ISLAM AND CIVIL SOCIETY
A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE TURKISH CASE

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In the political science and thought literature, civil society and state are defined as distinct spheres, which nonetheless complement each other. Under conditions in which civil society has developed sufficiently in a given society, the state is likely to have limited activities, act in a non-partisan manner and abide by law. This is indeed an instrumental state. Conversely, in societies where civil society is weak and deficient, all sorts of political, economic and ideological power remains in the hand of the state, which exerts absolute monopoly over all walks of social life. In such a milieu, the state is not only seen to be acting as a political organisation but is seen as a metaphysical and abstract entity which is beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals. The development of civil society is closely linked to the size and activities of the state. A ripening civil society replaces the state in the performance of certain functions and compels the state to turn into an impartial institution in relation to different segments of society. Wherever civil society is advanced far enough, the state, rather than commanding the society to adopt a particular ideology or way of life, is transformed into an instrumental organisation, which seeks to serve the individuals and protect their basic rights.

There are three prerequisites for the development of civil society: differentiation, forming organisations, creation of an autonomous sphere. All sorts of social differentiation should be encouraged if civil society is to strengthen. Accordingly, the society ought to be differentiated along sociological categories such as ethnic, cultural, religious, ideological, occupational and other linkages. The second necessary requirement for the strengthening of civil society is the accordance of freedom for all those representing different formations, who are willing to engage in politics. Social organisations in this sense act as an intermediary for the enjoyment of individual rights. Finally, the strengthening of civil society requires that the social groups,

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identities and categories enjoy an 'autonomous' status vis-à-vis the state. In other words, social groups and categories should have the right to determine their 'self' and translate this into practice without the intervention of the state. In short, today, the term 'civil society' implies the existence of a democratic society and state characterised by the rule of law in which the primary goals are securing maximum freedoms enjoyed by individuals, widespread participation in social and political life, and individual self-determination.

In the sense defined above, civil society obtained the chance of development only after the industrial revolution in the West. The notion of 'world state' set up by the Catholic Church had resulted in the restriction of individual rights and freedoms and had opened all the realms of social life into the hegemony of the state. The process of social differentiation, which occurred as a by-product of industrial revolution inevitably resulted in the process of political differentiation; together they set the course on the path of democracy. Therefore, the concepts of democracy and civil society have simultaneously evolved in the West. The lack of democracy always meant the absence of civil society. The rigid, centralising, totalitarian and tyrannical states, built on socialist principles in Eastern Europe in this century, were also characterised by the conspicuous absence of civil societies.

ISLAM AND CIVIL SOCIETY: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

When regard is made to the nature of the link between Islam and civil society, we may easily note that Islam is essentially a 'civil' religion. Unlike Christianity, which fell into the hands of the Catholic Church, Islam did not encourage the establishment of rigid, centralising, authoritarian or totalitarian states. The primary purpose of Islam is to show the human person what is right and what is wrong and to guide him/her into the true path. The task of guidance is not accorded to a rigid and centralising state. It is the revelation, which constitutes the primary reference for anyone to accept Islam and find the true path. The revelation, according to Islam, can be recognised through reason and conscience. Islam has taught the humankind the right and the wrong and left the choice to the free will of the individual. In a way, every human being possesses the freedom to decide for himself/herself.

Acting upon this point, Islam enjoins Muslims to rule the society on the principles of justice, consultation and peace. The Quran does not anticipate the building of totalitarian political structures and the imposition of a single way of life. On the contrary, the non-Muslims are accepted as a different category. There are certain clues within the Quran itself to indicate that both the *ehl-i kitap* (people of the book, i.e. Christians and Jews) and idol-worshippers should peacefully live side by side with Muslims. The verse 'to them is their religion and to you is yours' provides an important instance of this understanding. But we should not lose sight of the cardinal precondition for peaceful cohabitation, which is avoidance of betrayal to Muslims. The society, which came into existence in Medina at the time of the Prophet Muhammad was founded on 'Medina Contract', which was unprecedented in its recognition of the principle of 'social differentiation'. Hence the ideal model of society envisioned by Islam is not an ideological society, which is both monolithic and monotonous.

Likewise, the form of governance, which Islam encourages is neither authoritarian nor totalitarian in character. It is known that there were periods in Muslim history when authoritarian or totalitarian methods were pursued by rulers. However, this practice stems neither from the principles of the Quran nor from the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. The two basic principles found in the Quran that relate to governance are 'consultation' and 'justice'. These principles are surely in conformity with the preferred type of society perceived from the perspective of civil society. We note that these criteria were also observed in the practices, as the guiding principles at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Although he was the recipient of revelation, the Prophet always made his societal decisions on consultation and acted on the dominant views of his companions in preference to his own, although his views would later prove correct. That is what happened in the war at Uhud when the Prophet chose to apply the military tactic, which his companions had suggested although he had had a different plan.

In short, Islam is disposed to 'social differentiation' as well as to 'social participation'. In other words, Islam contains within its own epistemology the idea of opposition by individuals against the views imposed by the state who may even make the state to accept them; such examples were not infrequent in the early years of Islam. The historical documents reveal that the first caliphs (succeeding the Prophet) were always disposed to social participation and gave due consideration to the grassroots opinion.

Rather than through a centralised authority, Islam anticipates the expansion of religion through religious scholars. The 'use of force' as a means of spreading religion has never been accepted as a legitimate method in Islam. On the contrary, Islam seeks 'persuasion' in the transmission of the message. Accordingly, the main frame of reference for Islam is, unlike the totalitarian states, which address themselves to the 'masses', the individual himself/herself. The emphasis of Islam is not on the mass of peoples, classes or particular social groups, but on

each and every individual. As the human person is the main addressee of the message, Islam seeks persuasion through science (Islamic learning). Not unexpectedly, therefore, the Quran has a higher regard for scholars than rulers.

The emphasis of Islam on the 'human person' has close affinity with the 'individual' in democracies. To a significant extent, the principles of democracy, such as the individual, social group, civil existence, private life, free enterprise, political participation, elections, human rights, the rule of law, limited state, agree with those of Islam such as the centrality of the human person, community (*cemaat* pronounced as "jama'at"), intimate sphere of life, free trade conditions, consultation in decision-making, justice, human rights, fairness and law. The principles, which are indispensable for democracy are surely the products of particular social and historical conditions. To try to find the traces within Islam of social practices, which would entirely conform to them, would not be a reasonable approach. Since every society has its own historical background, naturally, every society develops its own basic principles. This implies that we should not try to find within Islam the democratic principles as they are practised in Western societies. Given that democracy is organically linked to the rights and freedoms of individuals, the subject of our inquiry must be limited to an examination of whether Islam is disposed to such principles as they exist in the West. As a matter of fact, basic human rights such as life, freedom and property, which are enforced in democratic societies, are likewise guaranteed under Islamic theology.

What has been argued by now in this paper relates to the thesis that the basic principles of Islam are disposed to the existence of civil society. When regard is made of the social practice of Islam, we can identify different historical phases. Islam started off as a civil movement in the person of the Prophet Muhammad. The civilian character of Islam survived until the establishment of centralised states in different parts of the Muslim geography. We observe that a rich mix of different understandings and approaches, profound religious perspectives, and various interpretative approaches developed during the 'civilian' phase of Islam. It was before the institutionalisation of centralised authorities that we witness the presence of the most vivid and dynamic forms of sectarian differentiation, philosophical revival, Sufi tradition, and various Islamic currents of thought. In other words, Islamic vitality belongs to the period when 'civil' Islam predominated. It is at this time that imaginative interpretation of Islamic law (*ictihad*) was common occurrence, which enabled the translation of Islam into the practical needs of social life. In this epoch of 'civil' Islam, Islam managed to lay down principles, which addressed themselves to the life of individuals and permeated the core values of social life.

Concepts such as reason (*akl*), revelation (*vahy*), inspiration (*ilham*) and sovereignty (*valayet*) which concerned every individual, and others like politics, consultation and justice which concerned only rulers, easily gained different meanings (from the later strict definitions) in this period. This was a time when Farabi's project of a 'virtuous society' based on political participation could be formulated. This same period was also ripe with a multitude of ideas, which suggested that reason was as important, continuous and lively a source as revelation in the construction of social life.

In conclusion, we understand that, both in terms of the wealth of experience and wealth at the level of social values and symbols, Islam took firm roots in society during its 'civil' phase. Islam thus reached the 'civilisational' stage, and its particular modality of life became a centre of attraction for other societies. The extent of richness, which Islam gained during its 'civil' episode enabled its expansion into other societies and cultures.

The civil stage of Islam eventually lost its ascendancy to the 'political' phase of Islam, which resulted in rigid and centralising institutionalisation. With the rise of the *political* cosmos, we observe the incorporation of the religious sphere into the domain of centralised states, like other spheres of social life. The realm of religious life and institutions, not unlike other spheres, were completely dominated by centralised states. As a result, the society's ability to take initiative faded while centralisation took the upper hand. A wide rift began to open between centre and periphery as a result of centralisation, and this laid the foundations of a transcendental state, which had little ties with society. The Ottoman Turkish experience is a lively example of the kind of transformation in the history of Islam mentioned above and thus merits some analysis here.

ISLAM AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE TURKISH CASE

When looked at from the perspective of civil society, we witness three distinct stages which characterise the Ottoman history. During the first of these stages which lasted until the 16th century, we observe sound examples of civil society. A distinctly Ottoman model manifested itself at this time. The state was the type of organisation governed by those who sought to keep the idea of Jihad (*holy war*) alive. These organisations, rather than establishing monopoly over social life, sought to expand the Ottoman dominions by conquering new territories. The principal values and dynamics of social life were determined by the elements of civil society. The theological schools (*medrese*) and religious orders (*tarikat*) appeared as significant religious

institutions. The Islamic foundations, which sponsored theological schools mostly flourished independently of the state in this first stage. It was the theological schools, which organised social education free of state involvement, and the main actors in this process were religious scholars (*ulema*). Likewise, religious orders established themselves as autonomous institutions independent of the state. The state did not interfere with education, and was only partially involved in the economic realm. During the same period, the guilds (*lonca*), which were the basic economic units in cities performed their functions entirely free of state involvement and those who administered the guilds were elected by the artisans themselves. Acting as the patron of different religions, the Ottomans granted some kind of autonomy to every religious group under the *millet* system. Every religious group was accorded the freedom to choose its own leader to administer the community affairs.

The period preceding the 16th century witnessed the climax of Ottoman power as well as the golden age of civil society. Behind the peak of Ottoman grandeur lay the existence of a state which directed its energy toward the outside world and a society which took the initiative in organising social relations. This was a time when 'social differentiation', 'tolerance' and 'freedom' were guaranteed. An interesting proof of this 'tolerance' is the freedom of propagation accorded to an atheist sect called *sürrinizm* which even had some adherents from the palace.

From the perspective of civil society, the second stage materialised from the 16th century onwards. This was the stage when the business of the state took precedence over that of the people. During this stage, which lasted until the 19th century, elements of civil society such as theological schools, pious foundations, religious orders, guilds, the *millet* system and farmers gradually came under the domineering influence of the centre and, compelled to pursue their activities in accordance with the priorities of the state, in time lost their autonomy. In this second stage when the centralist bureaucratic state consolidated itself, civil society began retreating and the atmosphere of difference and tolerance began to vanish. A peculiar feature of this period was the excessive increase in the number of edicts issues by the Sultans, which sought to imprint social life with prohibitions.

The third stage from the perspective of civil society began in the 19th century and lasted until the 1920s when Turkey was proclaimed a republic. This stage carried within itself a major paradox as far as civil society was concerned. On the one hand, civil society became slightly more active with the spread of modernity, on the other, the centralist structure, after gaining in strength, began to assert absolute domination over civil society and was eventually in a

position to absorb it. By virtue of these peculiarities of the centralist structure, civil society became more active at the turn of the 20th century, although it was controlled by the state. Hence civil society was significantly enriched by new elements, which were introduced in addition to conventional elements. Such modern elements included political parties, the media, different currents of thought, associations, economic groups, banking sector, trade, legal and administrative reforms all of which played a cardinal role in the development and expansion of civil society during the Ottoman rule.

This brief recapitulation of the Ottoman history may also be regarded as a summary of the evolution of the Islamic world. The Ottoman experience in the 20th century was astonishingly parallel to that which was experienced by other Islamic societies elsewhere. The summary of this experience is this: The reactions evoked by the colonisation of the Islamic world at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century by Western powers, *inter alia*, resulted in the emergence of rigid, authoritarian and centralist states in the Islamic world. The 'political' stage of the Islamic history which roughly began in the 12th century was reinvigorated yet again in this century vie authoritarian nation-states. The greatest single obstacle, which has hindered the growth of civil society in the Islamic world is the single-party politics or authoritarian oligarchic regimes which have remained in the hands of particular families. Such regimes not only disable the invigoration of civil society and, by implication, of democracy, but also constrain the political influence and freedom of activity enjoyed by Muslim masses.

Given that the republican era in Turkey has provided an interesting and important example for the Islamic world in the 20th century. The republican regime, proclaimed in 1923, inherited from the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, a centralist tradition and, on the other, a fair number of civil society institutions. However, Turkey was effectively ruled by a single party regime during the period between 1923 and 1950, which pursued policies of forcible westernisation. Civil society institutions were completely destroyed by the single party rule, which was bent on changing and transforming the entire society along western values. As the regime chose to take socialist values rather than liberal values as a point of reference in its pursuit of westernisation, it was not late before a rigid state structure was built. Neither modern nor traditional elements of civil society stood any chance of survival in 1923-1950. While no political parties other than the ruling Republican Peoples Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*) were permitted, no association, no social movement, or even a member of the press with a different orientation existed in this period. As the state totally permeated the economic

and social realms, the civil society was crippled to an extent unprecedented in the history of the Turks.

The introduction of multiparty politics in 1950 opened the route for a revival of civil society in Turkey. The most extensive resurgence of civil society in Turkey coincides to the period between 1980 and 1993. This was the time when Turgut Özal, as the leading political figure in Turkey, began to inject democratic liberal values into Turkish politics. In spite of all the democratic trappings of the Turkish political system since the 1950, this process was not buttressed by a liberal democratic culture given that the area of economics and politics was under the shadow of the state. From the early 1980s, Özal began to reinforce the democratic process by encouraging the expansion of a liberal and civic culture. As part of this objective, he tried to limit the influence of the bureaucracy, lay the foundations of a free market economy, diminish the role of the state over the economy by means of privatisation, ensure greater acceptance by Turkey of Western democratic values, and devised policies which accorded greater social freedoms.

This process resulted in considerable convergence between Islam and democracy in the person of Islamic groups. While various Islamic groups began, on the one hand, to register their influence in the public sphere through the use of democratic mechanisms, they elaborated formulas to establish accommodation between Islam and democracy on the other. As the indispensable conditions of this peaceful coexistence, the Islamic groups almost pressurised the state into accepting an impartial role for the state, passing new legislation to consolidate the free market economy and engaging more extensively into international trade. Today Islamic groups in Turkey have come to a position where they occupy a distinguished place in the educational, intellectual, political as well as economic fields. It is the civil society institutions established by Islamic groups, which have set the most essential, firmly rooted and vibrant examples of such institutions in the post-1980s. It is likewise these groups, which have asked the state to adopt the rule of law and democracy.

In conclusion, it may be asserted that the Turkish experience is not separate from those experienced in other parts of the Islamic world. The civil society has never flourished under the shadow of centralist, rigid, and authoritarian states anywhere in the world, and this is also the case with Muslim societies. Where such states still run supreme, Islam manifests itself as a source of reaction, since Muslim masses live under oppression, rather than synthesis. Under conditions of peace and freedom, Muslims are likely to search for synthesis and, on this basis, utilise Islam as an essential source of motivation in this world. This means that, under

democratic conditions, Islam may constitute a significant frame of reference in the democratic struggle for civil society and for individual rights and freedoms. In short, for Islam to become a source of tolerance, peace, freedom, justice, differentiation and development, there has to be law-abiding democratic states with limited functions. Undoubtedly, Islam will, in the hands of such states, bring peace, prosperity and happiness to the entire world in general, and to the Islamic world in particular.