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I

THE ISLAMIC STATE[1]

MORE conscious of their language than any people in the world, seeing it not only as the greatest of their arts but also as their common good, most Arabs, if asked to define what they meant by 'the Arab nation', would begin by saying that it included all those who spoke the Arabic language. But this would only be the first step, and it would carry them no more than one step farther to say it included all who claimed a link with the nomadic tribes of Arabia, whether by descent, by affiliation or by appropriation (through the medium of language and literature) of their ideal of human excellence and standards of beauty. A full definition would include also a reference to a historic process: to a certain episode in history in which the Arabs played a leading part, which was important not only for them but for the whole world, and in virtue of which indeed they could claim to have been *something* in human history.

The process opened with the preaching by Muhammad, an Arab of the tribe of Quraysh, of a message which he claimed to have been entrusted to him by God through the medium of the Archangel Gabriel, and which, to the minds of his followers, is so important as to have altered the nature of history. In his preaching Muhammad called on men to repent before it was too late and try to do what was pleasing to God, and defined also those beliefs and acts which God has commanded. Men, he taught, must believe that God is unique, that He has revealed His will through the medium of the prophets, that Muhammad is the last of the line of prophets, that the message revealed through Muhammad, the Quran, is the literal word of God, containing the expression of His will for man; they must act in accordance with the commands it contains, and the world will end with a Judgment at which their acts will be weighed and they will be held responsible for them. To the Prophet's

[1] This chapter has drawn largely on the works of L. Gardet, H. A. R. Gibb, M. Mahdi, E. I. J. Rosenthal, and R. Walzer listed in the bibliography.

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followers it seemed clear that the revelation of which he was the instrument, since it was the last, must also be the most complete, and that the Quran, together with his own precepts and example, must contain explicitly or by implication all that was necessary to live rightly. In course of time the text of the Quran was fixed and the traditions (*hadith*) of what the Prophet did and said (*sunna*, the Prophet's practices) were collected and examined, and scholars devoted themselves indeed to distinguishing the true among them from the false. In course of time too there evolved from Quran and *hadith* a comprehensive system of ideal morality, a moral classification of human acts which would make clear the way (*shari'a*) by which men could walk pleasingly in the sight of God and hope to reach Paradise. When there was a clear text of the Quran or a *hadith* of which the validity could be accepted this was not difficult; otherwise, those who possessed the necessary intellect and training must deduce the answer from the texts, by using their minds in accordance with the rules of strict analogy or some other process of reasoning (*ijtihad*). Gradually the results of this process became generally accepted by the common opinion of the learned, and when this general acceptance (*ijma'*) existed it came to be regarded as conferring on precepts or laws an authority no less binding than that of Quran or *hadith*. But there still remained differences of opinion about how the *ijma'* could be known, what it validated in fact, and, beyond the bounds of the *ijma'*, about the ways in which human reason could be used and the results its use would lead to; and in course of time these differences were codified into a number of systems (*madhhab*), all of them equally legitimate for a believer to accept.

This system of ideal morality, in its various forms, created a new society as well as a new type of individual. The essential acts of Islamic devotion had each its social aspect. Muslims prayed together in the mosque on Fridays; their annual fast in the month of Ramadan had the aspect not only of an individual act of self-discipline but of a great corporate ceremony; clothed in the white of consecration, they went together on pilgrimage to Mecca at the appointed season; they paid their stipulated alms into the central treasury. The *Shari'a* covered men's relations with each other as well as with God, and these also therefore were acts of religious significance, commanded or forbidden. To

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refuse to pay the taxes laid down in the *Shari'a*, and deny the obligation to pay them, was no less apostasy than to deny the existence of God or the validity of the prophetic message.[2] The religion of Islam created not only a structure of rights and duties, but also a moral solidarity to support it; Muslims believed themselves obliged to keep their neighbours' consciences as well as their own, not only to do right but to exhort and help others to do so.

'Other prophets before me were sent only to their peoples, I have been sent to all humanity.' It is true, Islam was preached by Arabs first of all, and regarded by some at least of them as being a wholly Arab religion; but this *hadith*, whether authentic or not, expresses what Muslims in course of time came to believe about their religion. Each previous prophet had been sent in the first instance to warn and guide a limited community, an *umma*, and each *umma*, after accepting his message, had ignored or misunderstood it or even tampered with its text. Hence the need for further revelations. The last, that of Muhammad, differed from the earlier in two ways: it was a message for all mankind, and it contained within itself a guarantee of its truth and its correct transmission. 'My community will not agree on an error': so runs the *hadith*, and once more, whether it is valid or not, it expresses what Muslims have accepted. The Islamic revelation claimed to be eternally true, and to supersede all previous revelations; the Islamic *umma* therefore was potentially universal and superseded all others. Since it was universal it was also united, and its members were equal. All Muslims, whatever their culture or racial origin, and whether of ancient or recent conversion, were equally members of the *umma*, possessing the same rights and responsibilities. Moral unity existed even between those who held different beliefs about the truth of Islam. The *umma* soon split on questions of policy and doctrine: one secession was that of the Kharijites, who broke away because they refused to make any compromise with expediency; another was the great schism between Sunnis and Shi'is, in origin a political dispute about the succession to the Prophet, but which gradually acquired undertones of difference in doctrine, law, and custom; and from Shi'ism there sprang a number of sects—Isma'ilis, Nusayris, Druzes—who carried

[2] al-Mawardi, *al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya*, p. 54 (Fr. trs. p. 115).

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certain Shi'i doctrines to extremes, and grafted on to them others of alien origin. Strictly orthodox Muslims tended to regard these last as lying beyond the bounds of tolerance, since their teaching was a threat to the essential beliefs of Islam; but between Sunnis and Shi'is—and between various divisions of each—there was a sense of community, based on the profound conviction of Muslims that to live together in unity was more important than to carry doctrinal disputes to their logical conclusion. So too with the Christian and Jewish communities which continued to live under Muslim rule, in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere: they were not of course regarded as part of the Muslim *umma*, but they were recognized as 'People of the Book', who believed in God, the prophets, and judgment, who possessed an authentic revelation and so belonged to the same spiritual family as the Muslims. As such, they were 'protected peoples', allowed life and property, the exercise of their religion and the preservation of their laws and customs, in return for loyalty and the payment of a special tax.

The *Shari'a* told men what right action was, but it also laid down precise worldly penalties for doing wrong. It was a system of laws as well as a system of morality. To uphold the *Shari'a* and impose the penalties, to watch over the performance of all duties commanded by God, to defend the *umma* against its enemies, to spread the bounds of the faith by holy war (*jihad*): all these involved a leader with authority, in other words political power. Thus the Islamic community could not be complete unless it was also a State, and political action was a way of serving God: 'it is a duty to consider the exercise of power as one of the forms of religion, as one of the acts by which man draws near God'.[3]

Thus, according to the belief of most Muslims, to found and lead a community was part of the essential function of the Prophet and of his legitimate successors. They did not all agree, however, about the succession to the Prophet. The Shi'is held that Muhammad's authority had passed first of all to his son-in-law 'Ali, then to a line of his descendants, the last of whom had disappeared; they differed among themselves about whether this was the fifth, seventh, or twelfth of the line. The members of this line, the imams, possessed, in Shi'i belief, not only political

[3] Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Siyasa*, p. 174 (Fr. trs. pp. 173–4).

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authority but the power of infallible interpretation of the Quran.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, held that Muhammad's authority had passed to the caliphs, leaders designated and accepted by the community, but that the caliphs inherited a part only of the Prophet's functions and powers. True sovereignty in the *umma* rested with God, not only in the sense that He was the source of all authority but also in the sense that He wielded it. Rulers, like other men, were not independent agents but the channels through which God worked. For a Muslim ruler, as for all Muslims, to be good or bad was to submit to God's purposes or revolt against them. The *Shari'a*, the statement of God's will, was therefore supreme in society, and a whole sphere of political activity—that of legislation—was in principle removed from the competence of the ruler. The caliphs, in theory, possessed neither God's power of making laws nor the Prophet's function of proclaiming them. They inherited only the judicial and executive power. The caliph, it was generally believed, should lead the community in peace and war, collect the canonical taxes and supervise the application of the law. He was also the imam, the leader in prayer, and he should himself be learned in the law and competent to exercise the power of interpretation. It was only in this limited sense that he was successor of the Prophet (*khalifat al-rasul*), but even in this sense he was indispensable to the community, ruler by divine right, and ruler, in principle, over the whole community; for most, although not all, jurists held that the unity of the *umma* implied a unity of political authority. 'He who dies without having known the imam of his time is as one who died in the age of paganism.'

There was a consensus of Sunni opinion that the ruler of the *umma* possessed, under God, the sole responsibility for ruling. In the last resort he was responsible to God and his own conscience alone. It is true, while some caliphs were designated by their predecessors, others in the earliest age were chosen by a group of leaders in the community, and the idea of a choice was always preserved, and symbolized by the ceremony of *bay'a*, the formal acknowledgment of a new caliph and pledge of loyalty to him by the notables of the *umma*. But after the first age this was no more than a formality, and even in theory it was not, in the

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full sense, a process of election. It was rather a recognition than a choice; in the view of most thinkers, in the *bay'a* the community acquiesced in authority, it did not confer it. By implication, the first duty of the community towards the ruler was one of obedience. But obedience should be neither passive nor without conditions. According to the theory generally held, the ruler should consult the leaders of the community (*shura*) and they should give him moral advice and exhortation (*nasiha*), although there was no clear idea *who* exactly should be consulted and should warn, and how far the ruler should be bound by what they said. For thinkers of the earlier period, the duty of obedience only held so long as the caliph ordered nothing which was contrary to the *Shari'a*. In later thought, as we shall see, obedience tended to become an absolute duty, and even an unjust ruler was regarded as better than none at all; only a minority of later thinkers taught that revolt could be legitimate, but even the majority, while teaching that obedience should be general, did not assert that it should be given without reserve. Thus al-Ghazali (1058–1111), after teaching the duty of obedience to unjust princes, points out that one must not, through obedience, condone their injustice. The devout Muslim should avoid the court and company of the unjust ruler, and should rebuke him: by words if he can safely do so, by silence if words might encourage rebellion.[4]

In the Islamic view of the true society there was implicit a series of interrelated contrasts. First and most fundamental, while the world worshipped idols or joined their worship to that of God (*shirk*), Muslims proclaimed and worshipped the one God alone (*tawhid*). Secondly, and connected with this, came a contrast in the ordering of society. The society which did not know Islam was ruled by custom, evolved by men for their own purposes and in ignorance of the commandments of God (*jahiliyya*—ignorance of the truths of religion); Islamic society, as well as those founded by earlier prophets to the degree to which they had not corrupted their scriptures, was ruled by the *Shari'a*. Again, the link between human beings in pre-Islamic society was that of natural relationship, based on blood or analogous to that which was based on blood. It was the solidarity of the clan or tribe (*'asabiyya*); but the link between Muslims in

[4] al-Ghazali, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, ii/4, chs. 5–6, pp. 124 ff.

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the *umma* was a moral link, a common obedience of the law, an acceptance of the reciprocal rights and duties laid down in it, and mutual support and exhortation in carrying it out. Once more, political power in the pre-Islamic community was natural monarchy, created by a human process, controlled by human sentiments or purely human calculations of means and ends, and directed towards worldly goals (*mulk*); but in the Muslim *umma* power was a delegation by God (*wilaya*) controlled by His will and directed to the happiness of Muslims in the next world even more than in this.

For an orthodox Muslim, history was the process by which the society of religious ignorance, directed to worldly ends, held together by natural solidarity and ruled by kings, was replaced by the ideal Muslim society. In a sense the struggle had been going on throughout history, wherever and whenever God had sent prophets to a specific *umma*. In a sense too it was still happening, wherever the *umma* faced the unconverted world. There had however been one period of particular importance, when the final revelation was fully embodied in the institutions of society. To devout Muslims, at the time and later, there lay a special significance in the early history of Islam, when the community was expanding and flourishing, the Quran and the Prophet's words were taken as principles of action, and the *umma* was one in outer manifestation as well as in spirit. For the moral imagination of Sunnis, the early centuries of Islam have always been a compelling drama in three acts: the early days of the Prophet and his immediate successors, the golden age when the *umma* was what it should be; the Umayyad period when the principles of the Islamic polity were overlaid by the natural human tendency towards secular kingship; and the early 'Abbasid age when the principles of the *umma* were reasserted and embodied in the institutions of a universal empire, regulated by law, based on the equality of all believers, and enjoying the power, wealth, and culture which are the reward of obedience. In later ages this period of history served as a norm for rulers and ruled alike, a lesson of what God had done for His people, a lesson too of the evils of division and the rejection of God's will. It provided material for reflection on the moral problems of the corporate life of the *umma*: the struggle for the caliphate between 'Ali and Mu'awiya, then between Umayyads and

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'Abbasids, the death of Hasan and Husayn, the massacre of the Umayyads, the withdrawal of the Kharijites from a community which they regarded as being hopelessly involved in sin, the breach between Sunnis and Shi'is—all these are living moments of the Islamic conscience, the points at which it becomes aware of the difficulties of embodying God's will in the life of society. With the full articulation of the message of Muhammad in a universal community obedient to divine command, what was significant in history came to an end. History could have no more lessons to teach, if there was change it could only be for the worse, and the worse could only be cured, not by creating something new but by renewing what had once existed. Inherent in this view of the past was a sense of decline: according to a famous *hadith*, the Prophet had said that his generation was the best of all, that the one which would come after him would be the next best, and after that each succeeding generation would be worse. But the popular mind consoled itself with the belief that in each century there would arise a renovator (*mujaddid*), and with the expectation of a *mahdi*, one sent by God to restore the rule of the saints and prepare the coming of Jesus and the end of the world.

History is what men need to remember of the past, and it is only at rare times and among small groups that the historical sense takes the form of a desire to reconstruct the whole of the past. For Muslims, the great age of early Islam served as an image of what the world should be. We ask different questions of the past, and can see what was to them, in a sense, irrelevant: the fact of historical development. In the light of this fact the contrasts become less sharp. It is still possible for a Muslim to maintain that, during the age of the caliphate, the principles of Islam were embodied in a community, but we can see more closely the process by which this took place. At the heart of the process of development stands the living tradition of *ahl al-sunna wa'l-jama'a*, the self-appointed, self-recognized, unorganized body of 'concerned' Muslims, believing in the revelation of Muhammad, wishing to preserve it unaltered amidst the changes of time, seeking in it guidance in the new problems cast up by those changes, defending it and drawing out its implications not so much by a rejection of what was new as by a discrimination between what could be absorbed into Islam and what could not.

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It was through them that the system of orthodox beliefs was built up, by reaction to a succession of challenges: from Greek philosophy, from mystical practice and theology, from Shiʿism and its offshoots. Of Greek philosophy they accepted the technique of logic and certain concepts of natural theology, while rejecting the tendency to turn the living God of Bible and Quran into an abstract principle, a postulate of thought; they took from mysticism its emphasis on inner devotion, on sincerity of intention as well as correctness of act, while looking with suspicion on the monistic theology which blurred the distinction between God and His creatures, and repudiating any suggestion that to know God by direct experience was more important than to obey His laws. They shared the Shiʿi reverence for the family of the Prophet, while condemning the gnostic ideas implicit in extreme Shiʿism, in particular the tendency to replace the idea of a human prophet by the idea of an emanation of God.

A similar process of development took place on another level. Gradually, the customs and practices of early Islamic society, many of them inherited from the pre-Islamic worlds—of Byzantium, Persia, and pagan Arabia—were absorbed into the body of Islamic law; it would perhaps be more correct to say, Islamic law was created by the blend of such customs and practices with principles and edicts drawn from the Quran and the authentic *hadith*. No doubt this process involved some 'adulteration' of law and tradition, the creation of new traditions in order to give a cover of Islamic respectability to what was not Islamic by origin; but it also worked in the opposite way, by the selection of customs and practices, the rejection of some and acceptance of others, and the modification even of those which were accepted, in the light of the teaching of Islam. By this slow process, never completed and never indeed capable of completion, the social systems of the many countries converted to Islam were permeated by its moral ideals, and a profoundly unified Islamic society was created.

It is doubtful whether the process could have taken place had the community not possessed, during its first and formative epoch, a unified political and administrative structure. It was under the caliphs, and thanks to their authority, that the distinctive law and society of Islam grew up, and it is not surprising that then and long afterwards the existence of the caliphate was

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regarded as a necessary condition for the maintenance of law and society. So long as it existed and flourished, its necessity did not have to be defended, but from the ninth century the political unity of Islam began to disintegrate, or at least to change its form. The Turkish mercenary soldiers, on whom the 'Abbasid caliphs had come to rely, began to exercise ever more power in the capital, making and unmaking caliphs and interfering in policy and government; in the provinces, new dynasties began to grow up, still in principle acknowledging the caliph's sovereignty and governing in his name, but in effect ruling independently over limited territorial States; and Shi'ism, revived and developed in the form of Isma'ilism, challenged the right of the caliph to rule and the form of Islam which he defended. In these circumstances, those who believed in the necessity of the caliph's power found themselves obliged for the first time to state explicitly the nature of the caliphate and the reasons for its existence. The most famous of such statements, that of al-Mawardi (991–1031) in *al-Ahkam al-sultaniyya*, defines the caliphate as being a necessity derived from the divine law rather than from reason; the Quran enjoins men to obey those set in command over them,[5] and this implies that there should be a caliph, to replace the Prophet so far as the maintenance of religion and the administration of worldly interests are concerned. His functions are political as well as religious: to maintain orthodoxy, execute legal decisions, protect the frontiers of Islam, fight those who refuse to become Muslims when summoned, raise the canonical taxes, and in general, himself to supervise the administration of affairs without delegating too much authority. He must possess certain qualifications, physical, intellectual, and spiritual, as well as the extraneous qualification of belonging to the same tribe as Muhammad, that of Quraysh; and he must be designated for his office by someone else—either by choice of the leaders of the community, 'those who bind and loose', or by choice of the previous caliph. Once chosen, the people owe him obedience, from which they can only be released if he is immoral, holds unorthodox opinions or has physical infirmities which make it impossible for him to perform his functions.[6]

Even as this doctrine of authority was being stated the movement of history was making it inadequate. The division of

[5] Quran, iv.58. [6] Mawardi, pp. 3 ff (Fr. trs. pp. 5 ff).

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