

ISLAM AT THE CROSSROADS

CHAPTER 5

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ABOUT IMITATION

The imitation -individually and socially -of the Western mode of life by Muslims is undoubtedly the greatest danger for the existence -or rather, the revival -of Islamic civilization. The origin of this cultural malady (it is hardly possible to call it otherwise) dates back several decades and is connected with the despair of Muslims who saw the material power and progress of the West and contrasted it with the deplorable state of their own society. Out of Muslim ignorance of the true teachings of Islam -very largely due to the narrow-minded attitude of the so-called '*ulamii*' class -arose the idea that Muslims might not be able to keep pace with the progress of the rest of the world unless they adopted the social and economic rules of the West. The Muslim world was stagnant; and many Muslims came to the very superficial conclusion that the Islamic system of society and economics is not compatible with the requirements of progress, and should, therefore, be modified on Western lines. Those "enlightened" people did not trouble to inquire how far Islam, as a teaching, was responsible for the decadence of the Muslims: they did not stop to investigate the *real* ideology of Islam; they

merely pointed out, and rightly so, that the teachings of their contemporary theologians were in most instances an obstacle to progress and material achievement. But instead of turning their attention to the original sources -Qur'an and Sunnah -they silently identified Islamic Law, the *shari'ah*, with the petrified *fiqh* of present days, and found the latter wanting in many respects; consequently, they lost all practical interest in the *shari'ah* as such and relegated it to the realm of history and purely theoretical book knowledge. And so an imitation of Western civilization appeared to them as the only way out of the mire of the decadence and degeneration of the Muslim world. In their well-meant but misguided efforts, such "enlightened" Muslims were assisted throughout the first two decades of this century by a flood of second-rate apologetic writings which, while not openly disclaiming the practical teachings of Islam, tried to show that its ideology could well be subordinated to the social and economic conceptions of the Western world. The imitation of Western civilization by Muslims was thus seemingly justified and the way was paved for that gradual renunciation of the most elementary social principles of Islam always under the guise of Islamic "progress" -which today marks the evolution of several of the most advanced Muslim countries.

It is futile to argue, as many of the Muslim "intelligentsia" do, that it is of no spiritual consequence whatsoever whether we live in this way or that, whether we put on Western dress or that of our forebears, whether we are conservative in our customs or not. Such reasoning is extremely misleading. Of course there is no narrow-mindedness in Islam. As has been said in the first chapter, Islam concedes to man a very wide range of possibilities so long as he does not act in contravention of religious injunctions. But quite apart from the fact that many a thing which is an essential part of the Western social structure -as, for example, the free and unrestricted intermingling of the sexes, or interest on capital as a basis of economic activity" -is unmistakably opposed to the teachings of Islam, the innate character of Western civilization definitely precludes, as I have tried to show, a *religious orientation* in man. And only very superficial people can believe that it is possible to imitate a civilization in its external appearance without being at the same time affected by its spirit. A civilization .is not an empty form but a living organism. As soon as we begin to adopt the outward forms of that organism, its inherent currents and dynamic influences set to work in ourselves and mould slowly, imperceptibly, our whole mental attitude.

It is in perfect appreciation of this truth that the Prophet said: "Whoever imitates other people becomes one of them" (*Musnad Ibn Hanbal, Sunan Abi Da'ud*). This well-known *hadith* is not only a moral admonition but also an objective statement of fact -in this case, the fact of the inevitability of Muslims being assimilated by any non-Muslim civilization which they imitate in its external forms.

In this respect, it is hardly possible to see a fundamental difference between "important" and "unimportant" aspects of social life. Nothing is unimportant in this context. There can be no greater mistake than to suppose that dress, for example, is something purely "external" and, thus, of no importance to the intellectual and spiritual Self of man. Dress is generally the outcome of an age-long development of a people's tastes and needs. Its fashion corresponds to the aesthetic conceptions of that people, and so to its inclinations. It has been shaped and is constantly being re-shaped according to the changes through which the character and the inclinations of its people are passing. Western fashions of today, for instance, thoroughly correspond to the intellectual and moral character of the modern West. By adopting Western dress in place of his own, the Muslim unconsciously adapts his tastes to those of the West and twists his own intellectual and moral Self in such a way that it ultimately "fits" the new dress. And in so doing he renounces a good deal of the cultural possibilities open to his own people; he renounces their traditional tastes, their aesthetic valuations, their likes and dislikes, and accepts the livery of intellectual and moral serfdom to a foreign civilization.

In other words, if a Muslim imitates the dress, the manners and the mode of life of the West, he betrays his preference for its civilization, whatever his avowed pretensions may be. It is practically impossible to imitate a foreign civilization without appreciating its spirit. And it is equally impossible to appreciate the spirit of a civilization which is opposed to a religious outlook on life, and yet to remain a good Muslim.

The tendency to imitate a foreign civilization is invariably the outcome of a feeling of inferiority. This, and nothing else, is the matter with Muslims who imitate Western civilization. They contrast its power and technical skill and brilliant surface with the sad misery of the world of Islam: and they begin to believe that in our time there is no way but the Western way. To blame Islam for our own shortcomings is the fashion of the day. At best, our so-called intellectuals adopt

an apologetic attitude and try to convince themselves and others that Islam is compatible with the adoption of Western values.

In order to achieve the regeneration of the world of Islam, the Muslims must, before adopting any measures of reform, free themselves entirely from the spirit of apology for their religion and social structure. A Muslim must live with his head held high. He must realize that he *is* distinct and different from the rest of the world, and he must learn to be proud of his being different. He should endeavor to preserve this difference as a precious quality, and pronounce it boldly to the world instead of apologizing for it and trying to merge into other cultural circles. This does not mean that Muslims should seclude themselves from the voices coming from without. One may at all possible for the Muslim community to preserve , for the sake of its cultural dignity, such traditional elements of dress and of outward appearance in general as would make it visually distinct from Western society. In the intervening period, however, the Muslim world has absorbed a very great deal of Western aesthetic influences, with the result that for many Muslims, and especially for the educated classes among them , a point of no return has been reached . For them , an endeavor to return to the mode of dress and outward appearance of past generations would today amount to no more than another act of sterile and undignified imitation: in this case, the imitation of a dead and unreturnable past. times receive new, positive influences from a foreign civilization without necessarily abandoning his own. An example of this kind was the European Renaissance. There we have seen how readily Europe accepted Arab influences in the matter and method of learning. But it never imitated the outward appearance and the spirit of Arabian culture, and never sacrificed its own intellectual and aesthetic independence. It used Arab influences only as a fertilizer upon its own soil, just as the Arabs had used Hellenistic influences in their time. In both cases, the result was a spiritual enrichment, a strong, new growth of an indigenous civilization, full of self- confidence and pride in itself. No civilization can prosper, or even exist, after having lost this pride and the connection with its own past.

But the world of Islam, with its growing tendency to imitate the West and to assimilate Western ideas and ideals, is gradually cutting away the bonds which link it with its past, and is losing, therefore, not only its cultural but also its spiritual roots. It resembles a tree that was strong as long as it was deeply rooted in the soil. But the mountain torrent of Western civilization has washed those

roots bare: and the tree slowly decays for want of nourishment. Its leaves fall, its branches wither away. At the end the trunk itself stands in danger of collapsing. An imitation of Western civilization cannot be the right means of reviving the Islamic world from the mental and social torpor caused by the degeneration of practical religion into a mere custom devoid of all life and moral urge. Where else, then, should Muslims look for the spiritual and intellectual impetus so badly needed in these days?

The answer is as simple as the question; indeed, it is already contained in the question. Islam, as I have pointed out many times before, is not only a "belief of the heart" but also a very clearly defined programme of individual and social life. It can be destroyed by being assimilated to a foreign culture which has essentially different moral foundations. Equally, it can be regenerated the moment it is brought back to its own reality and given the value of a factor determining and shaping our personal and social existence in all its aspects.

Under the impact of new ideas and conflicting currents, so characteristic of the period in which we are living, Islam can no longer afford to remain an empty form. Its magic sleep of centuries is broken; it has to rise or to die. The problem facing the Muslims today is the problem of the traveller who has come to a crossroads. He can remain standing where he is; but that would mean death by starvation. He can choose the road bearing the sign "Towards Western Civilization"; but then he would have to say good-bye to his past forever. Or he can choose the other road, the one over which is written: "Towards the Reality of Islam". It is this road alone which can appeal to those who believe in their past and in the possibility of its transformation into a living future.