

RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN THE ARAB WORLD

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THE state of religion among Arab Muslims is much the same as among Western Christians. With both, religion survives in an active form among a minority; with both, the majority still cling to the name. Among both, men desire a high standard of living which most of them have always been denied; they have a new faith in scientific progress, which has brought about concrete results, and they accept the claim that it supersedes old beliefs. Both in Christendom and Islam there are conservatives who do not care at what cost they associate religion with inessential interests to which they are attached. Among Muslims there may be a greater pride in the name of their religion than among Christians; the national apostasy of the Arabs is as far advanced as ours if we reckon by mosque attendance, but less so if we remember their pride in being Muslim. The intellectual reaction of a minority against unbelief is less advanced among the Muslims. Our intellectuals have reached the reaction against reaction, scientific humanists against believers, and with this has come a further hardening of our differences. Among Arabs the modern intellectual approach to religion is both cruder and more fluid. These differences are not as important as the similarities. Modern preoccupations are everywhere secular. In this Arab world which is broadly similar, in detail different, to our own, can we trace the influence of religion upon the actual preoccupations of ordinary people?

A directly religious party has never come to power in the modern Arab world. There are not even the quasi-religious groupings represented by the Christian Democratic parties which, in Europe, with their uneasy alliance between popular and conservative ideas, are the products of parliamentary democracy. These mark a phase in the relations of religion and politics to which there is no parallel in Arab countries. The nearest equivalent is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has not achieved power or positions of responsibility. Islam, said their leader, is not just 'prayer and holiness and pilgrimage', but 'the establishment

of the social justice which God guaranteed to man'.¹ The Brotherhood is like various Christian social movements in believing that the direct application of religious principles to social problems will produce a viable political and economic system. Like Catholic Distributists, the Brothers have a nostalgia for the past,² and wish to return to the rule of religious law.

They hold the political theory of the religious community. The Head of State should be the chosen of the people, who are the guarantors that the divine law will be obeyed. One telling tradition of the Prophet, quoted by Abu Aiman in an interesting exposition of the Brotherhood's aims,³ establishes popular authority: 'If people see a man doing wrong and do not stop him, God will punish them'; another limits the power of the ruler: 'A Muslim must hear and obey, whether he likes it or not, unless he is ordered to do wrong, in which case he should neither hear nor obey'. Even what looks like compromise with modern secular institutions is supported by Quranic quotation: consultative assembly, independent judiciary, rights of the human personality, protection of minorities, the unity of mankind; we begin to wonder why Islam has not always been a popular democracy (of the points cited, only minority religious rights have been regularly observed). Muslims may say of Islam, as Christians of Christianity, that it has never been tried by the whole community.

Religious law can be explained and justified in modern terms. Thus the prohibition of interest-bearing transactions as usurious is justified by Abu Aiman by reference to Communist and Nazi practice and to arguments of Keynes and Harrod. Islam would substitute 'the principle of partnership'. 'Thus, banks could continue to function as providers of credit on the basis of a partnership with their borrowers and depositors.' There is also an appeal to early Islamic practice: heavy taxation of commodities used by the rich, light taxation of those the poor use, is justified by the practice of the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. Nor is this all; many Brothers realize, as pious Muslim

1 Hasan Hidaybi, quoted by Ishak Musa Husaini in *The Moslem Brethren* (Beirut, 1955), p. 150.

2 Muhammed Najib, *Egypt's Destiny* (London, 1955), p. 150.

3 *What We Stand For*, in *Al-Muslimoon* (Damascus), vol. v, nos. 1-6. The Traditions of the Prophet are cited by Abu Aiman from Abu Daud and Tirmizi, and from Bukhari and Muslim, respectively.

governments have done in the past, that it may be necessary to have recourse to law that supplements the Qur'an (*ta'zir*) and also to a sort of dispensing power.⁴ The extension of the rights of the Peoples of the Book to all religious minorities, presumably including idolators, is the opposite of what the Qur'an intends, although Islamic rule in India, for example, made it inevitable. Abu Aiman's whole treatment of the holy war (*jihad*) is a withdrawal from the traditional interpretation, although he is able to support his humanitarian tendency easily enough by tradition, commending, for example, the instructions of the first caliph, Abu Bakr, to spare non-combatants, as well as their means of livelihood, and to leave refugees in monasteries undisturbed: 'the spirit of Islam', insists Abu Aiman, 'resents aggression, destruction and bloodshed, and enjoins justice, mercy and tolerance'. His account is pervaded by a communal charity ('A Muslim is the brother of every other Muslim; he does not oppress him and does not abandon him') and faith ('God is sufficient for us and most excellent is the Protector').⁵

The faith of the Brotherhood is its religious strength and its political weakness. Its founder, Hasan al-Banna, even as a student started a movement which 'aimed at the dissemination of good morals and opposed abominations and sin on the one hand, and Christian missionary activities on the other'; his spirit was rooted in the tradition of the Sufi 'ways' (*ṭuruq*), comparable to Catholic sodalities. The Brotherhood, for him, depended on a spiritual 'process of education'; he said of it, 'Its beginning is conviction and faith, and its stages are righteousness and obedience to God'.⁶ Why is it that it has not succeeded politically? Colonel Anwar as-Sadat (now Secretary General of the Islamic Congress) knew it well as liaison officer between it and the Free Officers, and subsequently as a Minister in the Egyptian Revolutionary Government; doubtless he expresses the official thought of the United Arab Republic when he criticizes the Brotherhood as dragged by the glorification of violence into degradation; as fanatical, 'nihilistic', lacking practical policy.⁷ 'If a religion is turned into a political system, then fanaticism is born. This

4 Hedaybi, before the People's Court, Cairo, *loc. cit.*

5 The quotations are from Tradition and from Qur'an.

6 Husaini, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 35.

7 *Revolt on the Nile* (London, 1957), p. 68, p. 73, p. 79 ff.

confusion of temporal power with the spiritual has been the downfall of many Oriental societies.'

The uncertainty in its practical politics of which the Brotherhood is accused is largely the consequence of being in opposition: the result, not the cause, of failure. The claim to include all the ideas of other movements is so wide as to weaken by imprecision; thus al-Banna, speaking to Communists, said, 'You cannot boast of a single principle without our having one just like it and exceeding its scope'.⁸ The Brotherhood has been much feared and hated for its violence, which it has now renounced.⁹ The chief explanation of its failure is put concisely by Sadat; it has set itself against the secular state. In Islam, as elsewhere, public affairs seem likely to have a secular future. 'I believe', said Jamal Abdul Nasser, with his characteristic irony, 'that history moves forward, not backwards.'¹⁰

The influence of religion in the Arab world is strongest in indirect forms which, when examined, clarify the secularist tendencies prevailing. This side of the question is perhaps best approached, first, by asking what are people's actual pre-occupations, and then by relating these to their sources. Everyone who knows the Arab world knows that two questions exclude all others from the public interest, nationalism¹¹ and socialism. The more closely we look at these two, the less easily can we distinguish them. There are many cross-currents. Arabs are as suspicious of the imperialist powers of the West as we are of Communism, and the great difference of opinion among them is about whether the Communist powers are imperialistic too. As Western influence recedes, distrust of Communism increases among non-Communists, but confidence in Russia and China survives the local quarrel with the Party. 'Nationalist' groupings oppose Communism, but include a motley range of conservatives, liberals, 'Owenite' socialists, and finally national socialists whom the Left describe as crypto-fascist. The Iraqi National Democrats follow the lonely road to orthodox parliamentary socialism. In the United Arab Republic, the Communist Party is suppressed,

⁸ Husaini, p. 40.

⁹ Mustafa as-Siba'i, quoted Husaini, p. 151; cf. Abu Aiman, above.

¹⁰ Speech to the General Co-operatives Conference, 27th November, 1958.

¹¹ For Arab nationalism, see *The Ideas of Arab Nationalism* by Hazem Zaki Nuseibeh (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1956) and *Egypt's Liberation; the Philosophy of the Revolution*, by Gamal Abdel Nasser (Washington, 1955).

but in Egypt the National Union (and in Syria its equivalent) are intended to express a range of different opinions, and to exclude party conflict within a socialist framework.¹² It is nearly common to all that the Arabs (that is, those whose mother-tongue is Arabic) are one nation (*qawm*), inhabiting a single homeland (*watan*), in which the people (*sha'b*) should be sovereign.

The Communist Party everywhere works for the same ends, but in the Arab world shares this assumption. Khalid Baqdash, leader of the Syrian Communist Party (the clandestine Syrian party, like the British Party, is thought to take its orders from the French; and it is also said that the Iraqi Party takes its from the Syrian) made a major statement of policy last December, in which the argument was almost exclusively nationalist. It listed the imperialist attacks on the Arab homeland that were in progress at the time; then came a programme which was nearer Communism as we hear it, calling for fuller agrarian reform, for higher wages, etc., all things, however, that are equally part of the Nationalist programme; and even so Baqdash's stress was upon Arab, rather than working-class solidarity.¹³ Communist 'nationalism' may be only a propaganda device, but, remembering the nationalist character of much Asian Communism, for example, in China, we cannot take this for granted.

Communists and Nationalists (in the restricted sense of a particular grouping) alike claim to be the only true and original anti-imperialists. Anti-imperialist terminology is not exclusively Communist; 'neutralism' (to which all non-Communists, democrat and 'fascist' alike, subscribe) seeks to avoid dependence on any one group of Powers. Baqdash's argument aimed to refute the suggestion that Communist Powers could be imperialist. Soon after, an ingenious argument to show that 'positive neutralism' could not exist, because only reliance upon the friendship of

12 Cf. for example Abdul Nasser's speech cited above: 'we not only build our society but we also design its pattern as we go. . . . The broad lines of this pattern are socialism, co-operation and democracy. . . .'

13 *Az-Zaman* and other Iraqi papers, Baghdad, 20th December, 1958. Cf. *Sawt al-Ahrar* for 22nd January, 1959 (at that date the only Baghdad paper publishing official Communist policy): the struggle is not between Communism and Nationalism, but between 'the Arab nationalist fighting forces . . . and imperialism and its agents. . . .' Since this article went to press, Abdul Karim Qasim, the Iraqi leader, has stressed (from his own point of view) the very thing that I am arguing: His opponents 'suppose that nationalism is the property of one man or that it is confined to one group'; but 'nationalism is the property of all. . . .' (Speech to Reserve Officers, 2nd March, 1959).

Communist countries could guarantee its aims, appeared over the signature of the prominent Iraqi Communist, Aziz al-Haj.¹⁴ This was an attack upon Nationalist attitudes. Despite this real opposition, Communists and non-Communists share a number of ideas. They agree over the Marxist diagnosis of Western imperialism; they positively reject the Western idea that it is necessary to contain Russia and China. All want to see industrialization at almost any cost, and agrarian reform on a radical scale. They want to see powerful central governments, and many are disillusioned with parliamentary democracy, even as an ideal; often they do not think it capable of expressing the popular will. Yet in spite of these shared opinions all but Communists are genuinely anxious not to be aligned with Russia, which they fear may exploit them, and even do not wish to be aligned with China, which they admire much more and fear much less. Nationalists are anxious to show that Arab Communists are Turkish, Kurdish or Iranian by stock. Arabs have great sympathy with India and China, as countries which have shown that anything the West can do, Afro-Asians can do better. They have little pan-Islamic feeling in a political sense.

Thus we may say that Arab feeling is always nationalist, popular, socialist. I want to analyse briefly what may lie behind it, and then to relate this to Islamic principles. What are its constituents? First, there is the determination of the Arabs to be their own masters. The East has been long humiliated by the West, both European and American, as much when we tried to do good; as when we sought our own profit. Arabs feel particularly humiliated by not having industry, arms, all the paraphernalia of power that are common to Western and Communist groupings alike. They want to count for as much as anyone else. The Russians and Americans depend on others only as masters depend on men. The British and French cannot bear to possess less destructive power than their big brothers. The Arabs want their share in the follies of the rest of us.

Secondly, there is sense of community. Nationality is only secondarily a political idea; first comes the conviction that Arabs are brothers; that, if they quarrel, it is within a family. The West and the over-westernized are wrong if they sneer.

¹⁴ *Sawt al-Ahrar* for 14th January, 1959; cf. Amr Abdullah (the Party Secretary) in the same paper, the day following.

Among all but the pleasure-seekers there is a genuine concern about the condition of peasants and workers, and about the fortunes of Arabs in remote parts of the 'homeland'. Communal expression—the language of popular revolution and the chanting of slogans—is congenial. And there is unspoiled gregariousness. Ideas and news pass rapidly by word of mouth; there is never in an Arab city that sense of vast numbers all intent on quite different purposes that is normally the mark of London or Paris. Crowds form quickly; men like doing things together, and are not ashamed to show emotion freely and easily and without inhibition.

Thirdly, there is admiration for efficiency, for public morality, for incorruptibility, that lies deep in the pride of community; this is a sort of Cato-wish that contrasts with the Ottoman inheritance.

A fourth factor is the longing for peace. Despite the dependence on military leaders (or even, since soldiers may be pacifist, because of it) the desire not to be caught up in an atomic war is a major influence on Arab opinion. There are two schools of thought. The more widely held, neutralism, began as a simple desire to opt out of someone else's quarrel, and developed into the more complex argument that a world divided sharply into two groups only is pre-disposed to fight. Communists, on the other hand, as strongly as the Western Powers oppose neutralism, which condemns the post-war policy of both, but they do so more cleverly, and, unlike the West, they have been able in unindustrialized countries to convince many people that their will to peace is sincere.

These, much simplified, are the ideas that shape Arab attitudes. All are secular, but may be related to religion. Even though Islam be claimed to be the religion of the nation, no party intends thereby a religious state; but there are different private attitudes. Very few of those who pray are among the Left grouping. Abdul Nasser speaks of his firm and deep belief in Islam; significantly, as 'the call of power and peace'.¹⁵ The old religious groupings affect the new affiliations. The minorities produce a

15 Introduction to *The Islamic Call*, by M. M. Atta (Cairo, n.d.); for Abdul Karim Qasim, in Iraq, cf. for example his message to the religious leaders in Najaf on the feast of the Imam 'Ali's birthday (24th January, 1959): he prays God 'to help me to serve the nation, promulgate virtue and promote religion and justice throughout the country'. In his speech of 2nd March he reiterated several times the need to 'work for the sake of God'.

high proportion of Communist Party members—for example, Christians and, in Iraq, Mandaean. Christians swing easily to a cult of personalities which secularizes religion: young girls wear lockets that show the Iraqi leader and tell their elders, 'Jesus did not do anything for us, as he does'. Muslims find it natural to talk religion and revolution in the same breath, 'in the name of God and the People'. Among them, the traditionally oppressed Shi'ah produce more Communists than do the Sunnis; more of them are poor, and among the poor there has for many years been a millennial belief that when the Russians come the men will be masters and the masters men. Most religious leaders are opposed to Communism, but how deeply, has yet to be seen. A few dissidents return from Russia convinced that 'among Communists there are Muslims, Christians and atheists, as there are in capitalist countries; all of them have freedom, in both capitalist and Communist countries', but that materialist philosophy is greater among the capitalists.¹⁶ These are surface facts: religious minorities may be distinguished still, after they desert the doctrines that made them minorities; Communism flourishes among the dispossessed; most religious people oppose it. This is what you would expect.

It is possible, however, to trace a connection between the basic ideas, common to all parties, which I have tried to identify, and basic ideas of Islamic religion. First, came pride of community. This is characteristic of Islam, the religion revealed to many prophets, and then comprehensively to Muhammad. Contempt, often kindly, has been the Muslim attitude to Christians. Moreover, Islamic pride was always close to Arab pride, because the Messenger of God was an Arab. Secondly, there was the sense of community itself. This Islam always inculcated, but when Muhammad formed the new nation, his *umma*, it united disparate Arab tribes by the message of faith; this *umma* reminds us of *sha'b*, 'the people', in a revolutionary sense, as well as of *qawm*, the nation. The communal worship, so much more liturgical in its unanimity than Christian equivalents, the pilgrimage, with its strict equality, the poor-rate with its defined charity, these 'pillars' of Islam made men realize that God's people were one. The sense of community and the pride of it are very close. 'Out of every

16 Sheikh Abdul Karim al-Mashita, in *Sawt al-Ahrar*, 29th January, 1959.

thing that God creates He chooses and selects', said the Prophet,¹⁷ actions, people, speech; 'the people that He chooses He calls "the elect" (*mustafa*)'. In these closely related cases there seems to have been a direct transference of ideas characteristic of Islam to the Arab nation.

The revulsion from Ottoman-type corruption is also traditional. In the simplicity of the early caliphs, who converted the world, the grand and corrupt Byzantine and Sassanian dynasties were reformed. Stories of the caliphs soon passed into Western literature; in English, Ockley¹⁸ gives a classic picture of Abu Bakr, determined that he should derive no personal advantage from his office; and of 'Umar, who, every Friday night, where Abu Bakr had distributed the Treasury surplus according to the deserts of the recipients, did so according to their needs, thus anticipating a well-known definition of socialism.

Fourthly, the Arab's reluctance to suffer nuclear bombing if he can help it may be due solely to his common-sense, but it seems also to reflect that communal solidarity which seeks peace among Muslims: 'they so nourish harmony and love among themselves that they really seem to be brothers. . . . They who have a religion of killing and death do not wish to kill each other, and the wretched Christians, who have a religion of life, and commandments of peace and love, kill each other without mercy', said the Florentine Dominican of thirteenth-century Iraq.¹⁹ This was the direct product of Islamic unity, of which peace is one face, and which Muslims never forget, or cease to desire. Today, Arabs retain the wish to hold together, apart from others, and in peace, while some Christians seem still wearily to see unwanted wars as an ineluctable duty. On the other hand, the ancient hatred of the infidel, the old holy war, *jihad*—exterior conflict which contrasted with internal Islamic peace—seems to be reflected in the hatred of imperialism, although only the Muslim Brothers explicitly relate the two. This hatred, in some ways justified, yet reaches that pitch of unthinking hatred which we meet in war. On the other hand, official *jihad* against Communism is still just possible.

Thus there seems to be a relation between Islamic concepts and some modern secular concepts in Islamic countries, where the

17 *The Life of Muhammad, a Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* . . . by A. Guillaume (London, 1955) 340 (p. 231).

18 *History of the Saracens (1708-57)*.

19 Ricoldo da Montecroce, *Itinerarium*, cap. XXIX.

process of changing to secular concepts takes place with a smoothness that we in the West have not known. An Egyptian scholar sees the modern secular tendencies as changing alike the Christian and the Islamic past ideas, but it strikes him as a natural development; he says that there are now 'a secularized version of the Rights of Man', a 'theoretical advance of the individual from status to contract', and belief in salvation through economic and social changes, and in the efficacy of perfect institutions.²⁰ No doubt there is a conflict here between the modern world and both the older religions, which he sums up as a change towards the regenerated society and away from the regenerated individual; but these new social tendencies are congenial to the nature and traditions of Islam. Another Egyptian writer sums up what I have been trying to say on this head. 'Islam is for this world and for the next world, for the individual and for the state, for governor and for governed.' 'The Islamic Call made of Muslims one united nation', but a popular union: 'Complete equality lies at the bases of union in the Muslim community'.²¹

The comparison between Christian and Islamic experience suggests differences. Although, in both, religion is giving away to some form of secularism, Islam presents no such organized front as the Church does. The Christian Churches hold defensive positions from which they are prepared to fight bitterly against secular pressure. Islam shows little sign of such planned and co-ordinated resistance; it might even be expected to disappear gently from the world, transmuted into democratic secularity without violence to its nature. This may well be too simple a view. Islam has a flexibility that corresponds to its lack of organization. If modern problems and religious notions harmonize more easily in Islam than in Christian countries, Muslims enjoy greater continuity with their own past, in responding to the present which we all share. They suffer much less tension than Christians do between their communal and their private obligations. Islam is contemporary in being a popular religion in an age of popular movement. It may survive by being closer to its secular enemy, and by struggling against it less than Christianity does; there are alternative ways to survival. Where Christianity seems to hope at best for a truce between Church and State, Islam may survive by avoiding

20 M. Shafik Ghorbal, *The Making of Egypt* (Cairo, n.d.), p. 25.

21 M. M. Atta, *op. cit.*, pp. 202, 205, 206.

battle altogether. In the last resort, it is the strength of faith which will determined survival, and there, though every observer may make his own guess, no one can accurately know. Prognosis is uncertain; at most we shall watch the succession of events without surprise.

OBITER

BLACKFRIARS SCHOOL. This year Blackfriars School, the school of the English Dominicans, celebrates the three hundredth anniversary of its foundation. It was among the first English schools to be founded on the continent after the Reformation for the education of the children of recusant Catholics. Cardinal Allen's school at Douay which was primarily for training priests opened in 1597, the Jesuit College at St Omers, now Stonyhurst, in 1592, and St Gregory's, Douay, now Downside, in 1622.

Father Thomas (later, Cardinal) Howard, nephew of the Thomas Howard who became Duke of Norfolk when the title was restored in 1660, had become a Dominican in June 1645, three months before his sixteenth birthday. From the first he had set his heart on the restoration of the English Dominicans as a step towards the conversion of England, and he had only been in the Order five years when he seized the opportunity of his appointment to preach the Latin oration at the General Chapter of the Order to tell his brethren of the sorry plight of England. At that date, 1650, there were only six Dominicans at work in England, no recruits were coming and there was no house of training to receive them. Father Thomas realized, as the English Benedictines who had taken refuge on the Continent also realized, that the English religious life would only be restored and recruits would come if houses were founded abroad. With that end in view he set to work and eventually with the help of the Belgian Dominicans obtained a house in Bornhem, twelve miles from Antwerp and twenty-one from Brussels, where in April 1658 regular Dominican life was started with a community of six under Father Thomas as Prior.

Father Thomas however would not be satisfied until there was adequate means of attracting to and training young men for the English Dominican Province, and so in the summer of 1659 he determined to establish a secular college, to afford additional means for the education of English Catholics in all branches of scholastic and polite