The influence of religion in the Arab world is strongest in indirect forms which, when examined, clarify the secularist tendencies prevailing. This side of the question is perhaps best approached, first, by asking what are people's actual preoccupations, and then relating these to their sources. Everyone who knows the Arab world knows that two questions exclude all others from the public interest, nationalism and socialism. The more closely we look at these two, the less easily can we distinguish them. There are many cross-currents. Arabs are as suspicious of the imperialist powers of the West as we are of Communism, and the great difference of opinion among them is about whether the Communist powers are imperialistic too. As Western influence recedes, distrust of Communism increases among non-Communists, but confidence in Russia and China survives the local quarrel with the Party. “Nationalist” groupings oppose Communism, but include a motley range of conservatives, liberals, “Owenite” socialists, and finally national socialists whom the Left describe as crypto-fascist. The Iraqi National Democrats follow the lonely road to orthodoxy parliamentary socialism. In the United Arab Republic, the Communist Party is suppressed, but in Egypt the national Union (and in Syria its equivalent) are intended to express a range of different opinions, and to exclude party conflict within a socialist framework. It is nearly common to all that the Arabs (that is, those whose mother-tongue is Arabic) are one nation, inhabiting a single homeland, in which the people should be sovereign.

It is possible, however, to trace a connection between the basic ideas, common to all parties . . . , and basic ideas of Islamic religion. First, came pride of community. This is characteristic of Islam, the religion revealed to many prophets, and then comprehensively to Muhammad. Contempt, often kindly, has been the Muslim attitude to Christians. Moreover, Islamic pride was always close to Arab pride, because the Messenger of God was an Arab. Secondly, there was the sense of community itself . . . The communal worship, so much more liturgical in its unanimity than Christian equivalents, the pilgrimage, with its strict equality, the poor-rate with its defined charity, these “pillars” of Islam made men realize that God’s people were one.

The revulsion from Ottoman-type corruption is also traditional. In the simplicity of the early caliphs, who converted the world, the grand and corrupt Byzantine and Sassanian dynasties were reproved. Stories of the caliphs soon passed into Western literature; in English Ockley gives a classic picture of Abu Bakr, determined that he should derive no personal advantage from his office; and of “Umar, who, every Friday night, where Abu Bakr had distributed the Treasury surplus according to the deserts of the recipients, did so according to their needs,” thus anticipating a well-known definition of socialism.

Fourthly, the Arab’s reluctance to suffer nuclear bombing if he can help it may be due solely to his common sense, but it seems also to reflect that communal solidarity which seeks peace among Muslims: “they so nourish harmony and love among themselves that they really seem to be brothers . . . They who have a religion of killing and death do not wish to kill each other, and the wretched Christians, who have a religion of life, and commandments of peace and love, kill each other without mercy,” said the Florentine Dominican of thirteenth-century Iraq. This was the direct product of Islamic unity, of which peace is one face, and which Muslims never forget, or cease to desire. Today, Arabs retain the wish to hold together, apart from others, and in peace, while some Christians seem still warily to see unwanted wars an ineluctable duty.

Thus there seems to be a relation between Islamic concepts and some modern secular concepts in Islamic countries, where the process of changing to secular concepts takes place with a smoothness that we in the West have not known. An Egyptian scholar sees the modern secular tendencies as changing alike the Christian and the Islamic past ideas, but it strikes him as a natural development; he says that there are now “a secularized version of the Rights of Man,” a “theoretical advance of the individual from status to contract,” and belief in salvation through economic and social changes, and in the efficacy of perfect institutions. No doubt there is a conflict here between the modern world and both the older religions, which he sums up as a change toward the regenerated society and away from the regenerated individual; but these new social tendencies are congenial to the nature and traditions of Islam.

**ISLAM AND MODERN SECULARISM**

The April issue of Blackfriars carries a discussion by Norman Daniel of “Religion and Secularism in the Arab World.” Excerpts from this article follow.
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