaps Americans now fighting for Al-Qa’da in Syria and elsewhere.

Nowadays, it is the language of wisdom, science, dialogue, and mutual understanding which attracts the souls of humanity, and not the language of killing, destruction, and plundering sponsored by extremist groups.

The image of Islam now portrayed in the West is much different from "لَهُ دُوَّارٌ فِي الْعَالَمِينَ" (Allah possess- es bounty for everybody in the Universe) (Qur’an 2/251), or "وَمَا أرسلنا الاردنى العالمين" (We have sent you as a mercy for everybody in the Universe) (Qur’an 21/107), or "قل الدين إلا الحب" (is religion anything but love and compassion?) (Imam Sadiq in Khisal-e Saduq), and other such wonderful sayings. As late Allamoh Mutahhari, a prominent contemporary Shiite Scholar, says the main reason of Islam’s wrong image in the West is our misrepresentation of this great religion and the false teachings propagated under the name of Islam (Divine Justice, Sadra publications, p.8).

Also, the image of Islam, especially the fundamentalist version of it nowadays prevalent in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Lebanon, Egypt, Afghanistan, Yemen, and similar places, is so full of blood-shedding and tribal and sectarian animosity that is not so representable in any foreign (non-Islamic) land including Japan, so much so that in my recent trips to Japan, I have noticed a considerable change of attitude of Japanese people towards Islam than about thirty years ago, when I first entered that country. This is a huge responsibility of all of us, the intellectuals and university scholars, along with concerned clergies, to try to change such a negative attitude.

3. The necessity of rethinking religion in traditional eastern societies

It seems that in the age of communication and modernity, and in the light of scientific, industrial, and experimental progresses of humanity, in the so-called global village in which all corners of land and all cultures, rituals, and practices have become so closely interrelated and well exposed to the judgment of others, the great religions of the world and especially the three great Abrahamic traditions deserve some through rethinking and new readings, thus paving the way for a new more logical, modern, and rational representation of all of them, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation, instead of one-sided interpretation of their respective divine laws resulting in destructive missionary activities.

Today, mankind expects inter-religious and cultural dialogue between all living traditions, so that by material and spiritual accumulation of each and every religious and cultural belief and practice, human culture and religiosity first provide the very basis of freedom, right, democracy, progress, and welfare of the whole mankind and, secondly, eradicate the roots of poverty, inequality, cruelty, suppression, ignorance, and material and mental humiliation all over the land.
4. Summary and Conclusion

Nowadays, the pre-requisite of any cultural/religious understanding, cooperation, and coexistence between the two great nations of Iran and Japan requires a complete overhaul of some of our beliefs, attitudes, and practices in the Muslim world, devoid of all kinds of prejudices and hasty generalizations.

Also, in Japan and elsewhere in the modern world, religion and religiousity does not mean what it means in the so-called eastern (oriental) traditional societies. For example, today if you ask people in Japan whether they are religious or not, most of them answer "No", while if you ask them whether they believe in Buddhism, Shintoism, and else, most of them answer "Yes".

Many people say in Japan people are born Shinto, marry Christian, and die Buddhist, while the great Abrahamic traditions, including Islam, are certainly distinct and mutually exclusive.

Finally, it seen the Islamic world and the Muslim countries have to put their houses on order first, and then try to communicate with the rest of the world. A famous Farsi (Persian) proverb says: "وراغی که به خانه روست به مستعمر است" (the candle needed at home, is forbidden to the mosque). It seems as long as we can not solve the problem of fratricide between Shiite and Sunnite Muslims in the Middle-East, any calling of the others to cooperation and brotherhood will go unnoticed.

Once again I welcome you my dear friends and guests to Iran and wish you a very happy stay.

(Endnotes)

1 Paper presented by Abdolrahim Gavahi, Ph.D., research fellow and lecturer on Foreign Religions and Comparative religious studies in the Second meeting between the Iranian (Academy of Sciences) and Japanese (Toyo University) scholars on "the necessity of coexistence of thoughts between Iran and Japan", Tehran, Academy of Sciences, Nov. 5th, 2013.
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