6.

The Roots of Political Pessimism

Islamic political thought or, more precisely, Muslim attitudes toward politics and the state produced a paradox that can be expressed as follows:

1. Islam emphasizes the religious importance of man's deeds in this world. Islam decidedly does not turn its back on mundane matters. Islam, moreover, grew up in early political success. Thereafter, the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims usually lived free of political threat from non-Muslims—until modern times. Muslims cling to the ideal of the early *umma*, which, unlike the early Christian Church, was a this-worldly religio-political community par excellence.
2. Yet, this very Islam with such characteristics created a political culture that nurtured a pessimistic attitude toward politics and, out of this political pessimism, a submissive attitude toward government. While never developing anything like the Christian separation of church and state, Islamic culture did foster a de facto separation of state and society.

This separation of state and society was never explicitly recognized as legitimate. The idealized early umma as led by the Prophet and thereafter the four rightly guided caliphs (and the equivalent imamate of Shi'ism) was the only legitimate model of Islamic government.

If the early umma can hardly be overemphasized as the exemplar to be singled out in all later Muslim political thinking, it would be equally difficult to exaggerate the extent to which actual Muslim history involved a

depoliticized society of Muslims who accepted government as a necessary evil but chose to have little to do with it.

This important development in the historical experience of Muslim peoples can be highlighted by contrasting the resulting traditional Muslim attitude toward politics with that of modern America. A venerable American response upon hearing about something deemed unjust or absurd or simply not to one's liking is, "There ought'a be a law." This simple statement contains an implicit political theory. It bespeaks an optimistic attitude toward politics, an affirmation that things can be corrected by group political activity.

The response of the typical Muslim from the time the tight-knit early Muslim community became an intercontinental empire right down to the present day would not likely be "There ought'a be a law." Much more in keeping with the political culture would be, "God forbid that the ruler learn of this." The typical Muslim reaction to worldly shortcomings has been to suffer in silence rather than bring the matter to the attention of political authority, for fear that an activist government would only increase the sum total of human misery, largely in the form of exorbitant taxation.

The traditionalist Islamic attitude toward *actual* government (as opposed to the traditional Islamic concept of the ideal government) is neatly summed up in the Jeffersonian dictum that the government that governs least governs best.

Again, let it be quickly conceded that this stark contrast between the modern American and traditional Muslim attitude toward politics necessarily distorts a much more complicated reality. There is, of course, a healthy dose of pessimism and cynicism in the American political tradition, too—well summed up in another saying: "You can't beat City Hall." Or the story told some years back by Representative Brooks Hays of Arkansas of the school teacher who, when asked on election day if she voted, testily retorted, "I never vote. It only encourages them."

Nor should it be overlooked that a tradition of petitioning authority for redress of grievances, and the concomitant tradition that the ruler should be accessible for just such petitions, was one of the most important customs that the early Muslim community adopted from Arab society.

Moreover, many, perhaps most premodern societies have tended to adopt a pessimistic attitude toward politics. The theological assumption of medieval Christendom viewing this world as a vale of tears can be set alongside that of traditional Islam.

Yet, after all reservations and nuances are duly noted it still seems fair to

characterize traditional Muslim attitudes toward politics as decidedly pessimistic. Why? One possible reason has already been suggested. It was the price paid in order to achieve and then protect two considerable assets: 1. keeping the God-ordained community beyond the grasp of fallible or corrupt human hands, and 2. maintaining the unity of the umma against sectarian splits by making theological disputes well-nigh impossible to adjudicate by worldly authorities, whether "church" or state.

Another possible reason is suggested in the comparison with medieval Christendom that also tended toward political pessimism. Both Christendom and the traditional premodern *Dal al-Islam* involved the ideal, and to an appreciably lesser extent the reality, of political ecumenicalism. There was in theory only a single legitimate state coextensive with the totality of Christendom and the Dar al-Islam, respectively. Imperial government transcending barriers of culture, language, and geography was the norm.

In imperial systems the ideal of individual subjects personally presenting their petitions to the ruler may not be repudiated in theory, but it becomes virtually meaningless in fact. One need only reflect on the clear qualitative differences between, on the one hand, the early caliphs in Arabia who personally led the prayers in the mosque and resolved problems face to face with petitioners and claimants and, on the other hand, a Harun al-Rashid (reigned 786–805), caliph of an Abbasid empire extending from Morocco to India, who is said to have kept himself posted on what was really going on by strolling the streets of Baghdad at night incognito.

Traditional empires, in short, whether East or West, Roman or Abbasid, Hapsburg or Ottoman, tend to be based on a clear separation between rulers and the ruled. Moreover, the rulers are a small elite often distinguished from the ruled by different language, culture, and lifestyle. Nor is this separateness necessarily resisted by those ruled. There is usually little or no agitation on the part of the great mass of subjects to break into the ruling class or in any other way to "get a piece of the political action," as the breezy American idiom would put it. In traditional empires—East and West—those ruled not only accept this separation but act so as to keep the walls dividing rulers and ruled in good repair.

To this common structural aspect of traditional empires should be added the political inheritance that Islam was fated to receive. Islamic civilization, in moving its political center out of the Arabian Peninsula and into the Fertile Crescent and the Nile valley, inherited the centuries-old Western Asian imperial tradition. The Umayyads ruling from Damascus and the Abbasids ruling from Baghdad found all about them not just the brick and

stone of earlier empires but also ideas and customs concerning politics. Just as the evolving architecture of Islam reflected the earlier legacy so too did their politics build on the traditions of the Romans, Byzantines, Achaeminids, and Sassanids, not to mention pharaonic Egypt.

It was this tradition (and the several imperial legacies cited above can be seen as variations of a single Western Asian approach to politics) that caused such notions as the ruler being "the shadow of God on earth" to gain some partial acceptance in the political thought of Muslims. It was this tradition that provided the matrix out of which evolved the Muslim mirrors for princes writings.

Islam, thus, quickly inherited all the appurtenances of traditional empires—viziers, bureaucracy, a royal mail and intelligence service, an army and taxation controlled from the imperial center.

All of this, which was fairly well in place as early as the reign of the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik (ruled 685–705), stood in stark contrast to the "primitive church" situation of Islam in Arabia where the first caliph, Abu Bakr, did his own shopping in the markets of Madina.

Islam and Christianity were, each in its own way, strongly marked by their early and sustained links with political powers. Christianity became institutionally and ideologically intertwined with empire with results that long shaped Western political thought. Islam followed the path of de facto separation and compartmentalization between state and society, between politics and religion.

Christianity chose to wrestle with the religious problems of political loyalty, of what to render to Caesar and what to God, of who is entitled to speak for Christendom, who decides on religious orthodoxy, and who enforces that orthodoxy. None of these thorny political problems was ever definitively resolved, but Christians—rulers and ruled—kept returning to the task, often provoking in the process schism and conflict.

Islam largely abstained from this effort, clung consistently to the model of the God-ordained early umma, accepted implicitly that later government did not live up to this standard (but largely avoided asking either why or what could be done), and bridged the gap between ideal and reality by accepting the bleak necessity of government however bad (thus the tradition of submission) but at the same time regarding that government as largely irrelevant to the individual believer's task of living according to God's plan (thus the tradition of political cynicism).

The resulting separation between political ideal and political reality from the time Islamic civilization had absorbed the Western Asian imperial tradition to the beginning of modern times can hardly be exaggerated. "It has

been well said that in medieval Islam there were never real 'states' but only 'empires' more or less extensive, and that the only political unity was the ideological but powerful concept of the Dar al-Islam, the common homeland of all Muslims."[1]

Much has changed since the distant days of medieval Islam, but the strong similarity with present-day Islam in which most Muslim governments enjoy little legitimacy while the ideal God-ordained Dar al-Islam continues to haunt Muslims points up the old truth that people seldom completely break with their past.

Political structures prove durable in the real world only if they provide a stable and plausible response to their environment. The Western Asian imperial tradition that Islam absorbed had long existed in this region because it did fit well with the environment. In seeking answers to this question one touches upon those seminal ideas of Karl Marx, Max Weber, and several of their disciples. The notion of a distinctive "Asiatic mode of production," of "Oriental Despotism," and of "sultanism" grow out of Western attempts to understand why the "East" seems to be so different.

Such ideas have often been poorly received by scholars and for good reason: they are too crude, too monocausal. They brush over important variations of geography, culture, and history. They are ethnocentric, too prone to evaluate the "other" exclusively by "our" standards. They are the ideological children of a specific time and culture—essentially nineteenth-century Europe—with its emphasis on progress and evolution.

No good purpose would be served in uncritically embracing these Marxist or Weberian ideas, but on the other hand a fastidious refusal to explore such questions at the level of broad cross-cultural comparison is not helpful either. The worldly adjustment of Islam—as civilization and culture—has involved a blending of religion (in the narrow, modern Western sense) with its human and physical environment. The Western Asian matrix of bureaucratic empire is as important to the political expression of Islamic society as the European feudal matrix has been to the political expression of Christendom and its offshoot, the modern West.

A prudent exploration of such bold interpretative theories may well prove useful, especially if they are put to use as working hypotheses, not proven dogma. Marx saw the great difference characterizing the "East" in the virtual absence of private property. He and later writers—especially Karl Wittfogel in his *Oriental Despotism*[2]—emphasized the "Asiatic" need for a strong, centrally controlled imperial state that could insure the distribution of water and the maintenance of canals and dams in the irrigated agricultural regions (as the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile valleys or the elaborate

underground *qanat*s of Iran). All of this created a special economic/political system dubbed by Wittfogel a "hydraulic society."

Weber saw one line of political/bureaucratic development as moving toward patrimonial bureaucracy, which may, in turn, reach an extreme form in "sultanism": "With the development of a purely personal administrative staff, especially a military force under the control of the chief, traditional authority tends to develop into 'patrimonialism.' Where absolute authority is maximized, it may be called 'sultanism.' "[3]

The common theme uniting the Marxist-Weberian-Wittfogel theories is that the "East" (embracing the core of Islamic civilization but including the Hindu and Chinese as well) offered an ecological system best exploited by central government control, unlike the rich, dry farming regions of Europe that are amenable to decentralized political and economic power—as in feudalism.

Indeed, to bring in the factor of premodern transportation and communication, it might be argued that Europe had vast stretches of good, dry-farming agricultural lands but a climate and topography that made all-weather roads or other means of internal transportation difficult, whereas Western Asia and Northern Africa (the Islamic "heartland") possessed limited clusters of dense urban and agricultural settlement separated by vast seas of sand and water that did provide a maintenance-free transportation and communication network. The European ecological system was not easily controlled from any single center, or even a limited number of centers, whereas the Islamic heartland predisposed a pattern of centralized political and economic control.

Marx summed this up as follows, adding in the process his customary disparagement of the "East":

> Climate and territorial conditions, especially the vast tracts of desert extending from the Sahara through Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary, to the elevated Asiatic highlands, constituted artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks the basis of Oriental agriculture. . . . This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water . . . necessitated in the Orient, where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of Government.[4]

This pattern of interpretation seems, in very rough outline, consistent with the broad lines of historical development in the Islamic heartland. Medieval Islam, Gibb observed, had no "real 'states' but only 'empire.' " The theories do fit in with what may be called the "mamlukization" of Islamic

politics, or the control of the state apparatus by a legally and culturally distinct group of slave praetorians—a process that began as early as the ninth century under the Abbasids and reached its fullest flowering in the heyday of the Ottoman and Moghul Empires.

Where the theories are perhaps weakest is in their concentration on politics at the top within the framework of an implicit concept of the nation-state as the norm. The result is a tendency to view Islamic government as pure despotism and Islamic society as congeries of discrete groups lacking effective organizational ties among themselves and vulnerable before the arbitrary all-powerful state.

Such an approach thus concentrates on the political weaknesses of Islamic society and slights its societal strengths, with resulting distortion.

Even so, aspects of the Marx-Weber-Wittfogel theories (or, to put it more modestly, insights) can be salvaged simply by moving the perspective from government to society as a whole. A de facto separation between state and society still holds. The "mamlukization" of politics can be accepted. The ecological plausibility of central political and economic control can be acknowledged. The impressive difference between the well-developed urbanism of medieval Islamic civilization as opposed to the much more rural medieval Christendom can be appreciated.[5]

With the focus shifted from government to society, the fairly limited role of the former is properly conveyed, and the tendency toward patrimonialism or even sultanism is placed in its proper context. Arbitrary government existed unchallenged largely because it did not attempt to do too much. Even the extent of direct central government intervention in the economy can be easily exaggerated.

From this viewpoint it might even be argued that the weakness of political ties between rulers and ruled fades before the clear strength of society. This point is often demonstrated throughout Islamic history by the way in which society persevered—at times even flourished—during periods when centralized empires fell apart and political power was decentralized.

For example, after surveying the tortuous politics of post-Umayyad Muslim Spain, E. Levi-Provençal observed that for Spain and without doubt the Maghrib as well "the economic life of the cities suffered in general very little from the political vicissitudes for which the cities might serve as theatre . . . (one has, instead,) the impression of intense commercial and industrial activity."[6]

Equally, the narrowly political history of Mamluk Egypt (1254–1517) offers a dismal series of coups and countercoups, but the cultural history is impressive. Even the casual visitor to Cairo can get a feel for this earlier

vitality by visiting the many distinguished architectural remains of the Mamluk period.

In a word, classical Islamic culture adjusted to its environment by producing a powerful but limited government. The very durability and dynamism of the classical Islamic synthesis attests to the strength of the choices made. Nor was this synthesis devoid of ties among groups. It has been persuasively argued that the earlier tradition of Western scholarship on the Muslim world, emphasizing the "mosaic pattern" of different groups (e.g., bedouin, mountaineers, urbanites versus rural folk plus the many distinctions of religion, race, and language), can be pushed too far and thereby obscure the demonstrable cohesiveness and coherence characterizing classical Islamic civilization.[7]

Nevertheless, this classical Islamic synthesis did tend to compartmentalize state and society. This book being about Islam and politics, it is necessary to concentrate on what emerges as one of the less well-developed aspects of an impressive Islamic civilization. Nor is this to be seen as an outsider's attempt to concentrate on a weak spot in Islam's worldly armor. For better or worse, Muslims today are almost oppressively concerned with politics and the state. This, itself, is a measure of the Western impact on the Muslim world in modern times (to be discussed later). One may deplore or applaud this fact. One can hardly ignore it.

Returning to politics—thus narrowly defined—the Marx-Weber-Wittfogel theories are seen as useful but incomplete. Muslims entered the modern age little concerned about the state as a political reality, submissively accepting the need for government in order to avoid anarchy, but pessimistically expecting little else of good from the political process.

The resulting tradition of political quietism as worked out by the Muslim scholars and canon lawyers is to be understood as having both a theological and cultural basis. The tradition proved durable because these theological and cultural factors fit together well.

Epitomizing the mainstream theological tradition is the hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. When asked, "Shouldn't we fight against them (bad rulers)?" Muhammad is said to have responded, "No, not so long as they say their prayers."[8]

Examples of these distinctive Muslim attitudes toward the state will be treated next.