



THE NEW REPUBLIC

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MOHAMMED AND MODERNITY

In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power by Daniel Pipes

(Basic, 359 pp., \$22.50)

Muslims are a nuisance. As a matter of fact, they always were a nuisance. In the Middle Ages, Muslim land pirates based in Provence raided far and wide in the western Alps, which must have been a kind of undefended wilderness. Later Moroccan sea pirates ventured into the Bristol Channel and as far as Newfoundland, and when they were objects of counteraggression during a truce they had the nerve to sue their attackers in a Dutch court (which is very convenient for historians, as Dutch courts keep good records). But during the odd century and a half since they obliged the U.S. Marines to intervene in the eastern Mediterranean on "the shores of Tripoli," despite a mad mullah here, a mad Mahdi there, despite the annihilation of a British and a Spanish army by Afghan and Moroccan tribesmen respectively, Muslim nuisance-power diminished markedly. It seemed a spent force. Then it dramatically reappeared in a new and unprecedentedly powerful form. OPEC and Khomeini reversed the trend. Or the shocks which they administered made visible and conspicuous a current that had been running strong for some time.

Westerners have since been trying hard to understand what hit them. Daniel Pipes's scholarly, far-ranging, and thoughtful book is a further contribution to this endeavor. Pipes has sympathy for the Muslim predicament. He

invites Westerners to imagine how they would feel if

... Arabs, Persians and Turks had made the breakthrough to modernity and Christendom were forced to adjust ... if Middle Eastern states had divided Europe amongst them ... if Iraq had conquered Rome, and ... Paris had been subject to Saudi laws ... if Egypt and Pakistan possessed the world's most powerful armed forces ... if the greatest authority on Aristotle were a Yemeni and the outstanding critic of Shakespeare a Moroccan ... if dinars, dirhams and riyals dominated the foreign-trade markets. ...

I have little disagreement with Pipes's diagnosis of Muslim distress. The point at which I am inclined to part company with him hinges on a question he does not ask insistently enough: why do Muslims differ in their reaction, not from the West, but from the other great pre-industrial literate civilizations (including "backward" parts of Christendom itself), which, after all, have had to face the very same trauma?

The difference between Atlantic societies which led the breakthrough to scientific and industrial society, and the others which were obliged to adjust to its impact, is fairly obvious. It is the difference *within* the others that presents the real puzzle. Admittedly Muslims have not been conspicuously successful in coping with the Western challenge, though their failure ought not be exaggerated; the difference between Muslim lands, and many non-

Muslim parts of Asia, and indeed various laggards within Christendom (in Southern and Eastern Europe, or in Latin America, not to mention the Horn of Africa) is not great, nor always to the disadvantage of Muslims. The really striking fact about Islam is not any special success or failure in coping with the challenge, but the truly astonishing extent to which Muslims have turned to, or maintained, their traditional religion. That is unique.

There is little to compare with it elsewhere, leaving aside special and idiosyncratic situations (such as the Polish use of the Catholic Church as a counter-state). But the political vigor of Islam is not tied to any area; it can be observed in *all* of them. Of the great pre-industrial literate religions, Islam alone has retained a powerful hold over the minds and political will of its adherents, among both the masses and the elites. Moreover, it has continued to expand. It is this which needs to be understood.

Among some unreflective Westerners, the belief is now current that this has something to do with oil (a view, I hasten to stress, not shared by Pipes). This explanation is worthless. The phenomenon to be explained predates the impact of oil wealth. The oil crisis is contemporary only with the Western awakening to the Muslim awakening. Pipes observes that "the religion of Islam does not account for the predicament of modern Muslims. ..." Indeed, it does not. But it may account for the unique reaction of Muslims to that predicament—unique not (yet) in its technical effectiveness, but in its ideological vigor and homogeneity.

Daniel Pipes's underlying assumptions represent what I should call the conventional wisdom of the West. This is not said disparagingly. The conventional wisdom of the West is deep, and its deployment by Pipes does not preclude him from displaying originality and insight when applied to this problem. Still, that conventional wisdom may well be in error, and it is worthwhile considering some alternatives to it. It is as well to have more than one view to hand when contemplating the future. Pipes's views do not merely reflect the modal Western philosophy of history; they are also basically optimistic. I hope he is right, and I fear that he may not be. Neither Pipes nor I will know for some time (if ever) which view is correct.

Pipes sees participatory politics as

distinctively Western: ". . . citizenship is another uniquely Western idea. . . . Islamdom knew nothing comparable." But most Muslim states (the Arabian peninsula excepted) took over the trappings of representative government as part and parcel of modernization; they fit poorly, however, with a tradition of what Pipes calls detachment from government, which he considers pervasive in the Muslim social synthesis. He might have quoted the familiar Muslim saying which declares a man blessed if he knows not the ruler and is not known to him. Contact with government is a peril to be avoided.

NOT unnaturally, Pipes seems influenced by his own previous historical work on the Mamluk period, during which government and war became the prerogative of a technically "slave" stratum. The rulers were slaves in the sense that they belonged to the state, though the state also belonged to them. The rulers' job was to watch over the peace in which wealth could be produced; the job of the ruled ones was to produce the wealth, and hand over a good part of it in payment. This was the Circle of Equity. The segregation of economic productivity from political participation which this implies is indeed alien to Western ideas of society, which in turn underlie the newly imported institutions. It remains to be said that this segregation was far more complete in theory than it was in fact, that it constitutes one aspect, not the whole, of traditional Muslim society, and that Pipes seems to be overimpressed by it.

It leads him to see a politically detached and at the same time claustrophobic civilization, which taught that any government was better than none, provided it upheld the faith and the morals which were integral parts of its ethos. It was conservative and socially unenterprising; supine twice over, for entirely secular reasons, analogous to those which can be found in Hobbes, and for religious reasons, through a kind of ideological sclerosis, a fixation on a supposedly definitive, detailed, and divinely ordained blueprint of the social order. Pipes offers a fascinating (and more or less convincing) list of reasons which make such a civilization specially ill-equipped for coping with the challenge when it came. (Compare this Muslim orientation inward with the Japanese habit of deferring to Chinese models, which presumably made it rel-

atively easy for the Japanese to shift their reverent gaze from Cathay to the West, once Commander Perry had demonstrated its authority.)

Pipes's Western optimism comes out in the next stage of his argument. The Western syndrome of social traits, he argues, is relatively indigestible for a society nurtured so long on a different style. In the long run, however, Muslims will have no choice but to digest it:

To escape anomy, Muslims have but one choice, for modernization requires Westernization; the fundamentalist option is illusory. . . . Islam does not offer an alternate way to modernize. . . . Secularism cannot be avoided. Modern science and technology require an absorption of the thought processes which accompany them; so too with political institutions. Because content must be emulated no less than form, the predominance of Western civilization must be acknowledged. . . . Only when Muslims accept the Western model will they be in a position . . . to develop. Secularism alone offers escape from the Muslim plight.

This is an application to Islam of the vi-

braced liberal institutions did so for their own sakes, and perhaps the first time it could not have happened any other way. Yet there seems to me no reason to suppose that the liberal package can be guaranteed to remain a necessary precondition either for fully developed industrial societies or for imitative industrializers. World War II, people tend to forget, was a damn close thing. Had the developed part of Europe been a self-contained continent, it most certainly would have gone the other way. So the Pipesian optimism does not even convince me about home, let alone about the House of Islam. The package deal of affluence-and-liberalism has been taken apart, and societies can and do pick and choose within it. (Japan, for instance, has a brilliant economy, a pluralist politics—thanks to military defeat—but little individualism.)

As far as the Muslims are concerned, I'd offer Pipes an alternative hypoth-

esis (and the implicit policy recommendations) which accompanied works such as W. W. Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth*, and much of the early preoccupation with "underdevelopment" and its correction. Fear naught, it says: the rest of the world wishes to become rich and powerful, just like us. (This is true enough.) But the only way of acquiring our affluence is to take over our rationality, our secularism, our liberalism, our accountable government . . . you name it, they'll have to swallow it. Affluence is only available as part of a package deal, and the other elements in the package will render the recipients at least a little harmless, perhaps even likeable. Of course there are grave dangers along the way, but in the long run, at any rate if we can help them round the cape, all will be well.

I wish I could share such optimism, either about history or about Islam. The liberal package did indeed have intimate links with the birth of science, technology, and industrialism, and it is unlikely that we could have had the one without the other. Societies which em-

esis. He quotes Wilfred Cantwell Smith to the effect that almost every Islamic movement in the modern world was based on some variation on the double theme of "internal deterioration" and "external encroachment," and this is indeed so. But why that preoccupation with internal deterioration? The answer, it seems to me, is that it was always there, that it is endemic, structural. It was a kind of optical illusion: Islam had to be ever deteriorating to stay in the same place. Complaining about the deterioration, denouncing it, and occasionally setting up corrective movements of reform, was an old, old habit, and certainly did not start in the eighteenth century.

There are profound reasons why this should be so. The Islamic blueprint offers the vision of a community of faith without internal divisions, implementing the unique uncreated Word of God as available in writing, without clerical mediators, each man with equal access

to God. In fact, however, prior to the coming of modernity, the rural world of the arid zone remained full of self-administering communities, predominantly though not exclusively defined in genealogical or pseudogenealogical terms, ratifying their cohesion by means of clan-specific forms of the sacred, and governing themselves by tribal custom rather than by script-transmitted, divinely ordained rules. In other words, some approximation to the blueprint was possible in urban settings, but was rather difficult to apply in rural and tribal ones.

Movements aiming to correct this situation were periodically set in motion, usually with urban leadership but with tribal followers. Ironically, the tribesmen themselves were not reluctant to enlist in movements aiming at mending their own manners, provided they also reaped some rewards. Paris is worth a Mass; and Fez, Sokoto, Khartoum or Mecca were well worth a bit of Koranic observance. But until the coming of modernity success was always temporary, and followed by a relapse. As Friedrich Engels noted, almost certainly cribbing from Ibn Khaldun, the revolutions were circular, and (unlike those of Christendom) led to no structural transformations. A few generations after the success of the reforming movement, the exigencies of urban and pastoral life resulted in a return to the self-same situation as the one which originally provoked the reforming zeal.

BY AND LARGE Christendom was used to self-governing towns and oppressed peasants. In Islam it tended to be the other way round. Commercial towns, practicing a scripturalist faith with marked "protestant" traits, were firmly ruled from above and, as Pipes stresses, developed a certain detachment from politics. But there was also, and this Pipes does not stress, an important segment of society, among both pastoralists and sedentary peasants, which was well habituated to self-administration, to an exceptionally high degree of political and military participation. These self-governing tribesmen were not morally paradigmatic. On the contrary, they tended to constitute a moral scandal, an offense, and they themselves concurred with this view, and from time to time participated in an inevitably ephemeral endeavor to eradicate the offence. Their liberty and self-administration were part and

parcel of a violation of the proper religious and political order. In Europe, the commercial, the scripturalist, and the self-governing overlapped to a very important extent. In Islam, there were some who were commercial and scripturalist, and others who practiced self-government, but their overlap was very small. *That* is the difference.

This situation had a further consequence which is insufficiently noted by Pipes. The state generally only controlled a part of the available territory, reluctantly leaving the rest to the self-administering communities. Within the state-controlled zone, the subjects did indeed display the political passivity which Pipes stresses. But the rulers, drawn from the kin-based communities, had (and still have) a strong tendency to operate in patronage networks, which continue to be a marked feature of the politics of Muslim lands. The patronage style is the translation into an urban or modern setting of the political style of that part of the population which does have a tradition of and aptitude for participation.

WHAT concerns us, however, is how this structure reacts to the trauma of foreign impact, of alien economic, military, and technological superiority. This isn't simply a matter of what happens in the individual psyche. We are not dealing just with an intellectual accommodation; the society itself is transformed. With all its technological and administrative attainments, the modern world wholly upsets the previous balance between the urban and rural segments of the society. It upsets the old stalemate, and does it in favor of the central state. In most places the old rural isolation and autonomy, with all its religious accompaniments (saint cults, a crypto-priesthood incompatible with "purer" and more "correct" versions of Islam) are eroded. For the first time the entire society can really aspire, in a realistic manner, to a closer approximation of the old religious blueprint. The endemic revivalism can at long last succeed.

Note that it now has multiple functions. It ratifies and justifies the now definitive ascension of the rustics to the ideals of urban life. It defines the entire community as against the infidel and the foreigner. It provides a charter in terms of which it can also judge and criticize its own rulers, a charter they cannot easily ignore. Thus the erstwhile

great tradition becomes a pervasive folk culture.

The main consequence of the disruption of Muslim society by the West and its technology is that purer Islam, once merely the special (almost virtuoso) performance of a fairly small urban elite, has become accessible to all—and not merely accessible, but positively attractive. It enables the ex-rustics to repudiate their own real and recent past, but to do so in the name of another strand of the tradition which had always been present and normative, even

when it was honored more in the breach than in the observance. The old elite style takes over and the old folk style is withering away. In all other pre-industrial faiths, the old central high culture is the least modernizable element, the most tainted by the *ancien régime* and its failure to stand up to the West. Such a society is then obliged to choose between Westernization and populism (or idealization of the folk culture). Not so in Islam: the old high culture is modernizable, and can serve simultaneously as the banner of self-transformation and the perpetuation of an old identity. It can do so because of its detachment from the *ancien régime* (a fact much stressed by Pipes); because it was never carried by a demarcated clerical organization (still less by a hereditary caste), but by an open and loose guild of religious scholars, which can now expand to embrace all those who wish to enter; and because it possesses traits—insistence on the observance of rules, scripturalism, an elegant monotheism, egalitarianism—which seem congruent with the work-ethic and the orderliness required for the drive toward modernization.

PIPES QUOTES the late Gustave von Grunbaum to the effect that the gap between "is" and "ought" is especially wide in Islam. It is not clear that this is really so. It is true that Islam regulates the details of daily life, as does Judaism, and does so in a way which may be hard to implement in the context of tribal life. But these requirements are not so terrible for townsmen, and everyone is now becoming a townsman, even in the villages. The religious requirements do not impose some impossible ideals of selflessness, otherworldliness, brotherhood, or abnegation, which could only be sustained during inevitably ephemeral periods of enthusiasm. They only require that a set of fairly concrete rules be kept. It is not obvious that this is irksome. On the contrary, it may provide a welcome sense of identity and community.

Pipes's failure to understand the logic of reformism comes out most markedly in his rather misleading treatment of Algeria. It is absurd to call it the most secularized country in Islam. Revivalist Islam dominates its moral climate, and was crucial as a form of proto-nationalism which had prepared the struggle for independence. Algeria is to Islam what Eire is to Catholicism, a land

where a leaderless rural proletariat in the end had to define itself in terms of religion, for it had nothing else. All this is not contradicted by the fact that in independent Algeria, the Mamluks keep the ulama in check: a separation of powers between the monopolists of force and the monopolists of legitimacy is something which Pipes must surely be familiar with from his own historical work, and modern Algeria has reproduced it.

THUS PIPES seems to miss the distinctiveness of the Muslim situation, just as he is probably too much impressed by certain seeming parallels with Judaism and Protestantism. Jewish communities living as minorities in a modernizing world probably were destined for that secularization and abandonment of legalism which Pipes predicts for Islam; but it does not follow that Muslims, who dominate the countries they live in, face the same fatality. Pipes also seems to me to misuse the notion of "antinomianism." Not all Protestants were antinomians; on the contrary, many took rules very seriously. Some early Protestants became antinomians for kicks, so to speak—the violation of revered rules was even more exciting than their dutiful observance. But that has nothing to do with latter-day antinomianism, the familiar kind in which a woolly unspecific moralism replaces a rule-bound ethic, simply because neither the rules nor their underlying theology are taken seriously any longer. I see no evidence for such a development in Islam so far.

Pipes may still be right in the long run. In the end faith may weaken after all. I am not in the prophecy business. I also think he is right when he says that oil will not make so very much difference to the cultural development of Muslim lands. But so far there is little evidence for his "optimistic" thesis (from the viewpoint of Western liberals), and I have attempted to sketch a model of the underlying situation which would explain why this is so. Still, the debate is interesting, and Pipes has made a stimulating contribution to it.

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PIPING UP

To the editors:

Ernest Gellner, whose work I have long admired, has written a spirited and intelligent review of my book, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* ("Mohammed and Modernity," TNR, December 5). But he has confused two significant matters, which I should like to correct.

First, Mr. Gellner equates Westernization with liberalism. I argue in the book that Muslims, if they are to gain wealth and power, must accept Western ways—be they liberal, fascist, Marxist, or other. Mr. Gellner, however, omits the alternatives and has me saying that Muslims must adopt liberalism if they are to succeed. This is not so. I do not state that Muslims will choose liberalism, only that they must eventually pick one of these Western approaches.

Second, Mr. Gellner confuses political secularism with atheism. I argue that Islam is inexorably losing its historic role as a political force, just as earlier happened to religions in the West. This is not the same, however, as predicting that personal faith will weaken—which is what the reviewer ascribes to me. Elsewhere in the book secularization is defined as a "process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance." *Social* is the key word: secularization need not imply the loss of faith.

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