



THE MIDDLE EAST READER



Edited
by
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Understanding Islam in Politics

By Daniel Pipes

Much of the conventional wisdom about Islam and politics needs to be examined with skepticism.

— Michael C. Hudson

Events in recent years have made clear the extraordinary role of Islam in world politics. As fundamentalist Muslims took power and achieved international importance in such states as Pakistan and Iran, understanding Islam became necessary to interpret their goals and ideology. Islam also gave direction to governments in Saudi Arabia and Libya, influenced electoral politics in democracies such as Turkey, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and posed important challenges to Communist regimes in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. Islam heightened domestic tensions in Nigeria, the Sudan, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Burma, and it defined rebellions against the central government in Chad, Ethiopia, Cyprus, Lebanon, Thailand, and the Philippines. It fueled international conflicts between Turks and Greeks, Arabs and Israelis, Pakistanis and Indians, and Somalis and Ethiopians. In the Arab-Israeli dispute, for example, Islam helped account for the nature of Arab resistance to Israel's existence, the intense involvement of such distant countries as Iraq and Libya, and the meaning of the call in the Palestine National Covenant for the establishment of a "secular and democratic" state in Palestine.

There has been an increasing need to understand the political impact of Islam. Proposals for solving the Arab-Israeli conflict must consider the special Islamic concern for the control of territory. American or Soviet negotiators seeking military bases in the Middle East must take into account vehement Islamic sensibilities against the presence of non-Muslim troops. NATO

strategists must keep abreast of Islamic sentiments among Turkey's population if they want to gauge the likelihood of the alliance's southeast flank holding firm. As Muslims of the Soviet Union increase in number and grow out of their isolation, the Islamic drive for self-rule will probably shape their aspirations; in all likelihood, they will use religious institutions to organize against the regime and they will look to foreign Muslims for support. Even business interests need to watch Islam, for many key oil-exporting states entertain "powerful sentiments of grievance and resentment against the Christian West"¹ which could seriously upset the oil market in coming years.

How Muslims feel and act has enormous international repercussions: they number about 832 million strong and make up roughly one-fifth of mankind; substantial groups of Muslims live in ninety-one countries and in them constitute a population of about 3.6 billion. Muslims control most of the oil available for export and they inhabit many of the globe's most strategic areas. Yet the question of Islam in politics has been given little serious thought until recently and remains a largely obscure topic in the Western world. In my view, this is not so much because of the subject matter's complexity but because of the many blinders that obstruct the vision of observers. For Westerners, the main problems have to do primarily with an historic animosity toward Islam and a disinclination to acknowledge the political force of religion. In the hope of clearing up some of these problems, this

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article discusses some obstacles that face a Westerner interested in understanding Islam and politics.

Recognizing Religion's Impact on Politics

For Westerners of the late twentieth century the notion that Islam — or any religion — acts as an autonomous political force may be a somewhat novel thesis. The influence of religion in the West has diminished so much during the past five hundred years that many persons, especially intellectuals, find it difficult to appreciate the political import of religion in other times and places. Developments such as the Iranian Revolution, the central role of the Catholic church in Poland, and the rise of fundamentalist pressure groups in the United States provoke much discussion, but the deeper, ongoing influence of religion tends to be ignored. Three obstacles are especially important in this: secularism, materialism, and modernization theory.

Secularization is a "process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance" and are increasingly restricted to the domain of private faith.² Since the early Renaissance the West has experienced a steady contraction of religion away from politics, ethics, education, and the arts; this process has gone so far that faith retains hardly any importance in the lives of many people. But secularization has not been universal, for some people in the West and many in other regions of the world, especially Muslims, are still deeply swayed by religious concerns. Secularized observers often disbelieve that the faith that they disdain can retain such force. For someone who views religion as a sign of ignorance and backwardness, the passions it arouses can be baffling. "To the modern Western mind, it is not conceivable that men would fight and die ... over mere differences in religion; there have to be some other 'genuine' reasons underneath the religious veil."³ For someone whose daily life is not touched by faith, understanding the power of religion in politics is difficult and requires an open mind and a willingness to see things from a different vantage point. There is a tendency to

discount the power of religion. Khomeini's rise to power is viewed as a result of economic discontent, of social tensions, political disenfranchisement, repression, charismatic leadership — anything but the fact that millions of Iranians believed this man could create a new order which, in fulfilling God's commands, would solve Iran's problems. More generally, "many commentators ... believe that present Islamic activism is primarily nationalist or socialist or economically motivated movements dressed in the garb of religion." Yet, "to ignore religious desires and to concentrate only on the economic drives or secularized political motives is to limit unnecessarily the scope of our understanding."⁴

The philosophical doctrine of materialism impedes comprehension of religion in politics even more than secularism. This doctrine originated in the nineteenth century, when European intellectuals, expressing unlimited confidence in rationality and science, formulated elaborate theories to demonstrate how predictably mankind responds to its environment. One of these theories was Karl Marx's historical materialism which emphasized the importance of changes in economic conditions. According to Marx, the system of labor (slave, serf, capitalist, or socialist) determines all other aspects of society, including its politics, social relations, and culture. Neo-Marxists later modified this theory to allow more flexibility, but Marxist thought continues to emphasize the role of economic relations, while discounting the importance of ideas (scornfully dismissed as "ideology"). Individuals may believe they are motivated by ideals — patriotism, religious fervor, justice, and humanitarianism — but materialists invariably discern hidden economic motives. They believe that a calculus of cost and benefit, often unconscious, determines most actions. For example, abolitionists in the United States thought they were motivated by morality to fight the slave trade, but the materialists would argue that slavery hurt their economic interests. So, too, material concerns spurred American rebels in 1776, French revolutionaries in 1789, and Nazi supporters in the 1930s.

The trouble with this is that the theory of materialism reduces humans to one-dimensional beings, and the truth is not so simple. Economic factors indisputably have a major role (and they had been quite neglected before Marx), but they do not singly determine behavior. One cannot ignore the wide range of emotions that are not tied to material self-interest: loyalties to family, tribe, ethnic group, language group, neighbors, nation, race, class, or religion sometimes overlap with material interests and sometimes run contrary to them. Material factors alone fail to account for the actions of a George III or a Hitler. They cannot explain the endurance of Communist rule so long after its economic deficiencies have become manifest. Nor can they explain why Japan, an island almost barren of natural resources, is so much better off than mineral-rich Zaire. Much less do material factors show why so many people willingly give up their lives for political causes they believe in.

Similar problems arise when economic motives are assigned to actions taken in the name of religion. Materialists dismiss faith as a camouflage for self-interested drives, and they consider it naïve to accept religious impulses at face value. But how do material interests explain the wars of the Reformation that split communities and made family members into one another's enemies? What possible gains could the early Mormons have expected as they left their homes and trekked to Utah? Though the Crusades, the long conflict in Ireland, and the recent proliferation of religious sects in South Korea all had economic dimensions, it is surely mistaken to view them primarily as economic phenomena. The Crusades, for example, were far more than an imaginative method of making work for the unemployed or a way to gain new markets; material factors alone could never have inspired such enormous undertakings, with such risks. And how would material factors explain the suicide massacre at the People's Temple in Guyana?

Islam too must be understood as a potent force. Popular views in the West ascribe almost everything Islamic to "fanaticism," as though this were an independent cause,³ but serious discussions usually discount the

role of Islam in favor of material factors. For example, a collection of essays, published in 1978 under the title *Muslim-Christian Conflicts: Economic, Political and Social Origins*,⁶ covers five countries (Lebanon, Egypt, the Sudan, Yugoslavia, and Cyprus), but not once in 245 pages do the authors ascribe clashes between Christians and Muslims to emotions arising from religious allegiance! As the book's subtitle indicates, they interpret every conflict as a symptom of material grievances. But how would such grievances explain, for instance what happened during one week in May 1982 in Lebanon: the explosion of a car bomb outside a mosque under construction, injuring four persons; the bombing of a West Beirut mosque near the house of a former-Muslim prime minister; the assassination of a senior Islamic figure; the killing of a Maronite priest; and the suicide mission conducted in a Maronite church in Tripoli, killing three and injuring five? Whatever the economic relations between Muslims and Christians, these acts could have been inspired only by religious sentiments; similar examples can be found in all the other conflicts too. The mere fact of adherence to Islam has profound political consequences. If one-quarter of India's people had not converted to Islam, the subcontinent would not have been split as it was; further, the millions of Muslims who abandoned their homes in India to move to Pakistan neither expected nor received material benefits for this transfer. Islam, like other religions, inspires impractical acts which cannot be ascribed to economic self-interest.

Modernization theory, an explanation of how nations develop, was articulated in the two decades following World War II, during a unique period of prosperity and self-confidence in the West, when science seemed invincible and progress irresistible. Modernization theory postulates that all nations must follow the lines laid down by the first countries to become modern, especially Britain and the United States. In the political sphere, this means rationalization, the civic society, and secularization. Religion is seen as an obstacle to modernization and its hold is expected to weaken as nations advance.

These ideas were already discredited before 1979, but the Iranian Revolution delivered a final blow. Modernization theorists could not account for the emergence of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the Iranians' leader against the shah, whose revolt represented the first major political movement away from Western political ideals in the twentieth century. Until Khomeini, the leaders of all great social upheavals in modern times espoused objectives deriving at least in part from European thought, whether liberal, Marxist, fascist, or other. Prominent non-Western leaders such as Kemal Atatürk, Gamal Abdul Nasser, Ahmed Ben Bella, Kwame Nkrumah, Robert Mugabe, Mahatma Gandhi, Pol Pot, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse-tung, Sukarno, and Fidel Castro espoused goals familiar to the West, notwithstanding their local flavor. They conceived of all aspects of public affairs — sovereignty, economics, justice, welfare, and culture — in ways that could be traced to European origins, and this encouraged many observers to assume that peoples everywhere in the world must emulate the West politically.

But Khomeini was different. Although unconsciously influenced by Western notions, he rejected them; his lack of interest in the West was symbolized by his spending four months in the tiny village of Neauphle-Chateau and never visiting Paris, a mere twenty miles away. Khomeini's goals existed entirely within an Islamic context; further, he had no Western constituency and was indifferent to his image in Stockholm or Berkeley. Satisfied to live as his ancestors had, unfamiliar with the Western concepts of progress, he wished for nothing more than to return to the Islamic ways he supposed had once prevailed in Iran. Khomeini showed that the force of religion need not wane with the building of an industrial society, that secularism need not accompany modernization. Yet the discrediting of modernization theory did not signal its disappearance; the notion that religion is on the way out has been so widely disseminated that it may take decades before it loses force. Perhaps the time has come to suggest that secularization is a transient process peculiar to the West; not only will it not affect the rest of the world,

but it is likely to be reversed even in the Occident: "An historian of the non-Western world can hardly fail to see Western secularism as a sub-facet of specifically Christian history; indeed, of specifically Western Christian history."⁷

Together, secularization, materialism, and modernization theory cause the press and scholarship too often to ignore Islam's role in politics. In recent times, Islam came to the attention of Western analysts in the mid-1950s, as the Soviet Union, threatening Western interests, built up links to Abdul Nasser's government in Egypt and other countries of the Middle East. In response, European and American writers debated the relationship of Islam to communism. One school of thought saw Islam as a "bulwark against communism," on the grounds that its emphatic monotheism precluded Muslims from accepting any ideology based on atheism; the other (and more subtle) view was that structural similarities made the transition from Islam to communism an easy one. As fears that the Middle East would accept Marxism-Leninism abated, however, interest in Islam among political observers subsided, and nationalism became the focus of attention. Discussion of Islam as a political factor then went into dormancy for about twenty years. Views expressed in a 1965 book, *Islam and International Relations*, summed up the attitudes of those times. One writer, Fayez A. Sayegh, stated that "at least with respect to 'neutralism,' ... Islam has had little, if any noticeable influence upon the reasoning, planning, decision-making, or expression of Muslim policy makers." The volume's editor noted that most of the authors "maintained that Islam is actually of quite limited significance in shaping the attitudes and behavior of Muslim states in international relations today."⁸ For years, politics in Muslim countries was discussed almost without reference to Islam.

Attention to Islam increased after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and even more after the 1973 conflict. In 1976, Bernard Lewis urged in "The Return of Islam" that more attention be paid to the phenomenon of Islam, criticizing "the present inability, political, journalistic, and scholarly alike, to recognize the

importance of the factor of religion in the current affairs of the Muslim world."⁸ Westerners were increasingly receptive to the role of Islam by the time Khumayni appeared. As he gained power, the Western world watched with amazement; Islam seemed capable of unleashing the most extraordinary forces. Then, overreacting to events in Iran, many in the Occident suddenly thought Islam capable of anything; "in a remarkably brief span of time, Islam has been elevated from a negligible coincidence of human geography, to a political force of global import."⁹ Indeed, interest in Islam became excessive, leading one journalist to complain in 1981 that "where before Islam was largely ignored, now it is seen everywhere, even where it has no particular relevance."¹⁰ The war between Iraq and Iran which broke out in September 1980 was almost universally understood in terms of Shi'i-Sunni differences and the threat of Shi'i revolt in Iraq, though the cause of fighting had much more to do with a straightforward dispute over territory.¹²

But if Islam received too much attention in Iran, it remained underestimated elsewhere. In May 1981, the press portrayed disturbances in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo in purely nationalist terms, as Albanians versus Serbs, and stressed the Albanians' economic plight, without making any mention of the underlying Muslim-Christian tension. In other cases, the impulse toward materialistic interpretations prevailed: increased emphasis on religious law in Pakistan was portrayed as a function of economic travails, and the upsurge of the Muslim Brethren in Egypt was seen as a symptom of poverty.¹³ Economic factors did have great importance, but they fitted within a cultural context molded by religion. Were Iranians Buddhist, a religious leader would not have vanquished the shah; were Lebanon entirely Christian, the civil war would not have occurred; were Israel Muslim, its neighbors would have accepted its establishment.¹⁴

Western discussions of the Islamic revival of the 1970s consistently de-emphasized the importance of religious feelings; indeed, some analysts even disputed the significance of Islam in the Iranian Revolution.¹⁵ Others

denigrated the role of Islam more generally.

In 1977, Michael C. Hudson referred to "the growing irrelevance of Islamic standards and criteria" to Arab politics.¹⁶ Two studies of Islam and politics which appeared in 1982 made even more sweeping and more surprising statements. Thomas W. Lippman asserts that "religion as such had nothing to do, for example with Somalia's decision to end its partnership with the Soviet Union" or the Libyan invasion of Chad, or Arab opposition to the Baghdad Pact, and so forth; Edward Mortimer concludes a book on "the politics of Islam" with the observation that "it is more useful, in politics at any rate, to think about Muslims than to think about Islam."¹⁷ (Why then, one wonders, did he write a book about Islam?)

False Parallels with Christianity

Approaching Islam in politics with the Christian experience in mind is misleading. Because the community of Christians shares almost no political traits, there is a mistaken predisposition to assume that Muslims also do not.

Superficially, there is much in common between the two faiths. Just as devout Christians disagree on their proper role in public life, so do observant Muslims. At one extreme, medieval popes and Imam Khumayni* claimed supreme political authority for the religious leaders; at the other, some Protestant sects and Sufi (mystical) orders encouraged their adherents to total political quiescence. The role of Christianity varied enormously in the Roman Empire, medieval Scandinavia, fifteenth-century Ethiopia, Calvinist Geneva, Spanish Mexico, Mormon Utah, and Soviet Russia; so too did Islam in Muhammad's Medina, Abbasid Baghdad, Almoravid Spain, Mongol Iran, Mataram Java, the Murids' Senegal, the Turkish Republic, and Saudi Arabia.

Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians spanned the entire ideological spectrum, advocating every form of political authority and economic system, working toward mutually exclusive goals — all in the

*This was the accepted title for Khumayni after his return to Iran in February 1979.

name of the same religion. The Catholic church served as a bulwark against communism in Poland, yet priests led leftist causes in South America. New Protestant movements in South Korea and the United States were identified with conservative causes, while the Zimbabwean clergy had a key role in rebelling against White rule in their country. It is difficult to imagine what a book on "Christianity and political power" could say that would apply to Christians generally; any search for common themes would surely fail.

"Islam and political power" might appear to have as little validity, for pious Muslims had political objectives as diverse as those of their Christian counterparts. In recent years, the three most prominent and self-conscious Islamic states were neatly spread across the political spectrum, Saudi Arabia being aligned with the United States, Libya with the Soviet Union, and Iran rejecting ties to either super-power for as long as it could. Some Islamic movements opposed pro-Western governments (as in Egypt and Turkey) and others conflicted with Soviet-backed regimes (as in Syria and Afghanistan). In the Sudan, Islamic sentiment favored greater state control, in Thailand it inspired a revolt against the central government. Islam had a populist quality in Tunisia but served as an instrument of state in Pakistan. Identification with the religion indicated defiance of the regime in the USSR and solidarity with it in Malaysia. Islam stood behind conservatism and revolution, peace and war, tolerance and bigotry; how does Islam and politics lend itself better to generalizations than Christianity and politics?

The answer is that Islam, unlike Christianity, contains a complete program for ordering society. Whereas Christianity provides grand moral instructions but leaves practical details to the discretion of each community, Islam specifies exact goals for all Muslims to follow as well as the rules by which to enforce them. If Christians eager to act on behalf of their faith have no script for political action, Muslims have one so detailed, so nuanced, it requires a lifetime of study to master. Along with faith in Allah comes a

sacred law to guide Muslims in all times and places. That law, called the Shari'a, establishes the context for Islam as a political force; however diverse Muslim public life may be, it always takes place in the framework of Shar'i ideals. Adjusting realities to the Shari'a is the key to Islam's role in human relations. Hence, this analysis emphasizes the role of sacred law, the motor force of Islam in politics.

Emphasis on the law implies that other aspects of Islam require less attention. Topics that can be nearly omitted include: (1) Theology. Whatever its spiritual significance, theology has little bearing on public life. To the extent that disputes about the nature of God, faith, the Qur'an, and the day of judgment do affect politics, it is through their impact on the Shari'a. (2) Sufism. The mystical orientation of Sufi groups often implies a lack of interest in details of the law or in public affairs; those Sufis who do become engaged in politics have concerns which fit into the same Shar'i context as everyone else. (3) Differences in sect and *madhhab*. Mainstream Muslims (that is, Muslims whose faith is acknowledged as valid by a majority of other Muslims) follow legal tenets so similar to each other that their differences can be ignored. Practices of the Sunni, Shi'i, and Khariji sects do vary, but only in minor ways; for example, Shi'i laws differ most dramatically from those of the Sunnis in that they permit temporary marriage. Sunni Islam contains four *madhhabs*, or rites of law, whose rulings differ enough to affect crucially a defendant in a courtroom but not so much as to concern us. (4) Fringe groups. Such non-mainstream groups as the Assassins, Druze, 'Alawis, Ahl-i Haqq, Baha'is, and Ahmadis venture far from the Shari'a, and in doing so they step beyond the pale of Islam. (5) Intellectual discourse. Thinkers affect Islam's role in politics only to the extent that they deal with the Shari'a. Philosophical, historical, and moral discussions are ignored here except where they touch on the problems of living in accordance with the sacred law. (6) Personal faith. Islam in politics concerns the implementation of laws more than individual faith. A believer is more likely to try to live by

Islamic precepts, but not always. Non-Muslims or Marxists from a Muslim background occasionally find it useful to apply some of the Islamic laws (this happened in the European colonies and in Soviet-dominated Afghanistan), while devout believers who are mystics or secularists may resist implementing the Shari'a.

Islam as an Identity

There are other sources of confusion between religion as a personal faith and as a factor in social relations. From a political viewpoint, the faith of the individual Muslim eludes analysis; also, it usually has little direct bearing on matters of power. Private feelings need not be related to political actions. Islam is more usefully studied as a source of laws, affiliations, customs, attitudes and traditions, with an emphasis on its influence over behavior in the public sphere.

Examples may help to demonstrate this point. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and most of his strongest supporters were Western-educated and not notably pious Muslims, yet it was they who fought to establish a state defined along religious lines. In contrast, the Islamic leaders opposed the creation of Pakistan and preferred to remain citizens of India. (This parallels the Israeli case: Zionism appealed mostly to assimilated Jews.) By all accounts, Muhammad Anwar as-Sadat was a pious man, yet he strenuously resisted the efforts of Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt, he made the country's family law more European, and he was assassinated by Islamic extremists. In contrast, some of the leaders of the Iranian Revolution, notably Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, were suspected of indifference to the Almighty; this did not prevent them, however, from taking an active part in the most rigorous re-assertion of political Islam in the twentieth century. Throughout the 1970s, as Mu'ammarr al-Qadhafi developed his own ideology and moved further away from Islam, he placed increased emphasis on Islam as a political bond and identity. In secularizing societies, the notion of a "non-believing Muslim" is widespread; in the Soviet Union, for example, Communists of Muslim origin routinely avow that

while they are atheists, they are also Muslims and proud to be so. Perhaps the sharpest distinction comes from Lebanon: a driver, the story goes, was stopped at a checkpoint sometime during the civil war and asked to tell his religion. "Atheist," came the answer. But in the midst of a war fought along religious lines, the guard needed to know the driver's confessional affiliation, not his personal beliefs, so he asked, "Are you a Christian atheist or a Muslim atheist?"

Muslim and Christian Relations

Iranian occupation of the United States Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 did more than prompt a diplomatic crisis between two governments; it also unleashed a flood of passions among Iranians and Americans. Iranians took to the streets by the thousands to blame America for every conceivable ill in Iranian life, "from assassinations and ethnic unrest to traffic jams [and] drug addiction."¹⁸ Imam Khomeini called America the "Great Satan," vilified its culture, and insulted its leaders. Americans responded with uncommon rancor, harassing Iranian students and painting Khomeini's dour features on dart boards and toilet bowls. Iranians provoked more American venom than any other foreign people since World War II; Koreans and Vietnamese, for example, never inspired a fraction of this abuse. The passions on both sides hinted at something more than the usual political difference; they suggested the pinching of a nerve.

Previous tensions between Iran and the United States could hardly explain this outpouring of feeling, for the two states had enjoyed consistently good relations from W. Morgan Shuster's trusty service as Iran's financial advisor in 1911 to Jimmy Carter's exuberant New Year's Eve toast to the shah in 1977, when he described Iran as "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world" and termed this achievement "a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership and to the respect, admiration and love which your people give to you."¹⁹ The two governments enjoyed a broad cooperation, especially in the two vital areas of oil production and staving off the

Soviet Union. Tens of thousands of Iranians studied in the United States and similar numbers of American technicians worked in Iran without arousing special problems.

If previous relations between Iranians and Americans cannot account for the strength of feeling in 1979, the explanation lies further back, in the long history of hostility between Muslims and Christians. Since A.D. 634, when, only two years after the death of Muhammad, Arabians and Byzantines first went to battle, Muslims and Christians have experienced a uniquely bellicose relationship. Arabians, Turks, Moors, Moros, and Somalis earlier filled the role now taken by the Iranians, while Greeks, Spaniards, Franks, Russians, and Ethiopians had the American part. Even today, Muslims and Christians carry on the long tradition of conflict in such places as Chad, the Sudan, Uganda, Cyprus, Lebanon, and the Philippines. As a diplomat recently observed in reference to the Muslim-Christian rivalry in the Malaysian province of Sabah: "What is happening in Sabah today is only a small reflection of what happened in the Crusades 1,000 years ago."²⁰

This hostile legacy still lives, influencing Muslim and Occidental perceptions of each other. On the Muslim side, resentment and envy of the West have seriously impaired attempts to come to terms with the modern world. On the Christian side, biases inherited from medieval times concerning the corruption of the Islamic faith, the licentiousness and violence of its adherents, and the fanaticism of its appeal continue still to shape attitudes. "People who melt at the plight of Asians and Africans are unaffected by that of Arabs and Moslems."²¹ Of course, any attempt to see Islam and the Muslims as they really are requires that these prejudices be recognized and set aside. Common images of fatalism, fundamentalism, and fanaticism are simplistic and mean; they do injustice to a full and rich faith which satisfies the spiritual and emotional needs of hundreds of millions of adherents. The old biases are false and gratuitous.

If uncritical hostility has been the historic obstacle to understanding Islam, a new tendency toward uncritical adulation is almost

equally unhelpful. In recent years, Islam has won the self-serving support of two types of Westerners. The first group uses it as a vehicle to attack its own society; for people who feel ill at ease in the West, embracing Islam serves as a way to change allegiance and to reject the world they grew up in. Conversion to Islam by the British foreign service officer Harry St. John Philby²² or the American boxer Cassius Clay symbolized a radical rejection of Western ways precisely because Islam is so widely considered antithetical to the West. Although few go so far as to convert, other people—Jews, anti-Semites, and disaffected intellectuals especially—take up Islamic causes as a way to express their own discontent. Radicals such as Voltaire, Napoleon, and Marx, all known for their antagonism toward religion, had a soft spot for Islam, precisely because it stood for the negation of religion as practiced in the West.

The second group of apologists, more recent but far more influential today, promotes Islam for profit. Praise for Islam and the Muslims often translates into better access to research materials for professors, funds for administrators, visas for journalists, votes at the United Nations for diplomats, and trade opportunities for businessmen. Incentives for Islamophilia have multiplied many times with the coming of the oil boom and the huge increase in disposable income available to some Muslims.

With the exception of the Black Muslim movements in the United States, pro-Islamic sentiments tend to be restricted to the elite in the West, for it is they alone who have enough contact with Islam to become familiar with it or gain from it. Sufi disciples come from the ranks of the affluent no less than do the sponsors of the National Committee to Honor the Fourteenth Centennial of Islam, an American group organized in the late 1970s to promote goodwill toward Islam and funded primarily by businesses with interests in the Arab oil-exporting states. Thus, a dichotomy results: while a few Westerners at the top praise Islam for personal reasons (be it alienation or profit), the masses, still swayed by the old hostility, despise and fear Islam.

Ideal and Reality

Islam calls forth intense reactions. It inspires a powerful loyalty among Muslims which no other faith can rival. Muslims almost never apostacize and they feel particularly strong bonds to their fellow believers. At the same time, Islam provokes an unparalleled animosity from non-believers, thanks to its reputation as an aggressive faith. These contrary opinions of Islam are roughly equal in scope; just as Muslim solidarity has a strong emotional appeal from Morocco to Java, so too does a suspicious, even hostile, reaction prevail among non-Muslims from Spain to Bali.

Accordingly, polarized attitudes dominate almost every discussion of Islam as a social and political force. Muslims and those sympathetic to Islam emphasize the idealism of the faith, while its detractors concentrate on the failings of Muslims. "There is a tendency ... for believing Muslims to use the term [Islam] as an ideal, and for outside observers to use it [to mean] an historical-sociological actuality."²³ Believers speak of Islam's concern with justice, its high moral and political standards, and its cultivation of learning; opponents respond by noting the corruption, political instability, and illiteracy in Muslim countries. Muslims see their society as spiritually superior to the materialistic West; critics call this an excuse for continued poverty. Supporters recall Islam's medieval splendor, denigrators point to its contemporary woes. What Muslims call communal solidarity, foes call facelessness; warm relations for one appear as a lack of privacy for the other. Muslims decry open sexuality in the West and claim that the veil protects the honor of women; for outsiders, Islamic mores are hypocritical, the veil demeans females, and honor merely justifies the double standard for men and women. Promiscuity appalls Muslims, polygamy scandalizes Westerners.

But it is Islam's attitudes toward non-Muslims that provoke the most arguments: Muslims proudly point to their record of tolerance and contrast it with the attacks on their lands by the Crusaders, modern European imperialists, and Zionists. Islam's crit-

ics emphasize the lack of equal rights for non-Muslims under Muslim rule and the persecution, insecurity, and humiliation they must endure. They claim also that the Muslim conquests in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and India were as aggressive as those of the West.

But these polemics do not elucidate the impact of Islam. When one side selects the most attractive ideals of a religion, and when the other chooses only the worst aspects of its history, a disengaged observer lacks balanced information to reach his own conclusion. A lack of non-partisanship severely impedes intelligent discourse about Islam in politics.

A related problem concerns the tendency of Westerners to take Islamic ideals at face value. While those ideals do profoundly influence Muslims, conclusions cannot be drawn directly from them to explain political patterns. For example, one might take the Muslim record in war, and the Western tendency to invoke Islam to explain both success and failure. When Muslims do well, it is explained by their belief that houris in heaven will reward them eternally for death in battle against infidels. This explanation, first heard in early medieval times, still surfaces; as recently as 20 July 1980, a *New York Times* correspondent wrote that the Afghan insurgents do so well against the Soviet Union because they believe that "dying in the name of Islam is a glorious death, one that will insure their place in paradise." When Muslims lose, Islam can be used to explain that too: the Qur'an imbues the Arabs with a love of words, they get caught up in the mists of their own rhetoric, and so their military efforts against Israel are undermined. Thus does Islam spur fanatical resistance in one place and inefficacy in another. Islam is called on to explain other opposites too — fatalism in Malaysia and endemic instability in Syria. Such simplistic characterizations should be discarded.

The real force of Islam in politics lies not in the sparse injunctions of the Qur'an or in the hypothetical unity between religion and politics, but in the complex interaction between Islam's ideals, Muslim historical experience, Western civilization, and cur-

rent events. To understand these, it is necessary to know something about Islamic law and Muslim history, not just in recent times nor exclusively in the Middle East, but also in previous eras and other regions. In particular, the importance of looking outside the Middle East needs emphasis.

Concentration on the Middle East

"Islam" so vividly conjures up the Middle East that the 612 million Muslims living outside the Middle East receive far less attention than the 220 million within it.²⁴ Mention of Islam brings to mind Arabs, Persians, and Turks, deserts and camels, baklava and strong coffee, men in flowing robes and veiled women — not Fulanis, Bosnians, and Malays, nor the lush plains of Bangladesh, the gruels of Mali, or the sarongs of Indonesia. Muslims receive attention in rough proportion to their proximity to the eastern Mediterranean. Thus is it easy to miss many facts: that Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country; that the Indian subcontinent has more Muslims than does the entire Middle East; that more Muslims are citizens of the Soviet Union than of any Middle Eastern country save Turkey; and that China has a larger Muslim population than the entire Arabian peninsula. Perhaps most surprising, six of the nine countries with the largest Muslim populations are outside the Middle East (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, the Soviet Union, and Nigeria).

Several reasons account for the prominence of the Middle East. First, it has a special importance and visibility in Islam, being the region where the religion was born, developed, and elaborated; now, as in the past, nearly all the key events take place there. As the core of Muslim life, the Middle East is the location of the most important sites of Islamic pilgrimages (Mecca and Medina as well as others in Israel and Iraq), the key educational institutions (such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo), publishing houses dealing with Islamic topics (Cairo first, followed by Beirut), and leading Islamic movements (the Muslim Brethren, reformist thought, the Iranian Revolution). Arabic and Persian, the two international

languages of Islam, are read, spoken, and cherished wherever Muslims live. Languages spoken by Muslims outside the Middle East are unknown inside it, their thinkers unheard of, their political movements without general impact. For these reasons, Muslims in the remoter regions look to the Middle East for spiritual direction, and this situation is seldom reversed. A Syrian would as soon look to Yugoslavia or Indonesia for guidance in Islam as a Frenchman would look to Latvia or New Zealand to learn about European philosophy.

Second, the Middle East is the Muslim area most in contact with Europe. This made it the focal point of Western concern throughout history and the region at the forefront of the Muslim response to modern Europe. Other factors making the Middle East prominent include its location in the heart of the eastern hemisphere (increasing its cultural centrality), the antiquity of its civilization, the presence of Israel, and the oil boom.

Outside the Middle East, only Pakistan can aspire to a role of international importance in an Islamic context, yet even its claim is relatively weak. Pakistan has a very large Muslim population, a sophisticated culture, and strong lines of fundamentalist and reformist thought. It underwent the unique experience of coming into existence as an Islamic state (through the partition from India in 1947). But Pakistanis use primarily Urdu and English, neither of which is widely known by men of religion in the Middle East, so their works remain largely unknown in the core area. Language, however, is not the main obstacle: such writers as Abul Ala Maududi and Abul Hasan Nadwi published in Arabic too, yet even they could not win an influence on Muslims as great as that of Middle Easterners.

The prominence of the Middle East means that most studies of Islam stay within this small portion of the Muslim world and do not touch the full range of Muslim life. Focusing exclusively on the Middle East, however, misses the richness of Muslim experience and the complete picture of Islam's influence. One may legitimately study the Muslims of only the Middle East (or any other

region) but it is improper to portray this as a study of Islam in general or as valid for Muslims everywhere, which is so often done. The Muslims of the Middle East are not typical: they have fewer non-Islamic cultural elements to contend with and they fall most thoroughly under the influence of Islam's civilization. No doubt the Middle East is the key Muslim region, but it is far from the only one. Hausas in West Africa are no less inspired than Kurds in Iraq by Islamic goals, and Malays are part of Islamic history as much as Yemenis; an assessment of Islam in politics (or Sufism or the arts) requires that the gamut of Muslim peoples be taken into account.

Muslims live in places rarely associated with Islam. One European country, Albania, has a majority Muslim population, and significant minorities live in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Ethiopia, famous as the Christian enclave in Africa, is nearly half Muslim, as is Nigeria. Fiji in the mid-Pacific has an 8 percent Muslim element, and three nations of the Caribbean basin, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Surinam, have Muslim minorities of, respectively, 6, 9, and 20 percent. Sizeable Muslim communities exist as far north as the Volga River and as far south as South Africa. In the past generation, Islam has acquired a formidable new presence in countries such as the United States, Britain, France, Germany, and South Korea.

Poor Terminology

The study of Islam is complicated by confused and imprecise terms. A brief discussion of usages here may help to reduce these ambiguities.²⁵

"Islam" is the faith in one God and in the Qur'an as the literal word of God. A "Muslim" is one who accepts the Islamic faith. These terms derive from the Arabic, closely reproducing its pronunciation, and are acceptable to everyone. "Moslem" and "Mussalman" are older pronunciations of Muslim, reflecting Persian and Turkish influences; while not incorrect, they have an archaic ring and have fallen out of current usage. The term "Muhammadan" (or "Mohammedan" or "Mahometan") also means Muslim, but this is a Western neolo-

gism dating from the sixteenth century, which imitates the formation of the word "Christian" by taking the religion's central figure and naming his followers after him. But this term is inaccurate and gratuitously offensive to Muslims, for Muhammad's significance in Islam does not compare to that of Jesus Christ in Christianity (indeed, in Muslim eyes, his stature is hardly greater than that of Jesus; one might as well call them Christians). "Muhammadanism" as a synonym for Islam compounds this error and is even more insulting to Muslims. The confusion that surrounds these terms can be illustrated by the farcical adjective synonyms provided in *The New Roget's Thesaurus* for Mohammedan: "Moslem, Moslemic, Moslemite, Mussulmanic, Islam, Islamic, Islamistic, Islamitic."²⁶ Ethnic terms have also been used to designate Muslims, including: Saracen, Moor, Arab, Turk, and Tatar. Even today, "Arab" and "Muslim" are often used interchangeably, although five-sixths of the Muslims do not speak Arabic and about five million Arabic-speakers are Christian.

Islam is variously used in English to refer to a place, a people, a faith, and a civilization: "in Islam," "the Islamic community," "the Islamic religion," and "the Islamic world." But this overtaxes a single word and invariably leads to confusion. Marshall G. S. Hodgson suggests referring to the place as Islamdom (patterned on Christendom), to the people as Muslims, to the faith as Islamic, and to the civilization as Islamicate (patterned on Italianate).²⁷

"Islamdom" encompasses all Muslims, wherever they form communities (that is, wherever they are more than isolated individuals). It differs from *Dar al-Islam*, which refers to territories under Muslim control, and from *Dar al-Harb*, lands not under Muslim control. Islamdom includes all Muslims, whether living in *Dar al-Islam* or *Dar al-Harb*. Like Islamdom, *umma* ("the community of Islam") also refers to the whole body of Muslims, but Islamdom has a geographic quality and the *umma* has spiritual and emotional connotations. The *umma* also includes isolated individuals.

Arabic words should be employed where

translations into English conjure up wrong images (such as "holy war" for *jihad*) or cumbersome ones ("the Abode of War" for Dar al-Harb). Although the use of Arabic words may be challenging to read, it is necessary if exact meanings are to be conveyed. In one special case, however, a well-known Arabic word should be translated regularly into English: Allah. Calling the Lord of Islam Allah seems to imply that Muslims direct their prayers to a divinity who differs from that of the Jews and Christians, whereas, in fact, Muslims worship the same Lord; Allah is merely the Arabic translation of God. Note how profoundly this changes our understanding of the Islamic statement of faith, from the bellicose-sounding "There is no God but Allah," to the unthreatening "There is no deity but God."²⁸

For an understanding of Islam's role in politics, an outsider must consciously push aside some familiar concepts and tools of analysis. For Westerners, the conventional division of politics into right- and left-wing has little value when categorizing Islamic movements. Nationalism in Islamdom is transformed into something quite distinct from its Western prototype, while law and territory have wholly different meanings. Unless the reader makes efforts to think

along new lines, he will probably find comprehension of Islam elusive. When dealing with Islam, first impressions are usually faulty. To take one prominent nonpolitical example: assuming that human relations have the same implications in Islamdom as in the West, Europeans and Americans naturally interpret the harem in light of what it would mean to them—something akin to the Victorian ideal of frail females staying at home, out of harm's way. In fact harems reflect a vision of women as sexually insatiable beings who must be kept away from men, lest they seduce the men from devotion of God and so foment anarchy.

Ironically, it is more difficult to distance oneself from Western notions when dealing with Westernized Muslims; whereas understanding of the Ottoman Empire or Khumayni's Iran obviously requires adjustment of the standard Western tools of political science, Turkey or Tunisia can be seen in more narrowly Western ways, for so much of the tone and style of their politics resembles public life in Europe and America. But this is superficial; despite speaking French fluently or wearing a tie to work, nearly all Muslims live culturally more in a context formed by Islam than in one formed by the West.

FOOTNOTES

1. John B. Kelly, *Arabia, the Gulf and the West* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), p. 494.

2. Ernest Krausz, "Religion and Secularization: A Matter of Definitions," *Social Compass* 18 (1971-72): 212. He defines religion as "an institutional aspect of society based on beliefs in a superhuman or supernatural realm" (p. 211).

3. Bernard Lewis, "The Return of Islam," in *Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Michael Curtis (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1981), pp. 10-11.

4. John Olbert Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1982), p. 2.

5. In the words of a veteran Indian administrator, writing in 1901: "All Mussulmans in particular are assumed to have fanaticism, as if it were some separate mental peculiarity, belonging to the Mahomedan faith, which accounted for everything, and especially for any very marked impulse." Meredith Townsend, "Asia and Europe," *Westminster*, 1901; quoted by Norman Dan-

iel, *Islam, Europe and Empire* (Edinburgh: At the University Press, 1966), p. 468.

6. Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

7. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *On Understanding Islam* (The Hague: Mouton: 1981), p. 252.

8. J. Harris Proctor, ed., *Islam and International Relations* (London: Pall Mall, 1965), pp. 61, vii. In the same book, however, H. A. R. Gibb wrote the following prescient passage:

The traditional linking of Islam to social and political activity persists, and will continue. I am not prophesying the revival of an overtly militant Islam, but among the unknown range of possibilities now being produced by contemporary stresses in every continent, one that the West would be wise not to discount is the re-emergence of a revived and reconstructed Islam as a world factor (p. 23).

9. Lewis, "Return of Islam," p. 11.

10. Martin Kramer, *Political Islam*, The Washington Papers, no. 73. (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), p. 15.

11. Edward Mortimer, "Islam and the Western Journalist," *Middle East Journal* 35 (1981): 502.
 12. For an argument making this point, see my article, "A Border Adrift: Origins of the Conflict," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, ed. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 3-25.
 13. William L. Richter, "The Political Dynamics of Islamic Resurgence in Pakistan," *Asian Survey* 19 (1979): 554-55.
 14. This raises the intriguing thought: what would the Arabs have done had the Zionists made Arabic, instead of Hebrew, their national language?
 15. For example, note the opening sentence of Mangol Bayat's article, "Islam in Pahlavi and Post-Pahlavi Iran: A Cultural Revolution?": "The 1978-79 Iranian revolution is too often perceived by the superficial observer, the uninformed media representative as well as the religiously inclined Iranian himself, as symbolizing the rise of Islam and the Muslims against its enemies from within and without." In *Islam and Development: Religion and Sociopolitical Change*, ed. John L. Esposito (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1980), p. 87.
 16. Michael C. Hudson, *Arab Politics: The Search for Legitimacy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 17.
 17. Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam, an Introduction to the Moslem World* (New York: New American Library, 1982), pp. 182-83; Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam* (New York: Random House, 1982), p. 406. I am grateful to John Voll for pointing out both these statements.
 18. *New York Times*, 6 January 1980.
 19. *Ibid.*, 2 January 1978.
 20. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 25 November 1972.
 21. Morroe Berger, *The Arab World Today* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1964), p. xiv.
 22. Who was the father of Kim Philby, the Soviet double agent, a man who turned even more radically against his own society.
 23. Smith, *On Understanding Islam*, pp. 43-44.
 24. Admirable exceptions include: Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968); Xavier de Planhol, *Les Fondements géographiques de l'histoire de l'Islam* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968); and Voll, *Islam*. Almost every other work which deals with more than one region is written by many authors.
 25. My article, "Understanding the Middle East: A Guide to Common Terms," *International Insight*, July/August 1981, pp. 33-36, explains usage of Middle East, Arab, Semite, and Islam.
 26. *The New Roget's Thesaurus*, ed. Norman Lewis (Garden City, N.Y.: Garden City Books, 1961), p. 399.
 27. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:56-60.
 28. Outside the Arabic-speaking countries, however, "Allah" often acquires a specifically Islamic tone. For example, in late 1981 the Malaysian government banned a Bible translated by Christian missionaries into the Malay language because "some Muslims complained that it translated God as Allah rather than using the generic Malay word for God, which is *tuhan*. Allah, they said, was the name only for the Muslim God" (*Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 April 1982).
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