4.

The Historical Bases of Traditional Muslim and Christian Political Theory

Most Muslims and most Christians have for centuries lived as majority communities ruled by governments that are at least nominally of the same faith. Even the religio-political struggles within Christendom and Islamdom have usually been intrafaith, such as Protestant versus Catholic or Sunni versus Shi'i.

Not so for the Jews. Throughout most of their history Jews have lived as tiny vulnerable minorities. Under such circumstances there was little practical need for a specifically Jewish political theory. Questions concerning the extent to which government, or the political community, should be guided by Jewish religious teachings simply had little relevance to the worldly situation of Jews. Indeed, only with Zionism and the creation of Israel did the need arise for defining the interaction of religious and political life in a state with a Jewish majority.

What, however, should the believer render unto Caesar when the particular caesar in question is of the same religious faith? Even more, what if this caesar presumes to be the defender of the faith, to seek religious legitimation for his rule? Such has been the lot of most Christians and most Muslims throughout the centuries, and it follows that Christian and Muslim thinkers have been obliged to address the questions of religion and the state in a way that Jewish thinkers have not.

From the historical perspective Jesus's instruction to "render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21) represented the political wisdom of a tiny minority seeking protection against government and the larger society by pru-

dently refusing to get involved in politics. Jesus's reply to the question of whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar was not an answer but a prudent evasion.

Any clear answer would have harmed Jesus's mission. If he had replied yes, he would lose favor with the many antigovernment and antiestablishment forces. If he had advised against paying taxes, he would likely have faced harsh governmental action. The evasive answer Jesus gave was relevant to the political situation he and his small band of followers confronted, just as this kind of political withdrawal remained relevant for most of subsequent Jewish history.[1]

The maxim "render to Caesar" does not, in short, really answer the question that later majority Christian communities faced, and it represents only an early phase of the Christian community's development in this world. It is also clear why no equivalent of "render to Caesar" figures in the Qur'an or in the hadith literature. Islam grew up in political success. The question of accommodating to non-Muslim worldly authority did not arise.

Christianity and Islam began in almost diametrically opposite political circumstances, but within a few centuries both religions faced similar political questions growing out of similar political reality. Both had become universal religions whose followers were of different languages and cultures. Both religions had spread over vast territories, and throughout most of the areas conquered for Christianity or Islam the faithful eventually became a majority of the population. Moreover, within the vast territorial expanses that made up Christendom and *Dar al-Islam*, political power was in the hands of those professing the faith.

The situation was never static. Exceptions always existed. Islam gave way to Christianity in Iberia, Christianity to Islam in Anatolia. Christianity continued to push out with great success in various parts of the world, Islam with similar success in other parts. The earliest Christian churches of the Holy Land and the Eastern Mediterranean lost their dominant positions and survived as ever decreasing minorities within the world of Islam. Nebulous and shifting zones of Christian-Muslim confrontation and coexistence such as now pertain in much of Africa have always existed. There have always been significant Christian minorities living among non-Christian majorities and ruled by non-Christian rulers. The same holds for Muslims.

Yet after all the changes over time and the many exceptions are duly noted it remains true that most of the world's Christians and most of the world's Muslim have lived for most of the time as majority communities in polities controlled by their coreligionists. This highlights the radical and

traumatic situation Muslims have faced in modern times when they found themselves directly or indirectly dominated by non-Muslims.

It is, accordingly, appropriate to use the more familiar history of Christian political theory as a yardstick for clarifying and interpreting Islamic political thought. Only a tantalizing sampling of broad generalizations can be mentioned, but perhaps the unavoidable distortion that comes with such simplifications can be offset by a perspective that emphasizes the shared circumstances of Islamic and Christian political traditions.

Politically both religions went through a process of compromises with and adjustments to the world. In Max Weber's terms there was a "routinization of charisma." Not all the believers accepted this in good grace. Within the two religious communities small groups have always come forward to resist such "routinization" with its inevitable adjustments and compromises that institutionalization necessarily bring. For these resisters nothing but a totally consistent application of the perceived religious truths, come what may, would suffice. Of such stuff are martyrs made, and not a few bigots as well.

These all-outers in the two religions have played an important role in posing the political questions to be resolved, but if the all-outers had won, neither Christianity nor Islam would have become, or have remained, universal religions. They would, instead, have continually split and resplit into smaller sects. Consensus politics is the cement of universal religions, even if this process is at times obscured by being carried out within the framework of authoritarian systems.

The Western Christian compromise with the world of politics went somewhat as follows: Christianity evolved from a proletarian outcast community to become the state religion in the Roman Empire.[2] The church government and the pattern of church leadership that had become effectively institutionalized before Rome embraced Christianity did not, however, go out of existence. Instead, church and state existed side by side.

Both church and state claimed otherworldly sanction. Both claimed thisworldly authority. Neither ever totally dominated the other. In the extended confrontation that ensued polemicists on both sides (usually clergymen or of clerical training whether supporting pope or emperor) created the corpus of medieval political thought that, together with the earlier Greco-Roman legacy of political philosophy, makes up the bedrock on which later Western political thought rests.

In the process, the existence of an organized church with its own hierarcy of leadership closely linked to but institutionally distinct from the state was accepted. The necessity and legitimacy of government was accepted. The

need for government to conform to a religious standard of conduct was accepted. Only the questions of who was to determine that standard and who to judge whether it was being met were left unresolved.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation brought additional problems obliging new adjustments. These new adjustments were long in coming and took a heavy toll in human suffering along the way, but eventually there emerged the notion of the secular state, a political entity that was to be judged by religiously based principles of morality but in no way controlled by or even accountable to any religious body.

The medieval church-state arrangement and the modern idea of a secular state that is religiously neutral were both the results of working compromises. The more reasonable among the partisans of pope or emperor, just as later the more reasonable Catholics and Protestants, seeing that doctrinal purity and logical consistency spelled continued strife, settled for a nebulous but manageable middle ground between the extremes. The ideological results of such compromises are always complex if not at times confused, making them vulnerable to the persistently logical attacks of the *pur et dur* intellectually inflexible. Such, it might be argued, is the customary fate of consensus politics, whether in the religious or the political field, but most of all in the area where religion and politics come together.

Muslim compromise with and adjustment to the world of politics took an interestingly different route. The Muslim community started, of course, from a different point. Muhammad and his immediate successors presided over both a new religious community and an imposing, rapidly expanding new polity. The early Christian church was, by contrast, a politically insignificant body that shunned worldly political ambition (believing the end of time was nigh). Facing the early Muslim community was the question of how to organize a state appropriate to the new religion.

Even this way of expressing the worldly development of Islam is not quite right, implying as it does a body of religious founders more or less consciously providing for a political apparatus. There was no Muslim church putting together a Muslim state. Rather, the new Muslim community—the *umma*—developed from a worldview that perceived religion and politics as a seamless web, that thought of this world and the world to come as a continuum. This perception is well expressed in the hadith of the Prophet, "Work for this world as if you would live forever. Work for the world to come as if you would die tomorrow."

In theological terms the early Muslim community did not accept that the end of time was nigh, nor that the believer should renounce this world in preparation for the world soon to come. In political terms the early Muslim

community gave religious valuation to this-worldy matters. It accepted the religious imperative of implementing God's plan in this world.

Accordingly, the historical period extending from the time Muhammad was first called by God through the rule of the four rightly guided caliphs—roughly two generations—has always been viewed by Muslims as the golden age. It was the time when God's divine plan was believed to have come closest to being achieved.

Of course, the time of Jesus and the early apostles is equally Christianity's golden age. The enduring political import of these two golden ages, however, differs sharply. Those Christians of later centuries looking back on the primitive church as model for their times were inclined toward separatism and sectarianism. Any effort to reconstruct the early Christian Church involved logically (and psychologically) renunciation of the imperfect world and the creation of a small body of the totally committed who would form their own community, open only to those accepting their demanding standards.

The Muslim reformer seeking to get back to the piety and the purity of the Islamic golden age could not opt out of the existing imperfect umma. The Muslim reformer's model was not, and is not, that of a small, tight-knit, vulnerable, and totally committed tiny community in but not of this world. It is, instead, that of a dynamic, politically successful great society accepting God's charge to maintain a divinely guided umma both in this world and the world to come.[3]

The Christian harking back to the Christian golden age would be motivated to repudiate the snares of this world, the Muslim to call for a reordering of this world according to God's plan.

The Christian neotraditionalist could be reconciled to political insignificance and minority status even within Christendom, but not the Muslim, who would feel compelled to bring back into being the powerful, politically significant early umma.

Contrast, for example, the sociopolitical implications of Paul's effort to raise the spirits of the insignificant (in worldly terms) church at Corinth with the Qur'anic passage (revealed three years after Muhammad had become leader in Madina) calling for unity and community:

> For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world. (lst Corinthians 1:26–28)

> And hold fast, all of you together, to the cable of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor unto you; how ye were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that ye became as brothers by His grace. . . . And there may spring from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful. (Qur'an 3:103–104)

For this reason the Muslim "patristic age" is infinitely more important to Islam and to Muslims as a source of political ideas than the Christian equivalent is to Christianity and Christians. The Christian thinker looking for models of the Christian approach to politics would be pushed to go beyond the Christian golden age, which has, after all, very little to say about politics. For this very reason Christian political theory (or, more largely, political theory emerging from a Christian context) has paid great attention to such matters as church-state relations in medieval Christendom, to the theological struggles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and to the religio-political implications of the rise of the secular state.

Political theory in the Christian context has, in other words, always ranged over a broad field of historical experience. There has been a corresponding deemphasis of the early church period as a political model.

Not so for Islam. The Muslim period of the Prophet and the four rightly guided caliphs stands splendidly alone as the significant model to which Muslims concerned with political philosophy should repair. Even the Shi'i political tradition gives overwhelming importance to essentially the same period, although different interpretations are placed on the same historical facts. The Shi'a contend that only Ali and his lineal descendants should have succeeded to the calphate. Moreover, the "patristic age" for Shi'ism extended somewhat beyond the age of the Sunni four rightly guided caliphs to include the martyrdom of Husayn (61 A.H./680 C.E.). In a sense the principal branch of Shi'ism that recognizes twelve imams from the family of the Prophet beginning with Ali might be said to have a "patristic age" extending until the *ghayba* of that twelfth imam in 869 C.E. Even so, the historical period from which the political (and other) doctrines of Shi'ism are largely derived is that encompassed by the mission of Muhammad, the imamate of his son-in-law, Ali, and of the next two imams, Ali's sons Hasan and Husayn.

This is not to dismiss the many important points distinguishing Sunni and Shi'a approaches to politics or to overlook the complex religio-political history of the early Muslim community, but it does seem valid to insist that, by contrast with Christianity, Islam in all its varieties looks back to its earliest years for its political model.

The decisive importance of early Muslim historical experience provides common ground on which virtually all later Muslims concerned with Islam and politics have chosen to take their stand. The neotraditionalist Hasan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brethren in 1928, emphasized the early Muslim community as the political model to be emulated. So, too, did the radical Shi'a political activist Ayatullah Khomeini.

At the same time, the modernist Ali Abd al-Raziq, arguing for a Muslim equivalent of separation between church and state, attempted to make his case by reinterpreting the religio-political history of the origins and early development of the caliphate. Equally, the radical 'alim from Egypt's al-Azhar, Khalid Muhammad Khalid, set out to justify a socialist approach to politics by appealing to examples from the time of the early Muslim community.[4]

Indeed, observers of Muslim political thought in modern times have often noted, sometimes with patronizing sympathy, sometimes with superciliousness, that those Muslims who seek democracy argue that Muhammad was the first democrat and the early Muslim community the first democracy, those advocating socialism depict Muhammad as the first socialist and the early community as the first socialist state, and so on as political styles change. Even certain Muslim communists went so far as to urge that Muhammad and the early community prefigured the idealized communist society.

What this persistent attitude of mind does reveal is the continued importance of the early Muslim community as political model. The idealized early community as a reservoir of Muslim political ideas must not be ignored by anyone who would understand the political rhetoric of Muslims past, present, and—so we are persuaded—future.

Other political traditions unrelated or at best loosely tied to the early Muslim umma model did emerge in Islamic societies. There was the rich heritage of Greek political thought developed by Muslim philosophers. There was also the literature of the "mirrors for princes" or practical guides to rulers. Nor should the borrowings from political traditions absorbed into the expanding Islamic civilization (such as the Sassanian, Byzantine, and Mongol) be ignored. Without careful attention to these other traditions the student of Islamic history throughout the ages would be quite at a loss to explain what daily governance was actually like and why.

Nevertheless, these other political traditions were not effectively integrated with the paradigmatic model of the early umma. Instead of a symbiotic relationship between the different political traditions there developed more nearly a compartmentalization.

Muslim philosophers studied and developed Greek philosophical thought but all the while accepted the clear distinction between *fiqh* (Islamic law) and *falsafa* (speculative philosophy).

Those writing tracts for rulers on how to rule were careful to honor the God-given Islamic religio-political model but were more concerned with practical advice than the religious model.

Imposing state structures were created starting with those early years when the Muslim center of political gravity shifted from Mecca and Madina to Damascus and later Baghdad. The ensuing fourteen centuries have witnessed many distinctively Islamic dynasties marked for longevity, territorial expanse, and cultural achievement. A roll call of selected dynasties suffices to make the point—Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, Almohad, Mamluk, Seljuk, Moghul, Safavid, and Ottoman. A venerable tradition of government developed throughout the centuries, one that acknowledged the primacy of the political model set out in the early community but made little effort to work out the implications of that ideal umma model for one's own times.

In other words, mainstream Muslim political thought throughout the ages has protected inviolate the idealized early community by resisting the temptation to relate too precisely the pristine model to stubborn reality. The model of the early community remains thus an unsullied norm, but in the terminology of modern political science the maxims derived from the idealized model are not readily operationalized. To those understanding political theory in terms of the post-Machiavellian Western tradition,[5] it almost seems as if the strictly Muslim political theory (as distinguished from the philosophical writings of Muslims or the "mirrors for princes" penned by Muslims) is satisfied to affirm that the good ruler should rule well, not really defining either "good" or "well" more explicitly but insisting that the answer is readily to be found in the Qur'an, the Sunna, and the practice of the early community.

Is this to say that Muslim thinkers were ignorant of—or deliberately ignored—the great differences in scale between Muhammad's ruling a small community in Madina and a caliph or sultan ruling a far-flung empire from Damascus or Baghdad or Delhi or Istanbul? No.

Did Muslim thinkers turn their backs on such precise questions as taxation, administration, rules of war, or the treatment of minorities? Again, certainly not. Muslim philosophers, theologians, and jurists have written tomes on just such subjects. Moreover, until modern times—and the shattering impact of the West on Islamic peoples—the broad lines of such writings were all part of the educated man's intellectual baggage.

One is tempted to put it this way: no Muslim Thomas Aquinas attempt-

ed systematically to integrate religious and other-than-religious sciences in a way that could provide guidance in political philosophy. Yet such a statement will not do, either, for it overlooks the really impressive efforts at philosophical/theological synthesis by such Muslims as al-Ghazali and Al-Ash'ari, not to mention the more strictly philosophical tradition of political thought culminating in the masterful work of Ibn Khaldun.

The most that can be said is that the writings of Muslims on what we Westerners would label political theory did seem rather more inclined to stay within one of the separate traditions—either philosophy or theology or practical guides for princes—and to steer clear of attempts to relate the one tradition chosen to the other two, even though all three were known to educated Muslims.

Another way to illuminate this distinction between Christian and Muslim approaches to political theory is to let Martin Luther exemplify a strand in the Christian approach that has no Muslim equivalent. Luther wrote,

> A man who would venture to govern an entire community, or the world, with the Gospel would be like a shepherd who would place in one fold wolves, lions, eagles and sheep together and say, "Help yourselves, and be good and peaceful among yourselves; the fold is open, there is plenty of food; have no fear of dogs or clubs!" The sheep, forsooth, would keep the peace and would allow themselves to be fed and governed in peace, but they would not live long.[6]

Many Muslim thinkers would not disagree with the import of Luther's remarks, but one would look in vain for a Muslim thinker who would assert so categorically that the Muslim scriptures did not constitute a completely adequate guide to mundane political practice.

Nor is this to say that the gamut of Muslim political thinking reveals either a blind or willfully stubborn idealism. On the contrary, the mirrors for princes literature is of a very practical nature, arguing, in effect: This is the way the world is. This is how people must be managed by rulers.

Even so, no Muslim writer went so far as to assert, or even suggest, that the necessary answers to daily political problems were not to be found in the Muslim scriptures.

Why this difference between classical Muslim and Christian political theory? That elusive issue is addressed in the next chapter.