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Unity and Community

A weakness of much cross-cultural scholarship is a tendency to move, often quite unconsciously, from the legitimate inquiry of how "they" are different from "us" to the more dubious question: "Why can't they be like us?"

The best antidote to such superciliousness is to study first what the alien culture sought to achieve and did achieve by the choices made. Thereby, the political problems arising from the confrontation between the cultural values adopted and the ongoing historical development can be more clearly seen from within.

From this internal perspective it is not so much that Muslim societies failed to link Islamic thought with political practice but that the Muslim self-image gave preeminent importance to the ideals of unity and community. To clarify this interpretation of Islamic political thought let us recall two fundamental points already adumbrated in a somewhat different context.

First, the clear relevance of early Muslim political theory for all later thinking about the role of the state and the political community coupled with the natural tendency of any scriptural religion to emphasize the historical period during which those scriptures were revealed combined to give the political model of the idealized early *umma* an unchallenged role in later Muslim thinking about politics.

Second, since a hierarchically structured clergy charged with establishing doctrine never developed in the Islamic community there was—viewing the matter politically—no effective institutional way to reconcile differences between religious dogma and political practice.

Rulers learned that they could usually get the acquiescence of their subjects provided they did not try to impose orthodoxy. Subjects learned that they could deviate in their religious belief and practice provided they did not openly challenge government. Certain ulama could resist the blandishments of government office, others could accept, and all could accommodate in a system wherein no one—not even the caliph—presumed to speak ex cathedra (to use the Catholic term) on religious dogma.

Expressing this point somewhat differently, it might be said that societies—just like individuals—do not go out of their way looking for problems to solve. They tend to tackle problems that cannot be avoided. The early Muslim community developed in a way that facilitated the compartmentalization, isolation, and, thus, nonresolution of potentially explosive issues involving religion and politics.

In the Christian development, especially in the Latin Church, members of the religious hierarchy, right up to the pope, had to decide on issues presented or forfeit the claims on which the institutional church was based. The same obligation to take a stand faced the emperor unless he was willing to grant by default this authority to the pope.

Since the caliph was not an emperor warily watching lest a religious establishment encroach on his power and the ulama were not an organized body possessing a clear chain of command and eager to prevent the ruler from asserting authority in the religious field, Muslims usually found it easier to rock along with a certain indeterminancy.

At the same time, all could and did appeal to the Islamic golden age—the time of the early umma—because it was 1. religiously satisfying, 2. religiously and politically appropriate, and 3. politically safe, there being no easy way in which the differing interpretations of what was required of the umma would be challenged or tested.

This is not to deny that Muslim history was from the earliest days filled with religious confrontation and, indeed, civil war. Since, as has been seen, Islam—unlike Christianity—early achieved astonishing political success in the form of a vast new sovereignty, extending within the lifetime of those who had known the Prophet Muhammad from Morocco to India, the normal tensions of politics ineluctably involved the religious community.

Yet, if the Muslim umma was caught up in the cut and thrust of politics, Muslim political thought evolved in a way that safely shielded the Islamic religio-political idea from worldly compromise. The first step in this evolution had been taken with the denial of the right to fix orthodoxy to any individual or group (whether caliph or ulama).[1]

The next step, after reducing worldly political authority's interest in

imposing orthodoxy, was to remove from worldly political authority the temptation to reopen the issue. This was achieved by the Muslim community's moving in the direction of political quietism. Government was to be obeyed provided it did not actively prevent pious Muslims from carrying out their religious obligations. An implicit quid pro quo had been struck between the umma and its rulers. If the rulers refrained from interfering in matters of faith, the ruled would obey and not insist on any specific religious principles of political conduct.

"O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority."[2] This Qur'anic admonition became the scriptural foundation for a submissive attitude toward political authority that reached its fullest flowering in the oft-cited maxim "Better sixty years of tyranny than one hour of anarchy."

In this way the Muslim community found an answer to the question of what must be rendered to Caesar even when the particular caesar was a professing Muslim engaged in very un-Islamic practices. Such a ruler was to be obeyed but not granted any sanctity. To speak in terms of medieval Western political thought, Islam rejected the divine right of kings.

The idea of the caliphate or imamate did, of course, offer the possibility of a Muslim equivalent of the divine right of kings, but the historical development did not take such a turn in the Islamic world. Admittedly, the notion of the ruler being "the shadow of God on earth" would certainly seem to introduce the Muslim equivalent of the divine right of kings. And this lofty designation for the ruler, probably traceable to earlier Sassanian notions of monarchy, was used even by such rigorous Muslim purists as Ibn Taimiyya (1263–1328), the hero of many present-day Muslim fundamentalists. On balance, however, this exaggerated title may be seen as fitting into the bleak acceptance that even harsh government was better than anarchy.

The caliphate or imamate became, instead, an abstracted ideal not expected to be applied in the real corrupt world. Rather than a divine right of rule, Islam came to recognize a divinely sanctioned need for rule.

The distinction is important. The Islamic tradition asserted, in effect, that mankind's need for government was so overwhelming as to make the quality of that government decidedly secondary. "Prayer is permitted behind any imam, pious or impious. . . . Revolt is prohibited even if the ruler is unjust."[3] So wrote a highly regarded twelfth-century Sufi scholar. That such a ruling should come from an eminent Sufi is especially significant, for Sufism often sheltered the Muslim equivalent of Christian antinomian and gnostic tendencies.

If even within Sufism—the most likely refuge for radical, antiestablish-

ment sentiments—there was a strong tendency to accept without protest whatever government came forward through the workings of the worldly wheel of fortune, then one could hardly expect to find well-developed political protest elsewhere.

A later Muslim scholar, writing in the age of political chaos following the Mongol invasions, took matters a step farther, even justifying the rule of a usurper "as a means of assuring the public order and unity of all Muslims." Moreover, if that ruler is in turn overthrown, then the victor becomes imam "for the reasons we have already presented, that is, the well-being and unity of the Muslims."[4]

All this seems to argue that Muslim political thought categorically rejected the right of rebellion against an unjust government. This would be going too far, and it should be emphasized yet again that Islamic culture, like its sister Semitic cultures—Judaism and Christianity—is too rich and complex to be so neatly labeled.

An account often cited by Muslims eager to demonstrate the right of rebellion—indeed, the duty to oppose an unjust government—concerns the second caliph, Umar, who called upon the people to correct him should he inadvertently make a mistake. One of the congregation brusquely told Umar to have no fear on that score, for any such deviation would be corrected "with our swords." Umar, it is related, then praised God for such an umma.[5] Several statements of this sort attributed either to the Prophet Muhammad or to one of his companions are to be found in Muslim literature. For example, "And we have heard the Prophet of God, may God bless and save him, say, 'If men see evil and do not change it, God will swiftly blind them with His punishment.' "[6]

Yet, on balance, the weight of Muslim tradition was on the side of political submission. The same Caliph Umar, often singled out in the hadith literature as the epitome of early Arab boldness, is related to have admonished, "If he (the ruler) oppresses you, be patient; if he dispossesses you, be patient."[7] There are also numerous hadiths of this sort attributed to Muhammad.

This picture of a traditional Muslim attitude toward politics characterized by resignation and patience must appear totally at variance with the Western image of Islam as a religion of the sword always eager to engage in jihad. It is certainly true that Islam, like Christianity, has always been a proselytizing religion. The religious merit of not only defending the faith but extending the borders of *Dar al-Islam* has always been stressed, but the old Western stereotype of countless forcible conversions to Islam ("Islam or the sword") is grossly inaccurate. As a general rule, it can be suggested that

there were no more forcible conversions in Islamic history than in Christian history.

What the West has largely ignored, and many present-day Muslims have forgotten, is that throughout most of Muslim history until modern times the problem of a non-Muslim political threat seldom arose, and when it did arise it seldom continued for long. This is yet another way of emphasizing that Islam, unlike Christianity, early achieved political success, and thereafter the situation facing most Muslims most of the time was that of accommodating to political reality within a largely self-contained, self-confident, and self-sufficient Muslim world.

The West, like most people everywhere and at all times, sees the outsider too much from its own perspective. Thus, in Western lore the Christian Reconquista in Spain and the earlier Crusades in the Eastern Mediterranean loom large, but they are reduced in importance when viewed from within the vast Dar al-Islam. Spain was at the western limit of Islamic expansion, and its loss posed no threat to the Islamic heartland. Moreover, while Islam was losing Iberia it was gaining Anatolia at the other end of the Mediterranean. The Crusades, as already noted, were something of a sideshow from the Muslim viewpoint. Not only were they of limited territorial penetration but even these Crusader gains did not long survive.

Indeed, the peak of Muslim political success came in the sixteenth century, following the Reconquista, with the flowering of the Ottoman, Safavid, and Moghul Empires.

In this vast territory, from Northwestern Africa to the Eastern reaches of South Asia, most of the Muslims for most of the time confronted problems of adjusting to at least nominally Muslim regimes. The political fortunes of most Muslims were, in this regard, comparable to those of Christians in medieval Europe. Caesar and subjects professed the same religion.

Accordingly, the tradition of political resignation and submission grew up within Dar al-Islam, with limited regard for the world beyond. It was a vast political world subject to considerable turbulence (just as medieval Christendom), but with rare exception (the Mongol invasions being the most important) the threats to political order and responses to political challenges were securely within the confines of an Islamic culture. The tradition of political resignation and submission thus evolved as an Islamic response within a well-established Islamic culture.

To some extent the predominant Muslim political tradition evolved toward a position bearing some similarity to the political teachings of Jesus and Paul. That is, both the early Christian and the developed Muslim political attitudes involved 1. an acceptance of existing political authority how-

ever unjust as preferable to anarchy 2. with a concomitant decided preference for avoiding contact with government to the extent possible 3. as the best way to preserve the purity and cohesion of the religious community.

Christianity after the time of Jesus and Paul embarked on a political path leading to institutionalized church-state confrontations and a meshing of religion and politics that spawned a complex and often contradictory corpus of political theory.

Islam took another path following its golden age of the Muslim "early church," with the result

> that there was no Islamic political doctrine. There was a fervent but vague aspiration, more external to the actual states. . . . To the extent that jurists had formulated a few concrete rules, these did not reveal this general aspiration except in form, and, far from having had some sort of influence on the evolution of the actual institutions, they adapted to them somehow or other—and these institutions resulted from the combination of all the historical, social, national and other circumstances of the Muslim world, which owed nothing to the intervention of Islam as a doctrine.[8]

As with all great choices made by a civilization, the option ultimately embraced by most Muslims concerning politics and political theory had many and divergent results. On the negative side the result was a corpus of religious-inspired political theory that offered little practical guidance for either ruler or subject while the much more pragmatically oriented "mirrors for princes" literature steered clear of the really fundamental questions of politics (who should rule, the limits of loyalty, etc.), it being in the very nature of this genre of political writing to avoid questioning established political authority or established religious doctrine.

The Muslim philosophical tradition also paid obeisance to the established religious orthodoxy while carrying out its philosophical speculation in an arcane language designed to protect the philosophers from scrutiny by the rigorously orthodox ulama. This they achieved, but at the price of letting their lucubrations remain peripheral to everyday life, both political and religious.

Thus the three strands making up the political philosophy of Muslims (the religio-legal, the mirrors for princes, and the philosophical) did not sufficiently mingle to create through the continuing dialectic of ideas and experience an integrated political tradition. Political speculation, instead, remained utopian in theory and pessimistic as regards the real world with the two spheres—theory and practice—remaining compartmentalized. The

result was what would appear to most Western observers, viewing the matter from their quite different heritage, as an underdeveloped political tradition.

The positive aspect of these political choices that became a part of Islamic culture is equally imposing, if not even more so. By rejecting anything equivalent to the Christian church/state confrontation and by shielding the ideal of the Muslim umma from any tampering on the part of the body politic, whether rulers or rebels, Muslims were largely able to avoid the sectarian splintering that has characterized Christianity.

By contrast with Christianity, the uniformity of Islam—in ritual, law, custom, in aesthetic expression embracing art, architecture, music, and calligraphy—is striking.[9] Islamic culture, it might well be argued, abandoned the effort to prescribe in any detail what the ruler or the ruled should do in the matter of worldly politics in order better to concentrate on the overriding aspiration of maintaining the unity of God's umma.

"And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah, and do not separate. And remember Allah's favor unto you: how you were enemies and He made friendship between your hearts so that you became as brothers by His grace . . . and there may spring from you a nation."

"Ye are the best community that has been raised up for mankind. . . . And if the people of the Book (i.e., Jews and Christians) had believed it had been better for them."

"Thus We have appointed you a nation of the middle that you may be witnesses over mankind."[10]

This sense of community as set out in the Qur'an is emphasized with even greater intensity in many hadiths attributed to Muhammad. The following are typical examples:

> "He who separates himself even a single span from the community, removes the noose of Islam from his neck."
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> "The hand of Allah is with the community. He who stands alone stands alone in hell."
>
> "Muslims are like a single body, if any part hurts all are pained or have fever."
>
> "The believer is to the believer like (the several stones of) a building. Each supports the other."
>
> "He who seeks to divide your community, slay him."[11]

On this important point Islam is shown to be, again, closer to Judaism than to Christianity. Although clearly more like Christianity in being a religion with millions of adherents spread over a large segment of the globe, as

well as a religion most of whose followers live in states in which their coreligionists constitute the majority, Islam has—for all its cultural and territorial diversity—maintained among its adherents a communal solidarity much more like that of Judaism.

This amazing communal solidarity binding together millions of believers across time, space, and cultures did, however, necessarily come at the cost of other matters not so carefully nurtured. All of which brings the subject squarely back to politics, to what might be labeled the tradition of political pessimism that will be discussed next.