IRBAS www.irbas.academyirmbr.com June 2017
International Review of Basic and Applied Sciences Vol. 5 Issue.6

Literature between two Cultures: Islam and Oriental Studies

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Abstract

This article aims at shedding light on the concept of Islamic identity in light of the oriental stereo- types. The study sheds light on the way by which the main components of the Islamic identity are presented in the Oriental studies .The study aims at proving that Islam is treated as a regional religion, which contradicts with the main principle which this religion is sent for; that is the universality of its message. The study also presents the barriers of identity such as race and colure and how the Islamic identity eliminates these barriers and unifies its followers to a higher level of loyalty which is piety and faith. The study concludes that Islam was distorted and presented as the "other, and is always presented as a threat of the West (which is not true!).The study proves that Islam is sent as a mercy for people all over the world; it does not matter if they belong to the East or the West. Islam is not an oriental religion; both the West and the East are embedded under its message.

Keywords: *Islamic studies, Orientalism, Cultural Identity, Islamic Identity, Ethnicity. Islam Phobia.*

Introduction

An identity is the marker that identifies a group of people who share specific genuine features. Some critics link between the identity and the geographical borders of people who lived in the same country. This is known as national identity .In fact geography divides people who have the same culture into different nationalities according to their countries; however, it is not geography that gives people an identity; rather it is related to cultural, religious elements .This research aims at focusing on the role of Islamic religion in building the identity of the Islamic nation.

The Aim of the study

The study aims at discussing the major markers of the Islamic identity on the one hand, and revealing the oriental studies and the distortion of these markers. Many theories related to new Historicism deal with the issue of identity, for example the theories of Michel Foucault that discuss the concept of identity. All these theories argue "how a subject within a culture makes meaning and acts in accordance with meanings" which its members believe in ; in other words, the individual identity is "shaped by countless external cultural influences…".Many critics believe that "individual belief and cultural discourse are also mutually constitutive that they influence and shape each other" (Gabriel:1970).

The Islamic identity depends mainly on one feature which is the Islamic Faith regardless of believers' racial, cultural background. Here, Islam unifies different cultures and races under the blessings of Islam .In other words the elements that used to divide and exclude people from belonging to any national identity such as race, color ,class or even sex are all refused and considered as a sign of weakness in Islamic faith. This principal rule had been settled by Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon His Soul) since the first day he preached the Islamic religion.

Islam and Oriental Studies

Oriental studies show a great interest in studying Islam and especially the Holy Quran ,the main source by which Islam could be understood .But let's see how the oriental studies introduce Islam and the Holy Quran. Islam has been a favorite issue in the European and Oriental studies ; for instance Gabriel reveals in his article "The transmission of learning and literary influences to Western Europe", the beginning of the contact between Muslims and the West was during the Islamic rule of Spain in Cordova" (Gardel: 1970). However, this contact was only cultural, but Islam as a religious creed was not tackled until the "advent in the eighteenth century of the enlightenment and cosmopolitanism" (Geertz: 1973). Actually, there are two groups of Oriental approaches dealing with Islam: first, there are fair scholars who assure the great importance of lslam and Islamic civilization to the West, on the other hand; there is another group of scholars who were not honest in their study of Islam and show a great prejudice against Islam and its Prophet's teachings.

Therefore, unfortunately, some Orientalists deal with Islam as a regional religion and link it only with the Arabs, this fact that undermines one of the most important features of Islam which is its universality. Von Grunebaum for example, expresses his wonder of how Islam which "begins as a ***national*** religion soon becomes a super national religion and a community with a distinctive negative attitude toward the state and political officials" (Gibb 1997). For many Oriental scholars, Islam is a field that worth studying since in Islam, there is "something worth study. Islamic religion stands out as "beacon –light amidst the encircling darkness of the Middle Ages, and the Islamic civilization as a landmark in the progress of humanity (Gibb 1997). Many scholars emphasize the great positive cultural influence of the Islamic civilization on Europe; especially in the fields of Science, Medicine, Algebra and Alchemy. However, when it comes to religion, they rejected admitting that Islam is a universal religion. Rather they restricted it to a regional religion.

Definitely, we don't deny the importance of the political power to impose its own order, but politics doesn't use power to make Islam a universal religion. Taking this point into consideration, it is worth mentioning that in many parts of distant Asia, Islam spread without any political power wars or conquests. Rather those people entered Islam as a result of the in interchange with Muslims in trade .Mez in *The Renaissance of Islam* attracts the attention to the fact that China has known Islam through trade .Many traders knew Islamic world and dealt with them. Mez states "a Chinese writer of the year 1178 asserts that of all the rich foreign countries which have a great store of varied and valuable goods non surpasses that of Arabs" (Grunebaum 1970).

The Sources of Islamic Identity

The Quran

Any established community must have a set of rules that organize its matters ;in Islam, it is Quran ,the holy book, which is revealed to prophet Mohammed from **Allah** (The only One Creator) as a message to all humanity .Quran is not only a holy book restricted for worship and prayers ,in fact it is a doctrine for life. It includes laws that organize all aspects of Muslims' life .Moreover, since prophet Mohammed is the last messenger, Quran is the last divine message for humanity and thus; Quran is a restatement of the previous messages before it. Definitely, it has assured the message sent by earlier prophets which is to worship only Allah and not to share any other divinity (such as priests or Sheikhs or anything that claims divine powers)

in worshiping Allah .Indeed, Allah asserts in Quran that Islam is a message sent for every person to read and think deeply of its significance, if not; this reading of Quran is going to be a testimony against him in the day of judgment. In other words, anything Allah has ordered in the Quran must be obeyed, and the same is with anything Allah prohibits, it must be avoided and stopped at once. Any command mentioned in Quran can't be cancelled even by the prophet himself. In the Quran, this issue is clearly stated:

And verily ,this (Quran)is a reminder for the Muttaqun(the pious).And verily, We know that there are some among you deny (this Quran).And indeed it (this Quran)will be an anguish for the disbelievers (on the Day of Resurrection).And verily , it (this Quran) is an absolute truth with certainty .So glorify the Name of your lord , the Most Great (Kermer's Translations of the words of the Holy Quran: Al-Haaqqah verses 49-52)

Arabic Language

Another important element in the Muslim identity is language; it has been seen as a marker of ethnic identity; and so, as Montgomery asserts in *An Introduction to Language and society*, the survival of the language is "closely bound up with the preservation or affirmation of distinct ethnic identity and culture." (Mez: 1973).

Actually, the importance of the Arabic language is asserted as the language of the culture; with regard to this point ,Louis Gardel in "Religion and culture" links between cultural identity and language ,he asserted that , "For the devout believer, every phenomenon of Arabization is of directly religious significance" (Montgomery :1995). Learning Arabic is one of the priorities in Islam because it is a holy language, the language of the prayers.

Conclusion

The question of the Islamic identity is of a great importance especially when we deal with the changes and the different cultural threats such as globalization and one polar-world power. In this context, Islam finds itself with confrontations with the West .Therefore; it has been urgently needed to refute the negative stereotype of Muslims and the misleading Orientalists' accusations. Thus, Islam must take the lead and makes itself clear to refute the misleading Oriental charges that distort its genuine spiritual message. Finally, Muslim scholars have to intensify their efforts to introduce the real spirit of Islam as a religion and a way of life; as well as uncovering the biased prejudices against Islam which is the thing that most people are searching for in vain. If this goal is achieved, the phenomenon of Islam phobia will collapse; because it is Islam that will enlighten their souls to truth and they will find their own selves in it. While Islam phobia aims to prevent many people to find the real essence of Islamic truth by creating this phobia .Definitely, it is Islam that will offer them peace of both body and the soul which they will find in the divine words of Quran. A world in which there will be no barriers between the white or the black, or the rich and the poor, the East or the West or finally between the self and the other., where all people are equal; for in Islam there is a divine realm ,a new spiritual rebirth and a continuous spiritual energy .To sum up, no matter what the biased Oriental scholars attempt to conceal by creating Islam phobia, Islam still is gaining millions of people who by away or another come to discover the truth and adopt it as a religion and away of life since Islam is a world whose scale of value is given to the degree of one's faith and belief in Allah , not to any mistaken identities.

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