The role of religion in civilization: a study based on Islamic teachings

Mohammad Adibimehr \textsuperscript{a}, Hamed Purrostami \textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Assistant Professor, University of Tehran, IRAN
\textsuperscript{b} Assistant Professor, University of Tehran, IRAN

Abstract

The third millennium has a cultural dialogue whose interconnectedness with religiosity and religion is evident for the experts. The form and orientation of a civilization changes according to the kind of religiosity (i.e. divine Unitarianism or liberalistic Humanism). This article undertakes an examination of the dimensions and effects of the Last Religion on civilization. Based on the Quranic verses and Islamic traditions, two dimensions are conceivable for the Islamic Civilization; a) the material and hardware dimension, as well as b) the spiritual and software dimension which is based on the development and emergence of the products of the Empirical sciences and Humanities. Moreover, the roles of religion in civilization include a) motivational role, b) productive role, c) systematizing role, and d) consolidation role which are all described in the present article.

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1. Introduction

Civilization is the ever-increasing dialogue of the third millennium. Different scholars have discussed different dimension of this issue, and have presented abundant ideas regarding its indices, functions, and factors. The question of civilizations emergence and contact with each other (either contradictory or interactive) relies on the nature of their inherent essence, as the external permutation of civilizations through the local and global realms depends on this inherent essence. In the eyes of many experts, this essence is the same religious teachings that have a paramount role in civilizations’ negative or positive orientations. This stance states the fundamental position of religion in civilization (see Namazi, 1964, p. 198-206). It is not concealed for the experts that a certain kind of interconnectedness and interrelationship exists between religiosity and civilization, which has effects on the individuals’ civility and that of the society. Religion can be God-oriented or whim-oriented, and it might be based on the divine Unitarianism or liberal Humanism. The issue under investigation in the present article regards the roles of the Last Religion in civilization. That is, according to the Quranic and Islamic teachings, what are the principles and indices of a pure civilization and how can such a civilization play a role in the civilization-making process in the modern era? This question brings about some important issues, including the point that a considerable part of the cultural invasion and

\textsuperscript{*} Corresponding Author name.
soft war of the enemies is focused on inculcating the deficiency of religion in civilization-making, and their media empires tend to depict that religiosity is incongruent with civilization.

Concept formation

Undoubtedly, without having clear definitions of the terms civilization and religion and knowing their scope, it is not possible to discuss the relationship between religion and civilization and the former’s different roles in the latter. Therefore, it seems necessary to clarify on these two terms.

Civilization

2. **Literally**, the word Tamadun (Arabic equivalent of civilization) means urbanism and is taken from the root word Madinah (Arabic equivalent for city) and Madaniyyat (Arabic equivalent for urbanism). It is defined as assuming or internalizing the urban behaviors. For example, Dehkhoda has defined Tamadun as “assuming urban individuals’ behaviors and transformation from violence and ignorance to delicacy, familiarity, and knowledge”. (Dehkhoda, under the Madan entry).

Verily, some previous dictionary writers have also taken civilization to mean urbanism and civilized to mean urban, however, civilization is an abstract noun which has not been common in speech till five centuries ago and was even rarely seen in written language. The European dictionary writers gradually mentioned two meanings for “civilized”, a) an urban person, and b) a cultivated individual who believes in the principles of litterae humaniores, humanity, and good manners (Namazi, 1964, p. 198-206).

Therefore, civilization is the same as the all-around and multifaceted development. All-around development can be defined as the balanced development of a society in its insights, manners, and methods.

Religion

There is no unitary procedure in defining religion, too. For example, Kant has considered religion as only necessary duties and writes in his “religion in the borders of cognition”, “religion is understanding our necessary and compulsory duties – with regard to the point that they are based on divine orders”. From the viewpoint of Freud, religion is a kind of mental defense against natural horrific phenomena such as flood, earthquake, etc. (Hick, 1997, p. 17). Conversely, Muslim thinkers have defined religion as having belief in the Creator of the universe and in a set of rules that have been sent by Him to human. Allameh Tabatabaee writes in Al-Mizan, “religion is a route whose traverse takes human to his true and real salvation” (Tabatabaee, 1984, Vol. 7, p. 269). In this definition, religion has been defined as a route and map whose traverse will take the individual and the society to the true perfection.

All in all, we can provide two basic definitions of religion which bring about different relationships with civilization:

1) Religion is the collection of knowledge derived from the Qur'an and traditions. It seems that this definition pays more attention to the resources of religion rather than religion itself, that is, the two resources of Qur'an and traditions are considered as equivalent to the definition of religion.

2) Religion is a comprehensive plan for the terrestrial happiness and the other-worldly bliss in the light of intellect and tradition. In this definition, religion is defined as a comprehensive system and plan that is capable of providing both individual and society bliss by using its resources, that is, Qur'an, traditions, and intellect. In this definition, the scope of religion is wider and consequently, its influence range is more extensive in different realms of life. Hence, the religious individual is a person who has a clear and systematic plan, and enjoys a certain style and method of living. The manner and mechanisms by which these two definitions of religion affect civilization are discussed in the following section on the relationship between religion and civilization and the former’s role in the latter.

3. **Roles**

Defining religion and specification of its dimensions has paved the way for expression of the different roles of religion in civilization. Religious teachings have emphasized the all-around development and civilization in different ways and forms. For example, Imam Ali (peace be upon him), in the introduction of his letter to Makik Ashtar Kakha’I, has
expressed his intention of sending him to Egypt as following: educating and purifying the people, development of the cities, and creating economic prosperity. As it is clear, Imam Ali (PBUH) considers the logic behind government as creation of civilization in material and spiritual dimensions. The important point here is that Imam Ali, despite the numerous problems and internal and external wars, considers civilization as his strategic priority (Nahj Al-Balagheh, letter 53). The roles of religion in civilization can be generally grouped into four forms of a) motivational role, b) productive role, c) systematizing role, and d) consolidation role. In the following lines, brief discussions about each of these roles are presented.

Motivational role

The best motivation and stimulus for progression toward civilization are religion and religious teachings. In Unitarian and religious viewpoint, knowledge – which is the cornerstone and principle of all-around development – is basically considered as a holy issue, and God has urged humans to learn it and has enumerated scholars as his best and most favorite Servants. From the viewpoint of the Honorable Prophet of Islam, knowledge is not limited by age, gender, time, or place (Majlesi, 1403 AH, Vol. 1, p. 180). That is, acquisition of knowledge does not depend on age and gender and it should be learnt in any time and place. Therefore, Islam emphasizes emigration as a way of acquiring knowledge and experience. The Holy Prophet (PBUH) addresses his follower – not in the form of a single statement, but rather, in a compositional manner – and orders them, “seek the knowledge even if it is in China” (Majlesi, Vol. 1, p. 177). It might be the case that His Holiness has considered both the spatial and civilization distance of China, as China enjoyed a developed civilization then. In Motahhari the Martyr’s words, what a society needs is considered by Islam as a collective duty. As an example, a society needs physicians, therefore, it is compulsory to have enough physicians, and as this necessitates acquisition of the medicine knowledge, studying in medicine major is considered a collective duty. This is true for other sciences and industries. So, the foregoing tradition considers all sciences, including Empirical sciences (see Motahhari, 1986, p. 16-18).

The pinnacle of religious incentives about moving toward religious-oriented knowledge and development is in the viewpoints of Imams (peace be upon them) who state that one’s value and worth depends on his/her knowledge and scientific gains, and no factor other than knowledge can take humans to perfection and salvation (Saduq, 1414 AH, p. 420). However, it should be noted that here, only a kind of knowledge and civilization is intended that is for the benefit of humans and helps them approach God, otherwise, knowledge might block the development and bring about selfishness and arrogance (Nahj Al-Balagheh, Saying 205). Therefore, it should be noted that moving toward the great Islamic civilization should not cause surpassing religion itself, or on the other hand, to ignore civilization for the sake of religiosity. But rather, based on traditions like “He who ignores this world because of the other world and the other world because of this world is not from us” (Ibn Sho’beh Harani, P. 410), this message is understood that the kind of terrestrial life that religion depicts helps build the other-world life, and the kind of other-world life that religion urges for leads to a terrestrial life full of prosperity, welfare, and civilization.

Productive role

If religion is a comprehensive plan based on the two resources of intellect and traditions, then civilization-making cannot extend beyond religious resources. That is, the way to make a pure civilization is to suitably use the resources of religion. Therefore, the way to produce civilization-making knowledge and propositions is the same as religious knowledge and propositions, because the process of producing knowledge and civilization is based on the validity of intellect and traditions.

In the terminology section above, two designs and definitions of religion were suggested. In the first design, religion is defined as a collection of knowledge stemmed from Quran and traditions. However, in the second design, religion is defined as the comprehensive plan for human’s terrestrial happiness and otherworldly bliss in the light of intellect and traditions. In this relationship, knowledge and civilizations stemming from it are caused by religion and indeed, it is religion that is the source of knowledge and civilization. The reason for this claim is that Humanities or Empirical
sciences either stem from traditional propositions (Quranic revelation or recitative revelation) or come from intellectual propositions (internal prophet). Both of these resources are religious and divine (Koleini, 1405 AH, Vol. 1, p. 15). Besides, no scientific proposition is civilization-making unless it is stemming from these two resources.

If accompanied by intellect, senses and experience are also capable of producing science. Without intellect, eyes only see and ears just hear. Indeed, without the processing of information by the intellectual faculty, these sensory faculties are merely observers rather than actual players and producers of knowledge and civilization. Of course, in Imam Ali’s words, part of meaning and scope of intellect includes experience (Amedi, 1987, p. 444), and in the words of Nahj Al-Balagheh commentators, it is through experience and its upkeep that human is capable of making civilization (Mousavi, 1418 AH, Vol. 4, p. 266).

It should be noted that most of religious propositions consider Islamic theology (Islamic beliefs), ethics (moral actions), and Muslim jurisprudence (Islamic laws). The reason is that the Quran and the Family of the Prophet (PBUT) have considered the priorities in presentation of knowledge, and if they did not provide this knowledge, humans were unable to access it properly and consequently, they could not find the salvation path and the way to God proximity. Moreover, these three sciences – i.e. Islamic beliefs, ethics, and Islamic laws – are concerned with fundamental insights, values, and methods of life, and dominate other sciences. The reason is that from a theological viewpoint, it poses not problem if the scholar of a certain science is not familiar with other sciences, but it is necessary for him/her to be equipped with the aforementioned three sciences. In other words, it is possible for an engineer not to be a physician or a physician not to be an engineer. However, both of them should be equipped with the necessities of Islamic beliefs, ethics, and Islamic laws. It seems appropriate to found the Islamic civilization based on this major thought. Moreover, a main part of the Islamic civilization should be sought in correction and use of the basic thoughts.

Systematizing role

Civilization is the all-around development. This development cannot be achieved unless a systematizing agent puts together the mosaic of elements and subsystems of such a civilization. Religion is capable of undertaking this duty and can help systematize the constituents of the Islamic civilization through coordinate and harmonious arrangement of insights, manners, and methods. The reason is that religion stems from a unitary will, that is, God’s will. Therefore, there is no incongruity and contradiction in the constituting elements of the Islamic civilization. Furthermore, having a correct worldview is the prime condition of developing a civilization, and religion offers this correct worldview to humans. This point has not gone unseen by scholars like Pannenberg. In his eyes, a scientific worldview that does not include theology is deficient. Moreover, he believes that a complete understanding of universe is not possible without referring to God. So, as religiosity is a system that we should be equipped with, civilization is also a system that individuals and human societies should reach for, and religion has a paramount role in this regard. On this basis, some scholars have provided a network definition of civilization and have offered that civilization is a stable network of knowledge, legal, cultural and artistic structures and systems of life in a group scale movement which aims at satisfying the ever-increasing Quranic needs of individuals and societies. A network and systemic viewpoint toward civilization implies that we should use all subsystems of religion in the development of a systemic civilization. As we fill all cells of cross-word puzzle in order to solve it, we should take into account the overall system of religion to build an Islamic civilization. The two bases for the construction of a pure civilization concern the systemic and strategic viewpoint toward religion and the use of the strategic role of religion in the development of a civilization. In other words, if we define religion as the metaphysical and comprehensive plan for human’s salvation and perfection, which refers to the Sublime Allah as its source, to intellect and traditions as its resources, to this world and the other world as its realm, and to insights (Islamic beliefs) and methods (Islamic laws and human and universe rules) as its constituents, then we might define the religious strategy in Islamic civilization as “a system and plan that is designed based on religious bases in order to construct a civilization”. In this plan, the art of using different capacities of religion to develop and construct the Islamic civilization is considered.
In Imam Ali’s (PBUH) words, the minimum use of the capacity of religion helped the Arab community culminate. Therefore, if the maximum capacity of religion is used in developing the civilization, we should expect a much more incredible civilization. Imam Ali (PBUH) says, “You were freed from darkness by us the Family of the Prophet and attained the pinnacle of civilization”. In the first sentence, Imam refers to the conditions of the Days of Ignorance when the darkness of ignorance, corruption, and crime prevailed everywhere. Then, due to the presence of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), people found the Straight Path and speedily moved toward the true goal. In the second sentence, Imam compares growth and development with a camel that has a hump (as the word Tasnamtum comes from sanam which means camel’s hump) and says, “You ascended to the top of that hump”. This refers to the pinnacle of growth and development that Muslims attained in the light of Islam, and is attested in the works of all eastern and western historians that are about Islamic civilization (Makarem, 2007, Vol. 1, p. 415).

Consolidation role

This is a famous saying that upkeep of something is more important and harder than its gaining. Civilization is not an exception. An example can be found in the case of Andalusia, where the residents of it did not try to upkeep and strengthen their –though deficient – civilization and so, lost their land.

Religion not only has the capacity for civilization-making, but also is the best option to upkeep and consolidate civilization, provided that we are not indifferent to the theoretical and practical necessitates of the religion. Religion offers numerous solutions for consolidation of civilization and enhancement of its glory. Here for refer to only two of such solutions.

Attentiveness to justice

Religion has an exceptional emphasis on the principle of justice, and if a government and a nation desire for formation and upkeep of the Islamic civilization in its true form, they should insist on the principle of justice. Principally, expansion of all-around material and spiritual development might not be fulfilled without justice. Ibn Abbas met Imam Ali (PBUH) at Dhiqar and saw that he was stitching his shoe. Then Amir al-mu'minin said to him, "What is the price of this shoe?" He said, "It has no value now." Imam then said, "By Allah, it should have been dearer to me than ruling over you but for the fact that I may establish right and ward off wrong." Then he came out and reminded people in a sermon: Verily, Allah sent Muhammad (PBUH.) when none among the Arabs read a book or claimed prophethood. He guided the people till he took them to their (correct) position and their salvation. So their spears became straight (they attained independence and order in their lives) and their unstable stone was settled (the anxiety they felt due to insecurity was eliminated). (Nahj Al-Balagheh, 33rd sermon).

There is a meaningful relationship between government, justice, and civilization in this speech. That is, Imam Ali (PBUH) mentions the establishment of right and warding off the wrong as the goals of government. This way, he expresses justice establishment in its general meaning. Then, he sends off this message to people that if you want to attain a high position, widespread peace, and independence and order in you society as well, you should help establish justice in the society and help the Islamic government establish justice and ward off wrong. Therefore, the whole process of civilization making and upkeep should be accompanied with justice, otherwise, goals will not be met and fulfillment of civilization will be nothing more than a dream. It should be noted that based on a Quranic law (i.e. and we destroyed those villages due to their injustice and oppression), prevalence of oppression and injustice might lead to the destruction of civilians and their civilization. That is, lack of the spiritual and software dimension of civilization (the most important of which is justice) might lead to the destruction of its material and hardware dimension (such as constructions and buildings). An example is the Aa’d people, who had the Eram Zat Al-Emad (Earthly Paradise with Pillars) which was ruined due to their oppression and injustice.

It is based on this foundation that philosophers like Allameh Jafari believe that it is not possible to consider and comment on any genuine development and civilization in human history without consideration of justice, because justice is the underlying factor of human life constituents. If we assume that a society is genuine in all its dimensions
— e.g. outstanding elites and thinkers, exploitable culture, huge material wealth, great topographical position — but lacks justice, the foregoing variables will be demise like a bunch of valuable seeds which remain under the soil and get rotten or are exposed to wind or stone falls and are destroyed. The presence of such variables without justice might even bring about more damages and misfortunes (Jafari, Vo. 3, p. 192-193).

Perfect eschatological practicality

Consolidation of every civilization needs hard work and perfect endeavor. That is, whatever a human understands, he/she should use it really, practically, and objectively. In religious teachings, lack of practicality is mentioned as the downfall of knowledge (Vaseti, 1997, p. 181) and unpractical scholars are reproved. On the other hand, the meanest kind of knowledge is one which resides only on the tongue and is not acted upon. Contrarily, the best kind of knowledge is one which is manifested throughout the body and is used practically.

Moreover, consolidation of civilization needs perfect activities and practicality, and not a void activity. That is to say, perfectness is among the variables that stabilize and consolidate a civilization. We should not reduce the quality of our activities and leave them imperfect with the piety excuse. Islamic teachings tell us that “work for your worldly life as if you will live for ever in this world, and work for your other world as if you will die today” (Khazaz Qomi Razi, 1401 AH, p. 227). That is, do your worldly duties so perfect and robust as if you are going to live in this world, and at the same time, work for your other world life as if you will pass away tomorrow (lest you immerse yourself in the worldly activities and forget the other world). This means that as one’s activities are perfect, they should be eschatological. The foregoing tradition has found a beautiful interpretation in the Supreme Leader’s words and has been interwoven with development and civilization issues. In his viewpoint, indulging oneself simultaneously for this and the other world activities is the gist of this tradition, and regards that development and civilization in the logic of the Islamic Republic of Iran depends on paying especial attention to it. In general, religion emphasizes two factors in consolidating and continuation of a civilization; first, paying especial attention to promotion of justice dialogue and its fulfillment in the society, and second, paying especial attention to perfect and eschatological practice as well as avoidance of laziness and mere speaking.

4. Conclusion

1. The question of civilizations emergence and contact with each other (either contradictory or interactive) relies on the nature of their inherent essence. Research projects show that his essence is nothing but religion and culture.
2. Although the words Tamadun and Hazareh are not mentioned in Quran, but an analysis of the word Madineh and its functions shows that the indicator of civilization is a systematic social life which involves a robust and established residence.
3. When defining civilization, we should not confine it to a certain domain. In other words, if a domain is named, it is for presentation of an instance rather than specification of a certain instance and concept. Therefore, civilization is the same as the all-around and multifaceted development, that is, the balanced development of a society in its insights, manners, and methods.
4. Religion is defined as the comprehensive plan for human’s terrestrial happiness and otherworldly bliss in the light of intellect and traditions. In this relationship, knowledge and civilizations stemming from it are caused by religion and indeed, it is religion that is the source of knowledge and civilization.
5. The roles of religion in civilization can be generally grouped into four forms of a) motivational role, b) productive role, c) systematizing role, and d) consolidation role.

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