BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE ISLAMIC WORLD

As recently as 15 years ago, no serious student of social and political change in the Middle East, North Africa, or South and Southeast Asia paid much attention to Islam. It was obviously the religion professed by the overwhelming majority of the populations in many nations of these regions, and no doubt it had once provided the framework of ideas and sentiments through which Muslims interpreted their own actions and institutions. But that was history. As an ideology in the modern world, Islam could hardly compete with such juggernauts as nationalism and Marxism.

By 1980 scholarly fashions had changed beyond recognition. Every commentator on these regions was now compelled to come to grips with Islam as a powerful, indeed transforming, political force. Perhaps the pendulum has even swung a bit too far. Islam has certainly held its own against competing ideologies in these areas, but except in Iran (and for wholly different reasons, in Saudi Arabia) it has not yet driven its rivals from the field. But Islam undeniably holds a privileged place in nations as geographically and culturally distinct as Morocco and Indonesia; eras of crisis always evoke a deeply felt need to reconstitute society and government on an authentically Islamic foundation—to strive to re-enact in the present generation what the Prophet and his companions so gloriously achieved 14 centuries ago.

The most ambitious effort to convey the interpenetration of Islam and society is by the late University of Chicago historian M. G. S. Hodgson in The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization (3 vols., Univ. of Chicago, 1974). Hodgson’s style is dense and prolix, and his chapters on economic life and social structure are seriously outdated. Even so, his grasp of the complex impact of Islam is unique, as is his own involvement with his subject. I. M. Lapidus, in A History of Islamic Societies (Cambridge, 1988), offers an intelligent, clear, and wide-ranging synthesis of current scholarship. Like Hodgson, the University of California historian tries to deal with the whole world of Islam, from West Africa to Southeast Asia. But his focus on broad structures and processes leads to a somewhat impersonal presentation. One gains a much less vivid sense than with Hodgson of what was at stake for these people.

Both Hodgson and Lapidus write narrative history on a vast scale. In his concise but formidably erudite essay, The Political Language of Islam (Univ. of Chicago, 1988), Bernard Lewis explicates the social and political vocabulary—much though not all of it firmly rooted in revelation—used by Muslims throughout their history. When, as here, individual terms such as “umma” (the community of believers) and “sultan” (used in earlier periods as “government” and in later times as “authority”) become the focus of discussion, they tend to take on a life of their own, as if concepts and attitudes were caused rather than symbolized by words. But altogether Lewis is both perceptive and challenging.

Since Islam was from the beginning not only a system of belief but a framework for political and social action, a knowledge of origins is essential. F. M. Donner, in The Early Islamic Conquests (Princeton, 1981), shows how a tribal society in Arabia became the core of a world empire: “The formulation of the umma, the concept of an overriding higher authority, and the strong tendency toward centralization of that authority provided powerful ideological underpinning for the rise of state institutions hitherto unknown in the region.”

Donner’s interpretation has found wide acceptance, but its assumptions have been sharply attacked by some, most notably by the Danish Islamicist Patricia Crone. In God’s Caliph (Cambridge, 1986), she and Martin Hinds propose a radical revision of established views about the relationship between religion and state in the early caliphate. Their view—that for almost two centuries the caliph claimed a nearly inspired authority to define Islamic doctrine—is extremely controversial, but it cannot be ignored.

During the long period between 900 and 1500, Muslims increasingly felt that religion and state had become divorced; the claims of most rulers to be God-fearing were dismissed.
as rank hypocrisy. Even so, the profound hope that political life might somehow be redeemed was not lost. Our modern understanding of these issues is based on a series of articles which the Scottish-born scholar H. A. R. Gibb devoted to Sunni political theory. Although some of these date back half a century, they have retained much of their value; a number of them are collected in Gibb's *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Routledge, 1962).

The political tradition of medieval Iran, rooted partly in ancient notions of kingship and partly in Islamic constitutional thought, is discussed by A. K. S. Lambton, professor of Persian at the University of London, in *Theory and Practice in Medieval Persian Government* (Variorum, 1980). Perhaps the best introduction to Perso-Islamic thought, however, is an 11th-century treatise by the vizier Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government, or Rules for Kings* (trans. by Hubert Darke, Routledge, 1978)—a powerful and uncompromising statement of royal absolutism, in which Islam's proper role is reduced to legitimizing and reinforcing submission to kingly authority.

It can be argued that the Ottoman Empire was the most deeply Islamicized of Islamic regimes, the one which strove most earnestly to harmonize royal autocracy and Islamic law. By far the best analysis of the institutional and ideological foundations of this durable polity is Turkish historian Halil Inalcik's *Ottoman Empire: the Classical Age, 1300–1600* (Weidenfeld 1973).

Its chief rival, the Safavid kingdom in Iran, originated as a millenarian Shiite movement. As the Safavids consolidated their power after 1500, however, they turned to a more moderate version of Shiism (the Ithna 'ashari or “Twelver” branch) and established it as the official religion of Iran. Shi'ite political thought was long the stepchild of Islamic studies, but the tumultuous events of 1978–79 in Iran demonstrated its relevance. A good introduction to the subject can be found in two collections of articles: S. A. Arjomand's *Authority and Political Culture in Shiism* (State University of New York, 1988); and Nikki R. Keddie's *Religion and Politics in Iran* (Yale, 1983). Both volumes discuss medieval and Safavid Shiism, but inevitably they focus on contemporary ideas. These not only inspired a political revolution but also reflect a profound ideological ferment within Shiism itself.

Although the Ottoman government appealed to Islamic principles and loyalties down to the very end, specifically Islamic concepts played a declining role (though they were certainly never absent) among the intellectual elite of the empire from the 1820s on. The classic account of this transformation is Bernard Lewis's *Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford, 1961), which brings the story down to 1950. Lewis has been criticized on several grounds—notably his narrowly Istanbul-centered view of political and ideological change and his identification of progress with secularization—but his work remains indispensable. For the Arab provinces (and eventual successor states) of the Ottoman Empire, we have Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Oxford, 1962; Cambridge, 1983, with a new preface), a superb overview whose elegant style complements its massive erudition and precision of thought. Perhaps Hourani's analysis assigns too marginal a role to Islam, but we must recall that until very recently the secularizers
BACKGROUND BOOKS: ISLAM

and Europeanists seemed to have the upper hand. Like Lewis's *Emergence*, it is a book of enduring value.

Disillusionment with European ideologies of whatever stamp and a renewed search for Islamic authenticity are signaled in *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967* (Cambridge, 1981) by Fouad Ajami of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Ajami does not subscribe to the Islamic movement, but he understands its appeal and its roots in political, social, and economic frustration. The Islamic critique of contemporary society in Egypt and Syria is astutely analyzed in Emmanuel Sivan's *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (Yale, 1985). Sivan, an Israeli scholar, correctly locates the radical impulse in the fear that Islam is in danger of extinction before the onslaught of modernity. The political struggle of Egypt's Islamic groups, culminating in the assassination of Sadat, is vividly portrayed in French political scientist Gilles Kepel's *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: the Prophet and Pharaoh* (California, 1985). It is worth recalling that in spite of intense socio-economic frustration and deep popular commitment to Islam, Egypt has not (so far at least) had an Islamic revolution. Kepel shows us that Egypt's fundamentalists failed to understand that the Egyptian masses "had not radically broken with the values of the Egyptian nation as such, values of which Islam is the most important, but not the sole, component."

The collapse of the Iranian monarchy in 1978-79 astonished Iranians no less than everyone else, and the success of the clergy in seizing and retaining power made fools of many wise men. Shiite doctrine and ideology are surveyed in the volumes by Arjomand and Keddie mentioned above. The best political analysis of the establishment of the Islamic Republic is Shaul Bakhsh's, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (Basic, 1984), though one might fault his focus in the middle chapters on the hapless President Bani-Sadr rather than the leaders of the Islamic Republican Party.

A bold attempt to portray the frame of mind of the Iranian clergy is Harvard historian R. P. Mottahedeh's *The Mantle of the Prophet* (Simon and Schuster, 1985). The author uses the biography (slightly fictionalized) of a Shiite mullah to explore the cultural and intellectual roots of modern Iran. Mottahedeh writes with a novelist's touch. At one point, for example, he recreates an episode from his mullah's childhood: "These 20 or so words in Arabic [from the Qur'an] seemed to enter Ali almost at one swallow, but when he recited them back to his father two days later, for the Arabic word *samad*, 'Eternal,' he said *shamad*, the Persian word for 'mosquito netting.' 'Dear son, if you have to speak Persian instead of Arabic in your prayers, at least compare God to something more substantial like *namad* [felt], which is a little stronger and more solid than mosquito netting.'" Mottahedeh's narrative is a bit dizzying in places, but on balance his is the one book on contemporary Iran that must be read.

Finally, we should call attention to the recent book by Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: a Critique of Development Ideologies* (Univ. of Chicago, 1988). Binder is demanding of his readers, but he squarely addresses a crucial question: What are the prospects for the creation of a liberal political order in the Middle East, and what role (positive or negative) may Islam play in this process?

—R. Stephen Humphreys
Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic History
University of Wisconsin-Madison

WQ AUTUMN 1989