Part Two

Convulsions of Modern Times

8.

Islam and Politics in Modern Times: The Great Transformation

Among the arguments advanced to this point are the following:

1. Islam is a sister religion to Judaism and Christianity. A study of Islam and politics in comparison with what has prevailed in Judaism and Christianity is much more likely to yield both empathy and understanding than an approach viewing Islam as sui generis.
2. Islam and Judaism are similar—and are to be contrasted with Christianity—in the importance placed on religious law (orthopraxy) and in the relatively decentralized, nonhierarchical arrangement of their religious specialists (ulama—rabbinate). There is thus no Muslim (nor Jewish) "church" and nothing quite like the pattern of church-state relations that had such a formative influence on politics and political thought in the West.

   One partial exception is Shi'i Islam since the sixteenth century (essentially in Iran), which has developed more toward an institutionally distinct and hierarchical Muslim "clergy."
3. In terms of politics and state-society relations, however, the Muslim experience has been more like that of the Christian and unlike that of Jews (at least for that over two-millennial span of time between the fall of the Davidic monarchy and the creation of Israel). For centuries most Muslims and most Christians have lived in polities having political leaders of at least nominally the same religious faith.
4. Islamic political thought emphasizes unity and community with correspondingly less valuation placed on the individual and individualism as in Christian (and Western) political thought. One of

the organizing principles to be found throughout Muslim history is the marked aversion to any action or thought that might bring about *fitna* (dissension, civil strife, temptation, etc.)

5. There have been fewer attempts by Muslim political leaders to impose religious doctrine than can be found in Christian history. This is not to say that political leadership has been religiously neutral. A state religion has been the norm, e.g., Hanafi Sunnism in the Ottoman Empire, Twelver Shi'ism in Iran since the sixteenth century, Maliki Sunnism in several pre-Ottoman Maghrib polities, and postcolonial Muslim states specifying Islam as the state religion in their constitutions. Unlike Byzantine emperors or European Reformation-era emperors and kings, however, Muslim rulers have usually avoided deciding issues of creed or practice and have tolerated minority religious communities.
6. Islam does place a significant religious value on living the good life and contributing to the good community in this world. Retreat from the world and denying the importance of this world are reproved. Membership in mystical Sufi brotherhoods, yes; but the members and virtually all the Sufi leaders as well remain concerned with affairs of this world. No monasticism, no celibacy. At the same time, the classical historic posture of Muslims has been politically quietist and pessimistic.
7. Muslim history has been marked by a de facto separation of state and religious community. Political leadership, often autocratic, has usually tempered its authoritarian potential by leaving the ruled free to live their lives demanding only peace (avoidance of fitna) and payment of taxes (which in principle can be manageable since government itself is small and confined to maintaining order). The ruled, in turn, have been satisfied to avoid politics and to accept a fairly distinct separation between rulers and the ruled.

The above very general formulations can be defended by reference to history and to existing historical scholarship. Even though not all specialists would agree, and every specialist—whether of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, whether of the "East" or the "West"—would insist on modifications, such an interpretation is well within the bounds of the prevailing "received wisdom."

That being the case, it is all the more striking to note that this interpre-

tation of mainstream Islam in its relations to politics offers not just an inadequate but a plainly wrong picture of Muslim thought and action in today's world. Politically quietist? What then about the smoldering civil war in Algeria pitting Muslim religious radicals against a government controlled by the military or the earlier decade-long and ultimately successful Afghan resistance to Soviet domination? Assassination of Egypt's President Sadat or the earlier execution by the Egyptian government of the radical Muslim ideologue Sayyid Qutb?

A de facto separation between state and society in Islamic history? How to explain the Islamic Revolution in Iran that destroyed centuries of government by shahs and ushered in a mullah-controlled Islamic Republic? Or even the very idea of the Muslim state of Pakistan now in existence for over a half century?

Unity, community, and avoidance of fitna? How can one reconcile this with the radical Islamic theories that champion resisting—even taking up arms against—other Muslims now deemed to have lapsed into *kufr* (unbelief, atheism) or *jahiliyya*?[1]

Today Muslims are highly politicized, and the resulting politics is often disruptive and violent. Moreover, the political debate is largely being set by the Islamic radicals as represented by the likes of Ayatullah Khomeini, Abu al-A'la Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb, Hasan Turabi, and Abbasi Madani. It was not all that many years ago when the political discourse was dominated by quite different persons—Kemal Ataturk, Riza Shah, Sukarno, Habib Bourguiba, Jamal Abd al-Nasir. Even the founder of the Islamic state of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was notoriously secular in his lifestyle. The story is told that at the time of Pakistani independence Jinnah wanted a celebration with champagne only to be told by embarrassed aides that it was the month of Ramadan during which Muslims fast from sunup to sundown.

Only a few decades ago most Muslim political leaders, and sympathetic outside observers, felt the need to modernize (secularize?) Islamic belief and institutions in order to shake off the presumed dead hand of fatalistic resignation. The situation today in the Muslim world obliges us either to reconsider our interpretation of "classical" Islam or to show how events in modern times have produced such a radical break. It is the latter position that will be argued here.

Why then did this book began with a sketch of classical Islam in its relations to politics? Since the Muslim religio-political radicals are largely dictating the discourse, do these earlier mindsets matter?

Yes, these earlier mindsets do matter. By setting out the past as a frame of reference we are better armed to understand just how innovative and rev-

olutionary many of the ideas now being advanced really are. At the same time, we put ourselves in that ideological past that the present ideologues claim to have recovered. Our sketch of the past enables us to better distinguish the extent to which present-day Islamists are not recovering but rewriting that past.

The temptation at this point to address today's religio-political radicals in the words of the man who dubbed religion the "opiate of the masses" cannot be resisted: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please. . . . They anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world-history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language."[2]

Finally, on this issue, if there is to emerge a more liberal political theory that can appeal to Muslims, it too will draw selectively on a new reading of the Muslim past. Only with past and present both in view are we able to speculate on what approaches such new readings might take.

To interpret the situation of Muslims today it may help to situate roughly the last two centuries within the entire span of Muslim history. This reveals that only in modern times have Muslim political communities faced simultaneously enticing ideological challenges as well as awesome politicomilitary threats from the outside world.

Islam, early on, did face ideological challenges. Its first generation of leaders had created an empire before the details of religious and political institutionalization had been worked out. By contrast, three centuries separated the time of Jesus from the conversion of Constantine. In less than three decades Muslims had extended their sway over virtually all of what we reckon today as the Arab world and Iran, had defeated the Byzantines and the Sassanids,[3] and had created their first imperial dynasty, the Umayyads.

During these early centuries of Islamic history the Muslim political and cultural leadership did confront such challenges as Greek philosophy and science, Byzantine and Sassanid imperial institutions (everything from bureaucracy to taxation to military organization), and the divergent mores and creeds of Christianity as well as other religions. Many of these alien ideas and institutions, conforming to the needs of a still expanding Muslim imperium destined at its peak to extend from Spain to India, were adopted

or adapted. They became a part of the emerging Islamic culture, necessarily not the same as that existing during Muhammad's life just as post-Constantine Christianity represented a quite different cultural mix from that of the earliest church fathers.

The resulting classical Muslim cultural synthesis evolved, unlike Christianity, in a consistent climate of Muslim political self-sufficiency if not hegemony. There was no need to accommodate oneself to a threatening neighbor, even less to a non-Muslim political sovereign.

Later Muslim history had its share of politico-military ups and downs, just as was the case in Western Christendom, or what we now call the West. There were even two crushing military defeats inflicted by nomadic warriors from Central Asia—the Mongol sacking of Baghdad and killing the Caliph al-Musta'sim in 1258 and the defeat and capture of Ottoman Sultan Bayazid by Timur (Tamerlane) at the Battle of Ankara in 1402.[4] These two devastating defeats were not, however, accompanied by the imposition, or even the allure, of alien cultural models.[5] The Mongol tide later ebbed, and the Ottomans soon began their recovery capped by the capture of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. Indeed, the heyday of Ottoman strength and influence was yet to come.

Nor is it accurate to assert that Islamic history, in terms of worldly achievement, has been marked by a downward trajectory ever since the earliest centuries. Early Orientalist accounts of Islamic history emphasized the image of a decline from the "golden age" of the early Islamic community. This is hardly surprising, for the decline motif has always figured powerfully in the Muslim collective self-image, especially in what might be called the "high cultural tradition" that early Western scholars tended to concentrate on. Muhammad was God's last messenger bringing the "seal of prophecy," the Qur'an, and in Sunni Islam only the first four caliphs (ruling during the short period from 632 to 661) represented the true caliphate, to be followed by the more worldly period of kingship (*mulk*).[6] In this image the Muslim community has never been so integrated, so pure, and, yes, so powerful as in these early years. This myth of the paradigmatic golden age that must be restored, always important as an organizing theme in Muslim religious and political thought, looms large in present-day religio-political radicalism as well—one reason, among many, why the radicals have been able to dictate the terms of the politico-religious discourse.

If judged by worldly success, however, the pinnacle of Muslim achievement came as late as the sixteenth century when the three Muslim empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Moghuls held sway. Nor was this age of latter-day Muslim imperial might lacking in aesthetic and intellectual contri-

butions. In architecture alone these empires nurtured the achievements of the Ottoman architect Sinan Pasha and produced the magnificent Safavid structures that have merited Isfahan being dubbed worth "half the world" (*Isfahan nufs jihan*) as well as the incomparable Taj Mahal built by order of the Moghul Shah Jahan.

The beginning of modern times for the Muslim world was very different, ushering in a traumatizing dual challenge that continues to this day. For the first time in history Muslim societies and states confronted not just raw alien military superiority (as the Mongols or Tamerlane) and not just the broad challenge of alien civilizations that seemed equally attractive and threatening to the true faith. Modern times for Muslims brought a simultaneous military and civilizational challenge—and in an intensity and duration previously unmatched.

Different dates are advanced to mark the beginning of this distinctive and troubled period in Muslim history. For the Indian subcontinent the 1757 Battle of Plassey, in which the British East India Company under Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal, is often cited as the turning point. A century later the last remaining trace of the Moghul Empire was swept away when the British government put Emperor Bahadur on trial for complicity in the Sepoy Rebellion and sent him into exile.[7]

In Iran the Safavid Empire had split asunder early in the eighteenth century, well before European penetration became the dominant theme. There the beginning of European domination is better situated in the early nineteenth century. Two treaties (Gulistan in 1812 and Turkmanchay in 1828)[8] ending wars with Russia marked by considerable territorial losses and other onerous terms left Iran thereafer a catspaw of Russia to the north and of the British who controlled India and the Persian Gulf.

The most appropriate turning point for the Ottoman Empire is 1774. That year ended a disastrous war with Russia and the signing of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarja.[9] For the first time the Ottomans surrendered to infidel control territory occupied overwhelmingly by Muslims (the Crimea). This war, provoked by Catherine the Great, delivered a clear message to the Ottomans that was quickly picked up in the chancelleries of Europe as well: the Ottoman Empire, with territorial holdings that had for centuries extended deep into Southeastern Europe and whose armies had twice beseiged Vienna (1529 and 1683), was no longer a match for the European Great Powers. This introduced the age of the "Eastern Question" or Europe's efforts to dismember the once mighty Ottoman Empire without risking intra-European warfare.[10] It was to last until the early 1920s.[11]

The British and Dutch East India Companies had begun to penetrate

Southeast Asia even earlier, in the seventeenth century, and by the next century the principal question of power was simply whether the British or Dutch would exercise hegemony there. By the Treaty of Paris in 1783 (which also recognized American independence) Dutch primary control there was recognized. European colonial penetration of Africa, both the Islamic and the non-Islamic areas, belongs to nineteenth-century history.

All in all, the last two centuries have witnessed a radical change in power relations between the West and the entire Muslim world. Viewing the present-day Muslim situation (and the Muslim perception of that situation) in the context of all Muslim history underscores the distinctiveness of these last two centuries. The Muslim concept of a worldly *umma*, a *Dar al-Islam* that was self-sufficient, superior, and secure from any outside threat had struck deep roots, and for good reason. It was built on and sustained by historical reality, not just the reality of the early Muslim community but centuries thereafter until, as we have seen, roughly the eighteenth century. All the more rude would be the ensuing shock to the many ideas and institutions that had been refined by the reality of previous centuries.

That something of the same plight has faced most of the world in modern times as the West increasingly imposed its will has not made the problem facing the Muslim world any less difficult. Even though the task of taking the measure of Western hegemony has been perhaps the dominant organizing theme of modern history for all peoples, a case can be made that the challenge to Muslims has been the most sustained and the most severe. Japan, China, and the states of Southeast Asia have emerged today as dynamic economic or political powers, if not both.[12] Latin America as well as Russia and Eastern Europe are in the ambivalent position of being either West or non-West depending on the criteria (whether subjective or objective) employed. In any case, the same sense of being dominated by an alien religion and culture does not pertain. India, not lacking its own problems, has at least less difficulty in selectively assimilating much that came with Western domination in the form of the long-lived British raj if only because Hinduism as a religion and civilization is much more malleable and syncretist than the sister Semitic religions Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Generally speaking, the situation in non-Muslim Africa today after about two centuries of Western domination is discouraging, but in continuing the comparison with the Muslim world the following nuances can be recorded: all of Northern Africa have Muslim majorities and many of the states south of the Sahara have either Muslim majorities or significant Muslim populations. They thus share the Muslim reality and perception being considered. That major point aside, in considering Africa south of the

Sahara as an entity it can be noted that Westernization in stimulating Christianization removed to some extent the alienness of the change taking place. Also, although states and civilizations did exist in non-Muslim Africa before Western domination, they were less extensive in time and space than were the Muslims empires. The intrusive Western ways could more readily replace or modify the traditional religio-legal institutions, since the Western impact produced larger and stronger political units that the postcolonial elites sought to keep. Accordingly (again the important Muslim element in Africa to be classified with the rest of Dar al-Islam), there has been at least the potential for a less agonizing confrontation between indigenous and exogenous, between the presumed golden age of the past and the threatening present.

Only Islam of the world religions and regions presents an uninterrupted history of confrontation (and, all too often, conflict) with the West. During most of that long period those living within the Muslim world more than held their own against their Christian/Western neighbors and rivals. Living for roughly twelve centuries in such self-sufficiency and security gave the Muslim world a rich span of time to develop institutions and ideologies governing all aspects of government and society. Islamic civilization was in control of the terms under which alien ways were accepted or rejected. Then, beginning some two centuries ago, their world began to turn upside down. The very deep-rootedness and coherence of Islamic civilization before the advent of modern times gave added severity to the multiform challenge brought by Western domination. Islam and the West, it can be argued, is a special case.