

An Operational View of Islam

Theology. The Islamic faith believes itself to be one of “The Three Heavenly Religions.” (al-adyan at-thalatha as-sammawiya) (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). According to Muslim tradition, Allah (in their view, the same God as the God worshipped by Jews and Christians) attempted over many millennia to send messages to mankind specifying the rules of conduct by which he desired humans to live. The prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus are believed by Muslims to have been messengers sent by God to warn mankind against sin. The Muslims believe that humanity largely ignored these warnings and as a result a last and most complete warning was sent down from heaven in the form of a “reading” (the Qur’an) revealed to a final prophet in Arabia. This was Muhammad. The Muslims believe that the Qur’an is an uncreated text. That means that they do not accept that it was composed either by God or humans, but rather that it existed in its present form and words in God’s mind for all eternity and merely “descended” to earth to be delivered to Muhammad.

In pursuit of the vision of the universe presented by the Prophet Muhammad and their understanding of the eternal and uncreated Qur’an, Arab armies exploded out of the Arabian

Peninsula (Shibbat Jazirat al-Arab in Arabic) in the 7th Century A.D. and in a few decades overran all the territories of Sassanian Persia, Byzantine North Africa to the Straits of Gibraltar and went all the way to the Gates of Constantinople. We should never forget the military potency of that vision and its continuing ability to motivate fighters.

This view of the Qur'an as uncreated and eternal is held by all Muslims but for some the fundamentalism of this belief causes them difficulties in adapting their faith to modern life. Another result of this understanding of the nature of the Qur'an was the establishment of the Arabic Language as the sacred language of Islam. For the great majority of Muslims, the Qur'an is an Arabic document and must not be translated. Since the Qur'an is believed to be, in essence, an aspect of God's mind, the question has often been asked in a jocular way if God thinks in Arabic. *For the great majority of Muslims the truth is unchanging and not subject to revision. In Shia Islam the possibility has always existed of a re-interpretation of basic Islamic concepts but it has never occurred. We must teach ourselves to have patience.*

An Exclusive Belief System. Islam is a proudly monotheistic faith. Most Muslims are so wary of assigning any great importance to worldly things that there is a long standing

prohibition among the majority against the depiction of animals or humans in art. The sin of "Attribution of Importance" (Shirk in Arabic) is thought to attach to devotion to earthly objects. In other words, pious Muslims fear that importance given to art or poetry or mere possessions detracts from devotion to God. (The Shia do not observe this prohibition) Muslims tend to think of Christians as polytheists who will not admit their belief in more than one God. They think that because of the Christian belief in the Triune nature of God and no amount of exposition of Christian theological argument for the Trinity satisfies the general Muslim (or Jewish) opinion that Christians are not really monotheists. Nevertheless, Muslims are enjoined in the Qur'an itself to tolerate (and only that) Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans (a kind of Zoroastrian) as "People of the Book" (ahl al-kitab in Arabic). This toleration is often misunderstood. It is, in fact, only toleration. Historically, Christian and Jewish populations have lived in Muslim controlled states on the basis of their acceptance of what amounts to second-class status. There have been exceptions such as Jordan under the rule of the Hashemite Kings and ironically, countries controlled by the Baath Party, but, in the main, Christians and Jews in Muslim countries have lived under constant social pressure to convert. This pressure takes the form of; exclusion from many enterprises and government posts, disqualification from military service, laws against the construction of churches and disqualification

from the office of president. A requirement that the Head of State be a Muslim is written into the constitution of many majority Muslim countries. *This kind of thinking should teach us that the obstacles which we must overcome in seeking to become friends and allies of the Muslims are deep seated, but not impossible to overcome.* In many ways the situation of Christians in the Arab countries is indicative of the depth of the exclusivity of Muslim belief on the subject of the necessary supremacy of Islam. Christians in Lebanon and Egypt, for example, live in a constant state of anxiety concerning their status.

A Medieval Idea Set. Islam believes itself to be the living embodiment of God's will on earth. It believes itself to be authoritative in all aspects of life. For the pious Muslim life is "seamless garment" in which business, military affairs, family life, inheritance and all other aspects of life are united into a pattern of obedience to God's will as the particular Muslim community involved interprets it. This is much the same attitude toward life that Europeans had before the Reformation and the Renaissance broke the unitary pattern of European life that had persisted since the end of the Classical Period. *In dealing with the traditional Muslim communities we should always remember that they live in a perceived universe in which change is neither beneficial nor virtuous.*

Splits in the Community. The early Islamic community in its greatest period of expansion managed to hold itself together under the religious authority of the successors of the Prophet, the "Caliphs" (khulifa' in Arabic) until the Islamic Empire ('umma in Arabic) became so extended that it contained peoples of widely varied interests and traditions. At that point it started to break up in a pattern of fragmentation that has persisted to this time. Among the first to declare a separate identity were the Shia of southern Iraq. Their founding myth holds that their refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Caliphs derived from their deep loyalty to the bloodline of the Prophet. Most scholarship holds that the Arabs of southern Iraq seized on this excuse because the invading desert Arab army of Islam denied them a fair share in the division of the "booty" seized in further conquests even after they had converted to Islam. Islam sees itself as a universal, unitary community. To "split off" from that universal body is obviously a great sin. Therefore, groups of Muslims who wish to stop obeying religiously sanctioned authority have to embrace some other form of Islam and to reject the former ruler and his group as "no true Muslims," in other words, heretics. That rejection makes disobedience and even war among Muslims acceptable. There have been many such cases. They still occur and the results of previous of many such divisions are still with us.

Another example of this form of “rebellion” was the conversion of the Iranians from Sunni to Shia in a bout 50 years back in the 16th Century. Until then the Persians (Iranians) had always been Sunni, but in the early 16th Century the Ottoman Turkish Sunni Sultan in Constantinople accomplished two important things. 1- His armies reached the borders of Iran in the northwest (near Tabriz) and 2- He declared himself to be Caliph. The Iranian rulers of the day decided that the combination of effective military force and an ideological claim to authority that would be accepted by many was too much and they too discovered in themselves a new found devotion to the blood line of the Prophet. In fifty years nearly all Persians became Shia. They have remained that ever since and have adopted all the Shia attitudes including a proclivity for Martyrdom (Shihada in Arabic). Another example of this phenomenon is the Shiism of the Hazara People of the Hindu Kush mountains in Afghanistan. The Hazara are a Mongol people. They are in Afghanistan as a by-product of a Mongol invasion of long ago, probably that of Tamerlane (Timur-i-Leng in Turkic). After the withdrawal of their kinsmen from Afghanistan the Hazara were always a small minority dominated by the Sunni Pushtuns and Tajiks. To escape their overlords they retreated higher and higher into the mountains. Today the Hazara all live at high altitudes above the level at which their oppressors wish to live. Nevertheless, the Pushtuns and Tajiks demanded tribute and obedience from

them on the basis of religious obligation. As you would expect the Hazara all converted to Shiism several hundred years ago and now receive support from Iran.

What can we learn from these examples of behavior? 1- Politics, economics and religion are closely linked in Islam. The religious identity of peoples reflects ancient deep-seated differences of perceived interest among the peoples. 2- The well-being of the people is often the basic determinant of religious and political orientation. A perception that alliance with the US would improve that well-being would be a powerful tool. That tool can be wielded with success by those who come to understand the cultural milieu in which they work.