

Islam and the Modern World

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Islam is a way of life. As such it may be treated from three different aspects: religious, political, and cultural. The religion of Islam is based primarily on the word of Allah as revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad and enshrined in the Koran, but supplemented by Muḥammad's personal deeds and sayings and modified in response to varying historical and geographic conditions. The variation has through the ages so increased as to justify treating folk religion as separate from the learned religion. Islam the state is that based on koranic law as established by the caliphs, and its successor states that styled or still style themselves Islamic. The culture of Islam, using the term culture in its narrow sense, is a highly synthetic compound of Semitic, Persian, Arabian, Greco-Roman and other elements, developed first under the caliphate but transmitted and modified through the ages and expressed mainly through the medium of the Arabic tongue.

The proposition that Islam the religion has been less responsive to outside stimuli than Christianity, at least in its Roman Catholic form, may be difficult to defend. True, Islam acquired special rigidity from the dogma that its basis—the word of God as recorded in the Koran—is perfect, unchangeable and fit for all times and all places, but this rigidity has been through numberless generations subject to such forces as to reduce considerably its practical effectiveness. Indeed, the variation between Islam as practiced by Moslems in the Philippines or Nigeria and primitive or learned Islam is no less than that between Roman Catholicism as practiced by American Indians and early Christians. Muḥammad's revelation dealt with the concrete: food and drink, interest on loans, punishment for crime, marriage, divorce and inheritance, number and conditions of acceptable prayers, whereas Christ dealt with principles, with the result that Christ's teach-

ings have not yet been outdated; but Muḥammad's followers have in course of time developed devices which justified the outdateding of much of his legislation.

First among these devices was hadith (*ḥadīth*, tradition), a record of deeds ascribed to Muḥammad in his non-prophetic capacity, or of words put in his mouth. Hadith became next to the Koran the most potent force in the lives of believers, and at times contradicted, even nullified, the teaching of the Koran. Thus Muḥammad the man was used by his congregation to undo what Muḥammad the prophet had done. The Koran is emphatic in its insistence that Muḥammad was a human being, who performed no miracles but served simply as a vehicle through which the incomparable, inimitable, miraculous Koran, originally preserved in the seventh heaven, was revealed to mankind. In this respect Muḥammad corresponds to the Virgin Mary, the Koran to Christ. The Koran should not be touched except in a state of legal purity. It should never be misquoted. The veneration accorded it is the counterpart of that accorded the host in the Roman Catholic system. But Muḥammad's followers bestowed on the founder of their faith generously what the Koran denied him. According to accepted hadiths, for example, in one of his early battles, al-Khandaq (the ditch), near Medina, Muḥammad fed from the broth of one chicken and a handful of dough all that hungry Moslem host which was digging the trench. Another tradition echoing Christ's experience makes Muḥammad's answer as to how many times a Moslem should forgive his slave: "seventy times."

Another device developed to soften the rigidity of Islam is *ijmā'*, the consensus of the Moslem community. "My community," Muḥammad reportedly said in a hadith, "shall not agree on an error." What this amounted to was legitimizing whatever public opinion accepts and approves, even at the risk of its being anti-koranic. In the absence of generally recognized and unified central religious authority, the authority of *ijma* played a determining role in several situations. Islam, it should be remembered, is a lay religion with no ordained priesthood, no clerical hierarchy and no sacraments. Its theologians are learned men, '*ulamā'*,

whose authority partakes of the nature of that of professors in a university. Only one sect, the Shi'ite, developed a religious hierarchy with an *imām* corresponding to a pope.

Through *ijma* the cult of saints was introduced by Sufis and popularized throughout the world of Islam. This cult, involving shrines, pilgrimages, vows and surrounding the holy person with an aura of Divinity militated against the most fundamental precept of Islam, the oneness of God. Only the modern Wahhābis of Arabia rose in arms against it. For another universally accepted institution in Islam, circumcision, there is no authority other than *ijma*. The practice is an ancient heathen one elevated by Islam to a position parallel to baptism in Christianity.

Under the impact of the West, beginning with the nineteenth century, Islam in all its aspects—economic, social, intellectual, political, religious—has been subjected to modernizing, secularizing influences that wrought hitherto unparalleled transformation in its structure. The Ottoman Turks under Mustafa Kemal embarked upon a policy of breaking entirely with the past and accepting fully and uncritically Western institutions and Western values. The Persians under Reza Shah, friend and admirer of the Turkish reformer-leader, attempted a similar response to Western impact, but with less success. Ottoman exposure to the West had been longer in duration and more effective in preparation. The Arabians maintained a cautious, conservative attitude. As custodians of the holy places and preservers of the Islamic tradition they could not readily respond to stimuli associated with Christianity and Europe. The people of the Arab Crescent, from Egypt to Iraq, took a middle-of-the-road course, a course that bristled with difficulties, involving critical approaches to both the new offering from the West as well as the heritage from the past and then reconciling what is accepted. In this Lebanon, with its Christian majority, a tradition of liberalism and Western orientation, led the way. It is still ahead of its neighbors.

Usually when a retarded culture is confronted with an aggressive, progressive one, the economic system is the first to be affected. Introducing improved methods of agriculture, substituting machinery for handwork in industry and using trucks

and automobiles, trains and airplanes in place of camels, donkeys and mules for transport and communication entail a measure of strain on ingrained habits but no violent emotional upset. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the entire economic system of the Near East was revolutionized. Technology usually serves as the entering wedge of progress.

Social change is slower and more difficult; but once a strand from an intruding culture penetrates into a recipient culture it prepares the way for other strands. It invites them. Loyalty to an extended, patriarchal family, characteristic of Moslem society, could not be abandoned in favor of loyalty to a small biological family, modeled after the Western, without violent emotional strain; but it has been accomplished at least among urban settlers. This is especially true of those with Western or Westernized education, and this is the group to which the majority of present-day leaders of thought and action belong. Not only was the social unit—the family—overhauled, but the entire social structure. The traditional Near Eastern society comprised two main classes, an upper and a lower. But now an emerging third class of up-to-date lawyers, teachers, physicians, writers and businessmen sandwiched itself between the two and gradually absorbed the power from the upper class. This new class was recruited largely from the lower.

Such radical economic and social transformation could not have taken place without some intellectual pre-conditioning. That was primarily the result of educational work initiated by Catholic and Protestant missionaries, French, British and American. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the establishment of numberless elementary and secondary schools, for boys and for girls, throughout the area. On the higher level mention may be made of the American University of Beirut, founded in 1866, and Université Saint-Joseph of the same city, founded fifteen years later. These were preceded by Qasr al-'Aini, established by Muḥammad 'Ali in Cairo under the leadership of a French physician. These universities were responsible for introducing modern science, medicine, pharmacy, law, engineering, agriculture into the entire area. Native schools, colleges and universities soon followed, all patterned after Western models. The Arabic printing press was introduced again from the West, mak-

ing possible the production of textbooks, newspapers and magazines. The first Arabic press with movable type was produced early in the sixteenth century under papal auspices in Rome. Literary and scientific societies were born. The implementation for the modern awakening of the Arab East was complete, and *finis* was soon to be written on its dark ages.

The way was now open for political transformation. New ideas about government, law, personal liberty, rights of citizenship, democracy, nationalism struck root. All contemporary Moslem states of North Africa and Western Asia (Arabia excluded) style themselves constitutional monarchies or republics. All have adopted democratic institutions and follow democratic practices in name if not in fact. All have introduced codes from France, Belgium or Switzerland. The medieval Moslem state knew no parliaments, constitutions or elections; it recognized no law other than the religious law, *shariah* (*shari'ah*, lit. "road to a watering place").

Along with democracy, nationalism wrought havoc in Islamic political life. Not only is nationalism an import from the West, but it is basically in conflict with Islam, which recognizes no nationalism other than Islamic and acknowledges no loyalty higher than that to it. Islam, it should be recalled, is a fraternity set against the outside world. An Arab Moslem, according to this theory, owes allegiance to every other Moslem—even if in India—rather than to a non-Moslem Arab. Love of country, of course, was known and practiced, but was devoid of political implication. Nationality had no territorial association. In all Islamic languages the terms used for nationalism, democracy, patriotism, citizenship are translations from or adaptations of European terms. Sunni and Shiite theologians today may pay lip service to Arabism, but their devotion remains to Pan-Islam.

The turn of Islam the religion, in the narrow sense, came next. Islam as a way of life could not have remained intact while the above-discussed changes were taking place. Moslem reformers and modernists began to read into the sacred text—Christian-like—new ideas that were not there. The *riba* prohibited in the Koran (2:276-8; 3:125; 4:159) became usury, excessive interest.

Moslem banks thereupon, in the first half of the twentieth century, made their appearance in Egypt and Palestine. Their branches have now reached even Saudi Arabia. The koranic authorization of wife plurality carries a proviso—"and if ye fear that ye cannot do justice [to so many] then [only] one"—which, it was explained, makes polygamy difficult, if not impossible. In Tunisia polygamy is now virtually banned; in Egypt it is strictly limited. President Bourguiba's attempt, however, to abolish the month-long fast of Ramaḍān was not successful. Rare today is the modern educated Moslem, outside of certain areas, who has more than one wife. The veil, we were told by modernists, was intended only for the Prophet's wives. It is rapidly disappearing in such cities as Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad. Egyptian politicians of 1961 vintage found koranic and hadith passages legitimizing their socialist legislation including nationalizing of private property; but Saudi and Yemeni politicians were not lacking in passages proving the contrary.

Allegory was another device for reconciling religion and science. The "stones of clay" with which "swarms of flying creatures" (Koran 105:1-4) pelted the Abyssinian army attacking Mecca the year of Muḥammad's birth were smallpox eruptions. The angel which "smote" and destroyed Sennacherib's army threatening Judah (Is. 37:36), Christian exegetes have been explaining for a long time, did the work through bubonic plague. By the same token the seven days of creation were made geologic eras. The reference in the Koran (2:28) to man as "a successor" to God on earth was used by the founder of the Egyptian modernist school, Muḥammad 'Abdu (1849-1905), as justifying acceptance of the theory of evolution.

Riddled with secularizing shots, the shariah, throughout a unifying force of international Islam and hitherto considered invulnerable, took its last refuge in the realm of personal status, with jurisdiction limited to such questions as those of marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, children and orphans. First among the Moslems to depose it from its last post were the **Kemalist** Turks. Among the Arabs the Tunisians followed. The family code they introduced in 1956 differs as radically from the shariah as the Turkish code does. In 1957 Egypt abolished the religious

courts and provided that all litigation be conducted in the ordinary civil courts but under the relevant personal law. Religious court judges were generally turbaned theologians; civil court judges are usually graduates of modern law schools.

Of the five religious duties prescribed by the shariah perhaps only one, the profession of faith (*shahādah*) is practiced by a modernized Moslem. Such a man does not observe the five daily ritual prayers, does not abstain from food and drink through every day of Ramaḍān, pays no regular alms (*zakāh*) and hardly ever undertakes a holy pilgrimage.

Out of the debris of Islam, in its varied aspects, left by the onslaught of modernization and secularization, only the religious dogmas of Islam seem to have emerged almost intact. These are: the oneness of God—the messengership of Muḥammad—the holiness of the Koran—the immortality of the soul—the judgment day with reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked.

Of all religions Islam comes nearest to Christianity. When it first appeared it was taken for a heretical sect. As a matter of fact a Moslem could subscribe to the Nicene Creed with but few reservations—important though they are—and a Christian could do likewise with regard to Islamic doctrines. Alienation between the two religions was not, therefore, due to ideological differences but to economic rivalry, military aggression, political conflicts and other historical developments. Active hostility began early on contact with the Byzantines, was intensified with the conquest and occupation of Spain, Sicily, and southeastern Europe. The Crusades, the mandates and other colonial pursuits perpetuated the feud. But as the memory of the past fades away and the prospects of future aggression diminish, secularized Islam and modern Christianity will find themselves once more drawn closer together. Both sides would then realize more and more that the area in which they agree is vastly more extensive than that in which they differ and that they have one common enemy: godless unbelief.