

The Cultural-Symbolic Soul: An Islamically Inspired Research Concept for the Behavioral and Social Sciences

Mahmoud Dhaouadi

This study deals with the nature of human cultural symbols such as language, thought, religious beliefs, knowledge, cultural norms and values, and science. The essay consists of two major parts: a) the development of a basic theoretical framework for studying the nature of what we call the cultural-symbolic soul, and b) the application of this new concept to understanding, as well as the formulation of a potential explanation for, the dynamics of cultural-symbolic exchange and confrontation between human collectivities regardless of time and space constraints. This paper therefore seeks to offer a balanced contribution to the evergrowing body of knowledge in the modern social and behavioral sciences. It also represents an attempt to work out a synthesis between theory and application which, if successfully executed, would enhance the scientific credibility of the behavioral and social sciences.

Human Cultural Symbols and the Islamic Outlook

The following analysis of human cultural symbols is inspired greatly by Islamic epistemology. In order to articulate a solid and well-grounded understanding of the place such symbols occupy within an Islamic perspective, a social scientist can find a source no more authentic than the Qur'an, the primary reference book of Islamic civilization that precedes both the hadith and the fiqh literature in importance.

The Qur'an contains many verses which inform the reader in detail about the important roles of certain human cultural symbols. For example, science and knowledge, religious beliefs, and individual thought are highly praised throughout the Qur'an. As regards the major positive value and worth of science and knowledge as cultural symbols, it is self-evident that the first verse revealed

to the Prophet (Qur'an 96:1) stressed the importance of seeking knowledge and science. From an Islamic viewpoint, the pursuit of knowledge and science is the top priority of humanity. From a social-psychological viewpoint, the Prophet had to be told this most important fact in his first contact with God through revelation (modern social psychologists insist that first impressions stick better and last longer in the human memory). Thus, God's command to the Prophet to read was most appropriate.

Since Islam regards knowledge and science as the sources of all other matters, the Qur'an devotes about one-sixth of its verses to knowledge and science proper or related themes. While Islamic epistemology makes allowances for different hierarchies among human cultural symbols, it strongly insists on the central role of human cultural symbols in the formation of a distinct human identity. The enormous gaps and discrepancies between the latter and the identities of other living beings and of artificial intelligence machines can only be grasped through a profound and meticulous understanding of the entire complex set of those symbols which only humans are privileged to possess.

The reading and interpretation of certain Qur'anic verses disclose in full the Islamic epistemological view of human cultural symbols. We restrict ourselves here to the following:

And (remember) when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo! I am about to create a mortal out of a potter's clay of black mud altered. So, when I have made him and breathed into him of My spirit, do ye fall down, prostrating yourselves unto him (Qur'an: 15:28-9).

These verses represent a fundamental Qur'anic statement on human nature: it is dualistic, for the clay and mud symbolize the materialistic (transient, fading) dimension of human nature, while the spirit breathed into the creation symbolizes the spiritual (transcendental, eternal, divine) dimension. In other words, human nature is simultaneously tangible (material) and intangible (spiritual). According to the Qur'an, it is this dual nature which makes humanity capable of serving as a link between the two realms for, while humans are made of flesh and blood like other living creatures, what motivates them is the divine spark. In modern scientific terms, this sparks makes it possible for humanity to use symbols.

A close reading of the Qur'an reveals that the essence of human cultural symbols is not materialistic, but spiritual. They therefore have their own particular dynamics and laws that set them apart from those governing materialistic phenomena. In substance, there appears to be a global discontinuity between these two components which form humanity's ultimate identity. On the one hand, there are the obvious differences between matter and spirit, and the resulting conflicts and antagonisms between the two illustrate their uneasy coexistence within human nature. On the other hand, matter and spirit display an array of

manifestations which tend to confirm their seemingly uncompromising differences, out of which two distinct worlds, each run by its own logic and order, can be made.

There is another difference between these two natures: the length of their duration. While the material world has a limited life span, this is not necessarily true of the spiritual world. For example, all great thinkers eventually die, but their ideas, concepts, and theories, all of which come from the spiritual realm in the Qur'anic sense, live on. In other words, they are transcendental, metaphysical, and everlasting. Human language is another example, for advancements in the field of communication have now freed the movement of words, whether spoken or written, from all space and time constraints. The instantaneous transmission of symbols by satellites has made it possible for human beings to experience events as if they were at a location thousands of miles away. As a result, we experience a world whose logic and order defy the logic and order of the physical world, as if we were no longer constrained by time and space. Like the acts of God, such rapid transmission of the spoken and written word, not to mention of images, has become a sort of order "be" which is instantly materialized in the "is" act.

On another level, human cultural symbols have an intrinsic aptitude for freedom and independence. Unlike the senses of the material realm, such as smell, which are located in an individual's physical-chemical-biological nature and therefore confined to the boundaries of the body, human cultural symbols enjoy a greater independence from the social actor. Such symbols become independent of their originators almost as soon as they are uttered. They then begin to spread everywhere, ignoring geographical obstacles and, despite attempts at censorship for whatever reasons, political barriers.

As human cultural symbols originate in the spiritual realm, they share, to a degree, certain characteristics of that realm and therefore set humanity apart from all other living creatures and modern artificial intelligence (AI) machines. It is this feature which is responsible for humanity's appointment as God's *khalifah* (vicegerent) on earth. From an Islamic point of view, there is no need to emphasize the centrality of human cultural symbols in the formation of an individual and a collective identity as well as in the management of human affairs.

Modern Western social sciences, particularly anthropology and sociology, have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about the nature and role of human cultural symbols in directing and shaping individual, group, and collective behaviors. Their practitioners agree that cultural symbols are crucial tools of a human being's socialization process for, if not exposed to them at an early age, he/she is dehumanized.

Positivist sociologists and anthropologists do not view human cultural systems in the same way as adherents to the Islamic perspective do. The latter

emphasize the spiritual nature of human cultural symbols, while the positivist social scientist generally has done away with any spiritual aspect of these symbols by concentrating solely on those external aspects that can be quantified, measured, and subjected to empirical verification. Thus, such symbols are not expected to be as crucial and central to the human individual's identity as they are in the Qur'anic perspective.

The reason for the differing emphases lies in each group's epistemological assumptions concerning the nature of the human being. For Muslim social scientists, an individual is by nature dualistic because he/she is composed of both material and spiritual elements, with the latter being the most important and central component. They would therefore argue that humanity's unique position cannot be adequately understood if the crucial role of the complex set of human cultural symbols is ignored or denied, for the real depth of the human entity can only be disclosed and grasped by the continual progress of science in understanding the human brain and its cognitive processes. Such a realization on the part of hard-core positivist social scientists would help engender conceptual and paradigmatic modifications to their theories.

Throughout this essay, the view of positivist social scientists on human cultural symbols will receive significant attention. However, the main intent is to offer an operational analysis of the following Islamic assumptions on the nature and the impact of human cultural symbols on both individual and collective behavior. Seen through the prism of Islam, human cultural symbols can be described as follows:

1. They are central and deep-seated in human nature.
2. Humanity's vicegerency (*khilāfah*) of the world is, to a large degree, dependent upon them.
3. They possess certain supernatural qualities: their life-span is long lasting and, in certain cases, eternal; their logic and order do not necessarily follow those of the materialistic realm; they manifest irrational characteristics; and their effect on behavior may be difficult to control, oppose, or manipulate.
4. Due to the above, the process of change as regards human cultural symbols tends to be slow and difficult.
5. Human cultural symbols are metaphysical in nature, for they originate in the spiritual realm.
6. They are at the origin of the existing variety, differences, and complexity of individual and collective human behavior across time and space.

In the analysis which follows, both the material (positivist) and the spiritual (Islamic) aspects of human cultural symbols will be presented. The external-

tangible-quantifiable-objectifiable nature of these symbols will be placed alongside their subjective-sacred-transcendental dimensions¹ in order to integrate the Islamic and hermeneutical approaches and thereby understand the inner nature of human cultural symbols. It is our belief that positivist social scientists, due to the inherent materialistic bias of their theories and the resulting lack of authentic neutrality, produce results that are not credible. This bias is also reflected in the traditional positivist view of the universe, which divides elements into first-order (i.e., materialist) and second-order (i.e., spiritual) categories. Such a division leads to a great deal of emphasis on the former and the virtual neglect of the latter. In other words, they are not employing Max Weber's concept of *verstehen*, in the sense of "understanding" and "insight," in order to come to terms with the true nature of human cultural symbols. While there has been criticism of this approach by some practitioners, it still dominates the social science disciplines.

The Concept of the Cultural-Symbolic Soul

It is in light of this scientific vision which seeks to create an objective/subjective synthesis that we continue our examination of the cultural-symbolic soul.

To begin with, the term "cultural-symbolic" refers to that set of cultural symbols by which humanity is distinguished from other living entities: language, thought, religious beliefs, science, cultural values and norms, and other similar characteristics. Second, the term "soul" is used to convey the belief that humanity's cultural-symbolic skills represent that part of an individual which is the most fundamental, central, and intimate to the formation of his/her identity. These are the elements upon which the attention of modern social scientists must be concentrated if they want to understand and explain individual and collective human behavior. It is also this "soul" which has caused humanity to be appointed (by God) master of the material realm, as the soul appears to be the inexhaustible source of human action in the widest sense of the term. Ultimately, it is the origin of that knowledge and intelligence which separates humanity from every other

¹Our decision to focus on the metaphysical and transcendental dimensions of human experience is the exact opposite of what is known as ontological monism (i.e., the belief that reality is of an exclusively physical nature). Our methodology is also far from conforming to methodological monism or methodological reductionism. We adopt in this study what E. Agazzi calls the contemporary notion of scientificity. This concept is the result of a level of consciousness which allows science to get rid of that dual monism. The contemporary concept of scientificity states that "each discipline aspiring to win a scientific status must be committed to establishing a body of knowledge which is simultaneously rigorous and objective." E. Agazzi, *L'Objectivité dans les différentes sciences* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Editions Universitaires, 1988), 14-5.

creation as well as the source of the most complex, refined, and unpredictable human behavior.

Third, the cultural-symbolic soul combines both objective and subjective elements. For example, language is an objective human skill with its own subjective dimensions. Modern cognitive sciences stress that without language, individuals would be unable to speak of such specific human phenomena as consciousness, sacralization, art, poetry, and others. This assertion is based on the claim that in the absence of cultural norms and values in human society, it is practically inconceivable that attitudes, feelings, prejudices, and similar characteristics could emerge from among a given society's individuals and groups. Religious beliefs are also related to intimate and subjective experiences. The mystic's contemplation and the extremist's fanaticism are two examples out of many possible ones that illustrate the subjective and sacral-transcendental aspects that human beings experience through their cultural-religious affiliations.²

Fourth, human cultural symbols possess metaphysical and divine traits. This characteristic does not seem to have captured the attention of modern social and behavioral scientists despite the tremendous theoretical and empirical progress made by anthropologists, sociologists, and others since the nineteenth century on the phenomenon of culture. Contemporary literature on this topic is largely nonexistent. Thus, the following reflections are but the result of a continuing personal research effort and thinking on the nature of human cultural symbols.³

Human cultural symbols have the potential for becoming eternal. This characteristic can be dealt with in tangible and measurable terms. For instance, human language is not limited just to its role as a means of communication between social actors,⁴ for it allows an individual's ideas or words to remain after his/her death. In other words, language makes it possible for individuals to prolong their symbolic existence by overcoming both time and space. The ideas of Aristotle, Ibn Khaldūn, Shakespeare, and others could not have survived and maintained their integrity without language.

On the oral level, the spoken word is used by humans to address their gods or whatever they view as sacred and eternal. By using spoken words, individuals can break out of the material realm and enter the spiritual realm during their prayers, meditation, dreams, religious experiences, and other rituals or practices.

²M. Hunt, *The Universe Within* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 315-64.

³See M. Dhaouadi, *The Other Underdevelopment in the Arab World and the Third World* (Tunis: La Maison Tunisienne de l'Édition, 1991), 280 (in Arabic), which summarizes my interest concerning psychocultural underdevelopment in developing societies. See also M. Dhaouadi, "An Operational Analysis of the Other Underdevelopment in the Arab World and the Third World," *International Sociology* 3, no. 3 (September 1988): 219-34.

⁴The analysis of the sacred-metaphysical dimension of human cultural symbols is entirely absent in contemporary behavioral social science literature. This explains the great difficulty in finding relevant references.

On the audio-visual level, it is now possible for an individual's image and voice to become eternal. Due to advances in audio-video technology, human cultural symbols can transcend space and time. This in effect moves them out of the physical realm, for they are no longer bound by the laws of nature vis-à-vis the body and material objects in general. They are now similar to metaphysical beings, for they are no longer affected by any time and space constraints.

McLuhan and his followers have given much attention to the revolutionary developments in the field of mass media that have made our planet seem like a "small village," but have remained silent on the special nature of human symbolic elements. As the nature of such symbols does not belong to the sensory and material world, their manipulation follows a different course. In effect, high media techniques have transformed humanity into a God-like creature. The modern Information Revolution is thus born out of both the immaterial (divine-like) quality of human symbols and the available modern techniques that have perfected the media's manipulation and exploitation of those symbols.

As cultural symbols, human values also reflect a dimension of eternity. Such values as freedom, justice, and equality are universal; individuals have defended them since time immemorial. They have often played an important role in great revolutions and religions throughout history regardless of time and geography. Examples of this are the many liberation movements, particularly in the Third World, which have been inspired by these values. They were also at the root of the great mobilizations and protests recently seen in countries as diverse as Algeria, the former Soviet Union, China, and the countries of Eastern Europe. This ever-present capacity to deploy and mobilize social actors shows that the influence of these values on social action is long term, if not eternal, in nature.

Freedom, justice, and equality possess, in turn, sacred and metaphysical aspects. History is full of individuals and collectivities who have sacrificed as much for these values as they have to defend and protect the teachings and principles of divine revelations. Furthermore, freedom, justice, and equality have a tremendous ability to mobilize people to resist and defeat all that stands in the way of their goal. And so, once the human will has been inspired and invested by the spirit of cultural values, it is changed to the extent that it becomes almost a quasi-supernatural force that cannot be blocked.

The eternal dimensions of cultural symbols can also be measured by their long-term effects on human beings. One example is the success of an invading people in spreading and then maintaining their language, religion, cultural values, thought, science, and so on over a conquered people. One colonial power which recognized this fact was France. Studies have shown that France, to a much greater degree than England, gave more importance to the colonization of the mind.⁵ More than twenty-five years after North Africa's independence, France's

⁵L. J. Calvet, *Linguistique et colonialisme* (Paris: Payot, 1974), 84-5; Yves Eudes, *La Conquête des esprits* (Paris: Maspero, 1982).

linguistic and cultural influence remains considerable there. North Africa therefore represents an ideal candidate for the application of the idea of “cultural lag.” Propounded by the American sociologist William Ogburn, this theory postulates that the cultural elements of a society’s social structure process change much slower than their material counterparts. The thesis of our study helps to explain the reasoning behind Ogburn’s cultural lag concept, an area about which he does not seem to say too much,⁶ for he concentrated on giving a descriptive account of change rather than formulating an explicit explanation of the *whys* of change.

For our part, the explanation of cultural lag could be framed as follows: human beings are cultural-symbolic beings and, therefore, the cultural-symbolic dimensions constitute all that is most profound and fundamental for their identity. As a result, cultural symbols appear to be more resistant to change because they are the central and strategic core of the individual or society in question, and because they draw their great force from a metaphysical (i.e., spiritual, supernatural) realm due to their sacred and metaphysical aspects.

Because positivist sociologists and anthropologists ignore this spiritual dimension, they have been unable to identify explicitly the cause(s) behind the great difficulty which human societies experience vis-à-vis the change of their cultural-symbolic systems. Our concept of the centrality of cultural symbols and their sacred and metaphysical input in forming the social actors’ identity helps to explain why the change of cultural components lags behind their material components. We are therefore no longer in the descriptive phase of “how,” at which Ogburn, to the great detriment of this theory, seems to have stopped.

The relevance of our cultural-symbolic soul concept can be clearly seen when applied to the dynamics of cultural exchange between peoples and their civilizations. While the Third World accuses the West of cultural imperialism, a number of Western countries accuse America of the same activity and increasingly consider it a threat to their cultural heritage.⁷ In the past, human collectivities have seen several instances of an exchange of cultural-symbolic influences: the Arabs borrowing from classical Greek culture, and the Europeans borrowing from classical Islamic civilization (mainly through Spain and Sicily).⁸ Such borrowing can be minimal, total, or somewhere in between. In this paper, we will limit ourselves to two manifestations of cultural exchanges: cultural conquest (a serious threat to the indigenous cultural-symbolic system’s integrity) and cultural-symbolic assimilation (the replacement of an indigenous cultural-symbolic system by another).

⁶G. D. Duncan, ed., *On Culture and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 86-95.

⁷Y. Eudes, *La Conquête des esprits*.

⁸P. Landau, *The Arab Heritage of Western Civilization* (New York: Arab Information Center, 1976).

Cultural Conquest and Assimilation

The phenomenon of cultural conquest, also known as cultural invasion or hegemony, occurs whenever a cultural exchange favors one party over another. Today's cultural exchange between the so-called North and South is a classical illustration.⁹ Due to the elimination of obstacles to penetration by modern communication technology, cultural conquest is viewed by some as extremely threatening. How does this affect our concept of a cultural-symbolic soul? In essence, it undermines the indigenous spiritual sphere which forms the core of a certain human group's very existence. One symptom of this invasion is the phenomenon of cultural erosion, still a noticeable element in many postcolonial societies. The elite and intellectuals of those societies frequently continue to perceive their reality through a prism based on the cultural symbols of a foreign culture. Such a development results in value conflicts, identity crises, cultural alienation,¹⁰ disorganized personalities,¹¹ and other problems.

Still more serious is the use of the conqueror's cultural-symbolic system as a weapon to uproot totally and destroy the conquered people's existing cultural-symbolic system and then replace it with his/her own. The Arab world is an excellent example of this. In the early days of Islam, Arab Muslims believed that they had the responsibility to spread Islam to the non-Muslims. In less than one century, they successfully brought to Islam the majority of the peoples of the area between the Persian Gulf and Morocco. Since the seventh century, these peoples' adherence to Islamic religious symbols has been strongly maintained, i.e., the symbols have been and continue to be dominant vis-à-vis the region's pre-Islamic religious symbols. These societies were also gradually Arabized through the rise of Arabic as the region's main language. In this way, conditions appear to have been met for those societies which had been Arabized and Islamized to belong permanently to Arab-Muslim civilization. The widespread adoption of these new cultural-religious symbols by the non-Arab and non-Muslim populations was in fact the source of the emergence of a greater Arab Muslim community.

In the modern sociological and anthropological senses, Arab-Muslim culture was a melting pot for the different peoples living in this enormous region between the Persian Gulf and Morocco. By means of the diffusion of cultural-religious symbols, Arab Muslims managed to create a strongly homogenous zone which has survived from the seventh century to our own time. The materialization of the Arab-Muslim basic personality was an inevitable outcome. Modern

⁹E. Comarin, *L'Etat du tiers monde* (Paris: Découverte, 1987).

¹⁰W. K. Ruf, "Dépendance et aliénation culturelle" in *Indépendance et interdépendance au Magreb* (Paris: CNRS, 1974), 233-79.

¹¹G. Kisber, *The Disorganized Personality* (London: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

anthropologists and sociologists agree that cultural-religious symbols play a determining role in the formation of the foundation for the basic personality of one or several peoples of the same civilization.¹² In other words, if the processes of Arabization and Islamization had failed, for any reason, we would not see the great similarities and affinities which have existed for centuries between the various ethnic groups and peoples of different backgrounds in the region.

Immigration and Cultural-Religious Symbols

Cultural-religious symbols are the decisive tools by which the assimilation of one human group into another is realized. For example, the United States, Canada, England, and France have received and continue to receive large numbers of immigrants. The degree of their integration and assimilation into the host society depends to a great degree on the cultural-religious variable. In other words, their integration and assimilation would be much easier if they shared the same cultural-religious symbols with the recipient societies, i.e., if they were Catholic or Protestant and if they spoke English or French. It is against this background that one can understand the reasons behind today's heated debate in France concerning the difficulty which the North African population, including the second generation, encounters while trying to assimilate into French society.¹³

In the case of the second generation, they are just as French as the French themselves as regards language and culture; the only difference is religion. Thus their attempt to become French is hindered, if not actually prevented, by their adherence to Islamic (as opposed to Christian) beliefs, rituals, laws, and especially its practices — Islamic cultural-religious symbols. Muslims who try to retain their cultural-religious symbols find it difficult to live in a Christian country such as France, for both its social context and its work organization milieu differ from those designed to meet the needs of members of a Muslim society. It is therefore quite difficult to conceive of an expatriate Muslim community's complete assimilation into a Christian land as long as its members remain strongly attached to their cultural-religious symbols.

The history of cultural contact between peoples proves that religious symbols tend to be better immunized than plain cultural symbols¹⁴ during cultural invasions and the process of cultural-symbolic assimilation. The experience of the West's

¹²N. Smelser and W. Smelser, *Personality and Social Systems* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1967), 80-7.

¹³F. Dubet, *Immigration: Qu'en savons nous* (Paris: Documentation française, 1989).

¹⁴In anthropology and sociology, the concept of culture includes religious beliefs as cultural components. But for methodological reasons, we have to separate culture into religious symbols and cultural symbols. This has helped us to distinguish the nature of each type of symbol's resistance to change in the face of cultural conquest and cultural-symbolic assimilation.

Jewish community and the Middle East's Christian community are two examples, among many, of this tendency. Jews living in Western countries have been completely assimilated into the mainstream of Western culture on the cultural-linguistic level. This is also true of the Christian Arabs, who have gone through the same process in the Middle East, which is predominantly Arab-Muslim in nature. Despite this integration and assimilation, both communities have been able to keep their autonomy and their own independent religious symbols. In other words, Judeo-Christian religious symbols appear to put up more resistance to the influence of the majority culture's cultural-religious milieu than do cultural-linguistic symbols.

This observation gives the impression that religious symbols have deeper roots in the human psyche than their cultural-linguistic counterparts. The role played in this by the sacred-metaphysical dimensions of religious symbols is obvious. In this context, Ogburn's concept of cultural lag needs to be made more explicit. As already pointed out, he maintains that cultural components generally change at a much slower rate than the noncultural components of a society. To be more precise, religious symbols (as cultural elements) change slower and also put up more resistance to change. Why this is so cannot be adequately explained without taking into account the central position which the spiritual dimension occupies vis-à-vis cultural-religious symbols. Two characteristics of this dimension will make the point: a) the semi-supernatural power potentially possessed by cultural-religious symbols, and b) their capacity for long-lasting, if not eternal, existence. Due to these two characteristics, a given human collectivity's cultural-religious system is more likely to be resistant or even immune to major change.

Such resistance can be seen in many Third World countries, almost all of which have experienced major transformations since achieving their independence. There is a strong consensus among sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists that attitudes, value systems, religious beliefs, and other aspects of these developing societies display a strong resistance towards change. Once the cultural-religious symbols are assimilated into the basic personality of the community's members, they tend to repel all kinds of threatening cultural-religious intrusions. The stubborn resistance of cultural-religious symbols in the face of change defies the empirical-positivist explanation. By the canons of scientific objectivity, one can hardly identify any particular external factor that could account for these symbols' great resistance to change. The adoption of the Weberian perspective of *verstehen* (understanding, insight) becomes necessary in order to comprehend the universe of cultural-religious symbols from the inside. Taking into account the full impact of the spiritual (sacred-metaphysical) dimension of cultural-religious symbols is crucial if one is to understand them. In other words, cultural-religious symbols draw their force of resistance from a source beyond the mere tangible materialistic world and

appear to be empowered by forces of a metaphysical or a supernatural nature.

The internal interpretation of the meanings of cultural-religious symbols makes it possible for researchers to come to grips with the sense of eternity that those symbols seem to contain. One example of this is human thought which has been recorded in a given language, for this event has given it the potential to outlive its author. The capacity of language (as a distinct cultural symbol) to eternalize human thought implies that cultural-religious symbols draw their enormous resistance to change from their longevity. As such, their existence as well as their impact on social action are of a very long, if not eternal, duration. This dimension of eternity enables cultural-religious symbols to engender more than a temporary change in human behavior. They are therefore likely to be neither susceptible nor vulnerable to rapid change, as are their material counterparts in a given human society.

The above-mentioned two dimensions of cultural-religious symbols can be used to shed light on the reason behind the criticism voiced by both developed and developing nations of America's so-called cultural imperialism. Such hostility is understandable, for once these foreign symbols develop some roots in a given society, they take on a long-lasting characteristic which makes it almost impossible to cast them aside at a later date. The evidence shows that the propagation of language, cultural values, religious beliefs, and so on in other societies and civilizations constitutes the strategic determining factor — more than any other factor — that could guarantee lasting links between nations, be they military, economic, geographic, or otherwise. The contemporary Arab world is a convincing illustration of this claim.

At least thirteen centuries have passed since cultural-religious homogeneity and unity were established in the region by the Arab Muslims. This solidarity has proven to be both very strong and durable. On the one side, the Arabs have known intra-Arab geographical, military, political, and other types of conflicts and tensions,¹⁵ but the cultural-religious links continue to be the guarantors of a unifying solidarity among the numerous Arab countries. Any realistic futurist projection of the Arab collectivity's destiny is likely to agree with the claim that the region's cultural-religious unity could survive forever as long as its Arab-Muslim cultural symbols were not seriously undermined or, worse, replaced by other cultural-religious symbols.¹⁶

¹⁵The Gulf conflict, which was triggered by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, is the most serious conflict among Arab states in modern history. Outside intervention, particularly by the forces of the United States, England, and France, in this intra-Arab conflict has greatly helped the conflict to slide towards a dramatic end.

¹⁶Arab-Islamic cultural symbols continue to constitute an unshakable basis for solidarity between the Iraqis, on the one hand, and the anti-Saddam Arab regimes and publics on the other. Ties between groups and peoples built on cultural symbols enjoy greater longevity or even become eternal, as stressed throughout this paper.

The danger of contemporary cultural imperialism, be it American, French, British, or otherwise, is much more than just an ideological slogan voiced by developing societies. The wide use of English and French in Africa and Asia, instead of the local languages, not only constitutes an interference in and a consequent impoverishment of the local languages, but also means that the struggle for cultural-linguistic independence will be long term. Cultural imperialism, whatever its origin, is harmful to the extent that it contributes to the disorganization of the cultural-symbolic systems of Third World societies. Only a culturally alienated, disorganized, and disoriented society could be struck in the most fundamental and intimate (the sacred-metaphysical dimensions) bases of its own identity. And such negative factors will not disappear overnight.

Cultural Symbols and Conflict within Nations

The cultural-symbolic roots of tension and conflict between nations are not limited to those between the dominant great powers or to those Third World nations that are asserting their identity. What appears to be happening now is the beginning of a global identity crisis, brought on by the assertion of such cultural symbols as language and religion, as people resist absorption by larger entities. It is this resistance which is playing a significant part in the escalating tension, discontent, protest, and conflict currently evident within nations and on a global scale. This view is shared by various analysts, some of whom assert that

the world is facing an identity crisis. In nations on every continent, including the United States, people who feel their heritage is threatened by the domination of others are seeking recognition. The traditional cohesion of the nation-state is being challenged.¹⁷

With the rise and intensification of colonialism during the nineteenth century, many ethnic groups found themselves without any means of expression. When colonialism finally ended, they began to assert their individual ethnicities and collective personalities. We are currently witnessing the same process in Eastern Europe which, freed from Soviet domination, is reasserting its identity. The most notable examples of this are Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the republics of the former Soviet Union. This trend is also found in the West. In Canada, for example, Francophone Quebec continues to demand increased autonomy from Anglophone Canada, and some are even calling for outright independence. There

¹⁷D. Newsom, "The World's 'Identity Crisis,'" *The Christian Science Monitor* (1-7 March 1991), 15 (world edition).

are similar trends underway in the Middle East. Despite the unifying force of Arab-Islamic cultural symbols in much of the area, religion and ethnicity continue to divide some groups from others. Lebanese Christians fear being engulfed by the much larger Muslim world, while Kurds continue to struggle for the realization of a Kurdish identity distinct from that of Arabs, Iranians, and Turks. Algeria's Berbers demand respect for and promotion of their language, thereby showing their deep concern for the survival of their identity. This move towards a clearly defined and separate identity vis-à-vis the majority is even seen in the United States. The concept of the "American melting pot" is being seriously questioned, for "today in the US, some disadvantaged groups put the strongest emphasis on their national origins."¹⁸

There seem to be four major factors behind such tensions and conflicts: religion, language, race, and territorial rights and claims. The first three are the main formative elements of a self-identity for individuals and human collectivities. As pointed out earlier, language and religion are among the most intimate and profound parts of a human collective identity. They are therefore inherently strongly resistant to change and tend to have a low degree of tolerance towards other religions and languages. This is why modern multilingual and multireligious nations can hardly avoid the emergence of internal tensions and conflicts. When mutually satisfactory compromises cannot be worked out between the groups living within the same national borders, the stage is set for the outbreak, either sooner or later, of tension, conflict, and perhaps even civil war. One opinion based on this assumption is that

conflict in the decades ahead is likely to center, not so much on disputes among states, as on efforts within states to find a balance between national cohesion and an honorable recognition of the separate characteristics of groups within the society. The outcomes of these internal struggles will weigh as heavily on world peace as potential rivalries between great powers.¹⁹

The Case of Quebec

Francophone Quebec's desire for greater autonomy or outright independence continues to generate tension and conflict within the dominant

¹⁸Ibid. Cuban- and Mexican-Americans in Florida and in some southwestern American states have done away with the concept of American society as uniquely unilingual. See A. Portes and R. Rumbault, *Learning the Ropes: Language and the Second Generation in Immigrant America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 180-221.

¹⁹*The Christian Science Monitor*, op. cit., 18.

Anglophone Canadian federation. The numerous constitutional conferences which the federal government has held with provincial governments have failed to bring about Quebec's successful integration into the Canadian federation. It is this desire to ensure the survival of its distinct Francophone identity that has led Quebec to follow its current course. Quebec's call for sovereignty is no longer the strict slogan of the separatist Parti Québécois for, to a certain extent, it has become a major issue for Quebec's ruling Liberal Parti, which has traditionally been known for its sympathy towards the current system of federalism and alliance. The report of the Bélanger-Campeau Commission, issued in March 1991, recommended to Robert Bourassa, prime minister of Quebec, that he call a referendum on independence no later than 26 October 1992. It now appears, after a war of words which has lasted for roughly thirty years, that conditions for Quebec's independence are favorable.

The malaise which the Quebec-Canada coexistence has known is mainly due to cultural-linguistic differences. According to John Porter, a Canadian sociologist, "the country (Canada) is broken into two major linguistic and cultural blocs which maintain a *high degree of exclusiveness from each other* . . ." (my emphasis).²⁰ Many articles in the Canadian media have also made the case that Montreal's Francophone and Anglophone communities suffer from what is known as the Two Solitudes syndrome: they each read different magazines and newspapers, listen to different radio and television stations, and dine (at least in the case of businessmen) in different restaurants. In effect, these two groups do not have the same cultural-symbolic soul, and therefore have two different poles of reference and two different cognitive maps. This phenomenon is not restricted to Montreal alone, but can be observed throughout the country at various levels. For example, the well-known sociologist from Quebec, Guy Rocher, speaks of it among professionals in his field:

The Congresses of The Canadian Association of Sociology and Anthropology offer the same scene of a more discrete presence of Francophone sociologists or, to be more precise, of a more-than-remarkable absence. In reading the Congresses' programs, one could conclude that Quebecer sociology has been in decline since 1965, while in reality it has been in full explosion. In fact, the underrepresentation of Francophone Quebecer sociologists is an indication of a *profound rupture* [my emphasis]. The gap has been widened between Francophone sociologists, particularly Quebecers, and Anglophone Canadian sociologists. A wall of silence has risen between us. It seems to be stronger and more lasting than the Berlin

²⁰J. Porter, "Canadian Character in the Twentieth Century," *The Annals* (March 1967): 49. See also "La Nation pour inclure ou exclure," *Le Monde* (29 Mars 1991): 20-1.

Wall. There has been no separatism, but there has been instead an effective separation, a moving away and a distancing. And this without referendum.²¹

The observations by Rocher and other researchers on the Two Solitudes phenomenon are the result of fieldwork and, therefore, are empirical observations. However, these observations remain rather descriptive, as do those concerning cultural lag (Ogburn) and exclusiveness (Porter), for the researchers do not seek to understand the profound reason(s) behind this syndrome. It is just accepted as a social fact. Rocher, however, appears to be both surprised and angry that this syndrome exists, for its mere existence appears to defy logic, at least in his opinion.

The concept of a cultural-symbolic soul allows us to go beyond the descriptive phase of the Two Solitudes phenomenon in Canadian society, for it recognizes the centrality of cultural symbols to an individual's, a community's, and a people's identity. If we accept the above-mentioned concept, it is no surprise to see the Two Solitude syndrome appear in Canada, since mere geographical proximity cannot overcome the separateness of two cultural-symbolic souls. This development has made mutual interaction and understanding extremely difficult. And so what we are now seeing in Canada is a rupture between two cultural-symbolic souls due to the Two Solitudes syndrome, a process which also confirms the assumptions, hypotheses, and thesis of symbolic interaction.²²

It is against this background that one can come to grips with the difficulty faced by positivist social scientists seeking to perceive and understand the larger implications which cultural symbols might have for the dynamics of human groups, communities, and societies. In general, modern sociology has rejected the idea of an alliance with a subjective methodology in order to get closer to the human dimension of the social actor than to the surrounding social structure. Our modest effort in this paper has shown, through our concept of the cultural-symbolic soul, that it is time for sociologists to reintegrate the subjective-transcendental (i.e., internal) components into their studies if they want to achieve more credibility with regard to the comprehension as well as the explanation of individual or collective human behavior, which we maintain is based on human cultural symbols.

Table 1 represents both a summary of some of the ideas, concepts, and theories which have been already outlined as well as an attempt to widen and deepen the scope of the study's thesis.

²¹G. Rocher, "Les Deux solitudes chez les sociologues Canadiens." Communication presented at the 25th Annual Congress of the Canadian Association of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, 27 May 1990. The translation is mine.

²²J. G. Manis et al., eds., *Symbolic Interaction* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968).

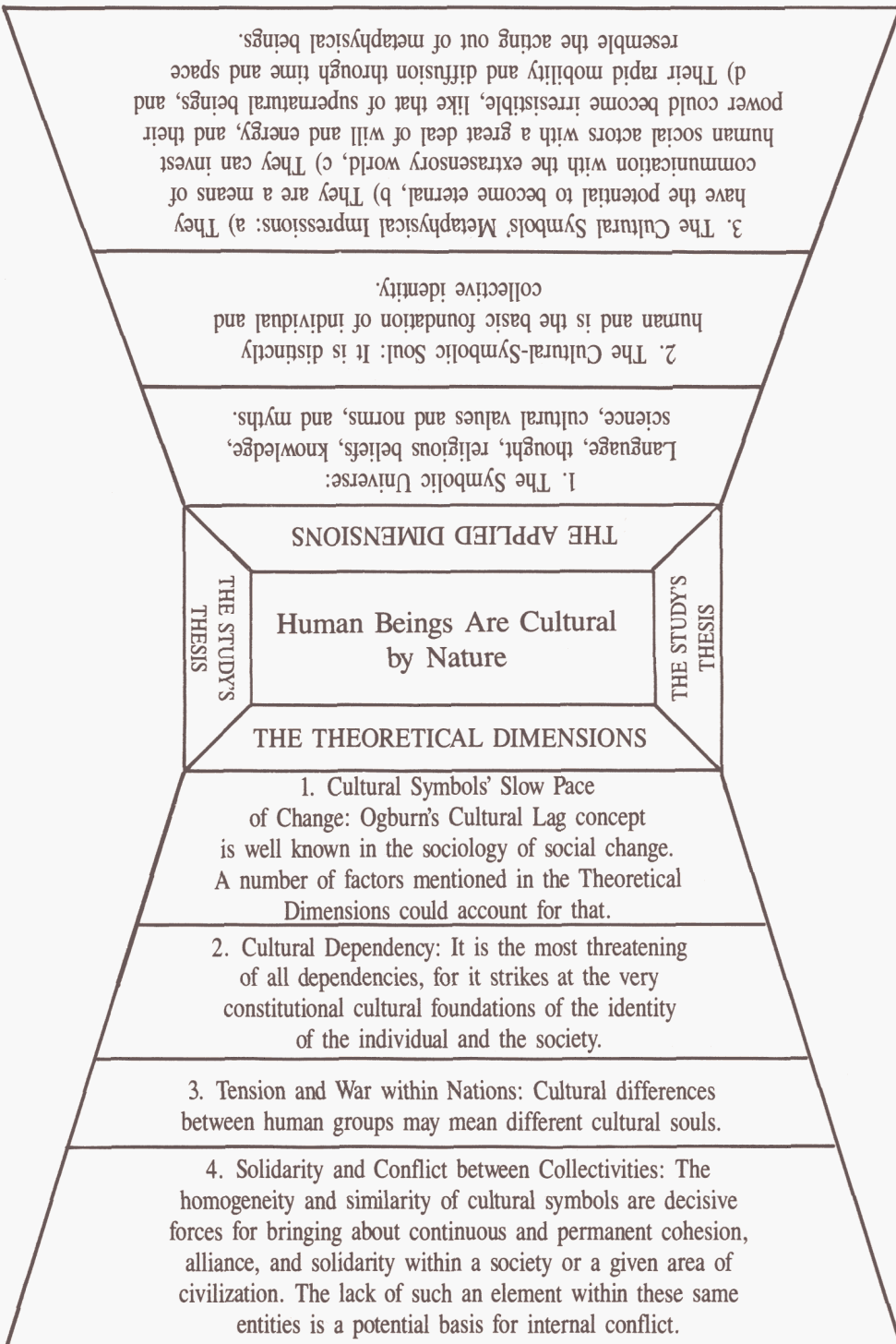


Table I. The Cultural-Symbolic Soul

The Promise of the Islamic Social Sciences

Our study has shown clearly that human cultural symbols are the basic elements of a given social actor's very soul, whether individual or collective, and are therefore central to an accurate understanding of any type of human nature and behavior. From an Islamic point of view, they represent the divine part of the human identity, that which God breathed into Adam after his creation and which makes humanity superior to all other living beings and artificial intelligence (AI) machines.

Human behavior, if studied from an Islamic viewpoint, must be understood in a radically different manner than Freud's libido or Durkheim's social determinism perspectives. The impact of the sexual drive or social forces on human behavior is strongly mediated by the intervention of cultural symbols. Internal or external stimuli to human behavior are scarcely translated into action before they are screened and checked by one's cultural-symbolic system. Furthermore, a cultural-symbolic framework allows a researcher to deal with and understand those phenomena that positivist behavioral and social scientists refuse to recognize, such as the individual's quest since the beginning of time for contact with the divine (which is dismissed as nonsense) and the continuing symbolic existence of great thinkers throughout time and space (which is hardly accounted for by materialistic positivist behavioral or social science paradigms).

As shown throughout this paper, an Islamically inspired perspective of human cultural symbols makes it possible for a social scientist to deal with sensory, spiritual, and metaphysical phenomena. Moreover, our concept of a cultural-symbolic soul represents an attempt to make room for such a perspective in modern social science thought in the hope that its practitioners will begin to give some serious consideration to the spiritual realm's effect(s) on individual and collective human behavior. Until this hope is realized, a credible scientific understanding and explanation of individual and collective behavior will not be forthcoming. The absence of such a perspective, which means that only an external and descriptive study is possible, is one of the great missing variables in those modern sciences which claim to study humanity and society. Seyyed Hossein Nasr bluntly condemns modern Western science for this very reason. According to him:

We can't gain an essential knowledge of man through any method that is based on an externalization of man's inner being and the placing of this externalized man, of the man who stands at the rim of the wheel of existence, as the subject that knows. If "essential" has any meaning

at all it must be related to the essence, to the Centre or axis which generates at once the spokes and the rim.²³

For instance, the present debate among Western specialists on artificial intelligence (AI) is still largely confined to the externalization of humanity's inner dimension. AI enthusiasts think that they can produce a similar or superior intelligence²⁴ by designing rational, logical, and logarithmic-oriented machines, while other scholars argue that the biochemical and physiological structures are prerequisites if AI is to match human intelligence.²⁵ In both cases, however, the focus is on the apparent or the external side of intelligence; the inner dimension is once again ignored. Such lack of attention to human cultural symbols also prevents researchers from admitting the spiritual nature of human intelligence, a fundamental Islamic tenet derived from the belief that God has breathed some of His spirit into each human being. In Nasr's terms, the externalization of human intelligence leads only to a very shallow understanding of it, for such a phenomenon cannot be accurately understood without an accurate understanding of its very essence.²⁶

This implies, at a minimum, the following two points: a) human intelligence is the most complex manifestation of human behavior. It is therefore unrealistic to reduce it merely to logical-rational thinking. In doing so, AI scientists prove to be worse than those behavioral psychologists who reduce all human behavior to the Stimulus-Response theory, and b) the complexity of human intelligence requires the expansion of the researchers' scientific horizon so that it includes both the internal as well as the external constituents which together make up human intelligence. Modern Western social scientists have so far refused to do this and therefore continue to miss the essential core of human behavior.

In an Islamically centered paradigm such a problem does not arise, for the Qur'an recognizes there is a spiritual dimension to human behavior, either on the individual or the collective level, and that each individual is required to gather knowledge based on such scientific methods as observation and field research (i.e., travel). Thus there is no inherent tension between the Muslim and the Western researcher, for both employ scientific means to reach their conclusions. What is needed is communication between the two groups for their mutual enrichment. By paying more attention to other epistemologies, ideas, concepts, theories, and methodologies,²⁷ an initial step could be made towards resolving

²³S. H. Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (London: Longman, 1975), 10.

²⁴G. Pessis-Pasternak, ed., *Faut-Il Brûler Descartes* (Paris: Découverte, 1991), 223-37.

²⁵J. Searle, "Minds, Brains, and Programs," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3 (1980): 417-57.

²⁶S. H. Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, op. cit., 10.

²⁷A. W. Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); A. Caillé, *Les Splendeurs et misères des sciences sociales* (Geneva: Librairie Droze, 1986).

the crisis which the social sciences have been experiencing in the West since the 1970s. In our opinion, the continuing growth of the body of knowledge in the Islamic behavioral social sciences should equip its practitioners with the knowledge to make constructive contributions to the reform of Western behavioral social scientific thought.²⁸

²⁸M. Dhaouadi, "A Critical Assessment of the Issues of Objectivity and Subjectivity in Contemporary Western Sociobehavioral Thought and Its Arab Khaldunian Counterpart," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (September 1990): 193-217.