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Islamic History

ISLAM was born in Arabia. In a sense it had to. Being the crystallization of ancient Mesopotamian (Semitic) religion and wisdom, it could be reborn only in Arabia for two reasons. First, Arabia was the only corner of the ancient world which continued the legacy without falling under the influence of Egyptian, Greek and Zoroastrian culture. Whatever influence of this kind had reached Arabia was slight and in the periphery only, in Petra and Palmyra in the north, in Yemen in the south. The center remained unaffected.

Secondly, whatever was left of the Mesopotamian legacy in Arabia was assisted, bolstered and preserved not so much in the religious practices of the Pre-Islamic Arabs, but in their language and poetry. Here, their consciousness of transcendence was mirrored unconsciously. Their language was itself an Arabesque in its lexicography, syntax, grammar and literary esthetics. Their poetry was the *non plus ultra* of symmetry, repetition, non-development and momentum long before Islam. Nothing could have fitted the Islamic message better than the Arabic literary medium. Perfect correspondence between them is the inevitable conclusion of any student with the minimum perceptiveness. Nowhere else was any such consciousness mirrored in any language. When Islam came, it built its whole case on the literary sublime character of its revelations – the medium which the Arabs (and

only the Arabs) could readily and perfectly appreciate. They knew what is and what is not miraculous or sublime in that medium. Even the enemies of Islam among the Makkans immediately recognized the *mysterium* in the revelation of Muhammad. Their vested interests and shock delayed them, but only for a very short while, in acclaiming it as divine.

Before the death of Muhammad, the whole of Arabia had acknowledged the new crystallization of its innermost, even unconscious, wisdom. It saw in Islam what Islam proclaimed itself to be, namely, that it is the quintessence of all ancient Semitic history, of all previous revelations and prophecies; that it is the thesis of transcendence, of a reality which Arab consciousness recognized as alone ultimate and truly transcendent. Arabia stood poised, now that Islam revealed to it its identity and destiny as the message-carrier of divine transcendence to the world.

Arabness, or this consciousness of transcendence mirrored in the Arabic language and poetry, had already penetrated to some degree the Fertile Crescent, its northern land bridge with Asia and Africa, before Islam. Indeed, the Fertile Crescent was Arabized in this sense by repeated migrations going back to Akkad in 3,000 BC or earlier. The later influences of the invading Philistines and "men of the mountains," of Hittites, Egyptians, Greeks and Persians, helped to confuse and veil, but not to extirpate or fundamentally alter, that consciousness. Arab transcendentalist consciousness resisted the onslaught of Egyptianization, Persianization and Hellenization. They did so heroically in all that has come to us from the Pre-Islamic Fertile Crescent, whether it be language, works of art, law-codes, or literature. Scarred, their consciousness of transcendence certainly was, be they Christian, Jewish or Zoroastrian; but it was undaunted.

No sooner had Islam presented itself to them than they shed the confusion and dilution of ethnocentric Rabbinic Judaism, of trinitarian immanentist Christianity, of caste non-egalitarianism, and dualistic naturalism of Manichaean Zoroastrianism. They readily acknowledged Islam as their own, not as something foreign but as something they had always held but were somewhat unable to express so clearly as the Qur'an had done.

Within a generation, the ranks of Islam swelled to include the majorities of people in the temperate belt from the Atlantic to India. Thereafter, the conquests had come to a halt and the millions began the task of transforming the new vision of divine transcendence into visible civilization. The next four centuries saw the blossoming of Islamic culture and civilization throughout the lands. Every ethnic entity contributed its best, but under the transforming principles of Islam. Diversity there certainly were; but the overall unity was unmistakable.

First to develop were the sciences of language and *belles lettres*, the media of revelation. Determined by Islam, consciousness now demanded to be informed how Arabic language and letters acted as vehicles of transcendence. This was at the same time necessary for understanding the Qur'an, the word of God, by people who had not mastered the Arabic language as well as its people of the desert. Grammars, lexicographic and etymological dictionaries, syntactical analyses of all sorts, literary criticism and analysis of the Qur'an, of every poem, common saying or piece of oratory carried by memory, were written by the thousands, oft for the first time in the history of human culture and learning.

The religious vision of Islam was complete in the revelation, the Qur'an. That is why Islam does not have a religious history, that is a history of its formation as a religion. Such "history" is limited to the biography of the Prophet, the last 22 or so years of his life during which the revelation of the Qur'an was completed. Caught by this vision of Islam, the Muslims plunged themselves into implementation and concretization, into translating the normative principles of Islam into prescriptive directions for human conduct, in developing and establishing a viable methodology for such translation. It is here on this front that Islamic genius poured itself forth. In the realms of personal status, procedure, torts and contracts, international relations, crime and punishment, the Shari'ah, or Islamic law, remains to this day absolutely without parallel, and its bases in juristic thought unmatched.

Being avidly anxious to discover the will of God in nature, the Muslims quickly learned and assimilated the legacy of antiquity and moved far beyond it. Al-Bayrūnī measured the earth's perimeter within inches of the most exact measurements of our day; Ibn Sīnā's *Canon of*

Medicine and al-Rāzī's *Ad Almansorem* and *On Small Pox and Measles* remained the standard textbooks of the medical profession until the eighteenth century; Ibn al-Bayṭār's pharmacopia, *Simplicia*, was being printed in the main European languages as late as 1866. Arabic numerals moved arithmetic, and *al-Jabr* (Algebra) moved formal mathematics, to new realms of advance and achievement.

Everywhere the Qur'an was chanted in its original Arabic. Everywhere, its verses decorated every room and house and punctuated every conversation and every treatise. Everywhere, mosques, *madrasahs* (schools) and other public buildings were erected realizing the Arabesque in ever new forms, in marble, stucco, brick or paint. Everywhere, the aural Arabesque of the call of the *Mu'adhdhin* on the minarets to the faithful to rise for the ritual prayers punctuated the day of millions. During the month of Ramadan (fasting) the whole tempo of life changed following the timing and practices of the fast. When either of the two *ʿIds* came, only the largest open field of the district could hold the multitudes who came in their best and new clothing to kneel and prostrate themselves together in worship of the one transcendent God, in the beautiful Arabic verses of the Qur'an.

Cities sprang under the influence of Islam which were the model of town planning, utility, cleanliness and integration. Colleges and schools, public libraries, public baths, recreation areas and gardens, running water and draining systems, to make even our modern cities poor, if not hopeless, comparisons. And all this in the 9th and 10th centuries when Europe's cities, the heirs of classical antiquity could hardly boast of one paved street, or of one public night light other than the moon.

In the eleventh century, Muslim spirituality began to take a different turn. Prodded by an over enthusiastic love of God as expressed in Arabic poetry by the famous mystical poetess Rābiʿah al-ʿAdawiyah, converts from Gnostic Christianity and Judaism, from Upanishadic Hindu mysticism and Buddhism, began to interpret Islam in mystical terms, shifting its emphasis from the actual where the divine will is to be concretized to the spiritual as such. The bridge which connected Islam to history, to space and time, and kept the Muslim's feet on the ground, snapped. Psychic and introspective analysis took the place of

legal and juristic study. Alchemy, astrology and numerology slowly replaced chemistry, astronomy and mathematics. Even the social health of the Islamic family gave way to the withdrawing, resigning surrender of the mystical brotherhood. Engagement in the affairs of society and state so expressive of the Muslim's consciousness of vicegerency was slowly abandoned for contemplative bliss and mystical experience of the individualist and personalist. The state was left to whosoever desired to grab it, and the caliphs became the puppets of powerful but fissiparous army generals. When the gathering storm arrived in the Mongol (Tatar) invasion of Genghis Khan, the Muslim World fell like a ripe plum. One after another, its jewel cities were put to the torch, and its people to death or devastation.

The fire that followed spread in many directions, China, India, Russia and South West Asia. In the latter the tide was arrested at 'Ayn Jālūd in Palestine where Ibn Taymiyyah, the first and greatest Muslim reformer, managed to check the Mongol advance with an Egyptian army. In vain did he try many times earlier to awaken the Muslims to this peril. The forces of mysticism always defeated him and connived with the authorities against him. Despite his military success at 'Ayn Jālūd, Ibn Taymiyyah fell again to the intrigues of the Sufis (mystics) and died in jail in Damascus.

Ibn Taymiyyah's hard work and death, however, were not in vain. He produced a whole library, over 300 works, in which he diagnosed the Muslim disease on every front of life. The major villain was of course mysticism which succeeded in reorienting the Muslim away from history, from the world, from reason and common sense, and delivered him to introspective meditation. Sufism dulled his realism, drew him away from society, from his business, even from his family. Instead of his pursuit of the will of God as law, Sufism taught the Muslim to run after the impossible dream of union with God in gnosis or "mystical experience."

Ibn Taymiyyah's words were not heeded. And yet, the miracle happened. The Tatar hordes which brought the holocaust were Shamanists. In a generation or two, they were all converted to Islam, the religion and culture of the very peoples they vanquished. The conquerors settled *en masse* in Asia minor and, a generation later, they were

ready to march again, this time under the banner of Islam. Still vibrant with the martial spirit with which they came from central Asia, the new converts to Islam now organized under the leadership of the house of ʿUthman (hence, the name “Ottoman”), pressed ever forward in the direction of Europe. The Byzantine and Russian Empires crumbled at their advance. Vienna was besieged by them until the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The Black and Caspian seas became Muslim lakes. Between Vienna and Constantinople (renamed Islampul, later corrupted to Istanbul) they planted many a Muslim community, many a Muslim city, and erected a new style of Islamic architecture on the foundations of the Byzantine.

It was only in the eighteenth century that their empire, the Ottoman Empire, began to decay from within for identically the same reasons which brought the downfall of the earlier Arab (ʿAbbāsī) Empire. It was also in the eighteenth century that the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah revived, again mysteriously, in the very heart of Arabia, as yet untouched either by Ottoman decay or the West’s ascendancy. The reform movement was led by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Sufism was its *bete noire* against which it hurled its fury. On the positive side, the movement called itself “salafiyyah,” that is, traditional. It had no object other than reestablishing the original vision of the fathers, before that vision was affected by Mysticism. Simultaneously or shortly afterwards, similar movements swept over the whole Muslim World. Western colonialism was then launched and the Muslim World fell again under alien dominion, was mercilessly fragmented and exploited, parts of it were settled by alien colonizers and their populations dispersed or were to be systematically destroyed.

Today colonialism is at an end; but not its vestiges, and influences. However, the Muslim peoples of the world are racing the clock to catch up with the rest of the world in economic and military power as well as in political awareness, unity and coordination. Their Islam remains the strongest ideology they ever knew, ready to move them again, and the world with them, if they but open their minds to its wisdom and their hearts to its appeal.

