

BOOKS

IN THE PATH OF GOD: ISLAM AND POLITICAL POWER

by Daniel Pipes

(Basic Books; x + 373 pp.; \$22.50)

ISLAM IN THE WORLD

by Malise Ruthven

(Oxford University Press; 400 pp.; \$8.95 [paper])

Sterett Pope

It is no coincidence that today's growing oil glut has brought in its wake a flood of books on Islam. With an assertive OPEC coming on stream in the early '70s, Western governments and media rediscovered the inscrutable bedouins and emirs of Arabia. The Iranian Revolution and a worldwide Islamic revival added Ayatollah Khomeini and Colonel Qaddafi to a growing list of Islamic riddles, and journalists and professors were sent scratching for answers. The publishing industry responds more slowly than the petroleum spot market; only lately have Islamic books started tumbling from the presses by the truckful, covering Islam country by country, discipline by discipline. The most marketable product, of course, is the generic Islamic work; and while it will never outsell the generic Westerns and romances available at American supermarkets, "Islamic" are becoming popular. No less than the detective story or the spy novel, the Islamic no doubt will be neglected and misunderstood until it is fully popularized and perfected.

For the moment, however, such books labor under several difficulties. The first is the scope of the subject itself. Islam is both a religion and a world civilization; it is a personal faith and a system of beliefs and practices that makes serious claims on government and politics. Careful synthesis and exposition of these interlocking aspects for the general reader requires some mastery of the separate disciplines of history, politics, and sociology at the very least. This is as tall an order for academic specialists as it is for globe-trotting journalists.

A second difficulty is more serious. This is the problem of context. Without the OPEC oil embargo, the Iranian Revolution, and the car-bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, few readers and even fewer writers would take an interest in Islam at all; and these much-reviled events have given "Islamic" books in the West an urgent and

polemical tone they might otherwise have lacked. V. S. Naipaul, for example, woke up to Islam during the Iranian hostage crisis, a bizarre drama that inspired him to make his own "Islamic journey" to four Muslim countries, which he recounts in his 1981 travelogue, *Among the Believers*. Descending into the streets of Teheran on page three of his narrative, Naipaul has a tiff with his surly Iranian driver and, on the strength of this, deduces that his hosts "have made the Iranian Revolution...without political doctrine, only with resentments...." Literary travelers, like good ethnographers, are often obliged to generalize from trivial observation and mundane experience; but when the object of study is an alien and "hostile" religion, the possibilities for misunderstanding, prejudice, and bigotry are enormous. As for Naipaul, his wish to make a random personal encounter emblematic of a whole revolutionary movement diminishes his own credibility.

Methodology aside, there is something deeply disconcerting about Western writers vigorously debating a religion none professes or practices. Polemics, harsh by nature, tend toward arrogance and presumption when they score points at the expense of a faith earnestly practiced and deeply felt by foreigners. On the other hand, Western attempts to empathize with Muslims can easily seem inauthentic and may often smack of apologetics. The problem is unavoidable and demands special sensitivity and imagination. Naipaul notwithstanding, journalists—who are usually more at home with personalities than concepts—are more successful with empathy; while academics—who live by debate and relish it—make better polemicists. The trick is somehow to combine the two approaches.

Daniel Pipes's *In the Path of God* falls squarely in the academic subgenre. Pipes, who has worked as both a professor of Islamic

history and a policymaker in Reagan's State Department, has written an informative study of contemporary Islamic politics. But his book has all the authority and false detachment of the most strident scholarly polemics. He tries to be soft-spoken and judicious, and at times he succeeds; but beneath his delicate discussions lurk familiar foreign policy debates and dogmas of the Orientalist tradition. Nevertheless, these defects do not seriously damage the book, which remains carefully argued and well written and has clearly benefited from thorough research. To his credit, Pipes has synthesized the best of Orientalist scholarship, to which he adds a bold new thesis of his own. But by relying on a single academic discipline, Pipes's synthesis of Muslim culture pays the price of overspecialization, while his own meditations on the Islamic revival prove both sensational and naive.

Professor Pipes's argument is simple and appealing: For all their diversity of climate and culture, the common denominator of Muslim societies is a concern for "the sacred law," or Shari'a, a code developed by early Muslims from the Koran and the life of the Prophet. This code regulates many aspects of private life, but it also makes strict demands on social relations and government. If Christianity is primarily a religion of ethics, Islam is a religion of laws. Unlike Christianity, Islam cannot easily be relegated to the conscience of the individual worshiper; instead, it must impose itself upon society at large and inform the body politic. So the kind of secularization the Christian West has undergone is problematical in the Muslim East.

Second, emphasis on the sacred law in early Islam promoted ideals that proved impossible to put into practice, even in the best of times, and created a dynamic tension between "what ought to be and what is." Finally, in the modern era, Islam's stubborn insistence on "worldly success" in the political realm has exacerbated this tension. As Muslims suffered conquest, colonization, and economic domination by European infidels they once treated with contempt or indifference, the entire Islamic world was seized with "the sense that something [had] gone wrong with Muslim history."

In modern times this trauma has been profound and enduring because, according to Pipes, of all religions and civilizations Islam "is the least propitious to modern life." As Muslims reluctantly came to terms with a dynamic and world-conquering West, they were forced to imitate and learn from their overlords—forced, but strangely unable and

unwilling. Islamic concern for the sacred law was at odds with Western notions of liberalism and secularization; Islamic extraterritorial loyalties of sect and tribe did not easily accommodate Western-style nationalism; and Islamic disdain for and hostility to the West made modernity especially unpleasant. As Pipes correctly points out, while modernization and Westernization might be separate in theory, in practice they come uncomfortably close to the same thing.

Western success highlighted the failure of "traditionalist" Islam, and so revision was in order. Islamic "reformism"—a self-conscious attempt to adapt the sacred law through scholarly reinterpretation—ended by distorting Islam beyond recognition; and "secularism"—which tried to discard political religion entirely—was no more satisfactory. There remained fundamentalism (Pipes calls it "radical legalism")—the attempt to apply the sacred law fully in the modern context. Fundamentalism is the most appealing option in the short run because it offers a totalist worldview and the security of divine sanction. But over the long haul fundamentalism cannot deliver, because the Shari'a has always been impossible to apply fully and because fundamentalism will never dispense with essentially antimodern aspects of Islam.

In the end, "Muslims can either struggle to implement the fundamentalist vision, or they can adapt to Westernization." For Pipes it is one or the other. Fundamentalism, like the conspiracy theories so prevalent in today's Middle East, is just another psychological defense, a quick fix that is neither healthy nor fortifying. Pipes is hard on his subjects and easy on his readers, but is he right?

Drawing on the best of Orientalist scholarship, Pipes's book shares the signal failing of the Orientalist tradition: its untempered idealism. His attempt to dismiss materialist philosophy in a single paragraph of crude caricature is hardly persuasive, perhaps because his own idealism is equally crude. Western sociology might have suggested a middle ground, but that would have complicated things needlessly, and Pipes is no sociologist. Islam as an idea is everywhere with Pipes. It moves men and mountains with equal facility and stealth. Ideas may determine history "in the final instance," as the Marxists say, but here they determine it in the first instance as well. Pipes is indeed quite deft at showing the dispersion of Islamic norms and themes, the way the sacred law organizes spheres as diverse as statecraft, the visual arts, and sexual relations. Such features of Islamic history as tribal allegiances and the domi-

nance of warrior castes are duly chalked up to Islam; but left unexamined are such relevant factors as geography and social structure. It is as if a Muslim writer were to blame high divorce rates in America on "Christian" or atheistic ideas without addressing such factors as economic conditions and the technology of birth control.

Only in one case does *In the Path of God* give economics and technology their due, and then it insists too much. Professor Pipes thinks that today's Islamic revival is largely due to the OPEC oil boom, which restored the confidence of many Islamic rulers, allowed Saudi Arabia and Libya to promote Islam abroad, and destabilized Iran, leading to Khomeini's astonishing experiment in Islamic government. But relax. The price of oil is down—oil is a depleting asset anyway—and Khomeini's rigorous rule of sacred law will soon fail, as have all such attempts in the past.

For all his hard-boiled realism, Pipes displays a strangely naive reverence for the missionary efforts of Saudi Arabia and Libya; these efforts turn out to be merely the policies of aid, propaganda, and conspiracy used by other powers. Only this time they are being used in the service of Islam. Pipes thinks that these policies are effective, the keys to the Islamic revival. But as Americans have long since discovered, aid and conspiracy are dubious foreign policy instruments at best. Economic assistance to allies, whether on a cash or project basis, is terribly inefficient. Most of the money we send abroad is quickly rerouted to the Swiss bank accounts of friendly statesmen, and the rest seems to disappear in the baffled recesses of Third World bureaucracies. Even the most closely watched projects often miscarry.

International conspiracy—we call it "covert action"—is even less effective. As the CIA never tires of proving, conspiracy provokes wild resentment, while rarely getting the job done. Off the television screen, Mission Impossible-style plots to destroy, deceive, and discredit foreign leaders generally backfire, leaving us looking insolent and foolish. If the awesome wealth, organization, and technology of the United States cannot make aid and espionage work, what are we to make of Saudi and Libyan policies, amateur and rag-tag as they must be?

In the propaganda department, Pipes clearly relishes the public relations antics of Colonel Qaddafi. The professor archly notes Qaddafi's attempts to buy the faiths of various African presidents—good copy to be sure, but hardly serious foreign policy. While Central Africa's Jean-Bedel ("Salaheddine Ahmed") Bokassa and Gabon's Al-

bert-Bernard ("Omar") Bongo did heed the call (Bokassa on a strictly cash basis), their conversions carried all the conviction of two American athletes endorsing the same shaving cream. Bokassa, ever the entertainer, seemed to regard the Islam business as just that: "You wouldn't believe this comedy!" he announced to the press. However amusing, Pipes's rehearsal of such shenanigans is also frivolous.

To believe Pipes, the Islamic book boom will shortly share the fate of the oil bonanza that inspired it. Khomeini will pass on to paradise; Qaddafi will become an eccentric aside to history; and Iranians and Libyans, tiring of their leaders' spiritual quests, will again turn their minds to the problems of modern life. And Western readers too, taking strange solace in the struggles of Muslims with modernity, will reluctantly return to their own travails.

Malise Ruthven's *Islam in the World* is everything that Pipes's book is not. Not so much an argument as an introduction, Ruthven's book is unassuming where Pipes's is authoritative. It is apologetic rather than presumptuous, bland rather than polemical. A gifted journalist, Ruthven brings to his work a knack for rendering moods and settings he has felt and seen, and he doesn't limit himself to a single academic tradition. Ruthven proves one of those rare journalists who is comfortable with theories and systems of thought.

He succeeds by his very modesty. "I am not trained as a scholar," Ruthven explains, "and as a journalist my opportunities to travel have been very limited.... I am an agnostic, not so hostile as to hold the beliefs of others in contempt, but unable to share them." Nevertheless, his expositions of Islam as religion, civilization, and political culture are fresh and thoughtful, perhaps because, unlike the agenda-laden Naipaul, he has no *idées fixes* of his own. Middle East scholars will not find any surprises in Ruthven, but many will admire his fine writing and good sense.

As an introduction to the general reader, Ruthven's book covers all the basics familiar to students of Islam. He has chapters on the life of the Prophet, the language of the Koran, the sacred law, Islamic sects and doctrines, and, of course, modern Islamic political movements. He draws eclectically from Koranic linguistic research, Weberian sociology of religion, and Marxist debates on Islam; and he complements abstract discussions with vignettes from Muslim life and ritual, marrying analysis to empathy, framing facts with imagination.

If Professor Pipes has hastily sent polit-

ical Islam to the morgue of history like an opiated cancer patient, Ruthven is not so bold. He ends his book on this sober but sanguine note: "[Islam] is a message phrased in the language of a pastoral people who understood that survival depended upon submission to the natural laws governing their environment, and upon rules of hospitality demanding an even sharing of limited resources. In a world riven by the gap between rich and poor nations, and in constant danger of nuclear catastrophe, this message has an urgent relevance, and it is one that we ignore at our peril." WV

HOW DEMOCRACIES PERISH

by Jean-François Revel

translated by William Byron

(Doubleday and Co.: 312 pp.: \$17.95)

Thomas Magstadt

If Jean-François Revel is right, nothing succeeds like failure or fails like success in world politics these days. Moscow is winning the cold war despite two startling facts: (1) The Soviet "model" has been an eco-

nomie failure wherever tried, and (2) the Western free enterprise system, for all its imperfections and vicissitudes, remains the most successful economic formula in human history.

The explanation for this paradox, Revel argues, lies in the elusive laws of political relativity, which have made economics largely irrelevant to the superpower balance. Constitutional democracies are neither militarily defenseless nor morally indefensible. Far from it. But by some cruel twist of fate, the peculiar anatomy of Soviet power is such as to readily adapt to attacking the soft underbelly of the West.

Tocqueville was on the mark when he observed that democracies are at a distinct disadvantage in dealing with dictatorships. But Revel, like Tocqueville, is not a crude determinist. Disadvantage is one thing, doom quite another. Even the appearance of the modern totalitarian state—the apothecosis of dictatorship—would not, by itself, justify the death sentence Revel pronounces. Nazi Germany, he notes, posed a mortal threat, but in the end the democracies prevailed.

So what is different about the Soviet totalitarian challenge? Not its contempt for the rule of law, for our materialistic values,

our moral standards, our religious beliefs; not its militarism, fanaticism, xenophobia, hypocrisy, megalomania, or cold-blooded Machiavellianism. The Nazis were certainly no less guilty of these perversions. The difference is a subtle one. In fact, the difference is subtlety.

The Soviets, Revel tells us, have discovered the Achilles' heel of Western democracy: its fundamental decency. This, in turn, explains the propensity of democratic nations to soul-searching and self-deprecation. Among the resultant anomalies are these:

Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself for the fact that another power is working to destroy it.

The democracies today accuse themselves of sins they have not committed and typically presume themselves guilty until proven innocent.

The Western powers adopt policies harmful to themselves and helpful to their common adversary.

America's NATO allies consistently apply a double standard in their relations with the U.S. and the USSR, excusing Moscow's felonies while condemning Washington's misdemeanors.

The aim of those who organize antinu-

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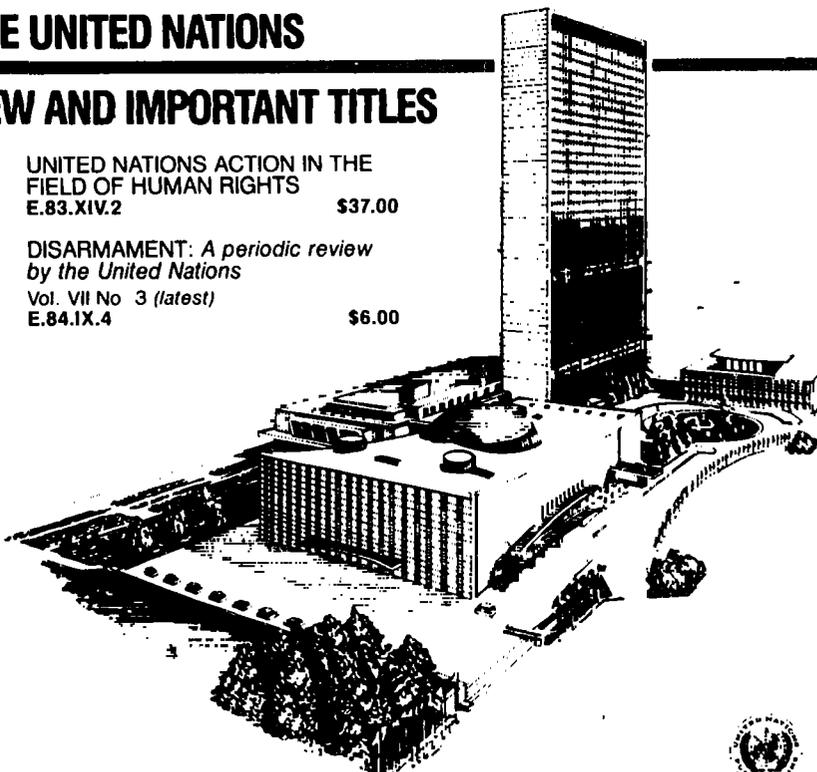
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