

Portraying Islam and the West in Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations*

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Abstract

This review deals with the relationship between Islam and the West from the point of view of the Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, especially in his book *the Fear of Barbarians*. Some issues have been discussed. Firstly, the term barbarism or savagery is defined and compared with the concept civilization. Secondly, attention is paid to Todorov's historical criticism of a number of Western concepts and postulates that they are circulating in politics and the media. Finally, some negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, that Todorov has criticised and corrected, have been highlighted in this article.

Key words: Islam, the West, Stereotypes, Barbarism, Civilization, Todorov

The Bulgarian-French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov (1939 - 2017) has been strived in his book *the Fear of Barbarians* (2010) to deconstruct the traditional European view on the foreigner. This view is characterized by a number of stereotypes, such as considering the *Other* as barbaric and savage, and that the white person is better than the black one, and that European culture is civilized and others' culture is backward. Todorov questions the Western intellect objectively and frankly, proving that there exist no wild culture per se, and that any civilization cannot survive forever. Whoever deals on a responsible ethical basis cannot fear the barbarians. He refers here to the political West, which always expresses its phobia of the foreigners. This xenophobic feeling is only a reflection of its uncivilized dealings with those it considers barbarians.

To understand this view, we should first understand Todorov's definition of the term barbarism, or savagery. After deconstructing the various meanings of this concept, he decided to adopt the meaning that indicates that barbarism is a denial (non-recognition) of the humanity of another. The origin of this definition goes back to Greece, where the barbarians used to refer to those who deny the full humanity of others, and this is the essential difference between them and others. In this way, they remove the other from the circle of humanity.

In addition, Todorov believes that the measure of urbanization is related to the nature of the human behavior, not to the fabrication of cultural products and technological devices, because they are related to well-being and not to virtue and morality. His interpretation is supported by facts from European history itself, such as the genocide of the Jews by the Nazis, and the atomic bombs that killed many innocent people, confirming that barbarism emerged from the heart of European civilization. So, he refutes the arguments of those who see that the West is culturally superior.

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This means that Todorov continues, as usual, to practice historical criticism. In this book, he undermines a number of Western concepts and postulates that they are circulating in politics and the media. He believes that human values such as freedom, equality, secularism, and human rights, of which Western regimes are proud, cannot be implemented by coercion. If the West really wants to achieve these principles, it must first begin with withdrawing its armies from Afghanistan and Iraq, closing political prisons and detention centers, and supporting the Palestinians to establish their independent state. To support poor people and backward countries to solve their internal problems, external pressures on them should be stopped, for which the West is largely responsible.

It is also worth pointing out that Todorov also deals with the relationship between Islam and the West. His book *the Fear of Barbarians* can be seen as a positive and objective testimony about Islam, in contrast to the negative campaigns that the extreme right-wing parties and the politicized media are conducting against Muslims. Two important levels can be distinguished in Todorov's approach. On the first level, he rationally responds to the makers, promoters and supporters of the theory of "the Clash of Civilizations", such as Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis, Oriana Fallaci and others. They see Islam as a "green threat" and present Muslims as a "barbaric menace" against the civilized Western societies. Therefore, the roots that feed that threat must be eradicated through various political, media and legal mechanisms.

On the second level, Todorov corrects the negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. He says that the Muslims, who today exceed one and a half billion people and live in dozens of countries, have been reduced only to the Islamic religious dimension, as if Muslims were completely different from the rest of other human societies, and their behavior can only be understood through the lens of religion. Moreover, Islam is usually reduced to political Islam and terrorism. Bin Laden expresses in a lesser way the reality of Islam, exactly as Hitler expresses the reality of the West. In this sense, there is no need for these attacks on Islam. They are not necessary if we truly strive for integration into the path of democracy. It is also sufficient to separate the religious from the political, and this separation is not alien to the Islamic religion. In addition, the Qur'an contains many texts that do not conflict with democracy.

More significantly, Todorov maintains that it is possible to bet on an important group within the Muslim community that advocates an open, progressive and enlightened Islam. This group exploits various textual, cultural and social possibilities that require tolerance, respect and dialogue. He believes that Islam is not one, and that not all Muslims can be reduced to a homogeneous mass. Indeed, the issue of generalization is possible, but historical arguments refute this hypothesis, because Muslims had previously settled in many non-Muslim countries, where they interacted positively with the laws adopted there and respected them without any problem.

In sum, as a philosopher and cultural critic, Tzvetan Todorov's approach to the relationship between Islam and the West is characterized by a rational and audacious critique of so-called "Western egocentrism" at the expense of "peripheries". It is striking that Todorov subverts and undermines the prevailing approach that emphasizes the concept of Islamophobia, for he does not see Islam as a source of fear. He calls for dealing objectively with the Islamic component within Western societies. More importantly, he focuses on the civilizational role that Islam has played and cannot be denied or ignored, as is evident in his following response to the previous Pope: The credit goes to Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and other Muslim scholars for transmitting the legacy of Greek thought to European theologians and philosophers, especially Thomas Aquinas, who in the thirteenth century reconciled between philosophy (Aristotelianism) and Christian religion. Benedict

XVI was inspired by Thomas Aquinas, but Thomas Aquinas was not ignorant of Averroes, the Muslim. (p. 225).

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Tijani Boulaouali, I am an Islamic Theologian and Arabist specializing in Qur'an Translation, Qur'anic Studies, Islamic Studies, Quranic and Biblical Concepts and Narratives, Interfaith Dialogue. I obtained my doctoral degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the KU Leuven on the Biblical reference framework of the contemporary Dutch translators of the Qur'an. I am a lecturer, researcher and coordinator of the Master World Religions and Islamic Theology at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven. I am also a member of Leuven Centre for the Study of Islam, Culture and Society (LCSICS), Research Unit Arabic and Islamic Studies, and Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS). In addition, I teach Islamic Religion at Flemish Ministry of Education and Training in Ghent. I published 20 single-authored books and I am a co-author of 14 books including: *Muslims and the Phobia of Globalization* (Cairo, 2022), *Mutual Fear between Islam and the West* (Casablanca, 2021), *The Image of Islam in the Dutch Academic Approach* (United Arab Emirates, 2013), *Arabic Poetry, the Duality of Norm and Deviation* (United Arab Emirates, 2012), *The Islam and the Amazighism* (Casablanca, 2008), *Muslims in the West* (Cairo, 2006). I am also a chairman of Ijtihad Center for Studies and Training (ICST) in Belgium.