Forum

Social Cohesion and the Five Pillars of Islam: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

A great deal of animosity exists between the western world (and its perceptions of Islam) and the Muslim world (and its perceptions of the West). In an attempt to break down stereotypical perceptions among non-Muslim university students, instruction in a class on "Understanding Islam" includes numerous aspects of the logical wisdom of Islam. One such illustration concerns the role of the Five Pillars in supporting and maintaining social cohesion among monotheists. A model of social cohesion and the Five Pillars is presented for discussion and reflection.

Introduction

Is Islam a threat to the West?[1] Many in the West believe so.[2] At the same time, many in the Muslim world distrust the West.[3] With Islam being the fastest growing religion in the world, dialogue can hardly be avoided even in the United States, which has a Muslim population that perhaps already exceeds 7 million.[4] Teaching about Islam at a secular western state university under such conditions is a serious challenge, especially when the instructor is a western non-Muslim but desires to present a fair and balanced discussion.

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New paradigms are being proposed for research concerning history and/or religion. For example, many people believe that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was either a reflection of gross stupidity on the part of American military officials or of malevolence on the part of the Roosevelt administration (which may have ignored warnings and allowed the attack to occur as a politically safe entry point into a war with Germany). However, another viewpoint has been proposed: the American Navy actually implemented a rather brilliant plan to trap the advancing Japanese fleet at Wake Island, Midway Island, or at Pearl Harbor, with the goal of both inflicting a crippling defeat on the Japanese and also allowing for a political entry into World War II.[5]

In a similar way, one may try to quantify the differences between Islam and other faiths as a way of moving one's understanding from a subjective condition to more of a factual situation. For example, it is rather pointless to debate the nature of Jesus because Muslims and Christians usually feel obliged to defend their own theological doctrines. However, the issue of paradox retains more flexibility because it is not, *per se*, part of the doctrine of either religion. An analysis of paradox in 69 shared doctrines was recently published in which upwards of 90 percent of the theological differences between Islam and Christianity could be traced to differences in the acceptance of paradoxical themes.[6] A tendency to reject paradox makes good sense, given A'ishah's statement: "Whenever Allah's Messenger was given the opportunity to choose between two things, he would always choose the easier and the more convenient thing."[7]

Likewise, instead of looking for points of weakness in one religion or the other, might it not be wiser and more advantageous to look for points of strength, that is, logical ways in which a religion's doctrines make sense psychologically or sociologically? From that frame of reference, the Five Pillars can be explained in terms of how these doctrines make logical sociological sense in terms of promoting social cohesion, as summarized in table 1. Social cohesion is defined as a sense of belonging, togetherness, social unity, and perceived bondedness with others of the same social group or society.

The Testimony of Faith

The Muslim testimony of faith is short and to the point, presenting beliefs that are clear and easy to comprehend. Contrast the lengthy and complex creeds of the Christian community that changed over the centuries and involve multiple versions (e.g., the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed). In

Table 1: Sociological Distinctions between the Five Pillars of Islam and Related Judeo-Christian Practices with Respect to the Promotion of Social Cohesion.

PILLARS	ADVANTAGES	REMARKS
Testimony of Faith: There is no deity but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet.	Testimony is simple, uncomplicated, and non-paradoxical, and thus supports unity and social cohesion among believers.	Christian creeds are much longer, more complicated, and necessitate acceptance of paradoxical beliefs, all of which fosters confusion and reduced social cohesion, as reflected in numerous denominations and conflicts.
Prayer: Five times a day for a few minutes	Prayers are in public, short, and frequent, thus reminding everyone of the importance of God and religion.	Formal Judeo-Christian prayers were 2-3 times a day (Psalms 55:7), usually performed inside a distant religious building, invisible to the public, as well as much longer. Thus, there was a greater burden in terms of travel/worship costs and time.
Zakat: Supporting the needy	Those who have acquired a specific amount of wealth are obliged to give a moderate tithe of (2.5%) to the truly needy.	An excessive tithe (10%) is desired but seldom given. When given, it is more likely to be used for religious "overhead" than for the needy. When given to the needy, it is often done as "charity" in a demeaning manner.
Ramadan: Fasting from sunrise to sunset	Fasting is expected from all who meet the relevant conditions, but only for a certain amount of time and only for one month.	Fasting is practiced by relatively few, but for longer periods of time and in ways that are more likely to endanger the person's health.
Hajj: Pilgrimage to Makkah	Only those who can afford it and are healthy are expected to travel. At the site, all wear simple clothes to "strip away distinctions of class and culture."[8]	Only those who are wealthy can travel to such holy sites as Jerusalem or Rome. However, they attain special social status over others who cannot, thereby fostering class envy and disunity.

a classroom, an instructor may ask students which type of creed they think will best promote social unity and cohesion: a simple, clear, easy-to-understand creed or a difficult, perhaps ambiguous, and even paradoxical creed? Most students immediately recognize the superiority of Islam's testimony of faith in terms of promoting social cohesion among believers. The Christian creeds were derived from controversy and may even help to maintain the very controversies from which they were derived.

Prayer

Muslims pray five times a day, using short prayers performed in public at their work sites (if they cannot conveniently attend a nearby mosque). Contrast the less frequent but longer prayers in the Judeo-Christian traditions. As a child, the author was aware of morning and evening prayer in the Episcopal/Anglican church, services that required travel to the church, took place inside a building, and took up to an hour, depending on the length of the homily or sermon. The prayer's length in the latter tradition and the requirement to travel some distance to perform it both work against the chances of its being performed by the average person. If the average person is unlikely to perform it, how can the ritual support social cohesion to any significant degree?

Furthermore, even if the ritual was performed regularly by many persons, their observances would normally occur inside a building and be invisible, for the most part, to the public. If non-believers should walk by a church, those inside and those outside the church would probably be invisible to each other. In contrast, non-believers in an Islamic culture stand out like sore thumbs when they refuse to pray when those around them are doing so. In other words, such people have to accept public embarrassment up to five times a day in order to continue their rejection of monotheism.

In addition, believers are not restricted to hoping that others honor God in private; rather, they share in the joy of seeing others actually demonstrate that honor for all to see in a regular, frequent, daily display of religious unity. Believers even pray in the same direction, as well as in the same way, with both formats promoting a unity of performance and, most likely, attitudes. So, one may ask students, which approach lends itself to the greater development of social cohesion? The correct answer is soon becoming obvious.

Zakat

Muslims are expected to support the needy from their wealth at a rate of 2.5 percent after they attain the minimal amount of wealth (*nisab*) that obligates them to do so. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian tradition expects a tithe of 10 percent; however, that requirement is seldom met, if contemporary research is any guide.[9] Even when given, the tithe is often used for religious overhead rather than meeting the needs of the poor. And even when used for the poor, it is often given under conditions that embarrass or demean the poor, making it difficult for them to accept such charity. The author knows of one Christian church that, for a brief period, used 50 percent of its budget for the poor, enlisting students to help build homes for them, among other things. However, some of the other churches in the same community had leaders who resented this example because it made them look selfish: They were using most of their funds for salaries or building construction/maintenance (the former church had a very low budget and a low maintenance type of worship center in order to allow for its own version of zakat). One pastor openly rejoiced when the former church failed to continue its earlier priorities.[10]

At any rate, zakat reduces the social class differential between the rich and the poor, being even larger in years when the economy is abundant. However, since it is based on wealth rather than income, the wealthy must contribute even when the economy is not generating much income. Christian giving has always been based on income, leading to reductions in giving when the economy is not generating as much in personal income. Thus, when the economy is poor, it is perhaps more likely that class differentials will increase rather than decline. In sum, it appears that the Muslim version of support for the poor has a greater potential for reducing class differentials and class envy, a situation that probably tends to increase social cohesion.

Fasting

Fasting is occasionally discussed in Christian circles, but in the author's experience it is seldom observed in practice. Of course, there is a precedent to keep fasting secret when it is practiced, but the author suspects that it is rare nonetheless. The rarity may not be surprising, because it is generally assumed that one must fast for at least several days, if at all, and give up all nourishment except water or fruit juice. Such fasting has the potential to be unhealthy, particularly for individuals with certain serious to borderline

medical conditions. In any event, a virtually nonexistent practice can do little to increase social cohesion.

In contrast, in Islam, fasting is expected of all healthy individuals at least once a year during the month of Ramadan. However, this fasting is only observed from sunrise to sunset, meaning that it can be performed without endangering the health of most individuals. By engaging nearly all members in a practice that requires self-sacrifice, Islamic society provides another opportunity for increased social cohesion, in the same way that basic military training builds cohesion among new military recruits.

Pilgrimage

Jews have a desire, though not an obligation, to visit Jerusalem. Christians have some similar to lower expectations regarding visits to holy sites in Jerusalem, Rome, or elsewhere. However, at least for American Christians, such visits are very costly and rarely undertaken. Only a small elite can afford them, thereby creating a differential between those who can afford to go and those who cannot, even though the latter might be known by God to be just as deserving or even more deserving. Hence, pilgrimage among Christians connotes class differentials and may tend to decrease social cohesion.

However, hajj is expected of all Muslims who can afford it and who are healthy enough to undertake it. In addition, many are helped to participate by wealthier Muslims. The experience of upwards of 2 million fellow Muslims circling the Ka`bah in unison cannot but help build social cohesion, not to mention the continuing support provided by shared memories and photos of the ceremonies that are commonly placed in mosques and Islamic texts. While hajj is focused on one general location at one time of the year, pilgrimage sites for Christians are separated by great distances as well as times in the year (e.g., Christmas at Bethlehem vs. Easter at Jerusalem). Thus, hajj appears better organized or situated to increase social cohesion than the somewhat similar types of experiences shared among Christians and possibly even among Jews. As Hamzah observes:

> It is a wholesome demonstration of the universality of Islam. It helps bring together myriad races from the four corners of the earth to worship, in all humility, one single God in one special place, during one special season. Distances are annihilated; divergences of race and color are set aside in this fraternity of faith that unites all Muslims in one great brotherhood. Muslims feel they are all on equal footing.[11]

Other Sources of Social Cohesion

The Qur'an. The Qur'an is a source of cohesion for Muslims. One book, one author (God), one short period of revelation, one language, one primary style (poetry), directly from one God, with no existing variant editions – all of these characteristics provide a greater source of cohesion and unity than the Bible, which is a collection of many works from many authors (some unknown, e.g., the Epistle to the Hebrews[12]), many languages, many periods of time, in many styles, and hundreds of variations, some of which were clearly scribal additions (I John 5:7 being the most famous example).

One God. The oneness of God is another source of cohesion for Muslims. The complications and paradoxes associated with the Trinity (and many other Christian doctrines) are well known and have been shown statistically.[13] The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated over many years within the Christian church and can be illustrated for students (table 2). Today, however, it must be admitted that Christians uniformly reject any notion that the mother of Jesus was intended to be part of the Trinity or that the Fatherhood of God has anything to do with sexual procreation or begetting a "son."[14] While a heresy known as Macedonianism was concerned with the nature of the Holy Spirit, most of the doctrine of the Trinity centers on the nature and person of Jesus.

An easier way to discuss the Trinity is to consider it as a "working model" rather than a perfect formulation. It was crafted over centuries as one way to reject a number of viewpoints that could not be well supported from New Testament scriptures about Jesus. It was perhaps better for rejecting false models than it was for explaining the nature of God. One needs to remind students that between 325 and 362, the Arian view was predominant among bishops in the Christian Church – a view that is among the closest to Islam.[15] Except for the stubborn will (he was punished with exile or banishment five times in his life for his views) with which Athanasius (296-373)[16] (apparently known by some as the "black dwarf" for his Egyptian heritage and short stature) argued against Arianism, the Christian Church might have remained Arian and tended toward a denial of the divine aspects of Jesus.

In the same cell in table 2, we find Sabellianism, in which God was seen as only one but as one who played different roles (not persons) in Jesus and as the Holy Spirit. Both Sabellius, a priest from Libya (taught at Rome, 198-217), and the Libyan priest Arius (d. 336) would have been comfortable with Islam in granting the titles "Word of God" or Jewish "Messiah" to Jesus.

Table 2: Different Accounts of the Nature(s) and Person(s) of Jesus.

PERSONS	One	One	One	One	Two
NATURES One	Human, but a major prophet and messiah for the Jews (Islam, Jewish Ebionites).	Semi-divine, primarily human - Arianism. – or – God has one person, one nature, and three parts (Sabellianism).	Mixed natures: Monophytism Jesus did not suffer on the cross, he only appeared, perhaps, to be human (Docetism).	Divine: Apollinarianism or Monothelitism.	Empty cell. Not at all logical from anyone's perspective to date.
Two			Orthodox Christianity: Jesus has both natures but is not schizophrenic (Diophytism).		Nestorianism.

Concerning Christianity

One could address many other issues influencing social cohesion within Islam as compared to other religions, but I believe that what has been shown already should convince most readers that Islam has some significant advantages over other religions in terms of those aspects that promote social cohesion. The strengths of social cohesion probably reduce attrition associated with conversions to other religious elements.

It also appears that other religions, particularly Christianity, have not made social cohesion a major priority. Jesus did ask his disciples to love one another (John 15:17) and to be one (John 17:21) – commands that, if followed, would certainly foster social cohesion. Numerous verses (Romans 12:5; Galatians 3:8; Ephesians 4:13) address unity, based on believers having the same Spirit of God (Ephesians 2:18, 4:3; Philippians 1:27, 2:1), the same love for one another (II Corinthians 13:11; I Peter 3:8), and the same peace from God (Ephesians 4:3; II Corinthians 13:11). However, dissension was not uncommon (I Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 4:14; Jude 1:4, 19; Revelation 2:2).

As did Jesus (Matthew 7:15), Paul warned his friends of the dangers of men who, like wolves, would enter the fellowship and try to tear it apart in future days (Acts 20:29-30). However, even such a simple command as

Jesus gave that no one call another "rabbi (teacher), master, or father" was ignored, as rigid ecclesiastical hierarchies were soon established (this was an issue the Montanist heresy criticized correctly as early as 157).[17] Rather, believers were to be brothers and sisters to each other (Matthew 23:8; I Timothy 5:1, 2). However, even in one of the earliest letters of the church (James 2:1-16), the author had to oppose openly certain preferential treatment of the rich that was already being observed during worship services. Even today, someone who attends some "Christian" churches in a very expensive suit of clothes is more likely to receive a heartier welcome than someone who walks in wearing jeans and an inexpensive shirt.[18]

However, it appears that in addition to highlighting the spiritual futility of being rich (Matthew 19:23; Mark 10:23; Luke 6:24; Luke 12:21; Luke 18:23), Jesus taught that prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor were not to be done for the sake of appearance or public reputation (Matthew 6:1-8, 16; 23:14) and that worship was to be done more "in spirit" than by geographical location (John 4:20-24). Later teachings appeared to emphasize that prayer should be continuous (I Thessalonians 5:17; Luke 18:1; Acts 12:5) rather than tied to chronological times. These teachings, I believe, hindered the adoption of prayer times, set tithes, fasting, or pilgrimages to specific "more holy" sites, even if they might have fostered greater social cohesion. Perhaps it was anticipated that persecution would be sufficient for fostering social cohesion among the survivors (Matthew 5:11-12, 44; John 15:20; I Corinthians 4:12, II Corinthians 4:9: I Thessalonians 2:15; Romans 12:14), even if they were never to be more than a small minority within most human societies (Matthew 7:13-14).[19]

Conclusion

It is likely that the comparative lack of social cohesion within the Roman world was one of many factors associated with the relative ease with which Islam's great generals were able to establish Muslim dominance over the vast majority of the known world in little more than 100 years (between 622 and 732).[20] Today, many centuries later, it would appear that, from a social science perspective, Islam continues to retain comparative advantages in terms of social cohesion as a result of its application of the Five Pillars. That by itself, not counting countless other logical reasons, should be sufficient to instill a deep respect for Islam among western university students. Perhaps even some would convert to Islam for such logical reasons.

Endnotes

1. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* 2d ed. (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1995).
2. Robert Spencer, ed., *The Myth of Islamic Tolerance: How Islamic Law Treats Non-Muslims* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).
3. Craig Charney and Nicole Yakatan, *A New Beginning: Strategies for a Fruitful Dialogue with the Muslim World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005).
4. I. A. Ibrahim, *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam* (Houston: Darussalaam Press, 1997); Manijeh Daneshpour, "Muslim Families and Family Therapy," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 24, no. 3: (July 1998): 355-68; Bahira Sherif-Trasik, "Muslim Families in the United States," in *Handbook of Contemporary Families,* eds. Marilyn Coleman and Lawrence H. Ganong (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004): 394-408; Paul Findley, *Silent No More: Confronting America's False Images of Islam* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 2001).
5. Walter R. Schumm, Farrell J. Webb, Carlos S. Castelo, Eric J. Jensen, Rose M. Ditto, Elaine Spencer-Carver, and Beverly Brown, "Enhancing Learning in Statistics Classes through the Use of Concrete Historical Examples," *Teaching Sociology* 30, no. 3 (2002): 361-75.
6. Walter R. Schumm, A. Diane Ferguson, Malika S. Hashmat, and Telisa L. New, "Differences in Paradox between Islam and Christianity: A Statistical Comparison," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 16, no. 2 (2005): 167-85.
7. Al-Arabi Abu Hamzah, *A Glimpse at the Beauty of Islam* (Riyadh: Darussalaam Press, 1999), 20.
8. Ibrahim, *Guide to Understanding Islam*, 68.
9. Walter R. Schumm, Ruth C. Hatch, John Hevelone, and Kimberly R. Schumm, "Attrition and Retention among Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Congregations in Three Metropolitan Regions: A Mail Survey of 1,149 Active and Inactive Members," in *A Case Study of Mainstream Protestantism: The Disciples' Relation to American Culture 1880-1989*, ed. D. N. Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991): 521-53.
10. The pastor's wife had been instrumental in seeking out poor people who might be helped. The first author and others helped build a new addition and latrine facilities for a Black woman and her daughter who had been living in a two-room house without water, electricity, or bathroom facilities. The church met in a steel frame building with folding chairs to conserve funds. After the pastor changed, the church decided to build a more expensive structure. A Lutheran pastor in the same community then made the comment to the first author that the church was no longer giving 50 percent to the poor, given their new construction program. Though now 55 years old, the first author, sadly, has never again encountered an entire Christian church with the same zeal for the poor.

11. Hamzah, *Beauty of Islam*, 40.
12. Walter R. Schumm, "A Discriminant Analysis of Whissell's New Testament Data: On the Statistical Trail of the Author of Hebrews," *Psychological Reports* 98, No. 1 (2006): 274-76.
13. Schumm, et al., *Differences in Paradox*.
14. R. C. Sproul and Abdul Saleeb, *The Dark Side of Islam* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003). Despite its discouraging title, this short book does attempt to explain and compare Islamic and Christian doctrines.
15. Bonnell Spencer, *Ye Are the Body: A People's History of the Church*, rev. ed. (West Park, NY: Holy Cross Publications, 1965).
16. Ibid., 86. Athanasius was banished or exiled for his beliefs in 336-37, 340-46, 356-62, 362-63, and 365-66.
17. Ibid., 68.
18. To this day, the first author refuses to wear expensive clothes to church services to protest the discrimination he has witnessed, in some churches, in favor of the rich or well dressed.
19. It almost seems as if local "Christian" congregations were designed to self-destruct if a certain critical mass of their members failed to have or retain authentic spirituality (see Jude 17-25, especially verse 19).
20. Peter Boxhall, "Arab Generalships: Part 1: Muhammad the Prophet," *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 122, no. 4 (1992): 434-40; Peter Boxhall, "Arab Generalships: Part 2: Khalid ibn Walid," *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 123, no. 1 (1993): 70-77; Peter Boxhall, "Arab Generalships: Part 3: War in the Western Desert," *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 123, no. 2 (1993): 157-65.