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İSMAIL E. ERÜNSAL — CHRISTOPHER FERRARD
CHRISTINE WOODHEAD**

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CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

W. Montgomery Watt

Events in the last few years have led to a growing interest in the relations between Islam and Western culture, and in this connection it may be useful to look at the interplay of culture and religion in two earlier periods, namely, that when Islam burst out of Arabia and largely replaced Christianity in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, and that when Islam had a foothold in Spain and Sicily and greatly influenced western Europe.

The Replacement of Christianity in the Fertile Crescent.

An expansion of Greek culture eastwards into Asia came about in the wake of the conquests of Alexander. It was chiefly the ruling élites of the various regions which were hellenized, that is, the dynasties which inherited sections of Alexander's empire and those other groups associated with them in the work of administration and sufficiently close to want to imitate them. For the most part the lower classes were little affected by Greek culture, except perhaps in some of the cities. A well-known piece of evidence here is the series of attempts by the Seleucids of Antioch to impose Hellenistic customs on the Jews of Palestine — attempts which were fiercely resisted under the leadership of the Maccabees. The Pharisees of the New Testament period were to some extent heirs of the Maccabees, for they had adopted forms and practices which kept them and their religion free from the defilement of Hellenism. Elsewhere, however, the resistance to Hellenism was less organized, and most of the wealthier city-dwellers seem to have acquired at least a veneer of Greek culture. The inclusion of the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean in the Roman empire did nothing to halt the expansion

of Greek culture, but rather encouraged it. Even among the Jews the party of the Sadducees and the family of Herod had in their various ways compromised with the dominant culture. The influence of Hellenism, of course, was never restricted to the Roman empire, but was strong, for example, in Iraq.

The relationship of Christianity to Greek culture is complex. Paul, the great missionary to the Roman empire, had received a Greek education in Tarsus as well as a Jewish education in Jerusalem, and as a result of his efforts Christianity spread among non-Jewish Greek-speaking city-dwellers, especially in the eastern half of the empire. In Greece itself and in much of Asia Minor these Greek-speakers were also essentially Greek in culture, but in cities like Alexandria and Antioch the lower classes, though often fluent in Greek, had Coptic or Syriac as their native language, and were still deeply rooted in a non-Greek culture. In particular three sub-cultures can be distinguished in the Fertile Crescent, each marked off by the possession of a literary language. Some of the views propounded by the theologians belonging to these sub-cultures were regarded as heretical by the Greek-speaking majority in the ecumenical councils, presumably because, even when expressed in Greek, certain of their ideas were foreign to the Greek outlook. The Coptic-speakers and one branch of Syriac-speakers were branded as Monophysites and the other main branch of Syriac-speakers as Nestorians. To the north of the Fertile Crescent the Armenian-speakers similarly developed their own so-called «Gregorian» form of the Monophysite heresy.

The case of Egypt may be looked at in more detail. Among the first things which spring to mind when ancient Egypt is mentioned are pyramids and mummies; and these express above all an intense desire for a bodily immortality. When we turn to the writings, albeit in Greek, of an Egyptian theologian like Athanasius, we find among his deep motivations this same intense desire for immortality, corporeally conceived. In sharp contrast to this is the teaching of Origen who, though he lived in Egypt, seems to have been of Greek descent. For him the essential man was the rational soul which existed before it had a body attached to it and which suffered this attachment as a kind of punishment. Far from

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wanting a corporeal immortality, Origen regarded that as abhorrent, and would at most admit that in the life to come there would be «spiritual bodies of extreme fineness». This shows how differently men of different cultures could interpret Christianity. It is also an indication that there was coming into existence a new type of intellectual, represented by Athanasius, who did not belong to the upper class with its Greek culture but had emerged from the masses with their Coptic (or Syriac) culture.

In the ruling élite and upper class of Roman imperial society there were to begin with few Christians. The situation changed, however, when Constantine adopted Christianity and made use of it in the administration of the empire. Ecumenical councils were not purely ecclesiastical affairs, but served as instruments of imperial policy. The result of this was that in the eastern empire the leadership of the Christian Church came to be identified with the ruling élite and thus with Greek culture. For a time there were universally acknowledged bishops who came from the sub-cultures mentioned, but long before the middle of the seventh century the theologians associated with these cultures had been declared heretical, and most of the Christians speaking Coptic and Syriac had been excluded from the Great Church. This was an important feature of the world into which the Arabs burst in the years just before 650.

Islam in its origins was aloof from Greek culture. Muḥammad and his Meccan contemporaries presumably admired the Byzantine and Persian empires for their wealth and power, and had some idea of the part played by religion in the life of each. Commercial interests, however, dictated neutrality between the two giants; and neutrality was hardly compatible with adhesion to either Christianity or Judaism, for the one was the religion of the Byzantines and the other had some obscure but close connection with the Persian empire. Islam, by its claim to be the only pure contemporary expression of the religion of Abraham, at once asserted an affinity to Judaism and Christianity and affirmed its independence and distinct identity. It was parallel to the «original» forms of these two religions but separate from them. Moreover it had to defend itself against them. In Muḥammad's lifetime he had to meet the

criticism of the Jews of Medina; and when Islam expanded politically into the Fertile Crescent its adherents had to be protected against more sophisticated Christians by such doctrines as that of the corruption of their scriptures. Thus Muslims tended to be suspicious of Christians, and few learnt more about Christianity than had been known to the contemporaries of Muḥammad in Medina. Such contacts as there were, too, were almost exclusively with Christians of the Coptic or Syriac traditions, and it was from these cultures that most of the converts to Islam came. Although such persons had assimilated much of Greek culture, their roots were in the older cultures of the region. In this way Islam developed without much direct experience of Greek culture and with a certain suspicion of it. Essentially it was based on the Arab form of Semitic culture.

The military and political successes of the Arabs have to some extent overshadowed important cultural achievements of the Arab or Islamic empire. One such achievement was the incorporation of most of the previous culture of the Fertile Crescent into a new culture which had the Arabic language as its medium and the Qur'ānic religion as its focus. When the Romans conquered the Greek world the latter, according to a Latin poet, took its less civilized conqueror captive. There were indeed some attempts to translate Greek thought into Latin, but on the whole Greek remained the language of learning. In the case of the Arab conquests, however, the opposite happened. The Arabic language, though hitherto associated with a relatively primitive culture, completely replaced Syriac and became the sole language of learning for the Fertile Crescent and regions beyond. Among the reasons for this are presumably the unshakable self-confidence of the Arabs and the centrality of the Qur'ān in their outlook; but in the present context it is the facts themselves and not the reasons for them which are important. It is to be noted, too, that the previous Syriac or Aramaic culture not merely came to have Arabic as its vehicle but was regarded as originating among the Arabs; the fact that something extraneous had been incorporated was glossed over or concealed.

Greek elements were, of course, present in the Syriac culture taken over by the Arabs. Some were explicit - Greek books translated

into Syriac - but others were all-pervasive without being obvious. The latter inevitably had some influence on the ways of thinking and expressing oneself in Arabic, though they are difficult to pinpoint. In course of time, however, Greek works of science and philosophy were translated into Arabic, either from the Syriac translations or directly; and the new Arabic culture was thus forced to come to terms with Greek thought. A few men became very enthusiastic about it, and some of these eventually identified themselves with philosophy, that is, with the Greek outlook, rather than with Islam, though claiming to be still Muslims. The main body of Muslim intellectuals, however, continued to be suspicious. In the end, largely through the efforts of al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), some of the suspicions were overcome and Greek logical methods and certain metaphysical concepts were accepted. As a result rational theology (Kalām) became widespread, though it was never universally accepted by Muslim theologians. Astronomy, mathematics and other sciences were developed on foundations which were largely Greek; but apart from this Greek culture was rejected. Even the hellenizing Islamic philosophers, writing in Arabic, were thrust to the periphery of Islamic culture. In other words, the Islamic world took what it found useful in Greek culture, without always acknowledging its borrowing, and treated the rest as if it had been non-existent.

A second important cultural achievement of the Muslims - and the point to be emphasized here - was the conversion to Islam of most of the Christians in what had been the original heartlands of Christianity. A large part of the reason for this, it may be suggested by way of hypothesis, was the failure of the Christian ecclesiastical leaders, because of their identification with Greek culture, to appreciate the outlook of those who came from Syriac or Coptic culture. These oriental Christians, as they might be called, by being declared heretics were cut off from the support of the Great Church and made to feel themselves inferior. When Islam came, they did not immediately succumb, for there was no forced conversion in the case of Christians. The choice between Islam and the sword was offered only to idol-worshippers; Christians and other «peoples of the Book» became minorities protected by the Islamic state and usually well-treated. There were social pressures

towards conversion, however, since there were some disadvantages in being a second-class citizen; and this led to a gradual movement of Christians into Islam and the replacement of Christianity by Islam throughout the region.

In these developments it is to be noted that the Coptic-speakers and Syriac-speakers constituted, or at least felt themselves to be, underprivileged groups within the society complex of the Roman empire and surrounding areas. Their dissatisfaction was accentuated by the fact that the most influential leaders in the Church were closely identified with Greek culture as well as being associated with the Greek-speaking ruling élite. The Coptic-speakers and Syriac-speakers had their own intellectuals - the bishops and theologians - who, though often expressing their views in Greek, were in close sympathy with the masses and out of sympathy with the Greek-speaking majority in the ecumenical councils. The distinctive feature of this situation was that the sense of being underprivileged came not purely from economic grievances, but largely from what might be called cultural grievances. The Greek-speakers failed to realize that from the standpoint of one who spoke Coptic or Syriac there was considerable justification for the views they denounced as Monophysite or Nestorian. The result of this failure of the Greeks in understanding and in charity was twofold. Firstly, the underprivileged groups overemphasized the distinctive features in their religious beliefs so that Monophysitism and Nestorianism almost became distinct religions. Secondly, when these groups came under Arab rule and individuals could gain a position of fuller privilege by becoming Muslims, conversion did not lead to a feeling of cultural loss, since the Arab-Islamic culture was closer to their deep cultural roots than was the Greek.

Islam in western Europe

The second period to be considered here is that beginning in the eighth century with the creation of Islamic states in western Europe. During this period that region was relatively unified, chiefly through religion, namely, the Latin or Western form of Christianity, but also through the heritage of the Latin-speaking

western part of the Roman empire. Into this region there was thrust an Islamic presence. Most of Spain was rapidly conquered by the Muslims about the beginning of the eighth century, and a relatively stable state was established, which is usually reckoned to have reached its zenith of power and prosperity in the middle of the tenth century. Internal dissensions led to disintegration of this state in the eleventh century, and the small Christian principalities in the north-west of Spain took advantage of Muslim divisions to extend their frontiers. They had a major success in 1085 when they captured Toledo, and after 1212 occupied most of Spain, though Muslims held out in Granada until 1492. In Sicily the Muslim conquest took place gradually through the ninth century, and the island was reconquered by Norman knights between 1060 and 1091.

The challenge presented to Latin Christendom by Islamic civilization was not unlike the challenge presented to the Middle East by Greek civilization after Alexander's conquests, or that presented by European civilization to the rest of the world in the last century or two. In each case the challenging culture was superior in various respects to the cultures challenged. The differences between Islam and Latin Christendom were perhaps not so great as in the other two cases, but there were a number of definite advantages on the side of the Muslims. They were greatly superior in medicine, astronomy and other branches of science. They were far ahead in mathematics, partly through the efficient system of numerals we still call «Arabic». They could produce books more cheaply. Their superior technology supplied the rich among them with countless luxuries unknown in western Europe - food, clothes, articles of clothing, housing. This cultural superiority was not, of course, the unaided work of the Muslims. They themselves had received much both from the Greeks and from various Asian civilizations, but they were no mere transmitters of something only imperfectly assimilated. They had made their own what they had borrowed, and had then proceeded to further advances in the same fields. Thus they were genuine bearers of this superior culture.

The western Europeans had a twofold or bipolar attitude to the Muslims. On the one hand, the Muslims were the great enemy,

for, apart from the Byzantine empire, the only organized states with which the western Europeans were in contact were Islamic. On the other hand, they had a great admiration for Islamic culture. In Sicily the nominally Christian princes Roger II (1130-54) and Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1215-50) were known as «the two baptized sultans of Sicily» because of their adoption of an Islamic way of life and Islamic methods of administration. For the occasional traveller from western Europe the palaces of Cordova and the other Moorish cities were places of unbelievable luxury. While princes and rich merchants tried to share in the «gracious living» of the Muslims, certain groups of scholars were attracted by their science and philosophy. This happened especially after the capture of Toledo by the Christians in 1085. Muslim scholars and Arabic-speaking Jewish scholars continued to live in Toledo, and in order to learn from these men students made the journey from other parts of western Europe. Gradually the European scholars had the most important books in the fields in which they were interested translated into Latin; and before long they had assimilated all that the Muslims had to teach them and were ready to make original contributions in medicine, astronomy, chemistry and philosophy.

This increasing interest in Islamic culture coincided with a new era of expansion for Europe, which is usually said to begin about the middle of the eleventh century. Trade was developing and towns were prospering, while fresh lands were being brought under cultivation. There was a great burst of self-confidence. In respect of military successes there was not merely the reconquest of Toledo in 1085, but Norman victories in southern Italy and Sicily throughout the second half of the eleventh century. Perhaps the Norman conquest of England is also relevant. In the buoyant mood of the times it is hardly surprising that western Europe embarked on such an enterprise as the Crusades. From the standpoint of an Islamic historian this is one of the most crazy and foolhardy policies ever adopted. It was only because of temporary dissensions among the Muslims that it attained as much success as it did.

It must be admitted, however, that, though the military strength of the Muslims in the Middle East was not yet impaired, there are signs of a loss of self-confidence and a decline of vigour.

There was no surplus energy for launching out in fresh intellectual or practical projects or even for dealing with the problems which arose from year to year. For instance, the Muslims, with their experience in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, probably brought to the Mediterranean new techniques in shipbuilding and navigating, but the development of Mediterranean techniques to suit the Atlantic was left to the Christians, notably the Portuguese; and it was these sea-faring techniques which led to the great expansion of Europe. Yet even after the Portuguese had discovered the route to India by the Cape of Good Hope, the Muslims proved incapable of sending ships to Europe in the reverse direction. This is not the place to discuss the reasons for this loss of confidence among the Muslims but merely to record the fact.

While the ability of western Europeans to accept Islamic science seems to be linked with appearance of a new, confident, expansionist outlook, it has to be noted that the new and more scholarly image of Islam that was being formed from the early twelfth century onwards was still a distorted image. Islam was conceived as above all a religion of sexual licence which gained adherents by violence and the sword. It was as if the Europeans were saying to the Muslims, «We may be inferior to you culturally, we are not much more than equal to you militarily, but we are vastly superior to you in our religion». In part this image of Islam was a projection on Muslims of vices which were present in the hearts of Christians but not fully admitted. This was later explicitly recognized by John Wycliffe, who went so far as to use the phrase «we western Mahomets» for the Western Church as a whole. The very idea of a crusade is to use violence and the sword for the purposes of religion, even if conversion of the infidel is not part of the aim; and despite official ecclesiastical praise of the celibate life one wonders how many western European laymen really thought marriage an inferior condition. In short, the distorted image of Islam was basically a negative image of Christendom, that is, an image of what Christians wanted to think they were not. In this way it strengthened the Latin Christian's sense of his own identity as member of a group which was the bearer of values superior to those of Islam.

It is in the light of this total context that the importance of the Crusades in European history is to be understood, and their relative importance in Islamic history (at least until after Muslims had studied history in the West). The inequality of the two sides is striking. The only Muslims affected by the Crusades were those in the petty states surrounding the invaded area, and even for these the battles against the Crusaders were only a permutation of the fighting between the various small Islamic states. For the vast majority of Muslims the Crusades, if they knew about them at all, were as remote as fighting on the north-west frontier of India was for the inhabitants of Britain in the nineteenth century. In western Europe, on the other hand, the idea of the Crusade entered profoundly into the soul of the people, so that the word «crusade» is still a term of praise in many activities. The appeal of the idea of crusading to the popular imagination even seems to have determined the course of events; for it appears that the Pope's original call was to help Eastern Christendom, that is, the Byzantine empire, whereas the point which came to dominate men's thoughts and plans was the recovery of the Holy Places, especially Jerusalem, from the infidel. To engage in military activity for such an end certainly strengthened men's feeling of their own identity as members of a community which was the bearer of superior values.

The final stage of the relationship came after Latin Christendom had assimilated all it wanted to assimilate from Islamic civilization. Colleges and universities had been created on an Islamic model. All the necessary books had been translated into Latin, and the Arabic language had ceased to be a useful tool for the forward-looking scholar, even if a group of Christian intellectuals came to be known as the Latin Averroists. Gradually the indebtedness to Islam in the intellectual and technical spheres came to be neglected and passed over in silence, and western Europe turned to emphasize its continuity with Greek and Roman culture. From one point of view this was a return to that identification with Greek culture which had lost the Middle East for Christendom; but on the other hand it was an important factor leading to the Renaissance.

Concluding Reflections

There are interesting parallels between the two periods studied. In the one Greek culture spread into the Middle East following Alexander's conquests, while in the other Islamic culture spread into western Europe following the Arab conquests. In both cases the areas conquered were subsequently lost, and yet in both cases, while all identity with the conqueror was firmly rejected, much was assimilated from the invading culture. In fact there was some reassertion of an older identity, though in a new form; the speakers of Syriac and Coptic accepted Islam as a contemporary form of the older Semitic religions, and for the west Europeans the Renaissance was a restoration of their links with Graeco-Roman culture.

This outcome is not altogether surprising. Each culture had what might be called an intellectual superstructure of science, philosophy and theology; and the bearers of this cultural superstructure were the intellectuals, that is, the group (or part of a group) in the community which specially cultivated the rational aspects of life. In the first case it was the theologians who attended ecumenical councils, in the second the scholars who went to Toledo and their successors. It is easy for intellectuals, however, to get so carried away by their rational ideas - the superstructure - that they get cut off from their cultural foundations, namely the values of conduct, feeling and aesthetic appreciation which in the course of centuries have become deeply rooted in the experience of the whole people. In the case of individuals it is commonly held that only when rationality is in touch with these foundation values can the personality be integrated. Similarly in a community it is only when the intellectuals in their thinking keep in touch with their own cultural foundations, shared by them with the masses of the people, that they can guide the latter.

In both the cases described, despite the enthusiasm of some intellectuals for the alien culture from which they were borrowing, the community as a whole in the end came to reject any form of identity with the chief bearers of that culture, namely, the main body of Greek-speaking Christians and the community of Muslims. The rejection of any Greek identity eventually brought many Mono-

physites and Nestorians to a situation in which they found in Islam an identity sufficiently close to their own deepest roots for them to accept it. The European revulsion from an Islamic identity was probably an important factor in western Europe's return to its roots in Graeco-Roman culture and its new zest for the study of the Greek and Latin classics.

There are parallels between the two cases examined here and the responses of Muslims to the challenge of Western culture in the last century or so. The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism may be seen as a vigorous reassertion of the distinctive Islamic identity, while the works of liberal Muslim intellectuals exemplify the difficulty of maintaining contact with one's own «grass roots». The contemporary process, however, is more complex than those studied and is still fluid, so that for many decades further developments may be expected.