The Politics of Islam

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Westerners tend to think of Islam as a "political religion," or at least as a religion which has an important political component. We speak too about "Islamic history" and "Islamic civilization" and we know that what we are referring to is not purely ecclesiastical or purely religious. Perhaps at the basis of this way of thinking and speaking is the fact that Muhammad was not only a prophet but also a statesman and political leader, and that his influence gave birth to a social entity which is both religious community and body politic.

Nonetheless, it is not altogether correct to think of Islam as a political religion. The Qur'an, the basic document of the Islamic religion, has no blueprint for a political structure. At most it continues certain political precepts of a very general kind: It emphasizes duties such as obeying recognized authorities and fighting against the enemies of the Islamic state, and it commands the referral of disputes for adjudication by God and Muhammad. The Islamic state during the lifetime of Muhammad was based essentially on the political ideas current among the pre-Islamic Arabs, and the Qur'an assumed the existence of this state as a given.

A Muslim discussing these questions would normally refer not to the Qur'an but to the Shari'a. The conception of the Shari'a is not unlike the Jewish conception of Torah. The Shari'a is the divine law in its essential nature, as it exists apart from all attempts to formulate it. The rules of conduct found in the Qur'an are part of the Shari'a, but they do not exhaust it. Almost as important is the example of Muhammad as this is known in the Traditions—a term used technically for duly attested anecdotes about the sayings and acts of Muhammad. Though several thousands of Traditions are accepted as genuine, there are still many situations which are covered

New political potentials depend on closing the gap between Islamic religion and Islamic nationalism

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centuries various dynasties of warlords, usually called “sultans” in English, by force of arms created greater or smaller states for themselves, but found it advantageous to receive from the caliph a letter appointing them as governors of the territories they in fact ruled. After the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258, the caliphate may be said to have gone underground, but in the eighteenth century the Ottoman sultans claimed that around 1543 the descendant of the caliphs of Baghdad had transferred the dignity to their ancestors. As the Ottoman sultan was then the most powerful ruler in the Islamic world, the claim came to be accepted by most Muslims, and the abolition of the caliphate by the Turks in 1924 (two years after abolition of the Ottoman sultanate) was widely felt by Muslims as a threat to Islam. Nevertheless, when a PanIslam conference met to consider the question, it was found impossible to make any appointment. No actual Muslim ruler was prepared to see even this rather empty dignity given to a rival. So it was agreed to abandon this traditional Islamic political office.

A few years earlier, at the beginning of the First World War, the Ottoman sultan had tried to get the Muslims of British India to revolt against their rulers by declaring a Jihad or “holy war” against the Western Allies as being, from a strict Islamic point of view, “infidels.” The Indian Muslims, however, were quick to recognize that the sultan was using a religious principle to gain a nonreligious end, for he himself was allied with, and indeed dependent on, equally infidel powers. There was thus little hesitation in setting aside the Qur’anic injunction to fight against the enemies of the Islamic state.

More recently there has been the affair of Bangladesh. It has commonly been held that there is a particularly deep sense of brotherhood between Muslims. Yet this sense of brotherhood was unable to restrain Muslims, where important nonreligious interests were at stake, from killing and indeed mas-sacre their fellow Muslims. As the Islamic world fully realizes the heinousness of this fratricidal strife, there may be some reaction of a practical kind. Here, too, both sides were relying in various ways on non-Muslims; and both were neglecting the Qur’anic precept to refer to God and to Muhammad—presumably to be interpreted as some judicial body representing Muhammad—the matters in which they differ.

Against this ineffectiveness of Islamic political principles in the modern world is to be set the strong loyalty of ordinary Muslims to the Islamic community and to Islam as a religion. This is a fact with which politicians must seriously reckon. It is not altogether a religious fact, however. In some ways this loyalty functions as a kind of secular Islamic nationalism or patriotism. Even the atheistic student will, if Islam is attacked by a foreigner, rush to its defense. Islamic nationalism, if the term may be used, also has much deeper roots than Arab nationalism, Egyptian nationalism, and the like. Ideas such as the unity of the Arabs and the unity of the Egyptians are mainly European imports and not indigenous to Islamic culture. They appeal primarily to the Western-educated classes, whereas the masses respond most profoundly to Islamic loyalty.

Second, adaptation has come about in the past through the activities of the ulema, or jurists. It was they who created the intellectual edifice whereby the Shari’a, beginning from a few rules designed for a small Arabian town, became the basis of the way of life of millions of people throughout a vast empire, including many sophisticated city dwellers. It was the ulema who adapted the formulation of Islamic doctrine to the modes of Greek thought already familiar in the central lands of the Islamic empire. (The adaptive efforts of modern religious intellectuals will be considered presently.)

Third, an important element in the life of the Islamic community is “consensus,” by which is meant ideally the consensus of the whole community of Muslims. Formally, consensus is one of the “roots of law.” More practically, it is a recognition that without wide acceptance by ordinary people the teachings of the charismatic leader and the conclusions of the intellectuals will have little effect. The case is often cited of the prohibition by the jurists of the drinking of coffee when it was first introduced to the Arab world; they later rescinded the prohibition when the consensus of the people was solidly against it.

Despite the possibilities of the adaption to changing conditions, Islamic loyalty, as the contemporary politician experiences it, is a conservative force. A politician attempting some desirable reform will have opponents who allege that he is attacking Islam and establishing a secular state; and then, unless he is lucky, he will have the mob against him. Only a man with great personal prestige, with something of a charisma, can carry through reforms; and even such
a man is seriously circumscribed in his efforts by this strong conservatism of the masses. Needless to say, its influence is almost entirely negative.

One way of dealing with this feature of Islamic life was that chosen by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey. He decided it would be impossible to achieve the reforms he wanted on an Islamic basis, and therefore broke with Islam and declared Turkey a secular state. The Shari’a was replaced by a legal system based on the Swiss civil code. Atatürk had sufficient strength and determination to carry out this drastic change and silence all opposition. Yet in important ways Turkey has not ceased to be Islamic. The religion of Islam is widely practiced. Traditional religious teaching, though forbidden for a time, can once again be given. There is even a modernizing Faculty of Islamic Theology at the University of Ankara. Many modern Turks with a good Western education claim that Turkey is an Islamic country; but in so doing they subtly shift the meaning. What they are asserting is that Islam is widely practiced, and this is true. But by “Islam” they do not mean the dīn or “religion” in the Islamic sense of placing the whole of life under the Shari’a, but only the “religion” in the usual Western sense of forms of worship and matters of personal piety.

Turkey’s break with its Islamic past was facilitated and made more far-reaching by the abandonment of the Arabic script and the adoption instead of Latin script, while at the same time a process was initiated of replacing many of the Arabic and Persian words in Ottoman Turkish by words of Turkish origin. Since the Arabic script was not well suited to Turkish, the change had various advantages; but, as Arnold Toynbee has pointed out, it also meant that the great mass of the Turkish people was cut off from both its Islamic and its Ottoman heritage. It was forbidden to publish even classical Turkish books in Arabic script unless there was also a Latin script version in the same volume. The change of script and the increasing Turkification of the current language mean that relatively few Turks have access to their own classics, especially in the field of religion.

Such a complete break with the past is not practical politics in the main Islamic countries, even though some young revolutionaries might think it desirable. For the Arab countries the abandonment of the old script is unthinkable in the foreseeable future. For one thing, the Arabs are proud both of their classical literature and of their language; for another, the Qur’an is in Arabic, and there would be strong resistance to writing it in any other than the traditional way. Even Christian Arabs—about five million out of over 100 million Arabs—are attached to their language; and, though they have special words for distinctive Christian ideas, they cannot avoid the Islamic ways of thinking implicit in Arabic. In Pakistan, again, the whole raison d’être of the state is to be Islamic, for only religion separates the Pakistanis from their neighbors. Indonesia, though the largest Islamic country, is in something of a frontier situation, where to be a Muslim is an important part of one’s identity, so that any break with Islam is unlikely. A similar situation prevails in the populous Islamic regions in the north of Nigeria.

The fact that politicians in several Muslim countries have pursued policies that are secular and of
Western inspiration, even though they may have tried to disguise this, is due in part to their admiration of the achievements of Europe and North America and in part to the way in which education has developed in the Islamic world since about 1800. In Egypt, for example, Muhammad Ali, who became ruler of Egypt in 1805, wanted to modernize his country and saw that education of a European type was essential. He was supported by certain sections of the community that were aware of the many advantages to be derived from European education. By the early twentieth century there was a complete system of Western education, from primary schools to a university. At the same time the traditional Islamic educational system had been retained intact, and it also went from village schools, where boys memorized the Qur'an and learned to read, to the university of al-Azhar, where there had been no significant changes in the curriculum for centuries, and where until about 1950 hardly any of the professors had a reading knowledge of a European language. One result of this twofold educational system was that religious thinking was insulated from Western thought. The authoritative religious teachers had a traditional training with methods totally unsuited to European-type schools, while people with a Western education had only an elementary knowledge of Islam unless they had done extensive reading on their own.

Egypt may be an extreme case, but it is far from unique among Islamic countries. The reluctance of many conservative Muslims to accept a European-type education, with its resulting dual system of training, is linked to the inherited suspicion of Muslims for everything Christian. This suspicion can be traced to the time when relatively simple Arabs from Arabia conquered Egypt, Syria and Iraq and found themselves mixing with much more sophisticated Christians. The troubles between Hindus and Muslims in British India were exacerbated by the fact that the Hindus had welcomed European education while the Muslims (until late in the nineteenth century) had stood aloof from it, and had, as a result, found themselves economically and socially at a disadvantage.

Thus educational developments in the modern Islamic world have made it impossible, or at least very difficult, for the ulama or authoritative religious leaders to give much guidance to the ordinary Muslim in dealing with the problems of the twentieth century, which, of course, are rapidly becoming more complex. The ulama have achieved something in the sphere of law in the narrow European sense, notably improvements in matters of detail. For example, in medieval times and until recently, Islamic courts preferred oral evidence and would hardly accept documentary evidence; they could not rule out of order as impossible a claim for alimony based on the allegation of a four-year pregnancy. Such matters have now been rectified in practice. In most instances, however, the rectification has been achieved by roundabout methods, or even by subterfuge. There has been no radical critique of traditional principles with a view to completely reformulating the basis of the Shari'ah. Without some such critique and reformulation there is a limit to the process of adaptation to modern needs which is possible.

In the Arab world of the nineteenth century, there was one important exception to this failure of the ulama to give a lead. Muhammad Abduh, who, after reaching the highest rungs of the traditional educational ladder, made a valiant attempt to reformulate theological doctrine in more modern terms. This was a significant beginning, but, though his followers tried to continue his work, the momentum was soon lost. Apart from Muhammad Abduh and his followers, modernizing discussions of religious questions in the Arab world have been left almost entirely to amateurs, that is, to Western-educated laymen, especially men of letters.

The Muslims of the Indian subcontinent have usually been a generation ahead of their Arab coreligionists in reacting to the West. As early as 1875, under the leadership of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, liberal-minded Indian Muslims established a college at Aligarh to provide education of a Western type and in 1920 it became a university. In the twentieth century the poet-philosopher, Sir Muhammad Iqbal, published, beginning in 1951, a series of poems presenting his vision of a revived and reformed Islam and worked this out philosophically in a set of lectures, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Though he was a great source of inspiration for younger Muslims and is regarded as the spiritual father of Pakistan, he was somewhat apart from the mainstream both of Islamic religion and of Western thought and has not blazed a trail which others may follow. Of much more lasting value is the writing of Abul-Kalam in India and of Mauloodi in Pakistan, both of whom, though modernists, are close to the mainstream of traditional Islam and are concerned for the deepening of the faith of ordinary men.

While Muhammad Abduh was aware of the political problems confronting the Islamic world in his time, his influence did not lead directly to any decisive political thinking. It is still common to find naive political attitudes among religious-minded Muslims—to be told, for example, that Islam has the correct ideas to solve contemporary problems if only men would put them into practice!

The most serious attempt in the Arab world to base politics on the Islamic religion was made by the Muslim Brotherhood, established by Husayn al-Banna in 1929. Its emphatically religious character no doubt led to its rapid growth, so that in 1949 it was
said to have two million members, spreading to Syria and to most other Arab countries. By 1939 the Muslim Brotherhood was strong enough to have a measure of political influence. At this period it stood for Egyptian independence, the unity of the Nile Valley (that is, of Egypt and the Sudan) and for certain internal social reforms. In the last years of the Egyptian monarchy the Brotherhood was opposed to royal policy and came under a ban. For a time after July, 1952, they were in favor with the Revolutionary Council, but by 1954 serious differences of direction had appeared and the Brotherhood was suppressed after several members had been executed or imprisoned for antigovernment activities. The essential weakness of the Brotherhood was that, when they became involved in politics and were forced to make political choices, these choices were haphazard and opportunistic and not strictly governed by Islamic principles. Some Brethren might speak of "Islamic socialism," but President Nasser was able to find iduma who could show that his very different "Arab socialism" was just as much or even more in accord with Islam.

The difficulty of deriving workable policies from Islamic principles—at least at the present stage of Islamic thinking—is illustrated at several points by Pakistan. It is generally agreed that Pakistan is an Islamic country and should have a truly Islamic constitution; but it has proved impossible to work this out in practice. The one point which in 1953 all interests accepted was that Pakistan was to be an Islamic republic with the Commonwealth. Normally, the British queen is the nominal head of state of the independent countries within the Commonwealth, but it was clearly unsuitable that an Islamic country should even nominally have a non-Muslim as head of state. In addition, any suggestion of applying Islamic principles in some specific way was found to upset the actual balance of forces within the country.

In considering the relation of Islam to politics, the most interesting movement in Pakistan is the Jamaat-e-Islami founded in 1941 by Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdoodi. This movement is not unlike the Muslim Brotherhood, but it has placed much more emphasis on the purely religious side. Mawdoodi, though he himself had a traditional education, has a large following among Western-educated students and intellectuals, for he has presented in a modern dress the basic Islam of the mainstream. (Among his popular books in English are Towards Understanding Islam and The Islamic Way of Life.) Despite his modernizing side, however, Western observers described him as "fundamentalist" and "reactionary." He has engaged in politics to the extent of having spent some time in prison under sentence of death and, perhaps most important, he and his movement have survived thirty years of political involvement and have gained considerable political experience. This movement would thus seem to make possible the appearance of a genuinely Islamic political program, but the way would still be open for the formulation of other programs equally Islamic.

The pattern of Jamaat-e-Islami is one that has frequently occurred in Islamic history, namely, a movement based on the teachings of a man of profound religious experience being forced by circumstances to adopt a political position. In the past the body of disciples has been transformed almost overnight into an effective military force; so it happened with Iman Tumart in North Africa about 1100, with Usman dan-Fodio in northern Nigeria about 1800 and with the Mahdi of the Sudan at the end of the nineteenth century. With contemporary military technology it is more difficult for religious enthusiasts to take suddenly to arms, but perhaps a political party is the equivalent. At the present time the best hope of directing Islamic loyalty or patriotism into creative channels is through a movement which, in itself religiously attractive, is able to move into politics. And, of course, it is helpful if the religious leader is advised by, or succeeded by, someone with outstanding skills as a statesman.

Any examination of the place of Islam in contemporary politics, then, must recognize Islamic loyalty or Islamic patriotism as a basic political fact of which Muslim statesmen must always take account, together with its tendency to support conservative and reactionary policies. Second, the best hope for enlisting the support of Islamic loyalty for reforming policy is with a man who has gained widespread respect as a religious leader and then publicly commits himself to a program of reform. Finally, even non-Muslim politicians are bound to pay attention to the strength of Islamic loyalty, and not least those ecclesiastical statesmen who are concerned with interreligious relations. If Muslims are to feel themselves truly members of a united world, some way must be discovered of appreciating and acknowledging the contributions of Islam to the religious and cultural advance of mankind.