Islam and Modernity

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"In Indonesia, Once Tolerant Islam Grows Rigid",[1] "The Mideast Threat That's Hard to Define"[2], "Identity crisis"[3], "'We will replace the Bible with the Koran in Britain'"[4], "Dilemma of the moderates"[5]. These and many other similar titles of articles appearing only last year are indications not of a resurgent Islam but of a brand of Islam that is facing a full-blown crisis; an Islam that can only affirm its identity within the confines of the *Šarî'a*; an Islam that finds itself forced to speak two incompatible languages because, in its view, it is addressing two incompatible cultures: the religious and the secular; an Islam that preaches against democracy and desires to rid itself of democracy while doing so within a democratic environment; an Islam that is at times forced to present itself as an ideology rather than as a doctrine, thereby betraying the roots it seeks to preserve and re-propose to 21st century society.

The historical roots of the phenomenon

The carnage perpetrated by the attacks on the United States by those commonly identified as "Muslim extremists" or "radicals" has brought to the fore the classical interpretation of the Muslim world view as well as its identity.

In this particular Muslim view the world is basically divided into the House of Islam (*Dâr al-Islâm*) and the House of War (*Dâr al-Harb*). The former consists of all those countries where the law of Islam prevails, that is to say, the Muslim Empire; the latter refers to the rest of the world. Just as there is only one God in heaven, so there can be only one sovereign and one law on earth. Ideally, the House of Islam is conceived as a single community, governed by a single state, headed by a single sovereign. With the exception of polytheists non-Muslims (regarded as unbelievers), who are brought by conquest under the rule of Islam, are tolerated and protected, provided that they are followers of one of the permitted religions, namely Judaism and Christianity. They must pay a special poll tax, known as *gizya*, and are bound not to make any attempt to convert Muslims to their own religion. However, Islam does not recognize the existence of any other political-religious society outside its boundaries. In the Muslim world view, all mankind must eventually accept Islam or submit to Islamic rule. Meanwhile, it is a religious duty of Muslims to struggle until this end is accomplished. This struggle is called *gihâd* and the one who performs such a duty is a *mugâhid*.[6] The former term occurs several times in the Qur?an in the sense of making war against unbelievers. The latter term has become familiar since the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Back in the 1980's the Soviet Union had already envisioned the eventual threat posed to its sovereignty by those republics under its hegemony that had a Muslim majority. Chechnya has become one case in point.

From the Muslim point of view there was a major difference in quality between the war against the Christians and the wars on the other frontiers of Islam. As Bernard Lewis has corrrectly pointed out, among the religions of the peoples of the Far East, of which Muslims had little or no understanding, early Muslims saw no alternative to Islam. Their advance into these regions was considered merely as the Islamization of the pagan peoples. The struggle in the West, by contrast, was against a rival religious and political system which denied the very basis of the universal mission of Islam and did so in terms that were both familiar and intelligible. The conviction among Muslims of their own predestined final victory did not render them indifferent to the significance and the uncertainty of a long, drawn-out conflict between two faiths and two societies. In Muslim writings the Christian world becomes the House of War (*Dar al-Harb*) par excellence, and the war against Christendom is the prototype of the *gihâd*.[7]

According to the classical formulation of Islamic Law (*Šarî'a*) this state of war is religiously and legally obligatory and could end only with the conversion or subjugation of all mankind. Consequently, a peace treaty between these two societies is theoretically impossible. The war could

only end with the universal triumph of Islam. What could occur is the *interruption* of hostilities for reasons of necessity or expediency by way of a truce. But even in this case, classical Muslim jurists set a limit. It must not exceed a period of ten years and can be repudiated unilaterally by the Muslims who, at the same time, are obliged by Islamic Law to give the other side due notice of the resumption of hostilities.[8] It is only within this framework of Islamic jurisprudence that one can understand Usâma bin Laden's rhetoric and the terms within which it is couched.

Christians in general first encountered Muslims as conquerors: it is, therefore, quite obvious that they should have perceived Islam as inherently martial. Given the intellectual and religious climate of the age, the only manner in which Christians could explain Islam in a fashion convincing to themselves was as a deviant form of Christianity. Right up until the Age of Enlightenment the latter knew of only two religions beyond its confines: paganism, which had been extinguished by the end of the ninth century, and Judaism, which had been supplanted by Christianity since Biblical revelation had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Thus any religious doctrine after the Christian was viewed as a heresy and its preacher was viewed as an impostor, a pseudo-prophet.[9]

Since Christians first encountered Muslims as conquerors, they saw them as inherently martial

On the other hand, Muslims were from the outset imbued with the supreme self-confidence born of the conviction that they had been singled out to receive God's last and most complete revelation; necessarily, therefore, they looked upon Christians in general, and Western Christendom in particular, with scorn. The *Dâr al-Islâm* thus occupied, by God's mercy, a more favoured portion of the earth's surface than did Western Christendom. Seen from Baghdad (the then? 'Abbâsid capital) in the Middle Ages, the Christian world was a *melange* of confused sects and petty monarchies squabbling among themselves in an unappealing environment. The Islamic community had no rival in its wealth, its technology, its learning, and its culture. A haughty disdain was the only intelligible attitude for Muslims to adopt towards Western Christendom.[10]

The primary task of *gihâd* has always been the extension of Muslim authority, first to the rest of Arabia and, under the Prophet's successors, the caliphs, to the rest of the world. In the early centuries of the Islamic era this seemed a possible, indeed a likely outcome, with the conquest in the East of those territories that had earlier belonged to the Persian and Byzantine empires and in the West with the conquest of North Africa, southern Europe, even advancing beyond the Pyrenees. After several centuries of unbroken victories, the *gihâd* was finally held and repelled by Christian Europe. In Western Christendom this resulted in the long, drawn-out process known in Spanish history as the *Reconquista*, which eventually led to the eviction of the Muslims from the territories they had conquered in Italy and the Iberian peninsula. However, this process of reconquest did not succeed when the Christian forces decided to export the struggle to the Middle East by means of the Crusades.

With the demise of the Crusader movement a new phase of the *gihâd* was inaugurated, this time not by Arabs but by later recruits to Islam, the Turks and the Tatars. These were able to conquer the hitherto Christian land of Anatolia, and in May 1453 they captured Constantinople, which from then on became the capital of the Ottoman sultans, the successors of the earlier caliphate in the leadership of the Islamic *gihâd*. The Ottomans in the Balkans and the Islamized Tatars in Russia resumed the attempt to conquer Europe, this time from the East, and for a while seemed within reach of success. But the lifting of the siege of Vienna in 1683 and the subsequent Treaty of Karlovitz in 1699 brought both campaigns to an end. European Christendom was able to oust the invaders and again, now more successfully, to counter-attack against the realms of Islam. By this time the *gihâd* had become almost entirely defensive in nature – resisting the reconquest of Spain and Russia, resisting the movements for national self-liberation by the Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire, and finally, as Muslims see it, defending the very heartland of Islam against infidel attack. This phase has come to be known as imperialism.[11]

In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the primacy and therefore the dominance of the West was clear for all to see, invading the Muslim in every aspect of his public and – more agonizingly – even his private life.[12] Thus, instead of invading and dominating Christendom, Muslims were themselves invaded and dominated by those whom they still viewed as Christian powers in spite of their overtly secular nature. The resulting frustration and anger at what seemed to them a reversal of both natural and divine law have been growing for centuries, and have reached a climax in our own time. These feelings find expression in many places where Muslims and non-Muslims meet and clash – the latest conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, Chechnya, Israel and Palestine, Sudan, Kashmir, and the Philippines, among others, are witnesses to this ongoing struggle. The prime target of the resulting anger is, inevitably, the United States, now seen as the unchallenged, if not unquestioned, leader of what some would like to call the free world and what others variously define as the West, Christendom and the world of the unbelievers.

But Islamic extremism sees other forms of venting its anger on enemies, whether real or imaginary. It is not a rare occurrence that foreign aid workers, doctors and nurses are attacked and killed for the simple reason that they represent an alien religion or are citizens of a Western country. Furthermore Islamic extremism does not discriminate among western states. All of them are termed as *the West*, and the West has been consistently identified with the Crusades and Modernity, both of which are considered inimical to Islam not only militarily but also religiously and culturally. Hence, Modernity is branded as Western, the West is branded as Christian, and the Christian is branded as Crusader. Although the last term has long lost its original meaning – in fact its meaning today is anything but religious – it is still useful for affirming Islamic identity against an allegedly hostile world. Usâma b. Lâdin has consistently put it to good use, even associating it with Zionism when referring to the alliance between the U.S. and Israel. In his letter dated 23 August 1996 he declared that:

> It should not be hidden from you that the people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed upon them by the Zionist-Crusaders alliance and their collaborators, to the extent that the Muslims' blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hands of the enemies. Their blood was spilled in Palestine and Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the massacres of Qiana, in Lebanon are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, Philippines, Somalia, Fatani, Ogaden, Erithrea, Chechnya, and Bosnia Herzegovina took place that send shivers in the body and shake the conscience....
> The Zionist Crusader alliance moves quickly to contain and abort any "corrective movement" appearing in the Islamic countries.[13]

Today Islamic fundamentalism sees new forms of crusades and colonialism such as secularism, globalization and consumerism. This had led the late Ayatollah Khomeini to brand the West, and particularly the United States, as "the Great Satan." However, as Bernard Lewis rightly comments:

> A more accurate expression of how the Western impact is perceived by those who oppose it was given by Ayatollah Khomeini, when he spoke of the United States as 'the Great Satan'. Satan is not an imperialist, he is a tempter. He does not conquer, he seduces. The battle is still going between those who hate and fear the seductive and in their view destructive, power of the Western way of life, and those who see it as a new advance and a new opportunity in a continuing and fruitful interchange of cultures and civilizations.[14]

Thus, the hatred of modernity as introduced by the West is not a question of what the West does; it is rather a question of what the Western world *is*, what it stands for. Islamic extremism, like all forms of religious radicalism, carries the doctrine of *gihâd* to its logical extreme, because it views its historical roots as ideal and perennial, and impervious to adaptation, which it considers as treason if not outright apostasy.

Contrasts and contempt

The Islamic World's first encounter with secularism took place in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which Muslims saw not as secular – a word and concept equally meaningless to them at the time – but as de-Christianized and therefore deserving of some consideration. All previous movements of ideas in Europe had been to a greater or lesser extent Christian, at least from the Muslim point of view. The Renaissance, the Reformation, even the scientific revolution and the

Enlightenment passed unnoticed in the Muslim world. The French Revolution was the first movement of ideas in Europe which did not appear Christian and which even presented itself, to Muslims at least, as violently anti-Christian. It is indeed ironic that such an encounter took place by way of the invasion of Egypt by the French armies led by Napoleon Bonaparte.

In any case, Muslims initially looked to France in the hope of finding in the ideas propagated by secularism the driving force of Western science and progress freed from Christian encumbrances. These ideas, and others derived from them, provided the main ideological inspiration of many of the modernizing and reforming movements in the Islamic world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries culminating in the *Tanzimât* laws enacted by an Ottoman empire in rapid decline and the rise of secular nationalism.

From the beginning, that is to say, from the first impact of these ideas at the end of the eighteenth century, there were some who saw that they could threaten not only Christianity, which did not concern them, but also the very fabric of Islam and who, seeing this, gave warning in advance. For a long time they had little influence. The small minority that was at all aware of European secular movements was, for the most part, profoundly attracted by them. Among the vast majority, the challenge of Western secular thought was not so much opposed as ignored. It is only in comparatively recent times that Muslim religious thinkers of stature have looked at secularism, understood its threat to what they regard as the highest values of religion, and responded with a outright rejection.

The Renaissance, the Reformation, even the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment passed unnoticed in the Muslim world

For some years now, there has been a strong reaction in Muslim countries against these secularizing tendencies, expressed in a number of Islamic radical movements, loosely and inaccurately designated at the present time as fundamentalist. These movements share the objective of reversing the secularizing reforms of the last century, abolishing the imported codes of law and the social customs that came with them, and returning to the holy law of Islam and the Islamic political order.[15]

An example of this perception and the resulting attitude may be seen from a reference made by Bernard Lewis to a recent Arabic newspaper article that defended polygamy. The author of this article argues as follows: In Christianity and more generally in the Western world, polygamy is outlawed. But this is contrary to human nature and needs. For ten days a month during menstruation and for longer periods during pregnancy, a woman is not available. In the monogamous West, the deficiency is made up by promiscuity, prostitution and adultery; in Islam, by polygamy. Surely this, the writer argues, providing respectability for the woman and legitimacy for her children, is the better of the two choices.[16] This makes good sense, if one accepts the writer's view of the relations between the sexes.

Another aspect of this contempt is expressed again and again in the statements of bin Lâdin and others who share his views. The refrain is always the same. Because of their depraved and self-indulgent way of life, Americans have become soft and cannot take casualties. These statements do not fail to recall the war in Vietnam, the massacre of Marines in Beirut and Somalia and, more recently, the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York. The latter was the result of the perception that the United States has become feeble and frightened and incapable of responding. Hence, the September 11 disaster was intended as an opening salvo of a large scale campaign to force Americans and their allies out of Arabia and the rest of the Muslim world, to overthrow the corrupt tyrants America supports, and to prepare the ground for the final world struggle.[17] For Usâma b. Lâdin, his declaration of war against the United States marks the resumption of a struggle for religious domination of the world that began in the seventh century. For him and his followers, this is a moment of opportunity. For him America today exemplifies the civilization and embodies the leadership of the House of War, and, like Rome and Byzantium, it has become degenerate and demoralized. Hence, the time is ripe

for its overthrow. But despite its weakness it is also dangerous. Khomeini's designation of the United States as "the Great Satan" was revealing and for the members of al-Qâ'ida it is the seduction of America and of its unbridled dissolute way of life that represents the greatest threat to the kind of Islam they wish to impose on their fellow Muslims.[18] The *gihâd* has thus taken a sinister twist.

In recent years, there have been some changes of perception and, consequently, of tactics among Muslims. Some of them still see in the West in general and its present leader, the United States, in particular the ancient and irreconcilable enemy of Islam, the one serious obstacle to the restoration of God's faith and law at home and their ultimate universal triumph. For these there is no alternative to a war to the death, in fulfillment of what they see as the commandments of their faith. There is a second category of Muslims, who, while remaining committed Muslims and while being well aware of the flaws of Western society, nevertheless also see its merits – its inquiring spirit, which produced modern science and technology; its concern with freedom, which created modern democratic government and free speech. Those belonging to this category, while retaining their own beliefs and their own culture, seek to join the West in reaching toward a freer and better world. Then there is a third category who, while seeing the West as their ultimate enemy and as the source of all evil, are nevertheless aware of its power, and seek some temporary accommodation and bide their time in order better to prepare for the final struggle. This appears to be the strategy adopted by some radical Muslim communities in Europe, especially in Spain, France and Italy. [19]

The psyche of radical Islam

As has already been affirmed, the present confrontation between Islam and modernity is the result of the centuries-old confrontation between Islam and Western Christendom. This present confrontation has several components. One of them is a sense of humiliation: the feeling of a community accustomed to regarding itself as the sole custodian of God's truth, who has been commanded by him to bring it to the infidels, and who suddenly finds itself dominated and exploited by those same infidels it had initially set out to subdue. Even when no longer dominated by non-Muslim powers, the Muslim community still views itself as being profoundly affected by them in ways that change its life, and enticing it to depart from the true Islamic way and to embrace other paths. To humiliation has been added frustration, as the various remedies, most of them imported from the West, have been tried and one after another failed.

After humiliation and frustration a third component necessary for resurgence has appeared – a new confidence and sense of power. These arose from the oil crisis of 1973, when in support of Egypt's war against Israel, the oil-producing Arab countries used both the supply and the price of oil as what proved to be a very effective weapon. The resulting wealth, pride, and self-assurance were reinforced by another new element – contempt. On closer acquaintance with Europe and the United States, Muslim visitors, such as Sayyid Qutb in the late 1940's, began to observe and describe what they saw as the moral degeneracy and consequent weakness of Western civilization.

In a recent work, Bernard Lewis notes that in a time of faltering secular ideologies and crumbling institutions, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that heralded the fall of communism and produced a climate fraught with uncertainties, an ideology expressed in Islamic terms appeared to offer several advantages: an emotionally familiar basis of group identity, solidarity and exclusion; an acceptable basis of legitimacy and authority; an immediately intelligible formulation of principles for both a critique of the present and a programme for the future. By means of these, Islam could provide the most effective symbols and slogans for mobilization, whether for or against a cause or a regime.[20]

The exploitation of oil brought vast new wealth and with it new and increasingly bitter social tensions. In the old society inequalities of wealth had been limited, and their effects were restrained – on the one hand, by the traditional social bonds and obligations that linked rich and poor,[21] and, on the other hand, by the privacy of Muslim home life. Modernization has all too often widened the gap, destroyed those social bonds, and through the universality of the modern media, made the resulting inequalities painfully visible. All this has created new and receptive audiences for Waâbî and like-minded teachings among the Muslim radicals.

Furthermore, the eclipse of pan-Arabism has left what is commonly known as radical Islam as the most attractive alternative to all those who felt that there has to be something better, truer, and more hopeful than the incompetent tyrannies of their rulers and the bankrupt ideologies imposed on them from outside. These movements feed on privation and humiliation and on the frustration and resentments to which they give rise, after the failure of all the political and economic panaceas, both the foreign imports and the local imitations. As seen by many in the Middle East and North Africa, both capitalism and socialism were tried and failed; both Western and Eastern models produced only poverty and tyranny. It would appear unjust that the West should be saddled with the blame for the failure of most post-independence Muslim countries. But popular sentiment in these same countries is not entirely wrong in seeing the Western world and Western ideas as the ultimate source of the major changes that have transformed the Islamic world in the last century or more. As a consequence, much of the anger in the Islamic world is directed against the *Westerner*, seen as the ancient immemorial enemy of Islam since the first clashes between the Muslim caliphs and the Christian emperors, and against the *Westernizer*, seen as a tool or accomplice of the West and as a traitor to his own faith and people. Just to take one recent example, in another part of the above-quoted *Letter to Muslims* Usâma b. Lâdin berates the Pakistani Government for collaborating, at least tacitly, with the United States in the latter's war against the Tâlibân regime:

> The Pakistani Government has fallen under the banner of the cross. The Almighty God says: To the hypocrites give the glad tidings that there is for them but a grievous penalty; yea, to those who take for friends unbelievers: Is it honour they seek among them? Nay, all honour is with God....[22]
>
> Whoever believes in God and Doomsday must not rest at ease until he upholds right and its supporters and until God defeats falsehood and its backers.
>
> Your stand against falsehood will strengthen us. But if they seek your aid in religion, it is your duty to help them. Prophet Muhammad, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, says: "A Muslim is a brother to fellow Muslims. He neither does them injustice, nor lets them down, nor surrenders them."[23]

Broadly speaking, Muslim fundamentalists are those who feel that the troubles of the Muslim world at present are the result not of insufficient modernization but of *excessive* modernization, which they see as a betrayal of authentic Islamic values. For them the remedy is a return to true Islam (identified with the Medinan period), including the abolition of all the laws and social borrowings from the West and the restoration of Islamic Holy Law, the *Šarî'a*, as the effective law of the land. From their point of view, the ultimate struggle is not against the Western intruder but against the Westernizing traitor at home. Their most dangerous enemies, as they see it, are the false and renegade Muslims who rule the countries of the Islamic world and who have imported and imposed infidel ways on Muslim peoples.

Broadly speaking, Muslim fundamentalists feel that the Muslim world is excessively modernized

Internal crisis

The Islamic world is locked in a struggle between those who are loosely described as conservatives and those who seek reform, those who want to prevent the secularization of their religion and culture and those who want to modernize it. If modernity means technical progress then there is everywhere a great thirst for it. If being modern means having a good job and a comfortable home and a good school for the children, then everyone desires it.

But many are those who would say that it is also a state of mind. If so, Muslims (and quite a substantial number of non-Muslims for that matter) are less certain about it. If modernity means *Americanization*, then many are wary of it, especially at a time when anti-American feeling is running high because of the continuing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as well as the volatile situation in post-Saddam Iraq. Furthermore, if modernity means freedom, what kind of freedom would this imply? Freedom of expression is popular with the people but extremely unpopular with the authorities. If freedom means alcohol and

promiscuous behaviour, religious leaders are indignant and appalled.

As stated above, whereas some Muslims have fiercely rejected modernity and all its works, insisting that their own faith and culture are both superior and self-sufficient, others have embraced Western style modernity, even if that has meant adopting a completely secular lifestyle. Others have tried to create a synthesis, adopting what is useful from the West while holding to their own religion and identity. They want their own modernity – an Egyptian or Turkish or Islamic modernity – rather than conform to a standard global identity. The question arises, however, as to the possibility of reaching such a goal. One of the reasons is that Islam does not separate the religious sphere from the secular. Furthermore, the effects of globalization are far-reaching, permeating both the public and the private sphere, especially through satellite communications, the internet, mobile phones, and so forth.

There are numerous Islamic states that are fully modern in the way they manage their economy, in the way they conduct their policies, in affirming their culture, and in the way they interpret their religion. In this context it is legitimate to ask if herein lies an ambiguity, recurrent in Islam, in its relation to the demands of historical situations where it must insert or affirm itself.

In his work *L'Islam et la modernité* Prof. ʻAbd al-Magîd Charfi, a Tunisian intellectual, accuses Muslim countries of having only grudgingly accepted modernization when the occasion arose during the whole of the 19th century. He notes that, since modernity came from "the outside", especially by way of colonialism, it presented itself as an intruder that put everything into question. Hence, it was met with varying degrees of resistance since these countries viewed it as a threat to all that which had been handed down by the "pious ancestors" (*al-Salaf*).[24]

The roots of the general attitude of the Muslim world in its encounter with modernity lie in a moderate reformist movement that was ambiguous and quite alien to modern science. It originated at the end of the 19th century and has now been totally absorbed by a tendency that is more fundamentalist than reformist in its nature. Contrary to what reformists themselves believed, in particular Muhammad ʾAbduh (d. 1905), it was by no means the case of an intellectual movement or organization that was even remotely comparable with the Reformation in Europe during the 16th century or to the crisis of modernism within Catholicism at the beginning of the 20th century. Adaptation to the modern world is based on a compromise and not on a conversion of the intellect. One must simply adopt the sciences and the techniques of the West without any reticence or superstitious backwardness, preserving, however, the integrity of the entire corpus of Muslim beliefs and their juridical and social applications. Science is accepted, provided that it does not encroach upon the realm of Islamic thought. One welcomes technical progress, provided that it does not substantially modify the mentalities and the social and family structures. Reading the works of Islamist authors such as Abû ʾAlâ Mawdûdî and the Ayatollah Khomeini one is under the impression that a distinction is being drawn between accepting the "products" of modernity while, at the same time, refusing its principles.

But in the 1980's the Iranian author Daryush Shayegan had already eloquently prophesied that such a dream is doomed to failure. Looking back at the first years of the Islamic revolution in his country he concluded:

> As a final illusion, we formed the conviction that it would be possible to be selective with the nature of the things we were obtaining: to separate the wheat from the chaff, to choose technology and firearms while heroically ruling out the subversive, laicizing ideas which lay behind them. To be, in short, integral Muslims wholly subservient to the omnipresence of *Shariʻa*, enterprising capitalists, efficient technocrats and – why not? – ardent nationalists as well. But then, before we had had time to take proper stock and get things in hand, we found ourselves on the wrong side of the stream: between what was happening in the world and what was happening in our heads, an abyss had opened up. Suddenly the bucolic vacation was over for in the meantime the world had changed, history had moved on, our familiar ecology had crumbled, and we were left stumbling about in no man's land, neither the land of our forefathers nor that of the new masters.[25]

This uneasy relationship between Islam and modernity can well be highlighted by referring to a lecture delivered by Prof. Sâdiq Galâl al-ʔAzm,

Head of the Department of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Damascus in 1995 on *Islam and Secularism*.[26] In his talk he addressed the frequently asked question, "Can Islâm be harmonized with modernity, secularism, democracy, modern science and technology?" His reply was "no" and "yes". If one were to give heed to the Egyptians Sâlih Sâriyra (see his *Treatise on the Faith*) and Šukrî Mustafâ (namely his group *Takfîr wa higra* [*Anathema and Migration*]), to the Afghan Qalb al-Dîn Hikmatyâr and the late president of Pakistan Zia ul-aqq, one would be tempted to reply in the negative, in the same manner as Catholic and Protestant fundamentalists of Europe and America, even though they do not have recourse to violence. On the other hand, if one were to ponder upon the examples of certain contemporary leaders such as the Turk Mustafâ Kemal Atatürk, the Egyptian Gamâl ʾAbd al-Nâsir, the Tunisian Habîb Bourguiba, the Moroccan Muhmmad V, and the Indonesian Sukarno, one would draw the conclusion that there is an Islâm that replies affirmatively to all the demands of modernity, but "in its own way" which is proper to it. Having made reference to fourteen centuries of Islamic history, in which he necessarily had to take into serious consideration the challenge of contemporary society (*al-muʻâsara*), Sâdiq Galâl al-ʻAzm arrived at the following conclusion:

> My conviction is that a realistic and rigorous response could be summed up in the following manner:
> – in its dogmatic and idealist form, the reply is 'no', since there exists nothing in the teachings and the doctrines of early Islam that indicates any kind of disposition towards its harmonization and accommodation with these forms of royal and hereditary , imperial and sovereign governments;
> – in its historical and realist form, the reply is 'yes' because everything proves that Islam harmonized itself and arrived at an understanding with royal, imperial and hereditary power that it had hitherto denounced.

For this reason it was possible for him to conclude by stating:

> I now come back to my first question: Can Islam agree with modernity, etc...? In order to reply by way of analogy with what I have stated above:
> – in its idealistic form, the reply is assuredly "no";
> – in its historical and realist form, the reply is "yes".
> Here I would like to say that consequently and each time in history that the idealist "no" came into collision with the historical "yes", the general tendency of this history has always been towards a victory of the historical "yes" over the idealist "no" to such a degree that it condemns the idealist point of view in an irrevocable manner, marginalizing it particularly to other times.[27]

Muslim intellectuals are trying to balance the islamization of modernity with the modernization of Islam

In this perspective there are a number of Muslim intellectuals who are attempting to reduce the distance between the "no" and the "yes" and to find a just balance between the *islamization of modernity* and the *modernization of Islam*.

Such a healthy tension is not alien to Islam as a culture and as a civilization. At the height of the ʾAbbâsid period (c. 832-950),[28] when works of Greek scholars were being translated from Greek or Syriac into Arabic, Islam as a culture and as a civilization was capable of absorbing and developing the intellectual and cultural heritage of non-Islamic civilizations such as those of the Greeks, the Persians and, to a certain extent the Hindu. This, of course, did not take place without opposition and sometimes outright hostility on the part of the upholders of Islamic orthodoxy. But this did not prevent Islam from producing scholars of profound erudition and insight such as Al-Farâbî (872-950), Ibn Sînâ (980-1037), Al-Gazâlî (1058-1111) and Ibn Rušd (1126-1198); although most of them, with the exception of al-Gazâlî, fell foul of the Muslim religious orthodoxy. However one must not forget that their achievements took place from the vantage point of Islam as a victorious force. Medieval Muslim historiographers saw Islamic conquests as a confirmation of the Qur'ânic concept of the Muslim community as *ummat*^{an} *wasat*^{an} (see Q. 2:143), a community of the centre, entrusted by God with the mission of leading the nations into the straight path. Furthermore, as stated above,

geographically speaking, the Islamic empire appeared to its scholars to sit astride the world that was then known to them. Stretching from Spain to the borders of China, it appeared to have neatly occupied its divinely appointed place in the very midst of the world's nations. Since Islam is considered by Muslims as the last revelation, so also it was seen by medieval Muslim scholars as the final heir of the world's cultures.[29]

In stark contrast with all this, as already indicated above, the encounter of Islam with non-Islamic culture and thought during the past 200 years has taken place within the context of colonialism where the former was the vanquished party. It is true that we find scholars who are attempting a *rapprochement*. Nevertheless, there is still much ground to cover in order to arrive at the reforms enacted by certain governments such as Tunisia or the realization of the ideals set out by Sir Muhammad Iqbâl (1873-1938) who, influenced by contemporary European philosophy, expounded his thoughts in the work *Six lectures on the reconstruction of religious thought in Islam.* This work has greatly influenced many a modern Muslim thinker.

Indications of stagnation and under-development

In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear in the Middle East, and indeed all over the lands of Islam, that things had indeed gone badly wrong. Compared with its millennial rival, which it still regarded as Christendom, the world of Islam had become poor, weak and ignorant. A United Nations report on development in the Arab world published in 2002, for example, states that the region is not developing as fast or as fully as other comparable regions. The report entitled *The Arab Human Development Report 2002* was compiled by a team of Arab scholars for UNDP – the United Nations Development Programme. The most striking weakness identified in the report and one which the authors suggest lies behind all other problems is a lack of democracy, which leads to poor governance. The report also points out that political participation in the Arab region is still limited compared to other regions – and that the region is rated lower than any other for freedom of expression and accountability. The Arab media was described as "at best partly free" and even when civil rights were enshrined in constitutions and laws, they were often ignored in practice. The report also warned of stagnation in Arab societies. It stated that intellectuals are fleeing a stultifying – if not repressive – political and social advancement. Arab women are almost universally denied advancement. Half of them still cannot read or write. The rate of death in childbirth is double that of Latin America and four times that of East Asia. The report stopped short of criticizing Islamic militancy and its effects on intellectual and economic growth, although this was implicit in passages referring to a less tolerant social environment.[30]

In most Muslim schools today subjects that are considered as paramount for the formation of the individual – religion, history, philosophy and civics – are still being taught using traditional approaches. In his observations on this situation Mohammed Charfi, former president of the Tunisian Human Rights League and Minister of Education from 1989 to 1994, outlines the consequences such methods have led to:

> The consequences of such teachings on the minds of young people in most Muslim-majority countries have been disastrous. Students learn that, in order to be good believers, they should live under a caliph, that divine law makes it necessary to stone the adulterer and forbid lending at interest... only to discover, out in the street, a society directed by a civil government with a modern penal code and an economy founded on a banking system.
> Many Muslim children still learn at school the ancient ideology of a triumphant Muslim empire, an ideology that held all non-Muslims to be in error and saw its mission as bringing Islam's light to the world. And yet young people see their governments working to live in peace with non-Muslim powers. Such discordant teachings do not prepare children to live in a changing world.[31]

In general even today Islamic education does not provide any awareness of the significant role played by non-Muslim cultures and civilizations in the making of the great civilizations of the Umayyads and the ʻAbbâsids. It does not give an integrated view of how Islamic civilization was born, developed and thrived.

Parallel views or parallel societies?

Another cause for concern is the attempt of Muslim organizations in Europe to create a parallel

society by offering an alternative concept of human rights, which is not only religious but also political in nature, thereby challenging the secular nature of Western societies and their governments. One eminent case is the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Islam* which was solemnly presented to the press at the U.N.E.S.C.O Headquarters in Paris on the 19th September 1981.[32] The press regarded it as the official position of Islam, without inquiring as to its source, who does it represent, the context in which it is set, or whether it is based on well-founded sources in Islam. Furthermore, it did not inquire as to the existence of other texts that are more important. It is interesting to note that no Muslim state consented to be the venue for the presentation of this document.

The text is addressed first and foremost to Muslims, but western public opinion was targeted in order to demonstrate that the Qur?an is not opposed to the modern concept of human rights. It is thus a text which is at the same time contentious and apologetic. In this sense it is perplexing to both Muslim and non-Muslim.

Being overwhelmingly theological, the content puts forward rather the Rights of God than the Rights of Man. Such a stand is already in sharp contrast with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights promulgated in 1948. It proclaims *human rights* in a religious ambience which is founded on the primacy of the *rights of God* (h*uqûq Allah*). Being ordered towards the realization of these *rights of God*, the believer is first and foremost a subject with duties. The Rights of God are affirmed as an absolute. If man contributes anything, it is to make the most of his situation in the face of those who prevent him from rendering these rights effective in the world which God has given to man in deposit (*amâna*). Man is nothing but the vicegerent of God over creation. God, by contrast, is at the same time the basis – point of departure – and the finality – point of arrival. The *Šarî'a* is an incarnation of his omnipotent will, to be implemented, whatever the cost.

Regarding the rights that are proclaimed, the UDHRI, by means of its theological approach, enters into a more generic current, that which takes into consideration the "concrete" human being. Man and woman are situated within the *Umma*. The Muslim who is the subject of the UDHRI is moulded by a globalizing concept of the revealed Law. As "vicegerent of God" on earth,[33] he must administer creation and the goods that it yields to him in respect to the rights of God.

This man belongs to the *Dar al-Islam*, protected by geographic frontiers, beyond which lies the *Dar al-Harb*, non-Muslim countries in the face of whom it must defend its identity. It is not the individual who is the subject of these rights but *the Community* as the place wherein the Rights of God are realized. The concept of a pluralistic world wherein Muslim and non-Muslim live sided by side, wherein are found Muslims for whom Islam remains a religion that is lived and men for whom Islam is considered more a civilization than a faith, remains for the Muslim totally alien territory.[34]

For the Muslim mind a free and fair election is the culmination, not the inauguration, of the process of democratic development

All this explains why for Islamists, democracy, expressing the will of the people, is the road to power, but it is only a one-way road, on which there is no return, no rejection of the sovereignty of God, as exercised through his chosen representatives. Clearly, for the Muslim mind a free and fair election is the culmination, not the inauguration, of the process of democratic development.

Conclusion

In the present situation it is hard to feel much optimism about the Muslim world at the moment. For most Muslims post-independence euphoria has been replaced by disillusionment in the face of continuing economic dependency and political repression, contributing to a reassertion of Islamic identity. Admittedly, there are some impressive individuals who have vision and clearly perceive the challenges their societies face. But those challenges are all the more daunting because they have both an external and an internal dimension. Internally, the struggle between conservatives and reformists continues, with the state often playing the role of an indecisive referee.

Meanwhile, many Muslims feel that the crisis in the Middle East (now including also Iraq), and other areas of contention between Islam and the West, reflects the true face of modernity – Westernization and Western dominance.

The present dilemma facing Islam has perhaps been well outlined by Mohsen Kadivar, an Iranian cleric and outspoken intellectual:

> There are two ways of looking at modernity. The first is to say it's like a suit made by a Western tailor – a suit that only fits Western society. The second way is to look at modernity as a concept which started in the West but doesn't have either a Western or an Eastern identity. A religious society can never accept everything that modernity might provide. In implementing modernity you can't override Islamic values. So if you see modernity as an ideology then, yes, it's Western. But if you see it as a process, then it's not tied to any specific place.[35]

We are living during a major period of historical transition. The changes affecting us are not confined to one area of the globe, but extend almost everywhere. In an age of globalization it is no longer possible to determine the frontier between the *Dâr al-Islâm* and the *Dâr al-Harb*. As a result of satellite communications and the internet, both have invaded each other's territory.

In the case of Islam, the process of modernity encompasses all aspects of culture and civilization: exegesis, technology, secularism, human rights, democratic pluralism, definition of the *Umma*. It is evident, therefore, that Muslims hold very contrasting positions when confronting modernity. On the one hand it appears to have "come from elsewhere", that is to say from a non-Muslim dominating power, frequently identified with the West and particularly with Christendom. On the other hand, Islam needs to redefine its threefold dimension of religion, society, and state (*dîn*, *dunyâ*, *dawla*). Such a process entails three successive stages: a) initially, resistance and refusal when confronted by "the cultural aggression" (as it is frequently defined by Islamists); b) consequently, a cautious welcome aimed at restoring Islam in all its grandeur; c) finally, a more serious inquiry into the possibilities of integrating the values of rationality, democracy and human rights in order to secure a better future for a renewed Islam.

In the eyes of Islamic radicals, the image of the West, populated by city-dwellers, is marked by superficiality and hypocrisy, in contrast to the honesty and purity of the pastoral life of a Bedouin. The great capitals of the Middle East (Riyad, Cairo, Damascus, Kuwait City, Abû Dâbî) with their grandiose palaces and monuments are viewed by them as the epitome of hypocrisy. Its inhabitants behave like devout Muslims in public and Westerners at home. To the Islamic radical, then, urban hypocrisy is like keeping the West inside one like a worm rotting the apple from within.

Hijacking an aircraft and crashing it into a skyscraper in the name of Allah may appear at first sight an attack on the civilization that manufactures and runs it, but on further reflection it is more than that: it is an attack not so much on *civilization*, as on *modernity* itself, the faith in the "system" that makes airplanes fly and constructs high-rise buildings. Malise Ruthven sums up this attitude in the following way:

> The high-rise tower block which stacks people vertically may have come to suit societies where freedom is experienced as personal privacy (freedom from being observed by one's neighbors, freedom not to make conversation in elevators). But societies conditioned by "horizontal" living, where the rules of extended family living, including sexual segregation, were maintained less by draconian restrictions than by customary zoning of male and female areas, living in a skyscraper becomes a kind of tyranny, in which males and females are imprisoned vertically into the discretely separated nuclear families that prevail in Western societies.[36]

This perception, however, is not a recent phenomenon in Islam. Already during the first wars of conquest following the death of the Prophet, the Muslim conquerors soon began to adopt the customs of the conquered peoples. With the advent of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) the Muslim rulers began adopting alien customs living in luxuriant palaces, wearing lavish clothes and enhancing their prestige by surrounding themselves with a sumptuous royal court. They established their seat of government in Damascus rather than at Medina. Then already they were labeled as heretics by some Muslim scholars such as Hasan al-Basrî for having abandoned the simplicity of the primitive Muslim community of Mecca and Medina. Others began discussing whether a

Muslim ruler who falls into grave error should be considered as an infidel and, consequently, deposed and killed. The conduct of Islamic radicals today is simply that of pushing the protest movement in early Islam to its extreme conclusion.

In spite of – and maybe because of – radical Islam, Muslims today face a daunting task. They are required to undergo a painful process of self-examination and self-criticism. Many Islamic governments today have come to realize that they simply cannot build 21st century economies on seventh-century legal precepts. However, one must admit that the process leading to the transformation of Western society from religious to secular evolved by way of Humanism, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. This process took the best part of three centuries in order to come to fruition and all three movements penetrated the Islamic world only in the early 19th century. Islam today is being pressured into adapting itself to the realities of a fast changing world in a matter of decades.

But perhaps the greatest challenge – and possibly the key to the problem confronting Islam today – lies in the realm of Qur'ânic exegesis. The key towards a healthy approach to the modern world is dependent upon the readiness of Muslims to undertake a dynamic interpretation of their sacred text. This is by no means an innovative exercise. Approaches to the Qur'ân that are now branded as heretical – such as interpreting the text metaphorically rather than literally – were widely practiced in mainstream Islam a thousand years ago. Early Islam possessed a diversity of interpretation by means of a process technically known as *igtihâd* that was both profound and enriching. This approach found its greatest champion in the medieval Muslim scholar Averroes.[37]

Such an course could open new vistas in the field of Islamic anthropology, which is vital towards a constructive engagement on the part of Islam with the modern world. There are instances in the prophetic career of Muhammad and the historical background of some of the verses of the Qur'ân that appear to justify such an undertaking.

The year 619 brought with it much spiritual turmoil and anguish to the prophet of Islam. During that year he was disowned by Abû Lahab, half-brother of his father, and lost both his wife Ḫadîga and his paternal uncle Abû Tâlib. The demise of the latter brought about a spiritual crisis in Muhammad since he died a polytheist without ever converting to Islam. One must recall that Abû Tâlib had taken the young Muhammad under his protection when he was orphaned of both parents and defended his nephew from the attacks of the people of Mecca. The prophet was constantly tormented by the thought that such a generous person should be lost because he failed to convert to Islam. At this point, according to Muslim tradition, the following verse was revealed:

> And We revealed to you the Book in truth, confirming the scriptures that preceded it and superseding it. Judge between them, then, according to what Allah has revealed, and do not follow their illusory desires, diverging from what came to you of the Truth. To each of you, We have laid down an ordinance and a clear path, and hath Allah pleased, He would have made you one nation, but [He wanted] to test you concerning what He gave to you. Be, then, forward in good deeds. To Allah is the ultimate return of all of you, that He may instruct you regarding that on which you differed (Q. 5:48).

This verse appears to place the ultimate decision as to whether a person is lost or otherwise in the hands of God. Read within the context of Islam's encounter with modernity, such an interpretation would lead to a fresh approach to this issue. Muslims would recognize that non-Muslims have a right to a different world view and that both are conscious that on this earth they have a common task: that of working for the well-being of humanity and a better world for future generations.

There are also signs of encouragement in local situations. In 1979 the Islamic Revolution in Iran was regarded by many Muslim radicals as heralding the re-establishment of Muslim rule according to the strictures of *Šarî'a*. More than twenty years have elapsed since that defining moment in the history of modern Islam. Within that period Iran fought an eight-year bloody and futile war with Iraq that wiped out almost an entire generation of Iranian youths. As stated above, today another revolution appears to be taking place, one which does not intend to do away with Islam, but which is concerned with striking a balance between state and religion. Iranians are getting impatient with the reformist government whom

they twice helped come to power but which has delivered little with regards to political and social reforms. What was defined twenty-three years ago as a clarion call for Muslims worldwide to rise and create Islamic states in the hope of resurrecting the caliphate, is now fast becoming a call to take a more considered view of the role of religion in modern society.

Throughout almost 1500 years Islam has contributed immensely to culture and civilization. It has influenced the medieval Western thought that gave rise to the Scholastic movement. The time has now come for Islam to claim its rightful place on the world scene by seeking dialogue and understanding with the modern world.

Notes

[1]Seth Mydans, "In Indonesia, Once Tolerant Islam Grows Rigid," in *The New York Times*, December 29, 2001.

[2]Youssef M. Ibrahim, "The Mideast Threat That's Hard to Define," in *The Washington Post*, Sunday, August 11, 2002, p. B01.

[3]Roger Hardy, "Identity Crisis," in BBC On Air Magazine, July 2002, p. 28.

[4]Paul Harris and Burhan Wazir in London, Jason Burke in Peshawar, "'We will replace the Bible with the Koran in Britain'," in *The Observer*, Sunday November 4, 2001

[5]Jeevan Vasgar, "Dilemma of the moderates," in *The Guardian*, Wednesday June 19, 2002.

[6]Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, Phoenix Books, London, p. 61.

[7]Bernard Lewis, *op. cit*., p. 66.

[8]Id., *op. cit*, p. 61.

[9]Richard Fletcher, *The Cross and the Crescent: Christianity and Islam from Muhammad to the Reformation*, Allen Lane, London 2003, p. 158.

[10]Id., *op. cit*., p. 159.

[11]Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, The Modern Library, New York 2003, p. 35f.

[12]Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?*, Oxford University Press, New York 2002, p. 151.

[13]See Ladenese Epistle: Declaration of War (Part I) on http://www.washingtonpost/ac2/wp-dyn/A4342-2001Sep21. Admittedly, President Bush's later use of the term "crusade against terrorism" after the September 11 tragedy did not help matters; neither did the code-name initially designated for the military operation in Afghanistan (*Infinite Justice*, later changed into *Enduring Freedom*), nor did the choice of the date for its onset. 7 October is the anniversary of the Christian victory over the Turkish fleet at the Battle of Lepanto.

[14]Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, Phoenix, London 1996, p. 18.

[15]Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford University Press, New York 1993, p. 183f.

[16]Quoted in Bernard Lewis, "Targeted by a History of Hatred," in *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, September 10, 2002; Page A 15.

[17]*Ibid*.

[18]Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, p. 162f.

[19]Bernard Lewis, *the Crisis of Islam*, p. 28.

[20]Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, pp. 21-23.

[21]This can be discerned by means of the moral principles of Islam, the so-called *pillars*, especially the obligations to fasting (s*awm*), to the payment of the poll-tax (*zakât*), and to perform the pilgrimage (h*agg*).

[22]Q. 4:138-139.

[23]http://news.bbc.co.uk/english/media_reports/newsid_1633000/1633204.stm

[24]See Maurice Borrmans, "Catholiques et Musulmans: Deux approches de la modernité," in *Islamochristiana* 24 (1999); p. 67.

[25]Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies confronting the West*, Saqi Books, London 1992, p. 15.

[26]See the review *al-Nahg* (*The View*), published by the Research Centre for Socialist Studies in the Arab World (Damascus), n. 40, Summer 1995, pp. 122-137, entitled *al-Islâm wa-l-ʔalmâniyya*.

[27]Quoted in Borrmans, *op. cit*., p. 69

[28]The ʾAbbasid period stretches from 750 till 1258, when Baghdad was taken by Hulegu Khan and the last caliph was deposed and slaughtered. The dates in brackets refer to the flowering of Islamic culture and civilization that took place during the reign of that dynasty.

[29]See Tarif Khalidi, "Islamic views of the West in the Middle Ages," in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 5 (1995) 1; pp. 31-42.

[30]See http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/

[31]Mohammed Charfi, art., "Reaching the next Muslim Generation" in *The New York Times*, March 12, 2002.

[32]For a literal translation in English of the text see *Islamochristiana* 9 (1983); pp. 103-120.

[33]See Q. 2:30ff.

[34]See Lucie Pruvost, art. "Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme en Islam et Charte internationale des droits de l'homme," in *Islamochristiana* 9 (1983), pp. 141-159.

[35]BBC News. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/in_depth/world/2002/islamic_world/2159316.stm Iran: The Pressure for Change Roger Hardy Monday, 29 July, 2002, 14:39 GMT 15:39 UK

[36]Malise Ruthven, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America*, Granta Books, London 2002, p. 261.

[37]See art. Alexander Stille, "Radical New Views of Islam and the Origins of the Koran" in *The New York Times*, March 2, 2002