Muslim Minority Status in the West as Spiritual Opportunity.
by Patrick Laude

Globalization, migrations and the wider spread of information about Islam around the world have contributed to a situation in which Muslims amount to a very sizable minority group in many countries. This is the case in most Western countries, in which the recent decades have been characterized by an influx of workers from Muslim countries, while also presenting a significant, although difficult to quantify, movement of conversion to Islam on the part of individuals with a Christian or Jewish Western heritage. In parallel, many Muslim countries have experienced a phenomenon of « re-islamization », often but not always connected to revivalist and reformist redefinitions of Islam, and not uncommonly fueled by socio-political concerns. It would hardly be a simplification to state that the renewal of Islam brought about by the spiritual crisis of the modern world has lied at the junction of dynamic trends of intensification of socio-religious or ethnico-religious identity in reaction to a process of globalization inspired by Western ideas and practices, and correlative efforts, already expressed since the late eighteenth-century, but intensified and widened since the second half of the twentieth-century, to restore a « pure », « unadulterated » and « homogeneous » form of Islam. In a sense, these two phenomena are parallel, as we have indicated, inasmuch as they point to the sense of a renewal of Islam, illustrated both by the reputation of this faith as « the fastest-growing religion » and the pervasive concern with it in contemporary socio-political commentaries. These two kinds of phenomena have contributed to the image of a strong, dynamic and even aggressive religion which is perceived either as the standard-bearer of religious, cultural and even national causes, or as a threat for a number of values and interests. However, looking more closely at the contemporary situation, one can discover important differences and even divergences between the situation of Islam inside and outside the historical *dâr al-islâm*. Among these differences, the main ones have arisen as consequences of the minority status of Muslims in societies that can be generally identified as secularized. In Muslim majority countries, Islam is mostly defined around traditional structures and movements that have more or less contributed to the resilient permanence of a religious and socio-ethnic nucleus of collective identity. Interestingly the regions of the Muslim world in which these traditional elements, often associated to popular forms of pietist and revivalist Sufism, have conserved an important measure of influence are those which have been historically confronted to attempts at aggressive secularization, such as the former Soviet Union, China and Turkey, and also those characterized by frequent interactions with other faiths, such as Indonesia, India and Africa. Elsewhere, that is primarily in the Arab world, but also in non-Arab regions of socio-political confrontations and unrest, we are confronted with a strong and militant Salafi inspired concept of Islam which has penetrated very deeply in many Muslims' understanding of their own religion.

The situation of Muslim minorities in the West is not altogether different in all respects, but it presents clear markers of specificity that make it particularly interesting in terms of potential future developments. Granted, the importation of traditional socio-cultural marks of identity by a variety of ethnic groups of immigrants to the West, such as Maghrebi in France and Turks in Germany, as well as the powerful and influential means of global *da'wah* on the part of recent puritanical and reformist Islam, make the situation of minority Islam somewhat similar to that of countries with a Muslim majority. However, the status of minority in secular countries has contributed to lead Muslims living in the West in a number of very different directions. One of them has consisted, on the part of Western

Muslims, to intensify their sense of difference vis-à-vis the non-Muslim majority, and cultivating an identity which is conceived primarily as defensive, if not antagonistic, to the values and practices of the surrounding society. The second direction has amounted to reach a deeper, more reflective understanding of what makes one a Muslim in the first place, in a context in which Islam is not a socio-political, majority-driven given situation. The two attitudes are not necessarily incompatible, but they generally give way to profoundly divergent outcomes. The first direction, which constitutes a cultural reflex of self-protection, is in a sense unavoidable and characteristic of any group intent on surviving the alienating nature of global contemporary trends. Any legitimate identity is by definition exclusive of what lies outside of it. However, negatively, the sense of difference can also feed another kind of alienation by preventing an harmonious integration with the surroundings and crystallizing a sort of self-centered feeling of radical difference that may end up denying the positive values and human virtues of others. In this connection, the French ethnologist Levi-Strauss argued, in his *Race and History*, that a healthy ethno-cultural group is one in which there is a balance between particularity and cultural difference on the one hand, and universality and human commonality on the other hand. This can certainly be applied to religious groups. A one-sided sense of difference will result in isolation, defense mechanism, sterility and ultimately hardening leading to self-suffocation or implosion. By contrast, if Islam has been able to survive and thrive historically and spiritually it is in part because it has demonstrated a capacity to interact, and to integrate, extra-Islamic elements that were quite compatible with its own metaphysical vision and ethos. This has happened, to take just three examples, in China by contact with Confucian culture, in India in multireligious communauties, and in Africa through integration with pre-Islamic structures of thought and ways of being. It bears stressing that if Islam was able to do so, it is because the world views of the cultures with which it was interacting were compatible with its own, at least in terms of a metaphysical emphasis on the primacy of the Divine, a qualitative cosmology perceiving nature as a repository of divine signs (*âyât*) and symbols, as well as a recognition of the imperatives of a moral life grounded in a transcendent order. The interaction of Islam with secular, modern, cultures is of a different nature and must, therefore, be envisaged with a different set of criteria. It raises much more acute and delicate philosophical and moral issues that cannot be just ignored in the name of tolerance or external development.

Besides the trend of isolation behind one's Muslim identity, another opposite excess –among Muslims living in the West-- has consisted in cultivating a misleading and erroneous sense of universality in which the very contours of the religion become blurred, and ultimately disappear into vague, abstract or sentimental views. Some Muslims, in the West, have therefore as if « disappeared » in the mist of this global and diffuse ethos. They have succumbed to the relativistic creed of many sectors of the modern world in which it has become fashionable to think that religions are outmoded, or even dangerous, precisely because they divide people and foster violence. As a consequence, they --and some Muslims among them, tend to propound a somewhat amorphous moral, humanitarian, abstractly religious model considered by them as the only means of achieving global harmony by neutralizing conflicts of identity. But this is forgetting that religious identities are far from being the only realities that divide and oppose people, while ignoring, moreover, that one cannot make religious messages responsible for the misuse that many inflict upon them today. If I am using my knife to cut out a piece of bread for my friends, it is indifferent whether others use the same kind of knife to cut their own fingers or cut the throat of fellow humans.

Now, as it has appeared in the preceding paragraphs, the dialectics between a focus on identity and a participation in universal values is highly relevant to the question of Muslim identity in the West : and it appears, in this respect, that four roads at least have opened ahead of Western Muslims. The first one, which has been eloquently criticized as sterile by Tariq Ramadan, consists in the kind of ghettoization and withdrawal upon oneself to which we have already alluded : this means remaining on the margin and the periphery of the society in which one lives in order to preserve one's ways by resisting to the socio-cultural pressures of Western societies. The second way amounts to the cultural and religious « disappearance » that we have mentioned above. It signifies a radical assimilation into European and American cultures. The third way, propounded by Tariq Ramadan in his *Westen Muslims and the Future of Islam,* consists in accepting and sharing whatever is good in non-Muslim societies in the name of an Islamic concept of universality and inclusiveness. This should lead, according to Ramadan, to new ways of interpreting some aspects of religious jurisprudence by taking into account not only the imperatives of the *Qur'ân* and the *Sunnah* but also the particular set of conditions that defines the Western context. Such an attitude of mediation between the imperatives of the authoritative texts and the constraints of the socio-cultural context, is, by and large, what Ramadan designates as « Salafi Reformism ». This orientation stresses a fidelity to the foundational texts of Islam that is inclusive of a creative reflection on the conditions of their application to the specificity of each socio-cultural context. Such a creative participation in non-Muslim societies goes hand in hand with a high visibility of Muslims as Muslims, in organizations and as individuals. The informing principle of such a « strategy » is that Muslims must show themselves as Muslims, thereby dispeling the perception that they stand in a potentially antagonistic position vis-à-vis the West. Tariq Ramadan does not consider a fourth possibility, although he perhaps hints at it critically when referring to the dangers of what he perceives as a spiritual but, in his view, « invisible Islam ». This fourth direction consists in going back to the essential spiritual intentions of Islam, reaching a deeper, interiorized understanding of *islâm* and *imân* in the light of *ihsân.* This interiorized Islam, which does not dispense with the law but follows its intentions, could allow Muslims to resolve most of the tensions and interrogations resulting from their contacts with non-Muslim societies. In other words, this way is a call to a personal, interiorized deepening and intensification of one's faith and practice centered on remembrance of God and the spiritual and moral consequences it entails.

As I indicated above, Tariq Ramadan advocates a universality of Islam that is expressed in the recognition in non-Muslim societies of all that is good, or at least not anti-Islamic. This is a very fruitful idea, and one conducive to a potentially greater integration of Muslims in their own Islam, and in the non-Muslim society in which they live. One of the main questions that needs to be addressed in this respect, though, is the following: how and by whom will this « good » in which Muslims are invited to participate be discerned? To this question, there seems to be only two possible answers. The first and obvious answer is that this discernment and the choices which are aferent to it should be the responsibility of the individual faithful themselves. This understanding would be welcome in most non-Muslim societies because it is particularly consonant with the modern concept of an individual, rational autonomy of the citizen that was fostered by Western philosophy and European law in the wake of the French revolution. This concept, which clearly parted from the former traditional emphasis on the mediating role of the family, the corporation and the local communities, is first and foremost asserted in European countries such as France, in which we can observe an extremely intense resistance to the possibility of the creation of religious

and ethnic communities which would function independently from the « sacrosanct » relationship between the State and the individual. French society is particularly sensitive to this perceived danger, often refered to as « communautarism », and criticized in France as being characteristic of so-called Anglo-Saxon societies. The much mediatized affair of the interdiction of the *hijâb* in French schools stemmed, in fact, from such a fear that pockets of communautarian independence would develop in French society. For the French, the wearing of the *hijâb* became an obvious sign, and even an ostentatious symbol, of such a peril.

Now, it will immediately appear to most Muslims that placing the locus of discrimination and judgment in religious matters in the individual is something very problematic and potentially dangerous from an Islamic point of view. For sure, each soul is responsible for itself before God, but when it comes to discerning the path of action in situations in which neither the *Qur'ân* nor the *Sunnah* have clearly provided prescriptions or proscriptions, Islam has always emphasized, historically, the need for *fuqahâ'*, or experts in matters in law and jurisprudence, who have been trained in the complex field of *fiqh*. The importance of religious learning and expertise has therefore been central in Muslim society. Islam has always made use of expert mediators because the *fitrah* or moral and spiritual norm is only latent and not fully actualized in mankind, not to mention that the complexity of life in this world makes it impossible for the faithful to trace his own law. The difficulty of the *faqîh* s task is compounded in modern Western societies, because knowledge of the law and jurisprudence must go hand in hand with a degree of familiarity with the society in which they are to be applied, exercised, and perhaps refined. The predicament of Muslims as a minority in non-Muslim modern societies therefore requires, as Ramadan has argued, that Islamic *fuqahâ'* be at once thoroughly conversant in the legal and religious tradition, as well as intimately cognizant of the particular circumstances and settings, particularly in the West, in which this tradition needs to be actualized as a living reality. Needless to say, such a category of *fuqahâ'* is extremely hard to find because of the relatively recent phenomenon of large Muslim communities in the West, and because *fuqahâ'* have tended to be trained in Muslim countries and have often been little exposed to the cultural realities of Western cultures. Moreover, there is also, here, a question of authority and legitimacy stemming from the fact that these experts need to be recognized both by the Muslim community and by the civil authorities of Western countries.

In the absence of satisfactory institutions of mediation and interpretation, where is the faithful going to find the criteria and means of a discernment of his own ? In addition or parallel to the obvious proscriptions and presciptions of the texts and Islamic consensus, our argument is that there is a need to have recourse to *ihsân*, and a inner sense of conformity to the *fitrah*. Some *ahadîth* point in the direction of such an inner, spiritual determination, like the famous *hadîth qudsi* from an-Nawwawî, « Among what mankind has retained from the primordial prophecy there is this : when you don't feel shame do what you want. » (*Inna mimmâ adraka an-nâs min kalâmi an-nubuwwati al-ûlâ : idhâ lam tastahi fa-asna' mâ shi'ta*).

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The preceding considerations have already suggested that there are basically two approaches to Islam in the world today, both of them having a central impact on the ways Muslims can live and function in the West, as well as in the Muslim world, *mutatis mutandis*. The first approach, which is by far the most visible, starts from a concept of Islam as a set of external social forms that are intended to determine the moral life of individuals, or at least social morality as such. This approach has been particularly prevalent everywhere a sense of a decline of Islam as a civilization has converged with a perceived need to resist the West, or

to compete with it. The first component of this attitude flows from a sense of decadence and weakness : it appeared as early as the late eighteenth-century with the Wahhabi inspiration and impetus. It has been said that the French conquest of Egypt was in that sense a catalyst for many Muslim intellectuals. They needed to understand why Islam as a worldly power had become weaker, and why the West had become stronger. In a sense the way in which the question was framed was already indicative of a certain one-sided apprehension of reality, with the side of *ad-dunyâ* clearly weighing more heavily in the scales than the side of *al-âkhirat*: Muslims fell into the trap of a purely external, material definition of success and strength. The fact that Islam as a civilization was at a time outwardly strong and expansive, primarily thanks to its spiritual, moral and intellectual vigour, does not mean that the inner vitality of Islam should be judged exclusively or primarily by external and terrestrial standards of outer realization, especially in a world that is almost entirely divorced from transcendent ends. But, leaving aside for a moment this important point, it must be emphasized that it is precisely at the moment when many leading Muslims began to think in terms of civilizational and outer comparison and confrontation with Europe that Islam was almost imperceptibly re-interpreted as an ideology. I mean by ideology a totalizing philosophical and political system that provides an integral interpretation of reality and is geared toward promoting socio-political changes in the world. In fact, however, it should have been clear to Muslim intellectuals that a religion like Islam is not an ideology, first because it is not a set of human concepts, but a divine revelation (*nazil, wahy*), and secondly because its fundamental goal is not the creation or the promotion of a given type of socio-political order but the religious salvation of the largest possible number of human beings. In other words, the socio-political dimension of Islam, while real in its own sphere, is only at best instrumental. The fact that Islam went, very early on in its history, through stages of violent internal oppositions over its socio-political leadership and structure, while being able to survive and provide religious nourishment for millions of people the world over for fourteen centuries, is in itself evidence that the socio-political dimension of Islam does not in fact touch upon the essential meaning and function of its mission. By entering into a kind of ideological competition with the West, Islam, or rather the Islamic world, has subjected itself to standards and definitions that more or less ignore the essence of its message. As a consequence, moreover, such a misunderstanding has led too many Muslims to be drawn into a competitive, polemical or even at times fanatically antagonistic position vis-à-vis the West.

Let us note finally, and this is the most important point, that such a purely external, social and political means of defining and promoting Islam has condemned Muslims to ignore, or even disdain as « irrelevant », the essential dimensions of *ihsân* and *'irfân,* reducing thereby religion to a set of practices, a set of rules and a set of institutions.Needless to say, Islam has always been a law and a set of practices and structures, but as Imam Ghazalî demonstrated in his *Ihyâ' 'ulûm ad-dîn*, the health of Islam as a human community depends upon an internal vivification, or revivification, that can only come about through a deepened spiritual consciousness of the meaning and practice of the tradition. Ghazalî shows that real knowledge (*ma'rifah*) is the first essential component of such a revivification. He also shows that spiritual *tawhîd* is the perfection of outer *tawhîd* :the first stage is likened by him to the outer cover of a coconut (outer profession of faith), the second stage to the inner cover of a coconut (faith in the heart), the third stage to the kernel of a coconut (nearness to God, *kashf*) and the fourth one to the oil of the kernel (knowing there is nothing but God). Such understanding and practice has been the thrust of Sufism, because Sufism has focused on *ihsân*, the science of remembrance and intentions, the science of virtues through surrender

to the One who has no second. Without this kernel and this oil, Islam can all too easily become like a dried up coconut shell.

The second approach, in favor of which we argue, consists precisely in such a revivification of Islamic consciousness through a concrete, spiritual and moral practice of *tawhîd*. As we indicated, Tariq Ramadan has founded his approach on the recognition of an objective framework of shared values among Muslims and the non-Muslim societies in which they live. But in fact, as we have suggested, such a recognition is only possible on the basis on an inner consciousness of the principles of Islam, a spiritual interiorization of them. We would therefore argue that the focus of Muslims should not be so much on external phenomena as potential universals as it should be on an internal discernment of what surrounds them from the standpoint of spiritual *tawhîd*. The *hadîth* of Jibrail reminds us that while *islâm* and *imân* are easy to define because they consist in actions and objective beliefs, *ihsân*, as perfection of both *islâm* and *imân*, can be defined only subjectively, as a mode of consciousness, or awareness, that « God sees you. » This is as it were « existential » *tawhîd*, the sense of the divine Unity in multiplicity of terrestrial life: the sense that one cannot escape the one God because there is none but Him. Those who advocate primarily an external, formal restoration of Islam, forget that *tawhīd*, the doctrine of Divine Unity that informs the whole of Islam, is not a horizontal system of colorless unification and busy systematization; it is, first and foremost, a vertical axis of integration in which the spiritual consciousness of Divine Unity is essential, determining, and binding. This is beautifully suggested by a famous *hadîth*:

Abu Sa'eed Al-Khudri narrated that God's Messenger said, "Moses said: 'O my Lord, teach me something by which I can remember You and supplicate to You.' God answered: 'Say, O Musa, *Lā ilāha illa'llāh* (no god but God).' Musa said: 'O my Lord, all your servants say this.' God said: 'O Musa, if the seven heavens and all of their inhabitants besides Me, and the seven earths were in a pan of a scale, and *Lā ilāha illa'llāh* was in another pan, *Lā ilāha illa'llāh* would outweigh them.'"

Now it must be acknowledged that the contrast between the two approaches that we have just sketched above is in some ways a pedagogical simplification. Historically, the two ways have been sometimes joined, or been parallel. The Sanusi movement of Lybia was an example of Salafi inspired movement which was also nourished by Sufi concepts and practices. Conversely Sufi masters such as the Algerian Amir 'Abd al-Qâdir in the ninteenth-century, or Shaykh Ahmad al-'Alawî in the twentieth-century, while being rooted in the pure metaphysics of *tawhîd* and spiritual science of *dhikr* and virtues, have had also an important external, social, and, for the former, political presence and impact. This shows that our distinction points to an emphasis rather than to an exclusive focus. It remains nevertheless true that phenomena such as Wahhabism in Arabia, *al-Ikhwân al-Muslimîn* in Egypt or *Jamâ'at-i-Islami* in Pakistan have been primarily propagating an external agenda of Islamicization of society, while Sufi brotherhoods have tended to place the emphasis on inner reformation and remembrance of God. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Tariq Ramadan has divided contemporary Muslims among six groups, which he labels as traditionalists, Salafi litteralists, Salafi reformists, Salafi political activists, liberal reformists and Sufi. While political Salafism clearly fall under the rubric of our first approach, and Sufism under the second, the other categories are less clear-cut and allow for a combination of the two. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, for his part, has proposed a categorization into four groups : modernists, fundamentalists, traditional and Mahdists. It is clear that, for him, both modernists and

fundamentalists correspond to the first approach, while traditionalists, including Sufis, have displayed clear affinities with the second way.

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What are the implications of these distinctions and analyses for Muslims living in the West, and how does their specific situation plays in this dialectics? On the one hand, the socio-political drive of so-called fundamentalist movements has necessarily taken a specific orientation in non-Muslim societies, since it cannot promote, at least a priori, an Islamicization of Western societies. However, outlooks akin to such movements continue to shape the positions of a number of Muslims in the West, especially among those who feel socially alienated, in a way that both marginalize and ghettoize them, and at the same time sets them, potentially at least, in an antagonistic situation vis-à-vis the non-Islamic society in which they live. This situation is akin to that of the traditional notion of *dâr al-harb*. The spiritual approach, by contrast, is primarily focused on an ability to practice one's religion and cultivate its inner perfection. Its primary focus has been, therefore, on securing the maximal degree of peace, security and harmony that it can enjoy in the host country. This is akin to the traditional Shafite notion of *dâr al-sûhl*, or house of concord, i.e. a situation in which Muslims, even though they do not live socially under the regimen of the *sharî'ah*, are free to practice their religion and to abide by its precepts. In the West, moreover, the spiritual dimension is all the more needed that it provides bridges of understanding with non-Muslim Westerners who, although widely secularized, have been informed by Christian concepts of religion which places the emphasis on inwardness and spiritual love.

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At the end of history Muslims will be in exile or as « strangers », as is stated in a *hadîth*. This exile can be understood on several levels. One of them is external and geographical. It may mean that Muslims, or the best of them, will be found outside of the regions that have been historically associated to Islam, the *dâr al-islâm*. This first interpretation may have very direct implications on the meaning of the status of Muslims in the non-Muslim world, and particularly in the West. But this *hadîth* may also mean that Muslims will be, or are, in exile in relation to the socio-political framework that should normatively define their religious home. It means that there will not be, or there is already no, real actualization of an external, social structure for Islam. Original Muslims, the first community of Mecca, were in exile in the sense of not being able to be at home, yet, in a terrestrial structure of their own. They were then again in exile, but in a more outer sense, when they settled in Medina, having had to left the spiritual center of monotheism. Similarly, the later times may be characterized as a period when Muslims find themselves in lands that do not belong to the *dâr al-islâm*, but also, and more radically, in a world, the entire world, in which religious structures are corroded and collapse, or else are distorted and subverted from within. The responsibility of Islam weighs, therefore, on the shoulders of each and every individual believer. Hence the need for *ihsân* and concrete, spiritual knowledge of *tawhîd* as foundation of the Muslim identity. Muslims are in exile in the world because they must live their faith in the absence of satisfactory external traditional supports. Muslim exile stems from the fact that the world of *al-dunyâ* is more and more bereft and ignorant of the vertical dimension of Islam. At the same time, this exile, and all the sufferings and sense of disiquilibrium that it entails, is also a source of inner grace because it fosters a more profound sense of *islâm*.. This is why the same *hadîth* concludes on a rewarding note : « Blessed will be those who are in exile. »

One aspect of the exile of spiritual Islam in the world that has often been missed is based on the fact that Islam means, in essence, « peace » whereas the world as we know it today is « war. » I do not mean to say here that there are wars in the modern world, for there has always been wars in that sense. On a deeper level, the secular, scientific, technological world of modernity is «war » inasmuch as it is predicated on an opposition between man and the universe that surrounds him. Whereas the traditional order of religions was founded on a correlation and harmony between the human order, the divine order and the natural or cosmic order, the rationalistic, mechanistic, naturalistic and materialistic philosophies that arose in Europe in the sixteenth and seventieth centuries resulted in a set of dichotomies between man and God, spirit and matter, and man and nature. Disconnected from the Divine, and having rejected or abandoned its status of *Khalifat-Allâh,* mankind placed itself at the center of the universe, severing its relationship with the transcendent, and introducing an unbridgeable gap between the rational subject and the objects of his study. Man thereby alienated himself from nature, which became the mere object of his conquest and exploitation. The rebellion, or war, against God resulted in a war against nature. The dynamic and evolutionist concepts that stemmed from this change in outlook have been characterized by a kind of insatiable production and consumption as epitomized by the industrial revolution and the colonial enterprise, both phenomena which are at the roots of the quasi-totality of the issues and problems with which contemporary men are grappling.

Mankind has been at war with nature, and at war with itself, as a result of its disconnection from God and the cosmic order expressed in and by the divine *âyât.* This is the key to understanding the barbaric devastation and unprecedented destruction that characterized the twentieth-century. « War », in this general, symbolic, sense, has become, so to speak, a norm, whereas it is normatively no more than a fight for the restoration of an order that has been broken, therefore an exception and a necessary « scandal ».. This distinction actually points to the qualitative gap betwen a just and an unjust war. A just war can be legitimate only to the extent that it is intended as a restoration of true peace. Just war amounts, therefore, to restoring the outer conditions that facilitate inner peace, whereas unjust war is the very expression of a radical lack of inner peace. This is why just war cannot be passionate and indiscriminate: it is impersonal and, as it were, a human prolongation of God's wrath. If there is, according to a famous *hadîth*, a smaller and a greater *jihâd*, there is also a smaller and a greater *salâm*.. There is an outer war, and an inner war, an outer peace and an inner peace : the smaller war aims at restoring the smaller peace so that the greater peace may bloom, but without the latter the seeds of war are always present and quick to sprout.

Whereas peace results, on all levels, from the harmonization of a multiplicity into a beautiful unity, war is mere multiplicity, disorder and disorientation : it is the exact opposite of *tawhîd* as a principle of integration. « War » as a state of being results from a polarization among cultural identities that have become disconnected from any sense of religious and human universality. Let us take, as a foremost example of this type of disconnection, the issue of Islam and the recognition of other religions. As any other religious tradition, Islam claims that it brings a message of truth that supersedes in some ways that of other religions. Without such a conviction of correcting or perfecting what has preceded it, Islam would have no *raison d'être* and no effectiveness. At the same time though, Islam ranks among the religions best equipped to acknowledge the principial validity of other faiths. The Qur'ân states that the Prophet has only been missioned to remind mankind of what it has always been taught by former prophets, and the legitimacy of the religions of *Ahl al-Kitâb* is fully acknowledged. This is the truly universal dimension of Islam.

A balance between identity and universality is therefore essential to the religious health of Islam. In fact, the Qur'ân shows the way to such a balance when it asserts that « Islam is the religion with God » (*inna ad-Dîn 'ind' Allâh al-islâm*) while acknowledging that no people from the past has ever been deprived of a messenger. Such a balance is possible only if universality is conceived as subjacent to particularity, and not independent from it in fact. Exclusivists and particularists who forget the dimension of universality of Islam close themselves up and closes Islam upon itself, and in doing so not only antagonize other faiths but also cut themselves from an access to the deeper layers of Islam, through which they would be in union and harmony with the whole of mankind, and in fact the whole of creation, in and through Islam as *rahmatan li-l-'alamin*. Let us not forget that, in a deeper sense, the whole of creation is in a state of *islâm*. Islam is based on the innate reality of a universal *fitrah* which is none other than the recognition of one's metaphysical dependence upon God. There is a Divine Mystery that willed, and wills, the whole of creation to be, and everything that proceeds from this « *kun* » is in fact, out of necessity, in a state of *islâm*, including minerals, vegetals and animals. In a more limited, restrictive sense, God has sent his messengers to remind people of their pre-existential contract with Him. In this sense any believer in Divine Unity is a Muslim. Finally, there is a more particular sense in which God sent, through the Prophet Muhamad, a terminal message of restoration of the primordial tradition (*ad-dîn al-qayyim*) : anybody who accepts this message is a Muslim in a specific sense. An understanding of these various levels of Islam allows one to perceive the deep relationship betwen particularity and universality. As a contemporary philosopher has put it, the privilege of Islam is that it « gives form to what constitutes the essence of all religious forms." It is therefore both particular, as form of the essence, and universal, as essential message of all religious forms.

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