

ISLAM AT THE CROSSROADS

CHAPTER 7

Muhammad Asad

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing I have tried to show that Islam, in its true meaning, cannot benefit by an assimilation of Western civilization. But, on the other hand, the Muslim world has today so little energy left that it does not offer sufficient resistance. The remnants of its cultural existence are being leveled to the ground under the pressure of Western ideas and customs. A note of resignation is perceivable; and resignation, in the life of nations and cultures, means death. What is the matter with Islam? Is it really, as our adversaries and the defeatists within our own ranks will have us believe, a "spent force"? Has it outlived its own usefulness and given to the world all that it had to give?

History tells us that all human cultures and civilizations are organic entities and resemble living beings. They run through all the phases which organic life is bound to pass: they are born, they have youth, ripe age, and at the end comes decay. Like plants that wither and fall to dust, cultures die at the end of their time and give room to other, newly-born ones.

Is this the case with Islam? It might appear so at the first superficial glance. No doubt, Islamic culture has had its splendid rise and its blossoming age; it had power to inspire men to deeds and sacrifices, it transformed nations and changed the face of the earth; and later it stood still and became stagnant, and then it became an empty word, and at present we witness its utter debasement and decay. But is this all?

If we believe that Islam is not a mere culture among many others, not a mere outcome of human thoughts and endeavors, but a culture-producing force -a Law decreed by God Almighty to be followed by humanity at all times and everywhere -then the aspect changes completely. If Islamic culture is or was the result of our following a revealed Law, we can never admit that, like other cultures, it is chained to the lapse of time and limited to a particular period. What appears to be the decay of Islam is in reality nothing but the death and the emptiness in our hearts, which are too idle and too insensitive to hear the eternal voice. No sign is visible that

mankind, in its present stature, has outgrown Islam. It has not been able to produce a better system of ethics than that expressed in Islam; it has not been able to put the idea of human brotherhood on a practical footing, as Islam does in its supra-national concept of the *ummah*; it has not been able to create a social structure in which the conflicts and frictions between its members are as efficiently reduced to a minimum as in the social plan of Islam; it has not been able to enhance the dignity of man, his feeling of security, his spiritual hope -and last, but surely not least, his happiness.

In all these things the present achievements of the human race fall considerably short of the Islamic programme. Where, then, is the justification for saying that Islam is "out of date"? Is it only because its foundations are purely religious, and religious orientation is out of fashion today? But if we see that a system based on religion has been able to evolve a practical programme of life more complete, more concrete and more congenial to man's psychological constitution than anything else which the human mind has been able to produce by way of reforms and proposals -is not just this a very weighty argument in favour of a religious outlook? Islam, we have every reason to believe, has been fully vindicated by the positive achievements of man, because it has envisaged them and pointed them out as desirable long before they were attained; and equally well it has been vindicated by the shortcomings, errors and pitfalls of human development, because it has loudly and clearly warned against them long before mankind recognized them as errors. Quite apart from one's religious beliefs, there is, from a purely intellectual point of view, every inducement to follow confidently the practical guidance of Islam.

If we consider our culture and civilization from this point of view, we necessarily come to the conclusion that its revival is possible. We need not "reform" Islam, as some Muslims think - because it is already perfect in itself. What we must reform is our attitude towards religion, our laziness, our self-conceit, our shortsightedness -in short, *our* defects, and not some supposed defects of Islam. In order to attain to an Islamic revival we need not search for new principles of conduct from outside, but have only to apply the old and forsaken ones . We certainly may receive new impulses from foreign cultures, but we cannot substitute the perfect fabric of Islam by anything non Islamic, whether it comes from the West or from the East. Islam, as a spiritual and social institution, cannot be "improved". In these circumstances, any change in its conceptions or its social organization caused by the intrusion of foreign cultural influences is in reality retrograde and destructive, and therefore to be deeply regretted. A change there must be: but it should be a change from *within ourselves* -and it should go in the direction of Islam, and not away from it.

But with all this, we must not deceive ourselves. We know that our world, the world of Islam, has almost lost its reality as an independent cultural factor. I am not speaking here of the political aspect of Muslim decay. By far the most important feature of our present-day condition is to be found in the intellectual and social spheres: in the disappearance of our belief and our creativeness and the disruption of our social organism. The state of cultural and social chaos through which we are passing at present distinctly shows that the balancing forces which once were responsible for the greatness of the Islamic world 'are nearly exhausted today. We are drifting; and no one knows to what cultural end. No intellectual courage remains, no will to resist or to avert that torrent of foreign influences destructive to our religion and society . We have thrown aside the best moral teachings which the world has ever known. We belie our

faith, whereas to our distant forebears it was a living urge; we are ashamed, whereas they were proud; we are mean and self-centred, whereas they generously opened themselves out to the world; we are empty, whereas they were full.

This lamentation is well-known to every thinking Muslim. Everyone has heard it repeated many times. Is it any use then, one could ask, to have it repeated once more? I think it is. For there can be no way for us out of the shame of our decadence but one: to admit the shame, to have it day and night before our eyes and to taste its bitterness, until we resolve to remove its causes. It is no use to hide the grim truth from ourselves and to pretend that the world of Islam is growing in Islamic activity, that missions are working in four continents, that Western people realize more and more the beauty of Islam.... It is no use to pretend all this and to employ casuistic arguments in order to convince ourselves that our humiliation is not bottomless. For it *is* bottomless.

But shall this be the end?

It cannot be. Our longing for regeneration, the desire of so many of us to become better than we are at present, gives us the right to hope that all is not over with us. There *is* a way to regeneration, and this way is clearly visible to everyone who has eyes to see.

Our first step must be the shedding of that spirit of "apology" for Islam, which is only another name for intellectual defeatism: only a masquerade for our own scepticism. And the next stage must be our conscious, deliberate following of the Sunnah of our Prophet. For Sunnah means no more and no less than the teachings of Islam translated into practice. By applying it as an ultimate test to the requirements of our daily life we will easily recognize which impulses from Western civilization might be accepted and which ought to be rejected. Instead of meekly submitting Islam to alien intellectual norms, we must learn -once again -to regard *Islam* as the norm by which the world is to be judged.

It is true, however, that many of the original intentions of Islam have been brought into a false perspective through inadequate but nevertheless commonly-accepted interpretation, and those of the Muslims who are not in a position to go back, by themselves, to the original sources and thus to readjust their conceptions are confronted with a partially-distorted picture of Islam and things Islamic. The impracticable propositions which are today put forward by a self-styled "orthodoxy" as postulates of Islam are in most instances nothing but conventional interpretations of the original postulates on the basis of the old Neo-Platonic logic which might have been "modern", that is, workable, in the second or third century of the Hijrah but is extremely out-of-date now. The Muslim educated on Western lines, mostly unacquainted with Arabic and not well-versed in the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), is naturally prone to regard those worn-out, subjective interpretations and conceptions as reproducing the true intentions of the Law-Giver: and in his disappointment over their inadequacy he often draws back from what he supposes to be the Canonical Law (*shariah*) of Islam. Thus, in order that it may once again become a creative force in the life of the Muslims, the valuation of the Islamic proposition must be revised in the light of our *own* understanding of the original sources and freed from the thick layer of conventional interpretations which have accumulated over the centuries and have been found wanting in the present time. The outcome of such an endeavor might be the emergence of a new *fiqh*, exactly conforming to the Two Sources of Islam -the Qur'an and the life-example of the Prophet -and at the same time answering to the exigencies of present day life: just as the older forms *fiqh* answered to the exigencies of a period

dominated by Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic philosophy and to the conditions of life prevailing in those earlier ages.

But only if we regain our lost self-confidence can we expect to go forward once again . Never will the goal be reached if we destroy our own social institutions and imitate a foreign civilization -foreign not only in an historical or a geographical sense but also in the spiritual one.

As things stand today, Islam is like a sinking ship. All hands that could help are needed on board. But it will be saved if the Muslims hear and understand the call of the holy Quran.

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

"Verily, in the Apostle of God you have a good example for everyone who looks forward to God and the Last Day" (*surah 33:21*).