THE CIVILIZATIONAL DISCOURSE CONCEPT ACCORDING TO ISLAMIC AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Civilization discourse is an alternative to the clash of civilizations. It is a form of positive interaction between civilizations that can lead to peace, cooperation and progress for all parties. Hence, surely there are similarities or differences in the perspective of all parties concerned about this concept because of differences in the fundamentals and sources held by these parties. This study intended to determine the extent of these similarities and differences in the civilization discourse concept according to Islamic and Western perspectives. This study was qualitative in nature and applied the content analysis approach. Findings show that similarity in values found in this concept was consistent with human instinct and humanistic values. However, differences that exists are from the source of this concept, which according to the Islamic perspective, involves certain laws because it is based on divine revelation from Allah SWT, while the West sees it solely from ethical and humanistic aspects.

Keywords: civilizational dialogue, Islam, the West, humanistic value, al-Qur’an.

INTRODUCTION

Civilization discourse is a collection of interactions that occur in various levels involving political, economic, cultural, artistic and community aspects. The civilization discourse concept
has heralded support from all parties because it aims for universal good. Nevertheless, no study has ever examined the similarities or differences of this concept from two perspectives, namely Islam and the West. Hence, this study intended to thoroughly examine the issues that have been raised as well as the extent of the Islamic world’s acceptance of the civilization discourse concept.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One scholar who has triggered the author’s interest in civilization discourse is Roger Garaudy. Through the book “al-Islam fi al-Gharb: Qurtubah ‘Asimah al-Ruh wa al-Fikr”, Garaudy (1991) had tried to substantiate the civilization discourse idea, which he thought could solve the political turmoil affecting the world today. However, he did not anticipate a comprehensive debate put forward by various parties. al-Jirari (2000), through al-Hiwar min Manzur Islami, also added the civilization discourse concept from an Islamic perspective by examining several verses of the al-Qur’an and its relation to the concept. Although he had debated the civilization discourse concept, however, verse 13 of surah al-Hujurat, which is the basis of civilization discourse according to the eyes of Islam, was not the focus.

Besides that, debate about the civilization discourse concept from an Islamic perspective can be refereed to Osman Bakar’s (2006), The Qur’an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilization Dialogue and Islam: A Perspective, edited by Azizan Baharuddin. According to the author’s observation, a comprehensive picture of the civilization discourse concept from an Islamic perspective is yet to be found.

al-Milad (2006) had edited a book entitled Ta’aruf al-Hadarat. This book is a collection of several articles related to ta’aruf al-hadarat, which according to him, was more suitable compared to hiwar al-hadarat. Although al-Milad focused more on trying to popularise the term ta’aruf al-hadarat, there was information that could benefit the writer’s research, especially information related to the history and development of civilization discourse as well as several scholars of interest. Nevertheless, as explained in the title, that book did not thoroughly debate the relationship between civilization discourse and the clash of civilizations. In the context of understanding the civilization discourse concept from a Western perspective, the article by Hernan Lopez-Garay entitled “Dialogue among Civilizations: What for?”, should be referred. The author had focused on the definition, fundamentals and objectives of civilization discourse but did not emphasise on the strategy, which is one of the main elements in the civilization discourse concept. Among the books that discuss civilization discourse strategy is the ‘Fundamental Concept of Islam and Inter-Faith Relations’, edited by Wan S.W.A. and Mohd F.H. (2007). This book discusses a strategy that can help realise a successful civilization discourse, which is a platform for inter-faith discourse. Unfortunately, the discussions did not touch on civilization discourse so much so that the term civilization discourse and clash of civilizations have become two different entities. In short, there are no literary works that compare the civilization discourse concept from the viewpoint of Islam and the West.
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This study was qualitative in nature and used an exploratory framework. Data were collected from primary and secondary sources related to the civilization discourse concept or inter-civilization interactions and subjected to a content analysis. The sources included books, journal articles, magazines, newspapers etc. Whereas, the data analysis had applied the inductive and comparative methods. Documents were analysed using the ATLAS.ti software based on several identified themes that included the definition, similarities and differences as well as the acceptance of the civilization discourse concept by the Islam world.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Definition

The combination of two words, namely ‘civilization’ and ‘discourse’ leads to the word ‘civilization discourse’, which means “a form of discussion between two parties or more that represents belief, ideology or views about a certain issue in a harmonious and ethical atmosphere so that common goodness and benefits can be achieved”. Thus, based on this definition of civilization discourse, there are several aspects that require attention, such as:

i. Those involved possess credibility as well as understand the objective and aim of the discourse, besides, it can be presumed to represent certain entities, such as the country, organization, institution etc.
ii. The topic discussed is wide and covers all aspects of human civilization, such as politics, economy, social and religion.
iii. The discourse should have a guideline and a set of ethical values so that the discourse can be held in a harmonious manner and its momentum maintained, especially when the discourse involves religion and ideology.
iv. The objective must pivot on the truth, seek mutual understanding and consensus, decrease the gap of misunderstanding, invigorate the practice of tolerance and cooperation as well as realise efforts in the interest of all parties concerned.

Similarities

Basically, Islamic and Western scholars accept the civilization discourse concept. Islam is a religion of peace; although it has been frequently labelled as a religion that instigates violence and war. In reality, the West has adopted an approach of “confrontation” in its history of foreign relations. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that in the West there also exist groups that support the approach of peace and harmony as well as reject hostile values (Elfatih A., 2003). Among the figures who desired to “form relationships” were St. Augustine (Portalié, E., 1907) and Pope Paul VI (Anon, 2012, http://www.vatican.va). This is not something awkward because civilization discourse is instinctual and humanistic. Although Islam and the West are frequently labelled as being the “confrontational block”, hence, civilization discourse is presumed to be
the opposite. Regardless of whether it is Islam or the West, each wishes to see positive changes in their mutual relations. Good relations cannot be detrimental to either party; on the contrary, it can help generate a more stable and productive global development trend regardless from whichever perspective, political, economical or social (Ellis, G., 2007).

Hence, looking at the implementation and appreciation of civilization discourse from a practical aspect, it is disappointing. The problem is not with the civilization discourse concept but rather an egoistic attitude and careless actions undertaken solely for self-interest. Some leaders from developed countries find it difficult to fully assimilate the civilization discourse concept in their actions, more so when their interests are threatened (Febio P., 2007). Summarily, civilization discourse only faces problems from a small group, such as political and economic figures as well as policy makers. Their thinking and actions are not based on the importance of universal relations and goodwill but rather on short-term political and economic gains. Putting this small group aside, civilization discourse is a transparent and established concept aimed at building a global civilization based on universal relations (Jan S., 1998).

Elements that are found in civilization discourse, both from the Islamic and Western perspectives and conceptual in nature as mentioned earlier, are based on instinctual and humanistic values. Both these elements are in fact contained in the teachings of Islam. Based on this, Nursi had named Islam as the “greatest humanity” (al-Nursi, 1998). These values are jointly owned by all races, which is a reality of humanity established by Allah s.w.t. Hence, due to this similarity, humans in general are commanded to form good relations amongst themselves or good human relations. This in reality consolidates the civilization discourse. Truly understanding this concept could help in rejecting or avoiding the clash of civilization concept that clearly rejects human relationship values (al-Jirari, 2000).

**Differences**

In-depth examination has found several differences. This study found that the difference in the civilization discourse concept from Islamic and Western perspectives was differences in the fundamentals. What is meant by the differences in the fundamentals here is the source that helps form the civilization discourse concept that differs between the West and Islam. Looking from the Islamic thinking framework aspect, surely it is sourced from the al-Qur’an and al-Sunnah. In the context of discussions on civilization discourse, the al-Qur’an and al-Sunnah have provided a conceptual idea about this issue.

Hence, from the aspect of elaborating and implementing, it needs to undergo a review process in the form of *ijtihad* and should not deviate from what is permitted by the al-Qur’an and al-Sunnah. This is where the role played by experts and Islamic scholars has developed Islamic values by considering contemporary reality and needs. Islam could be portrayed in its actual form to the West through civilization discourse so that Islam is seen as an alternative to their civilization, which is materialistic in nature. This is the challenge that Muslims need to face. Islam is then portrayed to the international community as being extremely relevant in the context of contemporary global relations. Islamic practices are actually not limited to a specific time or place because Islam is flexible (*murunah*) in nature.

The projection of Islam in this fashion is a big challenge for the Muslim community, especially to religious figures and Islamic scholars. A challenge such as this was mentioned by
Murad Hofman, “if modernisation (Westernisation) begins to fail and if religion begins to return to the West, why cannot Islam become the religion of the West in the 21st century”? (Mansur A., 2007).

In order to prove the role of the al-Qur’an as a source of the Islamic-based civilization discourse concept, Table 1 below classifies the elements in the civilization discourse concept and relates it to certain verses in the al-Qur’an.

Table 1 Civilization Discourse Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Source (al-Qur’an)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentals</td>
<td>al-Hujurat: 13, al-Isra’: 70,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim</td>
<td>al-Hujurat: 13, al-Mumtahanah: 8-9</td>
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The civilization discourse concept adduced by Western scholars was based more on the thinking or philosophy of scholars originating from the West. Leonard Swidler (2006), who was an Interfaith Dialogue exponent, agreed with this notion. He went on to say that interfaith (or civilization) discourse is something new and not something that emerged from divine deliverance but rather formed through human experience and thinking. Thus, from Islam’s point of view, this is not odd because Jesus a.s. was not destined to become a leader because of his short lifespan. Therefore, Jesus a.s. did not face issues involving relations with foreign parties. Patricia Romney (Anon, 2012, http://www.clarku.edu), in her article, The Art of Dialogue, only referred to Plato and Socrates when discussing the source of ideas about discourses in the Western world.

Perhaps the most well-known writer on dialogue in the western world is Plato (427-347 BC. Plato’s ideas are important because they are the origin or point of departure for almost all considerations of dialogue. Many people still consider Plato’s ideas is the absolute word on dialogue. The dialogues with which are most familiar are examples of the Socratic method of Plato’s teacher, Socrates (Anon, 2012, www.AmericansForTheArts.org)

In order to explain differences in this policy, a comparison of true values that have become the main objective of civilization discourse are discussed. Civilization discourse from an Islamic perspective should make truth as its objective. Based on this significance, Islam does not reject discourse as a means for seeking truth or as termed by some as converse dialogue (al-Shahrani, 2006). This means that sensitive issues, including the truth in a religion, cannot be
denied in the context of discourse in order to seek the truth. This indirectly creates a discourse in the form of a debate. Islam has never prohibited such a discourse but only laid down a condition that it should occur in an appropriate and intellectual manner. However, from the Western perspective, this issue was presumed to be otherwise. Western scholars saw discourse as a way of getting acquainted and understanding each other but not intended to seek religious truth (Anon, 2012, www.AmericansForTheArts.org). They believed that religion should not be debated because it could lead to conflict. This belief leads to religious pluralism, which assumes that all religions are similar, and no religion can claim that it reserves absolute truth. For this reason, debates were frequently ignored in Western-based discourses.

This was because discourses in a Western-thinking context are based on human thinking, hence, debates according to their view, experiences and practices only lead to conflicts and disputes (Leonard S., 2006). Islam is of the view that debates not necessarily lead to enmity or conflicts if it is initiated correctly. The assertion by the al-Qur’an for debates with members of the Scripture in a cordial manner is one form of religious command, with the condition that the debate is carried out according to Islamic values.

Therefore, if debates are ignored, then civilization discourse would be very superficial and externalised. Thus, from an Islamic perspective, the truth in a religion is the main element in a discourse that should be carried out in a decent and courteous manner, in line with the sanctity and nobility underlying a religion but not when it is rejected or denied by Allah SWT. Allah SWT exhorted in surah al-Ankabut, verse 46, meaning:

> And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice among them, and say, "We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him."

Therefore, based on the comparison between Islamic and Western civilization discourse concepts, several conclusions were drawn, as follows;

i. The civilization discourse concept from an Islamic perspective is based on divine deliverance, whereas from the Western perspective, civilization discourse emerged from the ideas of scholars and philosophers, such as Socrates and Plato, which was sourced from the thinking and life experiences of these figures. Nevertheless, in general, the civilization discourse concept would surely have a common ground between Islam and the West. The common ground here refers to instinctual and humanistic values (Sayyid Q., n.d.) and it brings together divine deliverance as well as thinking and life experiences.

ii. In relation to that, the civilization discourse concept extracted from divine deliverance (wahyu) was perfect as it was delivered by the Creator and the deliverance was intended to perfectly organise human life. Allah SWT exhorted in surah al-Anbiya’ verse 107, meaning: We have sent you forth as nothing but mercy to people of the whole world.

> Whereas, human thinking, although high in intellect and wide experience, is still limited by weaknesses and shortcomings because as humans, they are always exposed and influenced by phenomena that occurs around them.
iii. It is a fact that the term “civilization discourse” emerged from the West. However, it does not mean that the civilization discourse concept is something new. Islamic scholars have proven that the al-Qur’an, since its deliverance 1400 years ago, already mentioned about a concept related to civilization discourse (al-Tuwajri, 2009). Moreover, this study has proven that verse 13 from surah al-Hujurat is the ‘platform for the civilization discourse concept’, which contains the core elements that touch on the debate concerning civilization discourse. Hence, it can be concluded that the clarion call and issue pertaining to civilization discourse, as propagated by Western scholars, only emphasised on what was actually advocated by Islam for all this while.

iv. This proves that Islam is a true religion and not one created by humans. Its deliverance is admittedly a guideline for humans that guarantees harmony, stability and fairness for all parties, regardless of Muslims or non-Muslims.

The Islamic World and the Civilization Discourse Concept

It should be mentioned in this debate that the civilization discourse concept and inter-faith discourse are strongly related because inter-faith discourse is a branch of civilization discourse. Although civilization discourse is accepted by all parties in general because its concept is based on universal human values; however, weaknesses that exist in the inter-faith discourse also influences the acceptance of the civilization discourse concept by the Muslim community. There are three groups that have differing stands about the civilization discourse concept, whereby one group totally accepts the civilization discourse concept, such as that voiced by the West, one group totally rejects it and one group takes the middle path in accepting one part, while rejecting the other part.

After examining some of the literature that had rejected civilization discourse, this study concluded that the rejection was related to one branch of civilization discourse, namely inter-faith discourse. The main reason was that in civilization discourse, religion and civilization is presumed as one entity and no party should place their religion or civilization above others. This means that all religions are alike, and no party can claim that their religion or civilization is better or more genuine than others.

This group also relates civilization discourse with the mission of Christening and the colonization of the Islamic world by the West. Another point used by them is that there are several discourses, especially the inter-faith discourse. This indirectly contradicts with the teachings of Islam because as a Muslim, it is demanded that Muslims feel proud about their faith. Allah SWT exhorted in surah Al Imran, verse 19, meaning: The religion before Allah is Islam (submission to His Will): Nor did the People of the Book dissent therefrom except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account.

Hence, if examined thoroughly, this issue cannot be used as a yardstick for totally rejecting civilization discourse. This study feels that this issue is one of the weaknesses that exists when implementing civilization discourse, especially when trying to realise the early stages of the civilization discourse program. Western scholars and religious figures have admitted to this weakness. For example, Nabil Luqa Bibawi (2009) believed that this weakness was caused by the ‘colonizing attitude’ that still influenced Western thinking at that time.
However, he thought that it would gradually cease to exist because the initiation of civilization discourse would be good of all parties and the weakness that exist should be rectified from time to time.

The equality of religion in the civilization discourse concept should be understood as an equal right whereby each person or race has the right to choose their religion or belief without any element of coercion or undue influence by other parties. Freedom of religion and its practice is fundamental to universal harmony. Each race reserves the right to presume that their religion is the best for them. The right to freedom of religion is mentioned in the al-Qur’an, such as in surah al-Baqarah dan Yunus.

Civilization discourse does not allow participating parties to insult another’s religion. At the same time, civilization discourse also does not prevent one from having a discourse to seek the truth, insofar it follows general and ethical guidelines. Thus, if there is a view that the religious pluralism movement supports the “unified religion” (taqrib adyan) belief; hence, a belief like this, from the beginning, is presumed to be inconsistent with civilization discourse according to the Islamic perspective. This movement is also not the pioneer of civilization discourse. Islamic scholars from the beginning had detected the shortcomings of this movement. As summarised by al-Shahrani (2006), the civilization discourse concept accepted by Islam is a discourse that aims to create religious and societal harmony (ta’ayush silmi) and not to equate all the religions.

The second reason is that they believe in the verses of the al-Qur’an related to jihad and the war against infidelity. According to their belief, these verses of the al-Qur’an indicate that the conflict between faith (iman) and infidelity or between Muslim and non-Muslim communities is a certainty. In addition, this type of belief is further substantiated by the current global situation. This study found that the source of this view was the misunderstanding about the meaning of the verses. In order to explain the actual position about this question, the concept of war in Islam must be thoroughly examined. For this reason, discussions involved the understanding of verses that support this group’s beliefs. Besides that, other related verses were examined to determine whether they support or oppose the beliefs. Among the verses that formed the basis when discussing this issue are verses 191-193 from surah al-Baqarah.

“And slay them wherever ye find them and drive them out of the places whence they drove you out, for persecution is worse than slaughter. And fight not with them at the Inviolable Place of Worship until they first attack you there, but if they attack you (there) then slay them. Such is the reward of disbelievers. But if they desist, then lo! Allah is Forgiving, Most Compassionate. And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah. But if they desist, then let there be no hostility except against wrong doers” – Surah al-Baqarah, 191-193

Based on the literary works of several Islamic scholars, such as Elfatih Abdullahi Abdel Salam and Ja’far Abd al-Salam, this belief is not consistent with the actual fitrah of Islam. This is because Islam is fundamentally a religion of peace. Verses from the al-Qur’an that are presumed to be religious affirmations (dalil) and used to support the view that Islam has summoned its subjects to attack the non-Muslims are verses that are juz’i in nature. These verses only explain the aim and method of attack or war that should be used under unavoidable
circumstances. This indicates that war is the last option. Hence, if there are other avenues to preach without going to war, then that is the best avenue and it should be pursued. This suggestion is better understood through the *nas* mentioned in *Mughni al-Muhtaj*;

The obligation or duty to perform the *jihad* is an obligation or duty as an intermediary (*wasilah*) and not as the ultimate purpose (*maqasid*) because war is actually meant to deliver guidance (*hidayah*). Whereas, confronting the *kuffar* is not the intended “purpose” if guidance (*hidayah*) can be delivered by discussions and debate rather than *jihad* (war). Hence, a discourse is better than *jihad* (war) (al-Sharbini, 1974)

Similarly, when these verses were examined from the *asbab al-nuzul* aspect, it was found that they were *makkiyah* in nature. Situations of pressure and oppression faced by the Muslim community at that time shows why war was permitted, which was actually a means to defend oneself and the religion.

A lack of understanding of verses of the al-Qur’an related to war will eventually devalue the nobility of Islam, which indirectly would portray Islam as a religion that encourages war. These arguments have been used by the Orientalist to cast aspersions about Islam through accusations, such as Islam supports violence, Islam is fanatical etc. It is evident that this group has continued to cast aspersions about Islam without realising it (Elfatih A., 2003).

**CONCLUSION**

The civilization discourse concept, according to Islamic and Western perspectives, has similarities, as in the human instinct and humanistic values aspects, whereby all races and religions desire prosperity, peace and stability. Hence, these positive values from an Islamic perspective were retrieved from divine revelation (*wahyu Ilahi*), whereas the Western perspective is based on ethical values and philosophical thinking. The best approach when interacting with the Western civilization is to possess a moderate attitude (*wasatiyyah*), which is to accept what is positive and reject what is negative.

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