

## IRAN AND THE OCCIDENT

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### Introduction

It has become commonplace to think of the world in terms of an Occident-Orient dichotomy. The idea of Occident, including Greece, Rome, and medieval and modern Europe and North America is advanced versus Achaemenian, Parthian, and Sasanian Persia and the later "Islamic world," as well as India and China. According to this perspective, the "West" is characterized in terms of *logos*, the world of logic, rationality, law, responsibility, and objectivity, whereas the "East" is understood in terms of *nomos*, the world of path, illumination, mysticism, honor, patriarchy, and subjectivity. In this manner, European history is thought to be continuous, in which Athenian democracy and philosophy are manifested in the rise of modernity, capitalism, and the European hegemony.

Following the advent of modernity, the societies of Western Europe underwent a qualitative change. This led many Western European writers to extend their newly-formed world of rationality into past epochs. They created, as a result, such ideas as Asiatic mode of production and oriental despotism (not to mention formulations with outright prejudice) when referring to countries like Iran. In the present era, many writers advance the idea of a Western (and not a Christian) world versus the "Islamic" world. Given such distinction, no wonder it is difficult to imagine secularism or democracy in this so-called Islamic world. The orientalist discourse as well as the reactions to it (westoxication formulations and Islamic apologetics) feed into this dichotomy. The main conclusion then is that "East" and "West," if not irreconcilable, are fundamentally separate and different.

I suggest that Iran (as well as the rest of Western Asia) and Europe share a common heritage and therefore the popularized East-West dichotomy for at least this case does not hold. Iran has "Western" roots, just as the "West" has "Eastern" roots.

### Fabricated History, Imaginary Dichotomy

It is not an easy task to downplay the tremendous historical contact between Western Asia and the European continent. Not only have commodities, sciences, and technologies

traveled back and forth between Europe and Western Asia, but also socio-cultural exchange between these two areas has been a fact of life. Thus, the *historical* distinction between Europe and Western Asia may be thought of as largely geographic in nature, for mutual imitation and adoption between these regions have been frequent and for the most part non-problematic.

The recent experience with the adoption of new ideas and ways by one geographical region from another, however, has been somewhat different. First, the amount of flow from one place to another – this time from *Western* Europe to the “East” – has been much larger; and second, this flow has been coupled with another phenomenon – imperialism (previously colonialism).

The peoples of Western Europe who descended mostly from Nordic and Celtic tribes did not have much of a history of “civilization,” having acquired such elements partly from Greece through Rome, partly from Semitic peoples of the Levant and partly from Andalusia (of course these are direct routes of contact; otherwise all of the above people have borrowed from each other in turn). It is a characteristic of human societies to form their identities by glorifying their past, and Western Europeans were no exception. Lacking a “civilized” past, they took to the task of fabricating their own history of “civilization.” They claimed descent from Greece, and in the process attributed all knowledge to it as well – thus excluding all “others.” This fabrication did not trouble the actual descendants of the Greeks, for it included them in this process of glorification. Yet, by doing so, Western Europeans excluded the rest of the world from this heritage.

Subsequently, when these Western Europeans opened the gates of the “East” and presented their story of a civilized past to “Easterners,” their claim remained unquestioned. There were several reasons to this. First, having their own prejudices, “Easterners” such as Iranians also considered the entire Europe as one entity. To them, anywhere from Greece westward was “West,” not exactly in today’s sense but in the sense that they were predominantly Christian. It did not occur to anyone that Christianity is less than two thousand years old, and the entire classical Greek period predates it chronologically. This means that not only Europeans, but also Iranians projected the present state to past epochs. On the other hand, many of those peoples of the “East” who did not welcome the new colonialists and imperialists to their lands, considered other elements of Western European appearance as alien. Such views are the basis of Islamic fundamentalism and other similar nativist discourses.

It is customary in our world to attach little glory to those who have adopted ideas and ways of others, whereas inventors and creators are celebrated. Therefore, it is one thing to say that Western Europeans have borrowed elements of their “civilization” from Greece, and yet quite another to assert that they are the reincarnation of that culture of the past. On the basis of this observation, European history was imagined in a way to tie a country like England to Ancient Greece.

One has to note that Iranians were in contact with Greece at the height of her classical period and even much of the classical period appeared in Ionia, which was for a long period and for the most part a Persian province. Moreover, Iranians were responsible for much of the so-called revival of the Greek learning. It is a peculiar thing that Iranians are not allowed to have any claim

over Greek philosophy, but descendants of the Nordic and Celtic tribes who appeared on the world scene at a much later time present themselves as the true inheritors of the "Hellenic civilization." Some Western European authors have gone as far as saying that the mediaeval Persian (and Arab) scientists made no contribution to philosophy and science except that of keeping the "European" learning for several centuries and transmitting it back to Europe.

Let us consider a hypothetical situation. Suppose Greece had become pre-dominantly Moslem – a plausible event. Then, could Western Europeans claim descent from Greece when benefiting from their sciences and philosophy? The reader agrees that this was not possible, at least in its present form. In other words, the fact that Greece became Christian has provided some basis for the fabrication of a continuous European history. Yet the fact that Greece did not become Moslem has nothing to do with the Greece of 2500 years ago.

Moreover, before their independence from the Ottoman Empire, Greeks showed a strong affinity to the other Ottoman subjects, in culture and character, and not to Western Europeans. That is why sometimes a slip occurs and Greece is considered a part of the "Near East." This means that Western Europeans themselves were aware that Greeks of modern times resembled, among others, the Turkish-speaking people of Anatolia much more than "Westerners" — a big problem. To remedy this problem, Western Europeans engaged in the war of Greek independence and literary figures such as Byron risked their lives over it. After all, it was not possible to have a Greece under the Ottoman Empire, which was not "Western." If Greece, "the historic West," was not "Western," then it had to be made so.

I am not claiming here that there is no difference between Western Asia and (Western) Europe. Rather, I am suggesting that the *historical* distinction is baseless. Certainly, with the rise of industrial capitalism and modernity a considerable gulf appeared between these two regions of the world. Modernity as a phenomenon occurred in Western Europe as a result of the latest hegemonic shift. The socio-cultural manifestation of this hegemonic shift was modernity.

The benchmark of modernity, secularism, and democracy is claimed by some to be Judeo-Christian values. At the first glance, it may be argued that these values provided the necessary conditions for the rise of modernity, but it is not possible to hold these values as sufficient preconditions. After all, Latin America is Christian, inhabited predominantly by European or Europeanized people, and appeared as an extension of Western Europe. In other words, the socio-cultural norms of Latin America were imported from Spain and Portugal, the leading countries at the time of the Western European rise. Spain itself was under religious (catholic) rule for a long period in this century, a rule that, among other things, forbade women to hold bank accounts by themselves. In addition, only Jews from Europe were involved in the birth of modernity; other Jewish communities followed the societies to which they belonged.

I suggest that Judeo-Christian values (if there actually exists such a couple) were neither the sufficient nor the necessary conditions for the rise of modernity and secularism, for these phenomena cannot appear without the weakening of religion's hold on the society. In other words, modernity is based on scientific rationality and not the belief in the primacy of religion. One can only claim that the repressive conditions Christianity had imposed on Western European societies provided for the right sort of conflict which was resolved in the form of

secularism and modernity. But, this is a different line of argument.

Even if we accept the Weberian Protestant ethics argument as the underlying cause of the rise of modernity, industrial capitalism, and secularism, we are still unable to argue on this basis in favor of an Occident-Orient dichotomy of the kind I have been discussing here.

Worth stressing is that the conflicting relationship between Europe and Western Asia has been a result of the cultural affinity of these two geographical regions, rather than their differences. What exacerbated the conflict were their religious difference and their competitive bid for hegemony. Europe was predominantly Christian and Western Asia predominantly Moslem. This is not to say that Islam and Christianity are fundamentally different, but that any difference in allegiance to religion can become an excuse for conflict among those who are competing for power.

The "West" has had the upper hand in this competition for the last few centuries and has gained dominance over Western Asia as well as many other parts of the world. While countries like Iran are by no means alien to the "West," they have not embraced modernity as much as Western Europeans have. This fact is a source of apparent difference between the "West" and the "East." However, there has been a tremendous effort on the part of the people of the latter area to incorporate modernity into their societies. The problem is that the material aspects of modernity have not been shared equally by the masses of the societies like Iran. This fact has been both a contributing factor and a result of foreign imperialism and the backwardness of the country – which have feed each other in the past. That is why parts of the Iranian masses responded positively to the fundamentalist call. For fundamentalism is not limited to the predominantly-Moslem countries. However, the "West" does not have to deal with imperialism. Nor does it need to tackle the illiteracy and poverty that characterize countries like Iran.

As mentioned earlier, it is quite popular nowadays to use the term "Western Civilization" to refer to Europe and North America while calling Western Asia and North Africa the "Islamic Civilization." That is, only the name of one area has a religion built into it. One could argue that this is the case because pre-dominantly Christian countries of Europe and North America have embraced modernity and secularism completely whereas predominantly-Moslem countries of Western Asia and North Africa have not. The problem with this line of argument is that Latin America, much of East and South East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa have not embraced modernity and secularism either. Why is it that those regions are rarely called by the name of a religion? Still, some may argue that Islam is a master status of predominantly Moslem countries. This is however very difficult to prove. To be sure, Islamic fundamentalists advocate such views. Worth mentioning is that in Iran the biggest holiday is Noruz, a non-religious (or at least non-Islamic) holiday, whereas in Christian Europe major holidays are all religiously- (Christian) based. One can find other such evidence to show that religion can mean more to Europeans than to Iranians, in particular if they have similar level of education and income.

### **Final Notes**

My main task in this article was to question the assumptions of much scholarly and popular writing based on an historical Occident-Orient dichotomy. In particular, students of the Iranian

history and society who have been engaged in explaining A to Z of Iran in terms of religion and in contrast to the "West" have to be much more careful of the underlying assumptions of their analyses.

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