

ISLAM AT THE CROSSROADS

CHAPTER 2

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THE SPIRIT OF THE WEST

In the foregoing chapter an attempt has been made to give an outline of the moral foundations of Islam. We readily realize that Islamic civilization was the most complete form of theocracy that history has ever known. In Islam, spiritual considerations stand above everything and underlie everything. If we compare this attitude with that of Western civilization, we are impressed by the vast difference in outlook.

The modern West is ruled in its activities and endeavors almost exclusively by considerations of practical utility and dynamic evolution. Its inherent aim is the experimenting with the potentialities of life without attributing to this life a moral reality of its own. For the modern European or American the question of the meaning and purpose of life has long since lost all practical importance. Important to him is only the question as to what *forms* life can assume, and as to whether the human race is progressing towards ultimate mastery over Nature. This last question the modern Occidental (relating to the countries of the West) answers in the

affirmative; not so, however, the believing Muslim. In the Our'an God says of Adam and his race:

وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً ۖ قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ ۗ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

"Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it" (*sarah* 2:30).

This evidently means that man is destined to rule and to progress on earth. But there is a vast difference between the Islamic and the Western viewpoints as to the *quality* of human progress. The modern West believes in the possibility of a progressive spiritual, moral and social improvement of mankind, in its collective sense by means of practical achievements and the development of scientific thought. The Islamic viewpoint, however, is diametrically opposed to this Western, materialistically-dynamic conception of humanity. Islam regards the spiritual possibilities of the collective entity "mankind" as a static quantity: as something that has been definitely laid down in the very constitution of human nature as such. Islam has never taken for granted, as does the West, that human nature -in its general, supra-individual sense -is undergoing a process of progressive change and improvement resembling the growth of a tree: simply because Islam rests on the premise that the basis of that nature the human soul is not a biological quantity. The fundamental mistake of modern European thought, to regard an increase in material knowledge and comforts as identical with a spiritual and moral improvement of mankind, was possible only because of the equally fundamental mistake which consisted in applying biological rules to non-biological facts. At the root of it lies the modern western unbelief in the existence of what we describe as soul. Islam, being based on transcendental conceptions regards the soul as a reality beyond discussion. Though certainly not opposed to each other, material progress and spiritual progress are not one and the same, relating as they do to two distinctly different aspects of human life: and these two forms of progress do not necessarily depend on one another. They may, but need not always, develop simultaneously.

While clearly admitting the possibility and strongly asserting the desirability of an outward -that is, material -progress of mankind as a collective body, Islam as clearly denies the possibility of a *spiritual* improvement of humanity as a whole by means of its collective achievements. The dynamic element of spiritual improvement is limited to the individual being, and the only possible curve of spiritual and moral development is that between the birth and the death of each

single individual. We cannot possibly march towards perfection as a collective body. Everyone must strive towards the spiritual goal as an *individual*, and everyone must begin and end with himself or herself.

This decidedly individualistic outlook on the spiritual destinies of man is counterbalanced, but indirectly confirmed, by "the rigorous Islamic conception of society and of social collaboration. The duty of society is to arrange outward life in such a way that the single individual should find as few obstacles as possible and as much encouragement as possible, in his spiritual endeavors. This is the reason why Islamic Law, the *shari'ah*, is concerned with human life on its spiritual as well as on its material side, and both with its individual and its social aspects.

Such a conception, as I have said before, is possible only on the basis of a positive belief in the existence of a human soul and, therefore, in a transcendental purpose inherent in human life. But for the modern Occidental, with his negligent semi-denial of the soul's existence, the question of a purpose in human life has no longer any practical importance. He has left all transcendental speculations and considerations behind him.

What we call the "religious attitude" is always based on the belief that there exists an all-embracing, transcendental moral law, and that we human beings are bound to submit to its commands. But modern Western civilization does not recognize the necessity of man's submission to anything save economic or social or national requirements. Its real deity is not of a spiritual kind: it is Comfort. And its real, living philosophy is expressed in a Will to Power for power's sake. Both have been inherited from the old Roman civilization.

The mention of Roman civilization as being -at least to some extent -genetically responsible for the materialism of the modern West may sound strange to those who have heard the frequent comparison of the Roman Empire with the old Islamic Empire. How, then, could there be such a pronounced difference between the fundamental conceptions of Islam and of the modern West if in the past the political expressions of both were akin to one another? The simple answer is: they were not really akin. That popular, so often quoted comparison is one of the many historical platitudes with which superficial half knowledge feeds the minds of the present Western generation. There is nothing whatever in common between the Islamic and the Roman Empires beyond the fact that both extended

over vast territories and heterogeneous peoples -for, during the whole of their existence these two empires were impelled by utterly different motive-forces and had, so to speak, different historical purposes to fulfil. Even on the morphological side we observe a vast difference between the Islamic and the Roman Empires. It took the Roman Empire nearly one thousand years to grow to its full geographic extent and political maturity, whereas the Islamic Empire sprang up and grew to its fullness within the short period of about eighty years. As regards their respective decay, the difference is even more enlightening. The downfall of the Roman Empire, finally sealed by the migrations of the Huns and Goths, was effected during one single century -and was effected so completely that nothing of it remained but works of literature and architecture. The Byzantine Empire, commonly supposed to have been the direct heir to Rome, was its heir only insofar as it continued to rule over some of the territories which once had formed part of the latter. Its social structure and political organization had hardly anything to do with the conceptions of Roman polity. The Islamic Empire, on the other hand, as embodied in the Caliphate, underwent, no doubt, many deformations and dynastic changes in the course of its long existence, but its structure remained essentially the same. As for external attacks, even that of the Mongols -which was far more violent than anything the Roman Empire had ever experienced at the hands of the Huns or Goths was not able to shake the social organization and the unbroken political existence of the Empire of the Caliphs, although it undoubtedly contributed to the economic and intellectual decay of later times. In contrast with the one century which was needed to destroy the Roman Empire, the Islamic Empire of the Caliphs. needed about a millennium of slow decay until its ultimate political breakdown, represented by the extinction of the Ottoman Caliphate, became a fact, followed by the signs of social dissolution which we are witnessing at present.

All this forces upon us the conclusion that the inner strength and social soundness of the Islamic world were superior to anything mankind had hitherto experienced by way of social organization. Even Chinese civilization, which has undoubtedly shown similar powers of resistance through many centuries, cannot be used as a comparison. China lies on the edge of a continent, and was until half a century ago that is, until the rise of modern Japan -beyond the reach of any rival power; the wars with the Mongols at the time of Jenghiz Khan and his successors touched hardly more than the fringe of the Chinese Empire. But the Islamic Empire

stretched over three continents and was all the time surrounded by inimical powers of considerable strength and vitality. Since the dawn of history, the so-called Near and Middle East was the volcanic centre of conflicting racial and cultural energies; but the resistance of the Islamic social organization was, until recently at least, invincible. We need not search far for an explanation of this wonderful spectacle: it was the religious teaching of the Qur'an that gave a solid foundation and the life-example of the Prophet Muhammad that formed a band of steel around that grand social structure. The Roman Empire had no such spiritual element to keep it together, and therefore it broke down so rapidly.

But there is yet a further difference between those two old empires. While in the Islamic Empire there was no privileged nation, and power was made subservient to the propagation of an idea regarded by its torchbearers as the sublime religious truth, the idea underlying the Roman Empire was conquest of power and the exploitation of other nations for the benefit of the mother country alone. To promote better living for a privileged group, for the Romans no violence was too harsh, no injustice too base. The famous "Roman justice" was justice for the *Romans* alone. It is clear that such an attitude was possible only on the basis of an entirely materialistic conception of life and civilization -a materialism certainly refined by intellectual and aesthetic taste, but none the less foreign to all spiritual values. The Romans never in reality knew religion. Their traditional gods were a pale imitation of Greek mythology, mere colorless ghosts silently accepted for the benefit of social convention. In no way were those gods allowed to interfere with "real" life. When consulted, they had to give oracles through the medium of their priests; but they were never supposed to confer moral laws upon men or to direct their actions.

This was the soil out of which modern Western civilization grew. It undoubtedly received many other influences in the course of its development, and it naturally changed and modified the cultural inheritance of Rome in more than one respect. But the fact remains that all that is real today in Western ethics and world-view is directly traceable to the old Roman civilization. As the intellectual and social atmosphere of ancient Rome was utterly utilitarian and anti-religious -in fact, if not by open admission so is the atmosphere of the modern West. Without having a proof against transcendental religion, and without even admitting the need of such a proof, modern Western thought, while tolerating and sometimes even emphasizing religion as a social convention, generally leaves transcendental ethics

out of the range of practical consideration. Western civilization does not strictly *deny* God, but has simply no room and no use for Him in its present intellectual system. It has made a virtue out of an intellectual difficulty of man -his inability to grasp the totality of life. Thus, the modern Occidental is likely to attribute practical importance only to such ideas as lie within the scope of empirical sciences, or, at least, are expected to influence men's social relations in a tangible way. And as the question of the existence of God does not belong *prima facie* to either of these two categories, the Western mind is, on principle, inclined to exclude God from the sphere of practical consideration.

The question arises: how is such an attitude compatible with the *Christian* way of thinking? Is not Christianity -which is supposed to be the spiritual fountainhead of Western civilization -a faith based on transcendental ethics? Of course it is. But, then, there can be no greater error than to consider Western civilization as an outcome of Christianity. The real intellectual foundations of the modern West are, as already mentioned, to be found in the old Roman conception of life as a purely utilitarian proposition without any transcendental considerations. It can be expressed as follows: "Since we do not know anything definite -that is, provable by means of scientific experiments and calculations about the origin of human life and its destiny after bodily death, it is better to concentrate all our energies on the development of our material and intellectual possibilities without allowing ourselves to be hampered by transcendental ethics and moral postulates based on assumptions which defy scientific proof." There can be no doubt that this attitude, so characteristic of modern Western civilization, is as unacceptable to Christianity as it is to Islam or any other religion, because it is irreligious in its very essence. To ascribe, therefore, the practical achievements of modern Western civilization to the supposed efficacy of Christian teachings is extremely ridiculous. Christianity has contributed very little to the powerful scientific and material development in which the present civilization of the West excels all others." Indeed, those achievements emerged out of Europe's age-long intellectual fight *against* the Christian Church and its outlook on life.

Throughout long centuries, the spirit of Europe was oppressed by a religious system embodying the contempt of human nature. The note of asceticism which pervades the Gospels from one end to the other, the demand to submit passively to wrong inflicted and to "turn the other cheek", the denigration of sex as

something based on the fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the "original sin" and its atonement through Christ's crucifixion -all this leads to an interpretation of human life not as a positive stage but almost as a necessary evil -as an "educative" obstacle on the path of spiritual progress. It is clear that such a belief does not favor energetic endeavors concerning worldly knowledge and the improvement of the conditions of earthly life. And, indeed, for a very long time the intellect of Europe was subdued by this gloomy conception of human existence. During the Middle Ages, when the Church was omnipotent, Europe had no vitality and no role whatsoever in the realm of scientific research. It lost even all real connection with the philosophical achievements of Rome and Greece out of which European culture had once originated. Man's intellect revolted more than once; but it was beaten down by the Church again and again. The history of the Middle Ages is full of that bitter struggle between the genius of Europe and the spirit of the Church.

The liberation of the European mind from the intellectual bondage to which the Christian Church had subjugated it took place in the time of the Renaissance, and was to a very large extent due to the new cultural impulses and ideas which the Arabs had been transmitting to the West for several centuries.

Whatever had been best in the culture of ancient Greece and the later Hellenistic period the Arabs had revived in their learning and improved upon in the centuries that followed the establishment of the early Islamic Empire. I do not claim that the absorption of Hellenistic thought was an undisputed benefit to the Arabs and the Muslims generally -because it was not. But for all the difficulties which this revived Hellenistic culture may have caused to the Muslims by introducing Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic concepts into Islamic theology and jurisprudence, it acted, through the Arabs, as an immense stimulus to European thought. The Middle Ages had laid waste Europe's productive forces. The sciences were stagnant, superstition reigned supreme, social life was primitive and crude to an extent hardly conceivable today. At that point the cultural influence of the Islamic world -at first through the adventure of the Crusades in the East and the brilliant intellectual achievements of Muslim Spain and Sicily in the West, and later through the growing commercial relations established by the republics of Genoa and Venice with the Near East -began to hammer at the bolted doors of European civilization. Before the dazzled eyes of European scholars and thinkers another civilization appeared -refined, progressive, full of passionate life and in possession of cultural treasures which Europe had long ago lost and forgotten. What the

Arabs had done was far more than to revive ancient Greek science. They had created an entirely new scientific world of their own and developed hitherto unknown avenues of research and philosophy. All this they communicated through different channels to the Western world: and it is not too much to say that the modern scientific age in which we are living at present was not inaugurated in the cities of Christian Europe, but in such Islamic centres as Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, Nishapur, Samarqand.

The effect of these influences on Europe was tremendous. With the approach of Islamic civilization a new intellectual light dawned on the skies of the West and infused it with fresh life and a thirst for progress. It is no more than in just appreciation of its value that European historians term that period of regeneration the *Renaissance* -that is, "re-birth". It was, in fact, a re-birth of Europe.

The rejuvenating currents emanating from Islamic culture enabled the best minds of Europe to fight with new strength against the disastrous supremacy of the Christian Church. In the beginning this contest had the outward appearance of reform movements which sprang up, almost simultaneously, in, different European countries with the object of adapting the Christian way of thinking to the new exigencies of life. These movements were sound in their own way and, if they had met with real spiritual success, they might have produced reconciliation between science and religious thought in Europe. But, as it happened, the harm caused by the Church of the Middle Ages was already too far-reaching to be repaired by mere reformation which, moreover, quickly degenerated into political struggles between interested groups. Instead of being truly reformed, Christianity was merely driven into a defensive attitude and gradually forced to adopt an apologetic tone. The Church -whether Catholic or Protestant did not really give up any of its mental acrobatics, its incomprehensible dogmas, its world-contempt, its unscrupulous support of the powers-that-be at the expense of the oppressed masses of humanity: it merely tried to gloss over these grave failings and to explain them away by means of hollow assertions. No wonder then that, as the decades and the centuries advanced, the hold of religious thought grew weaker and weaker in Europe until in the eighteenth century the predominance of the Church was definitely swept overboard by the French Revolution and its sociopolitical consequences in other countries.

At that time, once again, it appeared as if a new, regenerated civilization, freed from the dead hand of the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages, had a chance of growth in Europe. In fact, at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century we encounter some of the best and spiritually most powerful European personalities in the domain of philosophy, art, literature and science. But this spiritual, truly religious conception of life was and remained restricted to a few individuals. The great European masses, after having been for so long imprisoned in religious dogmas which had no connection with the natural endeavors of man, could not, and would not, once those chains were broken, find their way back to a true religious orientation.

Perhaps the most important intellectual factor which prevented Europe's religious regeneration was the conception of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Philosophically-minded Christians, of course, never took this idea of sonship in its literal sense; they understood by it a manifestation of God's Mercy in human form. But, unfortunately, not everyone is of a philosophical bent of mind. For the overwhelming majority of Christians, the expression "son" had and has a very direct meaning, although there was always a mystical flavor attached to it. For them, Christ's "sonship of God" quite naturally led to an anthropomorphic idea of God Himself, who assumed the shape of a benign old man with a flowing white beard; and this shape, perpetuated by innumerable paintings of high artistic value, remained impressed upon Europe's subconscious mind. During the time when the dogma of the Church reigned supreme in Europe there was not much inclination to question this strange conception. But with the intellectual shackles of the Middle Ages once broken, the thinking people among the Europeans could not reconcile themselves to a humanized God-Father: on the other hand, this anthropomorphization had become a standing factor in the popular conception of God. After a period of enlightenment, European thinkers instinctively shrank back from the conception of God as presented in the teachings of the Church: and as this was the only conception to which they had been accustomed, they began to reject the very idea of God and, with it, of religion itself.

In addition to this, the dawn of the industrial era with its glamour of stupendous material progress began to direct men towards new interests, and thus contributed to the subsequent religious vacuum of the West. In this vacuum the development of Western civilization took a tragic turn -tragic from the viewpoint

of anyone who regards religion as the strongest reality in human life. Freed from its former bondage to Trinitarian Christianity, the modern Occidental mind overstepped all limits and entrenched itself, by degrees, in a decided antagonism to any form of spiritual claim upon man. Out of a subconscious fear of being once more overwhelmed by forces claiming spiritual authority, Europe became the champion of everything antireligious in principle and action. And thus it returned to its old Roman heritage.

One cannot be blamed for contending that it was not a potential "superiority" of the Christian faith over other creeds which enabled the West to attain to its brilliant material achievements: for those achievements are unthinkable without the historic struggle of Europe's intellectual forces against the very principles of the Christian Church. Its present materialistic conception of life is Europe's revenge on Christian "spirituality" which had gone away from the natural truths of life.

It is not within our scope to go deeper into the relations between Christianity and modern Western civilization. I have only tried to show' three of the reasons, perhaps the main reasons, why that civilization is so thoroughly anti-religious in its conceptions and methods: one is the heritage of Roman civilization with its utterly materialistic attitude as regards human life and its inherent value; another, the revolt of human nature against the Christian world-contempt and the suppression of natural urges and legitimate endeavors of man (followed by the Church's traditional alliance with the holders of political and economic power and its coldblooded sanction of every exploitation which the power-holders could devise); and, lastly, the anthropomorphic conception of God. This revolt against religion was entirely successful-so successful that the various Christian sects and Churches were gradually compelled to adjust some of their doctrines to the changed social and intellectual conditions of Europe. Instead of influencing and shaping the social life of its adherents, as is the primary duty of religion, Christianity resigned itself to the role of a tolerated convention and a garb for political enterprises. For the masses it has now only a formal meaning, as was the case with the gods of ancient Rome, which were neither allowed nor supposed to exert any real influence upon society. No doubt, there are still many individuals in the West who feel and think in a truly religious way and make the most desperate efforts to reconcile their beliefs with the spirit of their civilization; but they are exceptions only. The average Occidental-be he a Democrat or a Fascist, a

Capitalist or a Communist, a manual worker or an intellectual-knows only one positive "religion", and that is the worship of material progress, the belief that there is no other goal in life than to make that very life continually easier or, as the current expression goes, "independent of Nature". The temples of this "religion" are the gigantic factories, cinemas, chemical laboratories, dance-halls, hydro-electric works: and its priests are bankers, engineers, film stars, captains of industry, record sportsmen. The unavoidable result of this craving for power and pleasure is the creation of hostile groups armed to the teeth and determined to destroy each other whenever and wherever their respective interests clash. And on the cultural side, the result is the creation of a human type whose morality is confined to the question of practical utility alone, and whose highest criterion of good and evil is material success.

In the profound transformation which the social life of the West is undergoing at present, that new utilitarian morality becomes more and more apparent. All virtues which have a direct bearing upon the material welfare of society -for example, technical efficiency, patriotism, nationalist group sense -are being exalted and often absurdly exaggerated in men's valuation; whereas virtues which until recently were valued from a purely ethical point of view, as, for example, filial love or sexual fidelity, rapidly lose their importance -because they do not confer a tangible, material benefit upon society. The age in which the insistence on strong family bonds was decisive for the well-being of the group or the clan is being superseded, in the modern West, by an age of collective organization under far wider headings. And in a society which is essentially technological and is being organized at a rapidly increasing pace on purely mechanical lines, the behavior of a son towards his father is of no great social import so long as those individuals behave within the limits of general decency imposed by the society on the intercourse between its members. Consequently, the Western father daily loses more and more authority over his son, and quite logically the son loses his respect for his father. Their mutual relations are being slowly overruled and, for all practical purposes, made obsolete by the postulates of a mechanized society which has a tendency to abolish all privileges of one individual over another and - in the logical development of this idea -also the privileges due to family relationship.

Parallel to this goes the progressive dissolution of the "old" sexual morality. Sexual fidelity and discipline are quickly becoming a thing of the past in the modern West, because they were mainly motivated by ethics: and ethical considerations have no tangible, immediate influence on the material well-being of society. And so, discipline in sexual relations is rapidly losing its importance and is being supplanted by the "new" morality which proclaims the, unrestricted individual freedom of the human body. In the near future, the only sexual restriction will be, at best, derived from considerations of demography and eugenics.

It is not without interest to observe how the antireligious evolution sketched above has been brought to its logical climax in Soviet Russia which, on the cultural side, does not represent a development essentially different from the rest of the Western world. On the contrary, it seems that the Communist experiment is but a culmination and a fulfillment of those decidedly anti-religious and -ultimately -ant spiritual tendencies of modern Western civilization. It may even be that the present sharp antagonism between the Capitalistic West and Communism is, at its root, due only to the different pace at which those essentially parallel movements are progressing towards a common goal. Their inner similarity will, no doubt, become more and more pronounced in the future: but even now it is visible in the fundamental tendency of both Western Capitalism and Communism to surrender the spiritual individuality of man and his ethics to the purely material requirements of a collective machinery called "society", in which the individual is but a cog in a wheel.

The only possible conclusion is that a civilization of this kind must be a deadly poison for any culture based on religious values. Our original question, whether it is possible to adapt the Islamic way of thinking and living to the exigencies of Western civilization, and *vice versa*, must be answered in the negative. In Islam, the first and foremost objective is the moral progress of the human being: and, therefore, ethical considerations overrule the purely utilitarian ones. In modern Western civilization, the position is exactly reversed. Considerations of material utility dominate all manifestations of human activity, and ethics is being relegated to an obscure background and condemned to a merely theoretical existence without the slightest power to influence the community. To talk of ethics, in such circumstances, is nothing short of hypocrisy: and thus the intellectually decent among modern Western thinkers are subjectively justified if, in their speculations

on the social destinies of Western civilization, they avoid any allusion to transcendental ethics. With the less decent -as also with those who are less clearly decided in their moral attitudes -the conception of transcendental ethics survives as an irrational factor of thought, much in the same way as the mathematician is obliged to operate with certain "irrational" numbers which represent, in themselves, nothing tangible, but are, none the less, required to bridge the gaps of the imagination due to the structural limitations of the human mind.

Such an evasive attitude towards ethics is certainly incompatible with a religious orientation: and, therefore, the moral basis of modern Western civilization is incompatible with Islam.

This should in no way preclude the possibility of Muslims receiving from the West certain impulses in the domain of the exact and applied sciences; but their cultural relations should begin and end at that point. To go further and to imitate Western civilization in its spirit, its mode of life and its social organization is impossible without dealing a fatal blow to the very existence of Islam as an ideological proposition.