Introduction

A few years ago pundits and politicians discovered Islam—yet again. This sister religion of Judaism and Christianity was suddenly seen to determine the politics of the more than one billion Muslims in this world. Indeed, Islam, it was believed, prescribed a particular form of politics: secularism, or the separation of *din* (religion) from *dawla* (state), was inconceivable. Nor could there be any opting out of worldly concerns. Muslims must work to achieve the divinely ordained political community in this world, the *dunya*. Thus, the three *d*s, *din*, *dawla*, and *dunya*, cohered to provide a distinctly Islamic approach to political life.

Pundits and politicians of earlier times had regarded Islam differently. One of the few Arabic words with Islamic resonance that our grandparents would have recognized is kismet, meaning fate or destiny.[1] Muslims, it was believed, were fatalists, disinclined to believe that human exertions could shape events significantly. What was *maktub* (written, that is preordained by God) would surely occur.[2]

The most recent Western perception of Islam and politics is surely linked to the last months of 1978 and early 1979 when a seventy-eight-year-old Muslim cleric who had lived the previous fourteen years in exile forced an autocrat from his throne and began a revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini had rallied a mass movement in Iran that overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty—which President Jimmy Carter had earlier labeled an "island of stability" in a volatile region—putting in its place an Islamic government.

Two years later, in October 1981, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat was gunned down by assassins following, as they claimed, the dictates of Islam

to eradicate this "pharaoh" and work to achieve a legitimate Islamic government.

Thereafter it seemed as if every Muslim country has confronted the challenge of adapting politics and governance to the requirements of Islam. Some governments claimed to be Islamic. These would include, in addition to Iran, Pakistan and Sudan. Adding confusion to these new developments, the Saudi Arabia regime, which since its creation in the 1920s had viewed itself as the very epitome of Islamic orthodoxy (and been dismissed by many modernist Muslims as hopelessly old hat), was now accused by radical religious forces of lacking Islamic legitimacy.

Many other governments in Muslim countries have sought to adopt a religious coloration, for example by insisting that all legislation must conform to the corpus of Muslim religious law known as the *Shari'ah*. Radical religious groups have met such efforts, however, with derisive dismissal. And there are many such groups. Their names, once alien to Western ears, have entered into the Western lexicon—Hizbullah, Hamas, Takfir wa al-Hijra, FIS, and many others. Ironically, the older Muslim Brethren, once the bad boy of Middle Eastern politics in the eyes of establishment politicians and Western diplomats, was now earning in some circles the rubric of moderate.

These new religious forces have often been intent on overthrowing established government in any way necessary, including assassination and terrorism. Bringing about Islamic rule would also require shaking off foreign influence. This has meant eradicating both Western economic, political, and military hegemony as well as Muslim fascination with Western ways (Westoxification).[3] Thus, recent years have witnessed acts of violence and terrorism against Western interests not only throughout the regions of predominantly Muslim populations but even in New York, Paris, and elsewhere.

The existence today of Islamic governments, radical Islamist political groups, and terrorist incidents is incontrovertible. These are hard facts, not perceptions. Are we, then, to conclude that politicians and pundits are finally getting it right? Are we now coming to understand the true nature of Islam in its relation to politics? Such a judgment would be in line with the thinking of the radical Muslim ideologues themselves. They insist that there is, has been, and always will be only one true Islam valid "for all time and place" (*li kull makan wa zaman*, in Arabic).[4]

The notion that radical Islamist politics as preached and practiced today more correctly reflects the Islamic norm is also held by many non-Muslim observers ranging from serious specialists convinced that Islam offers a clarity of doctrine and a historical continuity distinguishing it from Judaism,

Christianity, or other world religions to commentators who have found a new threat to "our way of life" after the end of the cold war. Indeed, it might be maintained that the present-day West has returned to its centuries-old image of Islam as the traditional enemy vaunting a religion of the sword. Jihad (holy war) ranks alongside kismet as one of the few Arabo-Islamic terms long recognized in the West. Firmly rooted in the Western subconscious is the image of Islam as a peculiarly aggressive and impenetrably xenophobic religion.

It is the argument of this book that both the radical Islamist spokesmen and those disparate non-Muslim observers have it wrong. Yes, they are strange bedfellows, but they converge in positing an Islam existing outside of history, an unchanging Islam. They are conflating theology and history. They are confusing the ought and the is.

No serious person maintains that the this-worldly manifestation of, say, Christianity is the same today as it was in the time of Luther or Aquinas or Augustine or Paul. One accepts Christianity's diversity throughout time and space. Isn't it plausible to expect roughly the same of Islam in history?

Roughly the same is, indeed, to be expected in terms of diversity, complexity, and change characterizing the history of Muslims. Still, restoring Islam and Muslims to history also imposes the task of seeking out the distinctive strands of Muslim experience throughout the centuries that have produced an identifiable civilization. A useful way to illuminate the distinguishing characteristics of Islam in relation to politics may well be to compare this religion with its two Semitic sisters, Judaism and Christianity.

Such is the aim of this book. It presents the case that we can better understand present-day politics among Muslims by keeping two requirements in balance: 1. accepting the reality of historical diversity and change among Muslims (just as among other people) while 2. identifying what may be said to be distinctive in Muslim thought and action concerning politics. This is no more than the historian's usual task of balancing continuity and change, but it has not always been brought to bear in studying Muslims.

The first seven chapters will sketch the historically conditioned broad outlines of Muslim political thought. Thereafter the guiding theme becomes that of the great transformations and upheavals Muslims have been experiencing beginning some two centuries ago.

It will be argued here that mainstream Muslim political thought in premodern times tended toward political quietism. Moreover, Muslim political history, in contrast with much of Christian history, has been characterizd by a largely successful attempt to bar government from proclaiming (and then enforcing) religious orthodoxy.

From this it follows that although radical Islamist groups today claim that they are only restoring Islam to an earlier worldly model established during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers they are, in fact, introducing striking innovations. These innovations, being reactions to existing circumstances, are decked out as reconstructions of an earlier "golden age." This should not shock. All serious political thought (and even more religio-political thought) is a response to immediate problems. Once we integrate Islam and Muslims into ongoing history we should expect the Islamists to adapt past ages, past formulations, and past doctrines to present purposes, but we must be prepared to find signficant innovations as well.

A broad comparison between today's Muslim world and Europe of the Reformation can be suggested, however distasteful that comparison may be to both the Islamists and the many champions of Western "exceptionalism." Just as the leaders of the Reformation in Europe set in motion revolutionary religious and political changes while contrasting a presumably purer past with present corruption, so may today's Islamists be revolutionary in impact even as they preach a return to the past.

A healthy rule in present-day writing asks that authors avoid the role of "omniscient observer" and state their assumptions and prejudices, to the extent these can ever be understood. Here are mine: I have studied and at times lived among Muslims of the Middle East and North Africa, mainly the Arab countries, since 1953. My knowledge of other Muslims (the majority) is less personal and less thorough. I am an old-fashioned historian of the modern period emphasizing political and, to some extent, intellectual history. I am not a student of theology, and my selective dipping into Muslim and Christian theological studies while preparing this book has made me acutely aware of what an awesome discipline theology is. My approach to this subject is more mundane, more historical, more sociological (if I can presume to use that latter designation).

I feel very much at home in that part of the Muslim world where I have lived, and I hope that I have been able to avoid the detached subject-object or self-other approach that is often thought (excessively in my view) to characterize Western scholarship of the Muslim world. I am intellectually fascinated by establishment-challenging religious movements, of whatever religion, but they disturb me. To say that they are distasteful would be entirely too weak. I simply do not like those individuals, in past history or

present times, who believe that God has given them a clear message of what is required and has also mandated that they employ any means necessary to impose that message on others. I would go so far as to insist that such arrogance (as I see it) offers a poor parody of Islam or, for that matter, of Judaism and Christianity. Given this prejudice, I have made a conscious effort to be fair to those religious radicals whose ideology and actions I deplore. Whether I have succeeded in depicting them fairly (perhaps even too kindly?) is for the reader to judge, but my heart is with those who, possessing a fearful respect for human limitations, work to make things better without risking the possible chaos and suffering revolutions usually bring.

If I have a hidden agenda in writing this book it has now been unveiled. I would very much like to see present-day Muslim political thought and action draw more on its mainstream doctrines and theology in order to restore, appropriately updated where necessary, the best of its rich heritage of tolerance and a keen sense of solidarity that also shields basic individual rights against potentially abusive state power. I would wish to see an Islam that calls for the creation of, in the oft-cited Qur'anic passage, "a community of the middle way."[5] Such Muslim spokesmen exist today. May they increase in number and influence. For the present, however, those of a much harsher, more Manichaean message appear to be dictating the terms of the debate.