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Islam: Monotheistic but not Monolithic

by W. Patrick Lang



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Who are Muslims? What do they believe? Are their ideas and traditions so alien there cannot be reconciliation between them and Christianity? Are they united in their beliefs and attitudes? Are they uniformly and permanently hostile to the West? In the last five years, these have become important questions for us all. Once, the nature and theology of Islam were the concern of Orientalist scholars, but no more.

**Roots.** Islam appeared suddenly in the seventh century after the birth of Christ, emerging in a world long ravaged by war between the Christian Byzantine and the Zoroastrian Sassanian Persian empires. These two great powers had fought to a state of mutual exhaustion and were incapable of resisting armies of desert Arabs, who, driven by drought, overpopulation and faith in a new revelation brought to them by Muhammad — a merchant of the city of Mecca — swept north, east and west from the Arabian Peninsula.

According to Islamic teaching, the angel Gabriel facilitated Muhammad's reception of a collection of sayings and maxims, which when compiled constituted the final revelation from God to a sinful world. This was the Quran, the central Islamic scripture.

For Muslims, Muhammad is the last in a long series of prophets, which includes those of the Old Testament and Jesus of Nazareth, whom Muslims revere as a messenger of God.

The new faith was sternly monotheistic, admitting the legitimacy of Judaism and

Christianity, but holding that the Jewish tradition had been superseded by the “descent” of the Quran while Christians had misunderstood the New Testament, distorting it in such a way that they believed Jesus was one element of a triune God. Muslim intensity on this issue led many of the Church Fathers, who encountered Muslims in Syria and Egypt, to believe Islam was not a new religion, but a Christian heresy, specifically the Arian heresy. This was the view of St. John of Damascus, who lived at the court of the Umayyad caliphs.

**Religious sciences.** Exposure to the intellectual culture of the Hellenistic world and Zoroastrian Persia soon provided philosophical structure and theological support to the new faith. During the first centuries of the Islamic presence in the Middle East, the religion existed in a great state of flux, driven in various directions by the influence of Greek rationalism and Persian mysticism.

In this period, it appeared for a short time that mainstream Islam would be dominated by scholars — the Mu’taziliin — who sought to wed rationalism to Islamic revelation in such a way as to make the faith an endlessly adaptive “living” system. In much the same period, the mysticism that calls itself “Sufi” (“wooly” in Arabic in honor of the “habits” of its brothers) developed to fulfill the human need for personal experience of the infinite.

Both of these experiments ended in tragedy for their proponents. The power of the majority traditionalists and scriptural literalists eventually proved too much for the Mu’taziliin, who were driven from office and honor with much bloodshed and suffering. Today, their teachings survive in a clear form only among the Zeidi Shiites of north Yemen.

The mystics met a similar fate in which torture and crucifixion often occurred. Their crime lay in believing that they personally experienced God. For the literal minded, this seemed an obvious impossibility and blasphemy: Man is insignificant and flawed while God is transcendent and perfect. Sufi mysticism continues, with a large number of devotees, but it has survived only because its adherents have accepted the concept that what they experience is not God, but rather his reflection.

**Seamless garment.** In its unadulterated form, the Islamic faith is essentially medieval in character. It views the world in much the same way the peoples of the West viewed life before the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent. It envisions human existence as a “seamless garment,” in which all the aspects of life are united and viewed through the prism of submission to the will of God. Business, family life, inheritance, personal status, politics and war are all seen as governed by the same attitudes and laws. As a result, Muslims do not readily accept ideas that seek to separate various spheres of human activity.

The separation of church and state, for example, is not a concept readily accepted by pious Muslims, and it is often true that the zealous among them experience little remorse in the application of personal or state retribution against those seen as “impious” or “disrespectful” of God and his law. The now infamous *fatwa*, or religious edict, against the author Salman Rushdie was a good example of this as was the Danish cartoons incident in 2005. In both cases, death was the remedy suggested by some Islamic authorities.

**A religion of law.** After the initial age of development and ferment, the Islamic idea system stabilized into the forms that continue to dominate Islamic groups:

Due to this emphasis on law, the juridical and scholarly processes to formulate Sharia, or divine law, by any group became central to the life of the Islamic community. Islamic law is created by applying “tools,” known in Arabic as *usul fiqh*, the roots of law. These tools, which are employed by a virtual army of religious experts, are:

**Islam became a religion of laymen ... those who are often referred to as clergy in the West are usually scholars of the law.**

The application of these tools to the formation of Islamic law, and the group identity that grows from consensus among those who believe their particular group to be the custodians of the true Islam, is central to the history and present existence of a great variety of Islamic sects and related communities, some of which are only distantly Islamic in their beliefs.

There are other factors that influence the formation of Islamic states and political groupings. Ethnicity, geography, economics, military rivalries; these are all significant. But in the context of the medieval mindset that tends to cause the Muslim to see all elements as inseparable parts of one divinely ordained whole, the role of religious consensus is central to identity and often serves as justification for separation and hostility, where the true causes may lie elsewhere.

Without effective central authority and under the pressure of the centrifugal impetus of varying consensus, Islam has tended to evolve in the direction of ever proliferating understandings of the nature of Islam. That process continues and leads to widely differing understandings on the part of Muslims of the nature of Islam and its requirements for salvation.

Some of the groups and their origins (from a Western point of view):

**Sunni.** This is by far the largest sect in Islam and was the original form of the religion. About 70 percent of all Muslims are Sunni, who live in large numbers from Morocco to Indonesia, from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean.

Sunni Islam is distinguished by its conviction that the roots of law no longer include the possibility of original interpretation of scripture. There are four mutually recognized schools of Sharia within Sunni Islam: Maliki, Shafa’i, Hanafi and Hanbali. The differences among these schools of law are not thought by Muslims to amount to sectarian divisions, but to something analogous to the corpus of varying case law available to lawyers in different state jurisdictions in the United States. Sunni Muslims who accept these schools are distributed in roughly cohesive geographic areas with a good deal of overlapping.

**Shiite.** When the newly converted Muslim armies of desert Arabs conquered Mesopotamia in the seventh century, millions of Persian-speakers — in what is now southern Iraq — were brought under Arab Muslim control. Over an extended period of

time, nearly all converted to Islam.

For a century, the Arabs ruled as an occupying army, excluding Persian-speaking Muslims from participation in the list (*diwan*) of those who received a share in the annual income of the Islamic community. This was thought to be unjust. When a dispute arose among Muslims regarding the right of succession to the caliphate, the oppressed of southern Iraq predictably chose to support the descendants of Muhammad rather than their oppressors, the Umayyad dynasty of caliphs.

Since Islam embraces the idea of theocracy and the universal unity of belief, it has always been a feature of Islamic history that an Islamic population who wishes to revolt against an Islamic government frames its cause in religious terms. This makes the revolt one in which the rebels are restoring “true” Islam against sinners and deviants.

This appears to have been the case in the original Shiite revolt against what is now called the Sunni majority. To this day, Shiite populations are quick to think of themselves as an oppressed underclass bullied by the stronger and more numerous Sunnis.

This is often seen as reflecting Shiite weakness in the larger Islamic world rather than in particular settings, like Iraq. Given the mechanisms of group formation previously discussed, it should not be surprising that the Shiite populations have divided and redivided themselves many times along “fault lines” of doctrine and ethnic advantage.

There are now many different Shiite- or Shiite-descended groups, all of which are oriented toward the special status given to those who come directly from the family of Muhammad. The historical figures in that line of descent are all referred to as “imam,” as opposed to the Sunni tradition of naming their leaders “caliph.”

Various Shiite groups think this line of descent ended after 5 imams (the Zeidis in Yemen), 7 imams (the Ismailis, who live mainly on the Indian subcontinent) or 12 imams (the Imami Shiites in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran). In some cases they believe the last of the line has been “hidden” from the world for centuries waiting for the time of return in glory to “judge the living and the dead.”

There is a widely held belief in Islam (both Sunni and Shiite) that a messiah (*mahdi*) will come to assure the ultimate triumph of Islam. This notion of the messiah is often conflated with that of the “hidden (12th) imam” in such a way that one man is expected to be both. In the Shiite tradition, it is thought the messiah/hidden imam will return with Jesus of Nazareth and that together they will judge the world.

**Islam became a religion of law, the formulation of divinely sanctioned law was the primary and defining activity of the religion.**

**Sufis.** For many humans, law and obedience to law is not enough solace in dealing with the daily travail of life. For many Muslims, the traditional Islamic orientation toward a man/God relationship mediated by religious lawyers has never been enough comfort.

In response to this, Muslims developed forms of mysticism that remain, with enthusiastic support, in most parts of the Islamic world. Islamic mystics of this kind are called “Sufis.”

Only the Hanbali/Wahhabi/Salafist tendency in Sunni Islam firmly rejects Sufi mysticism as impertinent blasphemy. For other Muslims, however, Sufism is not an alternative identity, but a special devotion added to their more conventional observances.

There are many orders, or *tariqas*, among the Sufis. Some, such as the Qaderis and the Naqshbandi, are very old. They all possess a special liturgy, or *thikr*, and form brotherhoods that are not necessarily the quiet groups sometimes described by their friends in the West.

In the 19th century, Sufi brothers fought the Imperial Russian armies for decades; they later fought the Soviet Army in Afghanistan and continue to fight the Russian Army in Chechnya. There, as in the Balkans, they have made common cause with their Wahhabi adversaries. What the result of that will be, only time will tell.

**Ibadhi.** This is the prevalent form of Islam in the Sultanate of Oman. Ibadhism is probably descended from the Khariji revolt, which took place shortly after the death of Muhammad in 632. The Ibadhis do not accept that idea, but, it is, nevertheless, probably the case.

The Ibadhis are neither Sunni nor Shiite and consider both to be unbelievers. They do not believe the Quran is the uncreated word of God, but believe Muhammad to have written it inspired by God. The Ibadhis’ refusal to accept the validity of other views of Islam is undoubtedly the result of isolation and the innate divisiveness of the consensus process of group formation in Islam.

**Deobandi.** This is an extreme form of Sunni orthodoxy that developed in India in response to the presence and influence of the British colonial government. Like other Salafist idea systems, Deobandis look to the older forms and documents of Islam, believing that, over the centuries, Islam has been corrupted.

The Taliban practice a simplistic form of revivalist Islam based on Deobandi teachings. The Taliban learned this form of the Islamic faith in Islamic religious schools, or *madrakah*, run on the basis of an uneasy cooperation between Deobandi teachers and Wahhabi money.

**Schismatics and heretics.** There are other groups derived from Islam. In their present form, they are of doubtful Islamic identity.

The very nature of the Islamic faith, with its lack of a governing religious authority and reliance on group consensus for legitimization of Islamic identity, ensures that the continuing proliferation of splinter groups, large and small, is inevitable and will result in variations in doctrine and practice until the “last days.”

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