3.

Muslim "Church Government"

In Islam, unlike Christianity, there is no tradition of a separation of church and state, of religious organization as contrasted with political organization. At least, this is the oft-repeated statement contrasting the two religions. There will be occasion to suggest important modifications to this assertion, but let it serve as a point of departure.

One simple reason for this difference between Islam and Christianity is that Islam knows no "church" in the sense of a corporate body whose leadership is clearly defined, hierarchical, and distinct from the state. The organizational arrangement of Muslim religious specialists, or ulama,[1] makes an *institutional* confrontation between Muslim church and Muslim state virtually impossible. An *'alim* may speak out against a ruler, but there is no canonical way he can summon a Muslim "church council." Nor has he any opportunity to pass his charges up the Muslim religious hierarchy until a Muslim equivalent of pope or council or synod renders a judgment binding on all members of the "church." This, at least, holds as a broad generalization (with reservations and exceptions to be noted) for Sunni Islam. As for Twelver Shi'ism, the actions of Ayatullah Khomeini and the mullahs in Iran suggest that the clergy there are more nearly a recognizable "church" hierarchy. This Sunni-Shi'i distinction calls for separate treatment.

Sunni Islam

Taking the majority Sunni case first, to argue that no distinctive corporate body equivalent to the church in Christianity exists in Sunni Islam is not to

suggest that the ulama have no group identity or that the ulama, individually or collectively, have had little impact on politics. On the contrary, throughout the ages Muslim religious spokesmen have confronted Muslim rulers—ever so circumspectly at times, but occasionally in thundering condemnation. The ulama have often led or been intimately involved in movements toppling rulers from power.

The contrasting roles in the modern era of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1787) and Shaykh Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) exemplify the range of ulama involvement in this-worldly politics. The former represented the typical Muslim challenge from the periphery to the political center. He preached a rigorous puritanical religion from the central Arabian Peninsula, and his followers took up arms against other Muslims seen as lax to the point of apostasy.

Egypt's Muhammad Abduh, by contrast, was trained at al-Azhar and spent his life not in the hinterland but at one of the representative urban centers from which political power and cultural norms have radiated throughout Islamic history. After a brief flirtation with radical politics in his early years, Abduh chose the path of meliorist reform while working with the powers that be, including foreign overlords, the British having established their military occupation of Egypt in 1882.[2]

Both Ibn Abd al-Wahhab and Abduh garnered a following among the ulama as well as the people at large. Each in a different way left an imprint on religion and politics that survives to this day. The special type of Sunni Islam that outsiders call Wahhabism continues as the official religion of Saudi Arabia.[3] Indeed, the very existence of Saudi Arabia as a sovereign state is inextricably linked to the work of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.

Abduh was the pioneer and principal champion of the Salafiyya school of Islamic modernism, which insists that Islam, properly understood, is perfectly attuned to the liberal, democratic, and scientific values of the modern world. The Salafiyya ideology has strongly influenced two quite different movements:

1. The Muslim Brethren (founded in 1928), which, still in existence and now representing what might be labeled moderate fundamentalism, served also in the decades following its creation as the chrysalis from which later emerged many of today's radical Islamist movements.
2. The diffuse cluster of ideological options embracing the various gradations of religious liberalism, secularism, and what might be called Muslim Erastianism.

Many examples of moderate or radical ulama impact upon constituted political authority, such as personified by Abduh and ibn Abd al-Wahhab, can be cited going back to the earliest days of Islam. Time after time the ulama refused to be "lions under the throne" and instead defined religious limits to royal authority.[4] Time after time religious leaders took to the periphery and organized religio-political challenges to the political center, often overthrowing and replacing the existing dynasty in a recurring geopolitical dialectic brilliantly interpreted centuries ago by the celebrated Ibn Khaldun.[5]

At this point we need to address what might appear to be a contradiction between two general assertions thus far advanced:

1. A confrontation between Muslim "church" and Muslim state is virtually impossible, since there is no such organizationally structured Muslim body of "clergy," but
2. Muslim religious leaders from earliest times to the present day have resisted and at times challenged and even overthrown Muslim rulers. Anyone who can win over the ulama or in other ways achieve a standing as a valid religious spokesman is in a position to pose a serious organized challenge to government.

The two points can be reconciled. Perhaps one way to understand the general Sunni Muslim arrangement of religious and political power is to realize that the very amorphousness of Muslim religious structures has provided religious spokesmen protection against state control.

The state can give office and other perquisites to the Muslim clergy it favors, but throughout Muslim history the state has been circumspect in its dealings with religious spokesmen, even state-appointed officials, for two complementary reasons: 1. Assertive state action against religious spokesmen risks setting off a reaction that the state cannot easily control and 2. there is usually no need to contemplate such action since the Muslim clergy lack the institutionalized framework to stand as an organized body against the state. Indeed, in the modern era the Sunni ulama have tended to become organized not so much as a discrete corporate body but as part of the state apparatus.

A Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in eighteenth-century Arabia or his numerous predecessors may take the Muslim equivalent of nailing their doctrinal theses to the church door at Wittenberg, but there is no Muslim pope to bring the issue to trial. The Sunni ulama have almost never acted in an organized fashion as if they constituted an institutionally distinct, hierarchically arranged body. This refusal to organize, to confront, to let things

proceed to a showdown provides the Muslim clergy a certain protection against state control.[6]

Or perhaps a more subtle statement of the relationship is that neither state officialdom nor religious spokesmen have sufficient motivation to push matters to confrontation. The state has the organizational means but usually no great need to impose conformity on the ulama. The ulama lack the organizational framework—by contrast with the Catholic Church in its confrontation with the state in medieval Europe—but are usually not pressed by the state to abandon either doctrine or actions that they deem fundaments of the faith.

In religio-political confrontations that do occur many of the ulama continue to serve the state, and even sometimes take the offenders (in the eyes of the government) to task for violating legitimate Islamic practice. Just as often, however, the establishment ulama would take a more circumspect position, neither confronting the government nor anathematizing (if that Christian term may be used) the opposition. Other ulama might go over to the challenger either actively or quietly and behind the scenes. Many other ulama would adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

Examples in modern times of "establishment" ulama cooperating with political authority include the following:

1. In c. 1800 Hammuda Bey of Tunis ordered his ulama to write a rebuttal to a proselytizing letter sent by Wahhabi adherents. A leading Tunisian 'alim wrote a scathing response in Arabic rhyming prose (*saj'*).
2. Then, in the 1933, still in Tunisia but now a French protectorate, a qadi in Bizerte ruled that Tunisians who had adopted French citizenship thereby lost their status as Muslims and could not be buried in Muslim cemeteries. Pressed by the protectorate authorities to solve the problem (being exploited by the young Habib Bourguiba and those destined to create the nationalist Neo-Destour Party) the chief Maliki and Hanafi ulama issued a fatwa announcing that Muslims adopting French citizenship could regain their Muslim status provided they "repented." This satisfied neither the protectorate authorities nor—even less—the nationalists. Demonstrations against these ulama continued, and the protectorate authorites got out of their plight by creating separate Muslim cemeteries for Tunisians granted French citizenship.
3. Following the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the Egyptian government prevailed upon the leading ulama of al-Azhar to issue a statement supporting the accord. The ulama cited the *Al-Hudabiyya*

> agreement reached between Muhammad and the Meccan leadership in the early period of the Prophet's leadership to justify the peace treaty with Israel. Earlier, however, 150 ulama meeting at al-Azhar on August 7, 1960, had issued a proclamation calling on Muslims throughout the world to "adopt an attitude of jihad against the Shah of Iran's recognition of Israel."[7]

For this reason religio-political challenges throughout Islamic history have often been set in motion, quite literally, by voices crying in the wilderness (e.g., Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, the founder of the Sanusiyya order from a remote oasis in southeast Libya, or the Sudanese mahdi from Aba Island, far removed from Khartoum). Such action would then lead to a variety of possible outcomes: the most extreme would be either the downfall of a dynasty (the Mahdist forces overrunning Khartoum and establishing their government in Sudan) or the disgrace, and perhaps death, of the religious leader (the many defeated and thus "false prophets" noted in Western literature during the colonial period). Another alternative could be the failure of the religio-political challenger to win over the political center but the building of a new, viable sectarian movement in the hinterland (Sanusiyya in Libya or Wahhabiyya in Arabia).

Politics aplenty in all this, but nothing quite like the institutionalized church-state confrontations of European history. It is, instead, rather more like European church-state cooperation in confronting heresy raising its head in the hinterland.

Of course, the state has always had—and still has—great power to influence the ulama. Throughout much of Sunni Muslim history, and especially in modern times, the state has assumed the right to appoint and dismiss qadis, muftis, and teachers in Muslim seminaries, has exercised control over financial aspects of Muslim religious properties such as mosques, madrasas (religious schools), and the institution of *waqf* (endowment funds earmarked for religious purposes), and has used state police power to punish, imprison, and exile recalcitrant Muslim religious leaders.

In certain cases state control over the Muslim religious establishment became so pervasive that the ulama virtually became an arm of government. The best example was the Ottoman Empire, in which the ulama were largely integrated into the state apparatus. Such a development is perhaps best explained by the Ottoman's having possessed the most elaborate bureaucracy of any Muslim empire. For that matter, the roots of Ottoman government can be traced, at least in part, to the earlier Byzantine political tradition that the Ottomans built upon even while destroying the Byzantine Empire.

Not even the Ottoman Empire, however, attempted to impose religious doctrine. Nor did the members of the Muslim religious establishment holding government office make such an effort. This is all the more significant in that the Ottoman Empire developed institutionalized structures that might have made such moves possible.

For example, from the nineteenth century on the Ottomans did make an effort to breathe new life into the old idea of the ruler as caliph or, in effect, the religious leader of all Muslims as well as the sovereign over Ottoman subjects, regardless of their religion. This tendency, which peaked during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), was an interesting example of cross-cultural feedback. The classic idea of the caliph as religious and political leader of the Muslim *umma* had remained throughout the centuries the centerpiece of Muslim political theory, but statements on the subject by Muslim scholars had long been quite divorced from operative reality. The caliph in such writing was as removed from the real world as was the Platonic philosopher-king, and the only historical approximation of such an ideal was deemed to have lapsed after the reign of the "rightly guided caliphs," Muhammad's first four successors—Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali. (This, of course, is the Sunni formulation. Shi'i Muslims believe that Muhammad's son-in-law, Ali, should have directly succeeded, then followed by Ali's progeny.)

Thereafter, the title of caliph when bestowed upon Muslim rulers had been essentially an honorific, an inflation of throne titles common to most monarchical systems. The title was not seen by rulers or the ruled as a serious claim to either the historical caliphate or, even less, what might be called the idealized caliphate.

The West, however, had long misperceived the Ottoman ruler as a "Muslim pope," and as the West increasingly interfered in Ottoman affairs in support of Christian Ottoman subjects it seemed natural to Sultan Abdulhamid II that he should, indeed, be the Muslim "pope" and stand up for Muslims everywhere. Just such an arrangement had been prefigured as long ago as 1774 in the Treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarja between the Ottoman Empire and Russia.[8] Moreover, the idea of the Ottoman sultan as both religious and political leader made more sense in Abdulhamid II's day, by which time the empire was becoming overwhelmingly Muslim, having lost almost all of its Balkan provinces where Christians predominated. The result was Pan-Islam.

Sultan Abdulhamid II did not, however, opt for any Muslim caesaropapism. He supported religious figures, sponsored the building of the Hijaz Railroad to connect Damascus with the holy cities of Mecca and Madina

(funds were raised from all over the Muslim world by individual subscriptions) and was ever alert to gestures or acts that could enhance his position as leader of the entire Muslim umma. This is as far as he went. He did not try to decide religious doctrine, nor did he seek to exercise tighter control over the religious leadership.

In the Ottoman Empire there also developed the imposing office of *shaykh al-Islam*. This official, with his office in Istanbul, the imperial capital, came to be regarded as the principal mufti or, as it were, the mufti of last resort. This office could have stimulated the development of an organized and distinctive judiciary that might have more readily confronted the Ottoman executive. Something like a separation of powers as in the political thought of Montesquieu or in American governmental practice might have emerged. Nothing of the sort developed. The office had great prestige, but sultans appointed and dismissed whomever they wished, making a change on the average of every three or four years.[9]

Nor did the Muslim ulama attempt to nominate their own candidate or to support the continued tenure of an existing shaykh al-Islam. Individual holders of the office did from time to time get involved in high politics (such as issuing a fatwa to depose a reigning sultan), but no institutionalized power emerged from these activities. If the sultan was not really a Muslim pope, the shaykh al-Islam did not become one either. He was not even the Muslim equivalent of the archbishop of Canterbury.

In sum, the Sunni approach to church government is more akin to the Jewish. It rejects clerical hierarchy or centralizing procedures for establishing doctrine and law as well as for rewarding or punishing individual believers (Islam developed only limited and seldom used equivalents to penance, indulgence, anathema, or excommunication, all of which were for centuries fully institutionalized in Christian practice). Sunni Muslim political experience is, however, more like that of the Christian West—a religious establishment with close ties to government with both claiming to represent the majority population. A word now is in order concerning the quite different "church government" of Shi'ism.

Shi'i Islam

Shi'ism is legitimist, to adapt Western political terminology. The imamate, Shi'is assert, should have gone directly to Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and it should have remained thereafter from generation to generation in the Alid family line. As noted earlier, the majority Shi'i com-

munity believe that there were, counting Ali, twelve such imams in legitimate succession, the twelfth imam, having disappeared from worldly view, has since been in a state of occultation (*ghayba*).[10] Shi'a eschatology anticipates the return of the twelfth imam as the mahdi (the divinely guided) who will usher in the golden age and the consummation of God's plan.

This bedrock principle of the imamate in Shi'ism would not, however, necessarily produce a hierarchical, corporate Shi'i clergy. The role of the imam/mahdi in Shi'ism bears comparison to the role of the messiah in Judaism and of Christ's Second Coming in Christianity. Judaism has no clergy but instead a rabbinate (very much like the Sunni ulama). Christianity developed a corporate body—the church—and a clerical hierarchy. This divergent historical experience indicates that a religious system positing an occulted leader possessing divine or near-divine attributes (a Jewish messiah, a Christian Christ, or a Shi'i imam) could accommodate either a body of religious specialists who might be a nonhierarchical clustering of individuals and groups (as the rabbinate) or a corporate body arranged hierarchically (as the Catholic Church). Or the result might well be something in between the two. This latter possibility may best define the Twelver Shi'a clergy.

Shi'ism emerged as a fully elaborated theological system during a period of Sunni political power first under the Umayyads and then their rivals and successors, the Abbasids. To compress a complex story into a few words, the patristic age of Shi'ism involved moving toward a "spiritualization" of the imamate in order to avoid confronting existing political authority. In the same way and for the same reason there grew up the important Shi'i tenet of *taqiyya* (dissimulation), permitting believers to deny or dissimulate their beliefs if exposed to danger.

This prudent, politically quietist stance vis-à-vis worldly power continued in large measure among the Twelver Shi'i community until the sixteenth century[11] when a radical millenarian Shi'i movement, that of the Safavids, burst upon the scene in Iran. Iran, now rightly seen as the heartland of Twelver Shi'ism, was actually converted to that faith only in the sixteenth century under the aegis of this radical religio-political dynasty. The nineteenth-century Orientalist interpretation of Shi'ism as representing pre-Islamic Iranian culture and Sunnism reflecting pre-Islamic Arab culture has been proven to be an anachronism.

Twelver Shi'ism in today's world can summarily be presented in terms of the following evolution since the sixteenth century: the virtually messianic and charismatic authority of early Safavid Shi'ism was later routinized (to apply Max Weber's formulation) with the body of ulama (or mullahs, the term more in use in Iran) regaining control over religious doctrine and prac-

tice. The turbulence following the overthrow of the Safavid dynasty in 1722 could only strengthen the claims of the ulama to religious leadership, for the ensuing political leadership lacked any special religious aura. Moreover, the last major example of political leadership seeking to impose religious doctrine ended in complete failure. This was the effort by Nadir Shah (ruled 1736–1747) to effect a Sunni-Shi'i merger. The Shi'i ulama emerged victorious as defenders of the Shi'i faith.

Something approaching political stability was again reached with the advent of the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925), but the autonomy of the Shi'i clergy was not threatened since the Qajars claimed no special religious mandate to leadership as had the Safavids.

The eighteenth century in Iran also witnessed a confrontation between two schools of thought dividing the Shi'i ulama—the *Akhbari* versus the *Usuli*. The former held a position more like that of Sunni Islam in arguing that there was no need for independent scholarly judgment and interpretation (*ijtihad*). The Qur'an plus the statements of the Prophet Muhammad and the imams (*akhbar*)[12] were considered sufficient guidance to the faithful, thereby ruling out the use of human reason or of *ijtihad*. The *Usuli* school, on the contrary, affirmed the need for human reasoning and ijtihad in each generation.

Ultimately the Usuli school won out. This meant that the faithful required the guidance of a reasoning religious specialist, in a word, an 'alim who was a *mujtahid* (one who engages in ijtihad). There was to be no Protestant-like "priesthood of all believers." Instead, every believer needed to follow a mujtahid who would be for that believer a *marja'-e taqlid* (a source of imitation). The more influential of the clerical sources of imitation came to be called ayatullahs (literally, sign of God). Then in the early nineteenth century the Shi'i clergy developed the additional idea that the optimal arrangement was that of a single *marja'* to whom all others deferred. The Shi'i ulama were becoming more nearly a distinctive and even, in a sense, a corporate body. That all this makes Shi'i "church government" more like that of the Catholic Church has been noted by several observers. For example, "The triumph of the usuli school and the emergence of the institution of the supreme source for emulation are as important in the history of modern Shi'ism as the victory for papal power at Vatican I was for modern Roman Catholicism."[13] Or,

> In the first half of the nineteenth century, Shi'ism markedly diverged from the general Islamic pattern, becoming more similar to Western Christianity. As was the case with the papacy in medieval Western

> Christianity, in sharp contrast to Byzantine caesaropapism and its Russian heir, it was the successful institutional translation of the separation of the religious and the political spheres that subsequently gave the Shi'ite hierocracy tremendous *political* power as the independent custodians of religion and of the sacred law.[14]

Even so, the Shi'i ulama did not develop the kind of strict hierarchy as seem in Roman Catholicism from parish priest to pope. Nor is there any body of eminent Shi'i clergy designated to select that single marja' equivalent to the College of Cardinals empowered to elect each new pope. The question of who becomes recognized as an ayatullah or a marja' has no such hard-and-fast rules. Rather, one becomes an ayatullah not by election but rather by informal accretions of religious scholarly opinion that so and so is deemed worthy of the august title. There is almost a post facto aspect to the process: after enough religious scholars have come to so designate an 'alim whom they choose to follow, the title of ayatullah accrues to the man by a sort of emerging consensus. Something of the same approach characterizes the designation of an ayatullah as the single marja' of his time. Interestingly, efforts by political authority to designate the marja' have been resisted.

Another important aspect of the Shi'i ulama vis-à-vis the state and worldy affairs is that they, unlike their Sunni counterparts, have managed to rely financially more on contributions given directly to them by their followers. Of course, political authority from the time of the Safavids to the end of the Pahlavi dynasty offered the ulama official positions and financial inducements, but the Shi'i ulama never became nearly so "bureaucratized" as did their Sunni peers in, for example, the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman successor states. That a revolution in Iran was led by the ulama whereas Islamic radicals in most countries with Sunni majorities are largely from outside the ranks of the ulama dramatically illustrates how such structural differences impact on political dynamics. Indeed, the Sunni Islamic radicals often accuse the leading Sunni ulama of being catspaws of the government.

It remains to say a word about relations between religion and politics, betweeen "church" and "state" in today's Iran. Put simply, was the revolution that sent Muhammad Reza Shah into exile and produced the Islamic Republic consistent with earlier Iranian history? Did it accord with what we might call Shi'i political ideology?

Precedents for ulama activism are be found. There was the important role of the ulama in the Tobacco Concession boycott or during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution,[15] not to mention the earlier religio-political

movement that ushered in the Safavid dynasty and converted Iran to Twelver Shi'ism. Even so, the political ideology advanced by Ayatullah Khomeini and the political reality of a government actually led by mullahs represents a sharp break with tradition. Khomeini scornfully dismissed any argument for not only political quietism but also political prudence. Instead, the ulama in the absence of the Hidden Imam had, in his view, the responsibility of actively "commanding the good and forbidding the evil." The ulama could neither retire to their prayers and their private lives nor counsel others to do so. They could not tolerate non-Islamic practices by those in authority with the excuse that all government was necessarily illegitimate in the absence of the Imam.

Although Khomeini was careful to insist that the religious leaders were fallible, unlike the Imam, who was *ma'sum* (divinely inspired and sinless), they were, in his judgment, obliged to assume the Imam's worldly burdens of guiding the community. Moreover, to Khomeini, such guidance went far beyond the more traditional role of advising rulers. It even exceeded the activist tradition of thundering against the misdeeds of rulers and working to replace them. The ulama were to participate actively in governance, and this is just what happened in the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the office of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurisconsult) as set out in Khomeini's earlier writings being assumed by him until his death.[16]

In sum, the ulama in both Sunni and Shi'i Islam are an identifiable body of religious specialists. They attain this status following an extended period of formal training, just as is the case with Christian clergy. They then usually move into professional careers as teachers, preachers, judges (qadis), jurisconsults (muftis), or mosque officials in some other capacity. Just as the Christian clergy have ranged in eminence and theological sophistication from an Augustine or Thomas or Tillich to those with only a smattering of the basics so, too, there have been leading ulama throughout the centuries from a Ghazali, an Ibn Taimiyya, a Muhammad Abduh, or an Ayatullah Khomeini alongside those only slightly above the Muslim "laity" in religious learning. To this extent the idea that there is no "clergy" in Islam may be compared to the Protestant cry of the priesthood of all believers. Neither maxim is completely false but neither embraces the whole truth.

Always distinguishable from those pursuing civil or military positions in government, the ulama have nevertheless at times been so absorbed into

governmental activities as to be deemed virtually part of the bureaucracy. Such a development characterized the Ottoman Empire as well as most of the Ottoman successor states. The Shi'i ulama of Iran have managed to keep a greater group identity and separation from government—until with the Islamic Revolution beginning in 1979 they became government itself. Will this revolutionary change survive and become the norm? Only time will tell.

The ulama, Sunni or Shi'i, provide one important key to understanding the relationship of Islam to politics, and clearly assertions such as "no separation of church and state in Islam" or "no priesthood in Islam" fail to capture the more complex reality of Islamic history.