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The Role of Islamic Religion in

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by

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THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC RELIGION IN MEDITERRANEAN POLITICS

Religion may play many different roles in society. For the purposes of the present paper three main roles may be distinguished. Firstly, in a stable or relatively unchanging society, such as that of medieval Christendom or of Islam up to about 1800, religion may be described as the cement which holds the society together and gives it a high degree of unity. In a rapidly changing society, on the other hand, such as our own society is at the moment, religion may be associated with two opposing groups of people, namely, either those who approve of the changes and want to promote further changes or those who disapprove of the changes and want to resist them. It is not of course precisely the same form of religion which the two groups adopt, though they may claim to belong to the same religious community. The second role of religion, then, namely that in respect of those who welcome change, may be described as the focus of the emergent social forces. In the course of the changes in a society new groups increase in power and influence but find themselves thwarted by aspects of the existing order and become reformist or revolutionary. For such groups to be successful in achieving their aims it is usually necessary for them to have a religious or quasi-religious belief. Such a belief by making explicit a critique of the existing order gives direction to the activities of the group and at the same time inspires the group by making them feel that their activity is meaningful. Most religions in their initial stages have been in this way a focus of emergent social forces, and the same holds of new developments within a religion such as Lutheranism and Calvinism at the European reformation. Marxism, as a quasi-

-religion played a similar role in the Russian revolution.

The third role of religion to be considered is that connected with conservative or reactionary groups, and here religion is the bulwark of their attempts to resist change. This was the role described by Marx with the phrase 'opiate of the people', and undoubtedly religion often fulfills this role. Groups which had privileges under the old stable order, or groups which have gained privileges or wealth rapidly in the early stages of a process of change, want to halt the changes before their privileges are whittled away. Because religion was closely integrated with the order of society before the changes began, the groups think that religion supports them in their attempts to maintain as much as possible of the old order. This is to give religion a new role, however, so that, though these men seem to be maintaining the old religion, they are in fact subtly changing it. It is no longer the cement of the stable society, but has become the bulwark of reaction.

Religion as the cement of a stable society

The first role of religion has only residual relevance at the present day, since our society is no longer stable or unchanging. This residual relevance consists in the fact that attitudes associated with religion in a stable society may still have influence at the present time. This influence is probably greater in the case of Muslims, but Christians are not entirely exempt from it.

The religion of Islam not merely integrated society in those lands where Islam was dominant, and gave Muslims an identity of which they could be proud, but also provided them

with a defence against the counter-claims of other religions,
notably Christianity. The Qur'ān teaches that Christians and
Jews had originally received, through Jesus and Moses respect-
ively, a true revelation from God which was in essentials the
same as that of the Qur'ān; but it goes on to allege that
Christians and Jews have corrupted their original true religion
and have deviated from it. Their very scriptures - the Bible -
have been somehow corrupted. Consequently Muslims have for many
centuries looked on Christianity and Judaism with suspicion; and
when in the nineteenth century institutions were founded in
North Africa and Asia to provide education of a European type,
pious Muslims refused to entrust their children to these
institutions, feeling that they had a Christian taint. In India
one of the results of this was that the Hindus, who were confident
of being able to assimilate European education without themselves
being changed, obtained proportionately a much greater number of
the minor administrative posts in government and business offices,
and the Muslims felt neglected and overlooked. It is usually
held that the realization among Muslims that they were losing
influence to the Hindus was one of the factors contributing to
the Indian Mutiny in 1857.

Because of Napoleon's invasion in 1798 and the strong
modernizing rule of Muhammad 'Ali from 1805 to 1848, Egypt was
the first of the Arab countries to be exposed to the impact of
European culture. The effect here of Muslim suspicions of the
Christian character of European education was to bring about the
establishment of a system of European education parallel to the
existing Islamic system but completely independent of it. The
latter began with village schools where boys learnt the Qur'ān
by heart, as well as to read and write, and rose to the mosque-

-university of the Azhar in Cairo where jurisprudence, theology
and other Islamic subjects were studied at the highest level.
The parallel European system consisted of primary schools,
secondary schools and eventually universities where European
secular subjects were taught. Except in the schools run by
Christian missionaries, European education was essentially
secular, but this did not entirely remove the suspicions of the
more conservative Muslims. Because of this bifurcation in the
educational system the ordinary Muslim with a European education,
whose faith was exposed like that of Christians to 'the acids of
modernity', got little help from Muslim intellectual leaders.
Until 1950 or later the professors at the Azhar university had
little knowledge of the achievements of modern science and no
appreciation of the problems raised for the believer in God by
the modern scientific outlook. Muslim students in Europe in
recent decades would read the philosophical works of men like
Bertrand Russell, but would still, through suspicion of Christ-
ianity, avoid Christian attempts to reply to his atheism.
Because the official Muslim intellectual leaders were still think-
ing in medieval terms, it is Arabic novelists who in recent
years have made the most significant contributions to the
discussion of religious themes in modern terms.

Modern Muslims have also inherited from medieval times the
assumption that Islam is superior to Christianity as a religion,
even if for the moment Christians are economically and technologic-
ally superior. The average Muslim, especially the more simple-
-minded, does not doubt that Islam is the full and final truth
about man and his destiny. The depth of conviction on this
point is illustrated by a story - probably not true - about the
capture of Alexandria in the year 642 in the reign of the caliph

'Umar. The general who captured the city wrote to the caliph
asking what he was to do with the great library, and received
the reply: 'If the books are in accordance with the Qur'ān, they
are superfluous and need not be kept; if they are contrary to
the Qur'ān, they are dangerous and ought to be destroyed; so in
either case they may be burnt.' Even if this story is not true,
the attitude it describes is still dominant. Despite the
establishment of European-type universities in most Islamic
countries, there has been virtually no objective study of other
religions in the way in which Islam and other religions are
studied in the West.

The assumption that Islam is the full and final truth has
also political implications. Muslims have traditionally thought
of the world as divided into the 'sphere of Islam' (dār al-islām)
and the 'sphere of war' (dār al-harb). The former consists of
those countries ruled by a Muslim prince in accordance with the
precepts of the Sharī'a or divinely-revealed law, the latter of
those countries not yet so ruled. Muslims have always tended to
suppose that at the consummation of history the whole world
would be included in the 'sphere of Islam'. In the era of
colonialism it might have been difficult to hold this belief
seriously; but now that the Arabs and their fellow-Muslims in
Iran have realized the political power they have through their
oil, the dream is not wholly impossible. This does not mean
that they hope to make the whole of mankind Muslim by force of
arms - the idea that Islam spread by the sword is part of the
distorted European conception of Islam - but it does mean that
the ideal of the world unified by Islam is still alive in the
hearts of Muslims, including (we should not doubt) men like the
Shah of Iran and Colonel Ghadafi.

After speaking in this way about residual Islamic attitudes it is worth noticing that the modern West has inherited somewhat similar attitudes from medieval Christendom. There is the false stereotype of Islam as a religion of the sword and of sexual licence. There is also the assumption that Christianity is religiously superior to Islam; and this last seems sometimes to have been replaced by a secularist assumption that Muslims are less scientifically-minded than Westerners and that their general intellectual outlook is inferior. Presumably the influence of oil is destroying this assumption.

Religion as the focus of emergent reforming forces

When one comes to consider the relation of the Islamic religion to the forward-looking social forces in Islamic countries the chief question to ask is: Has Islam suggested any effective political or social activity? To this question the answer must be that Islam has so far produced nothing so relevant to the present situation and so determinative of the course of events as were the reform movements of Luther and Calvin in the Christian world of the sixteenth century. At most there have been some tentative attempts to find principles of reform in Islam and other attempts to find an Islamic justification for reforms originally inspired by Europe. The matter is worth looking at in fuller detail, however.

A religious reform movement or a new religious movement is only successful where it is associated with powerful emergent social forces. In the middle of a process of change, of course, it is impossible to know which forces are going to go on growing in influence. In the western part of the Islamic world at the

present time the two chief groups to be considered in this respect
are (a) the modernizing section of the upper class, and (b) the
new middle class.

By the upper class is to be understood the existing rulers
and their families, persons with political power and influence
such as great landowners, merchants and industrialists, and
persons with important administrative skills such as the higher
army officers and civil servants. In the last century and a half
some of the older members of this class have been content to keep
to the traditional way of life; but others have been enthusiasts
for modernization. Islamic rulers in general have seldom been
deeply religious and have tended to neglect Islamic principles
where these interfered with their political ends. The moderniz-
ing section of the upper class is therefore not a likely place
to find reforms with genuinely Islamic motivation. To modernize
is to adopt European or American ideas in practical affairs. The
outstanding example of an extreme form of this attitude is
Mustafa Kemal Atatürk who, in order to modernize Turkey, attack-
ed and destroyed its religious institutions. Islamic law was
replaced by a form of the Swiss code and the office of caliph
was abolished - an office which had become a kind of symbolic
religious headship of the Islamic world. At the same time
Turkey was declared to be a 'lay' state. On this basis a con-
siderable degree of modernization was achieved.

A contrary example is provided by the Shah of Iran. He is
using his great oil wealth to modernize his country, but at the
same time he has good relations with the religious leaders of
his people. He is in a different position from the rulers of
other Islamic countries, however, in that he is a Shī'ite. The
great majority of Muslims - over 90% - are Sunnites who place

their main emphasis on the rule of the law, and traditionally allowed much influence to the ulema or accredited interpreters of the law. In the Shī'ite form of Islam, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the divine inspiration of the leader. Thus the Shah, by building up his own position as leader, is able to carry the country with him in a program of modernization and yet appear to be acting in conformity with Islamic principles.

The middle class which has come into being as a result of the impact of Europe on the Islamic world has been described as consisting of 'secular intellectuals, rational entrepreneurs, efficient managers, liberal landowners' (Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society, New York, 1964, 261). Until recently it was roughly equivalent to those who had received a European-type education up to secondary school or university level. It included all who enabled the country to function as a modern state - some of the higher artisans as well as professional people. Because it was a new class, however, it had no cohesiveness, but was rather a conglomeration of diverse groups with varying interests. Most are thoroughly materialistic in their outlook and have little concern for religion even when they are not secularistic. In either case they tend to think in terms of the secular ideals of the West. Only a few are relatively good Muslims, and even these, because of their Western education, tend to have no deep Islamic roots. Many of the middle class, if they have intellectual doubts about Islamic religion, try to avoid these by thinking of their religion as a personal matter in the European fashion.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most of the western Islamic world (from Morocco to Iran) came under European control to some extent, though in varying forms. The rulers and

their immediate associates gained many comforts and luxuries for themselves, while proceeding very slowly with the modernization of their countries; and for these meagre achievements they brought their countries heavily into debt to the Europeans. The debts were irksome and increased European control, and so many of the upper class felt that they would be better off as independent states. The middle class were perhaps the most vociferous in the movements for independence. They regretted the debts contracted largely for the benefit of the upper class. They were also imbued with European liberal ideas and, after hearing much talk of national self-determination, did not see why this should not be applied to their own countries. The lower classes, feeling insecure as they became aware of the process of change, also supported the movement for independence. Their dominant motive was probably xenophobia, coupled with the traditional Islamic attitude of suspicion of everything non-Islamic.

One of the European ideas which gained much currency among Muslims, though chiefly among the middle class, was nationalism. This was essentially a European idea with no roots in Islamic culture but it was not perceived as foreign since it came in the form of Arab nationalism, Turkish nationalism and the like. In the peace settlement after the first World War a prominent place was given to the principle of national self-determination, especially in the breaking up of the Ottoman and Hapsburg empires. The independence movements in the various Arab countries used the principle of national self-determination as a lever against the European powers, and tried to develop new nationalisms to match the new frontiers drawn for them by the Europeans, such as Egyptian nationalism, Iraqi nationalism and Syrian nationalism. It was not natural for Muslims, however, to think of themselves

as belonging to a nation - not even the Arab nation, far less
the artificial nations created by the peace treaties. They re-
garded themselves as belonging to the extended family or village
or tribe, and then beyond that to the vast Islamic community or
umma. Once independence was attained, the local nationalisms
had little influence on the further course of events, while Arab
nationalism and the pan-Arab movement have insufficient roots in
the masses to succeed in bringing about Arab unity.

Many Muslims from different classes feel a loyalty to Islam,
to the community of Muslims and to Islamic culture, and this
might be described as Islamic nationalism or patriotism. It is
often linked with the hope of bringing all the world into the
'sphere of Islam', and is probably more deeply rooted than the
various nationalisms already mentioned. Yet even this Islamic
patriotism has little political influence. The average Arab
Muslim, for example, takes no interest in the Muslims of Pakistan
or Indonesia or even Iran. The war which led to the formation
of Bangladesh showed how easily fratricidal strife could occur
among Muslims. The explanation of these phenomena is probably
that, while the Sharī'a claimed to govern all aspects of human
life, in practice it was applied mainly to the internal ordering
of society and practically never to the relations between Muslim
rulers or states. This also helps one to understand the failure
of pan-Islamic movements.

When Islamic states after independence came to consider
policies for their further development, there were thinkers who
advocated what was sometimes called 'Islamic socialism'. Once
again, however, this had little Islamic inspiration but was
essentially European socialism with some superficial Islamic
features. The Muslim Brotherhood may also be mentioned here,

though it is perhaps to be classed as reactionary rather than reformist. It tried to deal with the problems raised by the economic and social changes by calling on men to turn away from everything un-Islamic and to align themselves with a thorough-going Islamic social structure and polity, both ideally conceived. For the first five years or so the Muslim Brotherhood was a kind of religious revival movement, and as such was relatively effective and gained many supporters. The goals of the Brotherhood, however, were in part political, but, when it moved into politics, power eluded it. Though there were some religious-minded intellectuals among the Brotherhood, the majority of its supporters came from the urban proletariat and the peasants. Yet it was far from having the support or sympathy of the whole of these classes, and its idealistic policies seemed too remote from immediate needs to attract many people. If it may be allowed that the Muslim Brotherhood is in part an attempt to launch an Islamic reformist programme, then it must be adjudged to have failed. Indeed this survey shows that nowhere has Islam effectively become a focus for emergent social forces.

Religion as the bulwark of reaction

Religion is the bulwark of conservative or reactionary attitudes especially in two classes: (a) the ulema or traditional religious intellectuals (who are primarily experts in Islamic law), and (b) the lower class consisting of the urban masses and the peasants.

When Islamic society was relatively unchanging, its structure was based on the Sharī'a or divinely given law. In some respects the Sharī'a is an ideal law, which is only effective in

practice when a ruler or goverment orders particular judges and courts to apply certain sections of it. For the last century or so the chief parts of the Shari-'a still effective in the more advanced countries were those dealing with personal status, such as questions of marriage, divorce and inheritance. In principle, however, the Shari'a goes far beyond the sphere of law as that is understood in Europe, and includes moral ideals, matters of hygiene, ritual prescriptions and indeed every aspect of human life. At the same time the Shari'a is never fully codified. It is known from a relatively small number of commands given to men by God in the Qur'ān and from a great mass of anecdotes - known as hadīth or 'traditions' - about the sayings and actions of Muḥammad. Since the Shari'a is God-given, no human being, not even a powerful ruler, can alter it. At the same time, however, the application of the Shari'a to particular circumstances can only be known through extensive human intellectual activity.

During the first three Islamic centuries or so the ulema, using the relatively simple basis of the Qur'ān and the 'traditions', worked out a vast and complex edifice of rules and regulations which came to determine the structure of Islamic society. In doing this they were said to be exercising ijtihād or individual judgement and reasoning, but at some point the 'gate of Ijtihād' is said to have been closed, and after this the ulema had to follow precedents closely and could make now decisions only within narrow limits. In the present century there has been much discussion of whether the 'gate of ijtihād' can now be opened to make possible a new formulation of the rules of the Shari'a adapted to contemporary circumstances though still based on the Qur'ān and the 'traditions'. On this point, however, the authorities are still far from agreeing, and

thus there has been no radical reformulation of the Sharī a.
Many changes have in fact been made, but this has been done by
roundabout methods and legal tricks, not by a direct assault on
the problem. For example, when it was felt that the minimum age
for marriage should be raised to 16 or 17, it was thought
impossible to assert that marriages contracted at a lower age
were invalid - for one thing Muhammad had married one of his
wives at the age of nine. Several Muslim countries, however,
managed to discourage child marriage by decreeing that their
courts were not to consider matrimonial suits arising out of
marriages contracted before the parties were seventeen.

Because the legal basis of Islamic society was of this
nature, the ulema had considerable power, at least in those
spheres where the Sharī'a was recognized. They were usually a
closely-knit body, but at the same time there were often deep
rivalries among them. In modern times their power has decreased
in the measure in which the Sharī'a has been abandoned. Neverthe-
less they still have much power of a negative kind. If one of
the ulema proposed a startling innovation, he would be denounced
by his fellows as a heretic who was corrupting Islam, and would
probably find that he was blocked from further advancement in
his career. Similarly, if a politician adopts a policy of which
it can be alleged that it is going against Islam, the ulema can
rouse the masses of the people against him. In the nature of
things most of the ulema are strongly conservative, and there is
little prospect of their agreeing on any extensive measure of
reform. The fact that conservative ulema are the authoritative
interpreters of the Sharī'a is one of the reasons why in Pakistan,
for example, though most people fully approve of its being an
Islamic state, there has been no agreement on the legal and

constitutional basis of the state. In other words, politicians
are not prepared to give the ulema the power implicit in any
such arrangement, since they fear that on doctrinaire grounds
they would oppose necessary government measures.

The lower classes (the urban proletariat and the peasants)
are nearly all deeply loyal to Islam and the Sharī'a as
traditionally conceived. This means that, while it is virtually
impossible to rouse the masses to support reforms, a demagogue
can nearly always rouse them against a reform he dislikes by
alleging that it is contrary to Islam and that Islam is
threatened. Marxist communism may sometimes present an immediate
practical programme which attracts support from the masses, but
as soon as difficulties appear, the cry of 'atheism' will be
raised and will remove the bulk of such support.

It would seem that the only way in which radical change can
come to an Islamic country is where an individual gains great
personal authority as a leader. This may happen after outstand-
ing success in war, as was the case with Mustafe Kemal Atatürk.
Because of his personal authority and his wide support in Turkey,
he was able to destroy the power of the ulema and make Turkey a
reformed secular state (though during the last two decades re-
ligion is said to have become again a force to be reckoned with).
To take a different example, the Madhī of the Sudan achieved
personal authority through the charisma or baraka derived from
his religious teaching and practice, though this authority was
no doubt further enhanced by military success. It was mainly
the religious baraka, however, that made it difficult for the
ulema to oppose him; they could hardly say that Islam was
threatened by him when for most of the people he was the person-
ification of Islam. In so far as some members of his family have

inherited the _baraka_ - and this appears to be the case - there
may be an opportunity for effecting radical changes in the Sudan,
and these might then be followed elsewhere.

The way in which the Islamic religion can function as a
bulwark of reaction can be observed in contemporary Libya.
Colonel Ghadafi is an exponent of technological modernization,
and to this extent follows European secularism. In respect of
social problems, however, his outlook is not unlike that of the
Muslim Brotherhood; that is to say, he believes that the solution
of today's troubles is to be found in a more faithful observance
of traditional Islam. He fails to see that the adoption of
technology produces changes in society which lead to new and
different problems which are not solved by a return to the past.
Consequently the actual effect of his unrealistic idealism is to
bolster up the privileges of himself and the elite who have gain-
ed materially from the discovery of oil; and this is done at the
expense of the masses.

Conclusion

The Arab countries and Iran are faced with grave social
problems as a result of the impact of the West. This impact has
various facets. One of these is increased ease of communication,
both in respect of actual travel and in respect of the
dissemination of news. Another facet is the inclusion of these
countries in the international economic system which is mainly,
though no longer exclusively, European and American. They have
also begun to adopt the products of Western technology and also
some of its manufacturing processes. In the course of the other
changes a new class structure has appeared in which a middle

class is prominent, as has already been explained; and this middle
class, through the type of education it has received, is familiar
with European secular thinking and not least with the political
ideas of socialism and communism. At the same time, as Western
comforts and luxuries became widely available, a growing
materialism has spread through all classes. Yet on the other
hand the process of rapid change has produced feelings of in-
security.

In this situation it has to be admitted that ordinary Muslims
have not received the guidance and assurance they needed from the
Islamic religion, that is, from its authoritative intellectual
leaders. Much of the trouble goes back to the lack of cross-
fertilization between Western education and Islamic education.
Even today the traditional Muslim intellectuals have hardly
begun to realize the true nature and full extent of the problems
of their society. Islam has tended to claim that it is more self-
sufficient than in fact it is. Because it regarded the Sharī'a
as perfect and final, its mind tended to be closed to good ideas
from non-Islamic sources (as exemplified by its suspicion of
European education). Because the ulema have also assumed that
traditional formulations of the Sharī'a share in its finality
and perfection, there have been no attempts worthy of notice at
radical reformulation; and so official Islam has little guidance
to offer in the contemporary situation.

The most satisfactory solutions of the problems of today
are those which are inspired by some form of European thought
and which have attracted Muslim politicians and non-religious
intellectuals. Reforms along such lines, however, are usually
blocked by the religious conservatism and loyalty of the masses,
supported by the ulema. Apart from this instinctive opposition

to reform the masses of the people will not feel they have a true identity unless the reformed social structure is manifestly continuous in some way with the Islamic past.

The immediate political relevance of all this is that the Islamic countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East have grave social problems for which they cannot find an appropriate and generally acceptable solution, and so are liable to experience sudden and extensive political and social changes, which may in turn lead to a realignment of external relationships. Moreover, where there are widespread feelings of insecurity, the Muslim belief that Islam is superior and contains all truth, so that everything else is superfluous, easily leads to xenophobia and to the breaking of relations with foreign states. In these circumstances it is very important for European statesmen to have a deep understanding of Muslim attitudes and to be suspicious and critical of any negative attitudes towards Islamic civilization which they find in themselves.