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Abstract

Jihadism is psychologically connected to the grammar of Arabic language

Introduction

It is one of the great mysteries of our time: What went wrong with Islamic culture? A thousand years ago, when Europe was just beginning to emerge from the Dark Ages, Islamic scientists, mathematicians, artists, and scholars were at the vanguards of their respective fields. Today, as Sunnis and Shias slaughter each other over grievances that were obscure in the seventh century, and both sects avow their undying hatred for the west, many Islamic countries seem as retrograde as they were once progressive.

Any numbers of reasons have been proposed, some sophisticated, some silly: “they hate our freedom,” “Crusaders, Colonialists and Zionists humiliated them for centuries,” “polygamy and sharia’s sexual mores deprive young men of outlets for their libidinal energies,” “Wahhabism,” “oil,” “Islamism.” But all of these explanations at best describe symptoms rather than the disease itself.

Methods

A different diagnosis is proposed here. The ultimate explanation for the impasse between Islam and the West can be traced to the different grammars of Semitic and Indo-European languages. In the 19th century, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Nietzsche suggested that philosophy moves along tracks created by languages; Bhartrihari expressed similar ideas in India in the 6th c. AD. In the 1930s the linguist Benjamin Whorf and the anthropologist Edward Sapir suggested that people who speak sufficiently different languages might also think and even behave in different ways. The new version of the Bhartrihari-Humboldt-Nietzsche-Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis is concerned not so much with the relationship of grammar to cognition as to emotions. When Osama bin Laden thundered that “Being killed for God’s cause is a great honor achieved by only those who are the elite of the nation. We love this kind of death...as much as you like to live,” or when Saddam Hussein promised “the mother of all battles,” American listeners heard florid rhetoric; many Arab speakers felt their calls in their blood. Noam Chomsky suggested that the ability to learn and use language is hard-wired in our brains. But Chomsky missed the importance of emotional contents of the different languages. “Meaning” embraces more than concepts: ideas resonate emotionally as well, and those emotions are inseparable from the sounds of the words that describe them. While concepts can be transferred from one language to another, not all of their emotional resonances can.

Results

Because of the syntactical structure of Arabic, it is difficult to introduce new vocabulary and new ideas; old emotions and old ideas are inextricably bound together. If the advent of Islam initially lit up the Arab world, over time the limitations of the Arabic language would dampen and finally extinguish the intellectual and creative fire. Investing too many emotions in too few ideas is ultimately detrimental to the expansion of knowledge: it nails the mind to old ways. Thinking becomes more difficult than to blow up oneself.

Discussion

In a recent column in The New York Times, Thomas Friedman quoted the Syrian-born poet Ali Ahmad Said, also known as Adonis. “The Arab individual is no less smart, no less a genius than anyone else in the world. He can excel—but only outside his society,” he told an interviewer on Dubai TV. “If I look at the Arabs, with all their resources and great capacities, and I compare what they have achieved over the past century with what others have achieved in that period, I would have to say that we Arabs are in a phase of extinction, in the sense that we have no creative presence in the world. We have the quantity,” he said. “We have the masses of people, but a people becomes extinct when it no longer has a creative capacity, and the capacity to change its world.”
Conclusion(s)

The desire to understand our world is as basic a human instinct as our quest for food and shelter and our drive to reproduce ourselves. Both an attribute of civilization and a neurological function, language is something that all human beings have in common. But language is also one of the things that keeps us at odds with each other. The Semitic storytellers who thought up the tale of the Tower of Babel knew what they were talking about.

References

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