

# 1

## Flux and reflux in the faith of men

Islam is the blueprint of a social order. It holds that a set of rules exists, eternal, divinely ordained, and independent of the will of men, which defines the proper ordering of society. This model is available in writing; it is equally and symmetrically available to all literate men, and to all those willing to heed literate men. These rules are to be implemented throughout social life.

Thus there is in principle no call or justification for an internal separation of society into two parts, of which one would be closer to the deity than the other. Such a segregation would contradict both the symmetry or equality of access, and the requirement of pervasive implementation of the rules. The rules of the faith are there for all, and not just or specially for a subclass of religious specialists—virtuosos. In principle, the Muslim, if endowed with pious learning, is self-sufficient or at any rate not dependent on other men, or consecrated specialists. (If not learned, he is in a loose way dependent on those who are, which is very important.) Thus officially, Islam has no clergy and no church organisation, though it needs scholars, and church and community are co-extensive. As Tocqueville put it,

Islam is the religion which has most completely confounded and intermixed the two powers . . . so that all the acts of civil and political life are regulated more or less by religious law.<sup>1</sup>

Tocqueville also comments on the significant identity of training for religious and other learning, and the absence of priesthood. In traditional Islam, no distinction is made between lawyer and canon lawyer, and the roles of theologian and lawyer are conflated. Expertise on proper social arrangements, and on matters pertaining to God, are one and the same thing.

Judaism and Christianity are also blueprints of a social order, but rather less so than Islam. Christianity, from its inception, contained an open recommendation to give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. A faith which begins, and for some time remains, without political power, cannot but accommodate itself to a political order which is not, or is not yet, under its control. Within Islam, the Shi'ite sectarian doctrine also contains devices for such accommodation, on a

### *Muslim Society*

temporary basis – not so much for giving Caesar that which is his as for telling him what he wishes to hear, whilst keeping one's own counsel. This, and a martyrdom foundation-myth, brings Shi'ism, the second-largest sect within Islam, closer to Christianity. But rapid success deprived mainstream Sunni Islam of martyrdom, and left it ambivalent *vis-à-vis* esotericism. Esotericism can be pushed to an extreme amongst sectarians, as by the Druze, where the inner doctrine is so esoteric that no one, including its adherents, appears to know exactly what it is.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity, which initially flourished among the politically disinherited, did not then presume to *be* Caesar. A kind of potential for political modesty has stayed with it ever since those humble beginnings. Theocratic aspirations only appear intermittently; canon law significantly means religious ordinances as distinct from secular ones, unlike the Muslim *kanun*. The most prolonged effort in the direction of theocracy was perhaps Byzantine Caesaro-Papism, which, significantly, was one of the models available to Islam.

But the initial success of Islam was so rapid that it had no need to give anything unto Caesar. The theocratic potential of Judaism has also remained muted, in comparison with Islam: though initially a charter of the conquest of the Promised Land, the achievement of the promise was neither rapid nor stable nor permanent. The conditions of the diaspora obviously did not favour aspirations to replace Caesar. (In modern Israel, the legal institutions of the Ottoman autonomous community, the 'millet' system,<sup>3</sup> are kept alive by parliamentary stalemate. Coalitions, in need of parliamentary support, pay the price and grant the religious interest a perpetuation of the *status quo*. Thus, ironically, thanks to proportional representation, Israel continues to be, jointly with the Lebanon, a surviving fragment of the Ottoman society.)

Two conditions favour this greater social pervasiveness of Islam: its rapid and early political success, and the idea that the divine message is complete and final. The first inhibits the handing over of some sphere of life to non-religious authority; the second makes it that much harder to offer rival versions of the blueprint. The scheme *is* to be implemented, and no new schemes are to be countenanced. Dr Michael Cook has also shown<sup>4</sup> how the relatively mundane and secular Jewish preoccupation with the regulation of social life, based on human legal wisdom rather than on divine authority, when fused with the God-centred, unificatory theology-mindedness of Christianity, produced the characteristically Muslim divinely sanctioned and God-centred legalism.

This social pervasiveness makes Islam specially interesting to the sociologist of religion. There are other good reasons. A European background has tended to influence the choice of questions about the social role of religion. These issues appear in a new light when looked at from a Muslim viewpoint.

Two dominant sociological questions were inspired by Christianity, more so than by other faiths. Each concerns its role, either in the rise or in the fall of a civilisation. The first question was: did Christianity contribute to the fall of the

### *Flux and reflux in the faith of men*

Roman Empire? The second was: did a special segment of Christianity play a key role in the emergence of modern industrial civilisation? The first of these questions is now somewhat dated. Time was when men found this question central and compelling: their obsession was the preservation of an old civilisation, not the attainment of a new affluence. But the demise of the Roman Empire is no longer a source of current sorrow, and the attribution of blame for that disaster is not a hotly debated issue amongst us. It was not always so. St Augustine was eager to rebut any such charge. More surprisingly, the question was revived in the Augustan age; Gibbon and Hume saw the relationship of religion and civilisation in these terms, and their conclusion was not the same as St Augustine's. Later still, Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* contains, implicitly or explicitly, at least three theories of religion.<sup>5</sup> Most prominent, and as it were official, is his evolutionist, three-stage theory of a progression from magic through religion to science. This might be described as a development in the manner of seeking the connection between things, first in inherent plausibility ('sympathetic magic'), then in the caprice of spirits, whose wilfulness was better fitted to explain irregularities, and finally in scientific experiment. The manifest weakness of the theory is its intellectualism – the assumption that at the heart of religion there is a *theory* of causation, and that men shift from one style of thought to another in consequence both of cumulative and purely cognitive failures of the earlier style. Frazer's method was not so much, as later anthropologists supposed, to ask himself what he himself would think, were he primitive man; rather he asked, given the account of the human mind found in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*,<sup>6</sup> how did primitive man reach the conclusions which are reported by observers?

But when Frazer thinks of the moral and social impact of religion, he talks quite differently, and he then becomes the last of the Augustans and returns to their question:

The religion of the Great Mother . . . was only one of a multitude of similar Oriental faiths which in the later days of paganism spread over the Roman Empire, and by saturating the European people with alien ideals of life gradually undermined the whole fabric of ancient civilisation. Greek and Roman society . . . set the safety of the Commonwealth, as the supreme aim of conduct, above the safety of the individual whether in this world or in a world to come. All this was changed by the spread of Oriental religions, which inculcated the communion of the soul with God and its eternal salvation as the only objects worth living for . . . The inevitable result of this selfish and immoral doctrine was to withdraw the devotee more and more from the public service . . .

The third theory to be found in his work was one he certainly did not consciously espouse, but one which is implicit in his elegant arrangement of his material and which was subsequently exploited by others, in a spirit quite alien to his own: a kind of C.G. Jung/T.S. Eliot romp amongst the archetypal symbols dredged up from the unconscious of a wide variety of cultures:

### *Muslim Society*

To another work of anthropology I am indebted in general, one which has influenced one generation profoundly . . . *The Golden Bough* . . . especially the two volumes *Adonis*, *Attis*, *Osiris*. Anyone . . . acquainted with these works will immediately recognise in the poem certain references . . .<sup>7</sup>

Thus only one of the three theories in Frazer perpetuates the eighteenth-century vision and its values: an admiration for the civic and social virtues of classical religion, contrasted with the egotistic concern with other-worldly salvation which replaced it. But, in these terms, the issue is no longer alive. Those who continue to repudiate Christianity no longer sigh for the Roman Empire.

The other great sociological issue, by contrast, is very much alive. The role of ideology, religious or other, in the genesis of the modern world and of its industrial or bureaucratic institutions, is still of burning interest and at the very centre of our concern.

Each of these two questions acquires quite a different appearance when looked at from the viewpoint of Islam. Islam, unlike Christianity, was not born *within* an empire which subsequently went into a decline, a decline which a hostile observer could blame on the faith; nor did it become a kind of politically disembodied receiver of the pre-existent world empire which had collapsed, and which it could perpetuate by ecclesiastical organisation at a time when the political one was beyond recall. On the contrary, it was born *outside* two empires, one of which it promptly overran, and the second of which it conquered in the end. It was *the* basis, first of an oecumenical empire, and then of a number of others which closely identified with the faith and found their legitimation in it. This makes the question of religion as the social cement of civilisations appear in quite a different light, when considered from a Muslim viewpoint. It had not corroded an earlier traditional civilisation, nor lived on as its ghost. It *made* its own empire and civilisation.

The question concerning the origins of the modern industrial world also looks quite different from a Muslim viewpoint. Traditional Muslim civilisation was not, like Christendom, the womb of the modern industrial world. So it cannot claim the credit or blame for it as a totality, nor can the achievement be connected with any sectarian segment within it. It was the partial victim, and not the progenitor, of the modern world. But it is a rather distinctive victim.

Four major literate world civilisations were in existence at the end of the Middle Ages. Of these, it seems that Islam alone may maintain its pre-industrial faith in the modern world. The faith of the Christian world has been re-interpreted and adjusted out of all recognition. (Modernist Christian theology, with its elusive content, asymptotically approaching zero, constitutes by far the best evidence for the secularisation thesis, far more so than any overt 'rationalism'.) Confucianism is repudiated in its homeland, however much it may be possible to trace the survival of its spirit. Hinduism survives as a folk-religion, neither endorsed nor discouraged by the elite of its land. Only Islam survives as a serious faith pervading both a folk and a Great Tradition. Its Great Tradition is

### *Flux and reflux in the faith of men*

modernisable; and the operation can be presented, not as an innovation or concession to outsiders, but rather as the continuation and completion of an old dialogue within Islam between the orthodox centre and deviant error, of the old struggle between knowledge and ignorance, political order and anarchy, civilisation and barbarism, town and tribe, Holy Law and mere human custom, a unique deity and usurper middlemen of the sacred, to cite the polarities whose linked opposition, sometimes dormant, sometimes virulent, seems perennially latent in Islam.

Thus its traditional internal differentiation into the folk and scholarly variants was actually helpful in effecting adjustment. The folk variant can be disavowed, blamed for cultural backwardness, or associated with the political machinations of colonial oppressors, whilst the 'purer' variant can be identified all at once both with pristine origins and with a revived, glorious, modern future. The old Great Tradition became the folk version under modern conditions, which also made that folk far more numerous and far more weighty in the state. The old Great Tradition, which is now its natural idiom, helps that folk to define itself against foreigners, against westernised rulers, and against its own disavowed, 'backward' rustic past. Thus in Islam, and only in Islam, purification/modernisation on the one hand, and the re-affirmation of a putative old *local* identity on the other, can be done in one and the same language and set of symbols. The old folk version, once a shadow of the central tradition, now becomes a repudiated scapegoat, blamed for retardation and foreign domination. Hence, though not the source of modernity, Islam may yet turn out to be its beneficiary. The fact that its central, official, 'pure' variant was egalitarian and scholarly, whilst hierarchy and ecstasy pertained to its expendable, eventually disavowed, peripheral forms, greatly aids its adaptation to the modern world. In an age of aspiration to universal literacy, the open class of scholars can expand towards embracing the entire community, and thus the 'protestant' ideal of equal access for all believers can be implemented. Modern egalitarianism is satisfied. Whilst European protestantism merely prepared the ground for nationalism by furthering literacy, the reawakened Muslim potential for egalitarian scripturalism can actually *fuse* with nationalism, so that one can hardly tell which one of the two is of most benefit to the other. By contrast, any attempts, for instance, to purify and modernise Hinduism must come up against the inegalitarian, hereditary and hierarchical element at its core, which cannot easily be accommodated under modern conditions.<sup>8</sup>

Max Weber is the greatest of the sociologists associated with the question of the affinity of faith and modern socio-economic organisation. He did not leave us a general sociology of Islam, parallel to his studies of India, China or ancient Judaism,<sup>9</sup> but in general he favoured the view that the *institutional* preconditions of modern capitalism were not restricted to the West, but that it was the ideological element which provides the crucial *differentia*, that extra spark which, in conjunction with the required structural preconditions, explains the miracle.

## *Muslim Society*

One may wonder whether indeed the Muslim case supports such a view: the *differentiae*, of Islam seem institutional rather than ideological. Ideological parallels to Christianity can be found, but they operate in a contrasted institutional milieu. Whether or not he himself would have extended this general explanatory strategy to Islam, if one does try to do so, it does not seem to fit neatly. But the stability, or stagnation, whichever way one wishes to describe it, of the Muslim world, constitutes an interesting check on the theories of the origins of capitalism. Towns, trade, and an urban bourgeoisie are all highly prominent in Muslim society. Themes can be discerned in the ideology of urban trading groups which are at the very least reminiscent of those credited with a crucial role in the economic development of the West, even if a puritan sense of sin seems less well developed. The difference would seem to be less in the absence of ideological elements than in the particular balance of power which existed between the various institutions in that society. Did Muslim theology also contain that warrant for obsessional guilt and self-examination which could impel men to compulsive and 'rational' accumulation which would, in favourable circumstances, produce the modern industrial world? The experts seem to disagree. J.-P. Charnay claims:

the idea of original sin has been expunged from Islam . . . the final Revelation . . . has not condemned human nature as such . . . the absence of original sin accentuates the notion of individual responsibility . . .<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Marshall G.S. Hodgson writes:

In the Qur'an it was early made clear that human beings face a fundamental moral choice. They cannot hover half way . . . they may choose to stand in awe of their Creator and accept His moral demands . . . Or human beings may . . . turn away from their Creator . . . [But] a human being cannot choose to be pure at will . . . he . . . can achieve moral purity only by the power of God. The fundamental choice . . . appears . . . overwhelmingly crucial . . . All else in the moral life will follow from this choice.

. . . This fact would be made inescapably manifest in a final cosmic catastrophe, when . . . all human beings would be visibly judged by God Himself . . .

Accordingly, Muhammed insisted on the moral responsibility of human beings. Life was no matter of play, it called for sober alertness; men dare not relax, secure in their wealth . . . all these things would avail nothing at the Judgment . . . humans must live in constant fear and awe of God, before whom they were accountable for every least deed.<sup>11</sup>

This state of mind – total responsibility for the consequences of a basic original choice which was yet not within one's own unaided power, and hence justified an anxiety which could never be adequately allayed by any mundane evidence – seems recognisably similar to the fashionable theory which turns the first great economic accumulation into a by-product of an unavailing attempt to reassure oneself that one's primal 'choice' has been well made. On this account, Muslim burghers too should have felt impelled to accumulate in an endless effort to



### *Flux and reflux in the faith of men*

persuade themselves that they were the Elect of God. Admittedly, this eloquent passage comes from the pen of an author who candidly tells one a few pages earlier that he himself is a convinced Christian and Quaker. One may well wonder whether this rather Augustinian/Kierkegaardian picture really is closer to the veritable Muslim state of mind than Charnay's more relaxed sketch of a 'morale actuelle, très humaniste'.

I like to imagine what would have happened had the Arabs won at Poitiers and gone on to conquer and Islamise Europe. No doubt we should all be admiring Ibn Weber's *The Kharejite Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which would conclusively demonstrate how the modern rational spirit and its expression in business and bureaucratic organisation could only have arisen in consequence of the sixteenth-century neo-Kharejite puritanism in northern Europe. In particular, the work would demonstrate how modern economic and organisational rationality could never have arisen had Europe stayed Christian, given the inveterate proclivity of that faith to a baroque, manipulative, patronage-ridden, quasi-animistic and disorderly vision of the world. A faith so given to seeing the cosmic order as bribable by pious works and donations could never have taught its adherents to rely on faith alone and to produce and accumulate in an orderly, systematic, and unwavering manner. Would they not always have blown their profits in purchasing tickets to eternal bliss, rather than going on to accumulate more and more?

A Muslim Europe would also have saved Hegel from the need to indulge in most painfully tortuous arguments in order to explain how an earlier faith, Christianity, nevertheless is more final and absolute than a chronologically later one, namely Islam. (In fact he did it by invoking the fact that Europe was only Christianised at the time of Charlemagne, who is at least suitably posterior to Muhammed.) Had Islam, the later and by some plausible criteria *purier* faith, prevailed, no such problem would have arisen for a Muslim Hegel.<sup>12</sup> There would have been no embarrassing boob in the *welthistorischer* timetable. Altogether, from the viewpoint of an elegant philosophy of history, which sees the story of mankind as a sustained build-up towards *our* condition, it would have been *far* more satisfactory if the Arabs had won. By various obvious criteria – universalism, scripturalism, spiritual egalitarianism, the extension of full participation in the sacred community not to one, or some, but to *all*, and the rational systematisation of social life – Islam is, of the three great Western monotheisms, the one closest to modernity.

### David Hume and Islam

The best approach to the social role of Islam is probably through the religious sociology of David Hume, notwithstanding the fact that he is not normally considered an Islamicist. His *Natural History of Religion*<sup>13</sup> is sometimes acclaimed as the first scientific study of the place of religion in society. It

### *Muslim Society*

remains one of the best, perhaps the best. But the central theory found in that splendid book, and one which is quite specially relevant to Islam, seems to have been seldom noticed. For instance, the late Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion*<sup>14</sup> mentions Hume and comments on some of his views, but omits to note what is most distinctive and important in Hume's sociology of religion. He only reports Hume's view concerning the historical priority of polytheism and idolatry. Philosophers do no better than anthropologists: a reader of Bernard Williams<sup>15</sup> might likewise easily conclude that Hume espoused and concentrated on a superficial unilinealism, which in fact he quite possibly did not even hold, but would learn little or nothing of the far more central, interesting and profound oscillation theory which he certainly *did* hold, which preoccupied him, and which is central to his argument.

The attribution of unilinealism to Hume is based on an opening remark of Hume which can just as well be interpreted as a simple assertion of *fact* rather than as a *theory*. It does indeed so happen that in the past two millenia mankind has shifted from polytheism to monotheism, on balance. But is that a law or a trend, which could justify extrapolation? Later in the book, Hume does tell us what he considers the real law-like trend to be.

The only writer who seems to have noticed this doctrine is Frank E. Manuel, but he thinks little of it. In *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*,<sup>16</sup> he writes:

Hume . . . could not hold fast to any theory of progressive evolution. Despite Turgot's earnest attempts to convert him, he always remained outside the ranks of . . . believers . . . in progress . . . the flux and reflux between polytheism and theism is a blunt denial of the idea of progress. Here Hume appears a sceptical cyclical theorist in the classical tradition.

Manuel considers the oscillation theory 'one of the weakest parts of the essay'. He blames Hume for failing to hold fast to the very doctrine with which Evans-Pritchard and Williams erroneously credit him. Manuel seems to grade people in terms of whether they contribute or at least adhere to the idea of progress, an idea which was emerging at the end of the eighteenth century and which was destined to dominate the nineteenth. The interest of Hume's views here hinges precisely on his refusal to adopt such a view.

Hume does indeed begin his discussion with the observation which misled Evans-Pritchard and Williams:

Behold then the clear testimony of history. The farther we mount up into antiquity, the more we do find mankind plunged into polytheism. No marks, no symptoms of any more perfect religion. The most ancient records of the human race still present us that system as the popular and established creed.

The first idea he puts forward in attempting to explain this is the difficulty of abstraction, and the tendency of the crude mind to stay close to the earthy: the ignorant multitude must first entertain some grovelling and familiar notion



### *Flux and reflux in the faith of men*

of superior powers, before they stretch their conception to that perfect Being, who bestowed order on the whole frame of nature.

But this evolutionist and intellectualist schema – from crude pluralism to abstract, rational, elevated monism – is soon and rightly (or regrettably, in Manuel's opinion) abandoned. It has a certain congruence with Hume's epistemology, though not with his moral psychology. It fits in well with his theory of knowledge, given its vision of the human mind progressing by gradual abstraction from sensation to abstraction, which is but a pale echo of sensation. But it conflicts with his view of human motivation, for it seems to imply that the relative success of monotheism is due to its recognition as *rational*. Hume himself apparently did, in fact, hold that monotheism, supported by the argument from design, was indeed more rational than polytheism; but he clearly does *not* suppose that the historic swings from polytheism to monotheism were due to a popular recognition of the rational superiority of the one view over the other. Not only reason, but popular religion too, is a slave of our passions, and somewhat more so (and in a different sense). The swing to monotheism, if and when it occurs, is likewise due to quite other and emotional factors. Its congruence with reason, if it obtains, is coincidental.

But, even more interestingly, Hume comes to abandon the idea of progress, of continuous unilineal change in one direction, and he replaces it by a far more intriguing and important *oscillation* theory. Men do indeed change from polytheism to monotheism, but not for rational reasons; moreover they also change *back again*, and this also from non-rational motives. *This* is the really valuable theory which is to be found in Hume. He refers to this interesting and distinctive theory as the 'flux and reflux' of polytheism and theism.

It is remarkable that the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism to idolatry.

This oscillation of opinion, as one might expect, has nothing to do with reason; it has to do with the politics of fear, uncertainty, deference and hierarchy. This is the heart of Hume's theory of religion.

The swing from religious pluralism to monism is activated by a kind of competitive sycophancy:

in an idolatrous nation . . . though men admit the existence of several limited deities, yet may there be some one God, whom, in a particular manner, they make the object of their worship and adoration . . . his votaries will endeavour, by every art, to insinuate themselves into his favour; and supposing him to be pleased, like themselves, with praise and flattery, there is no exaggeration, which will be spared in their addresses to him. In proportion as men's fears or distresses become more urgent, they still invent new strains of adulation; and even he who outdoes his predecessor in swelling up the titles of his divinity, is sure to be outdone by his successor in newer and more pompous epithets of praise. Thus they proceed; till at last they arrive at infinity itself, beyond which there is no farther

### *Muslim Society*

progress: And it is well, if, on striving to get farther, and to represent a magnificent simplicity, they run not into inexplicable mystery . . .

Clear examples are provided of this apotheosis:

Thus the deity, whom the vulgar Jews conceived only as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, became their Jehovah and Creator of the world.

Or again:

Who can express the perfections of the Almighty? say the Mahometans. Even the noblest of his works, if compared to him, are but dust and rubbish. How much more must human conception fall short of his infinite perfections?

But this perfect, hidden, inaccessible deity, propelled beyond the reach of our ideas by our competitive sycophancy, is too distant and too inaccessible.

At this point, a contrary psychological principle comes into play. This is the principle of seeking the protection of intermediaries and middlemen when approaching the mighty and the awe-inspiring. The use of such an accredited mediator itself indicates proper respect and reverence and thus enhances the prospect of a favourable hearing. The deity itself of course then also needs such mediators, and this strengthens their position in turn. This impels the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction:

elevating their deities to the utmost bounds of perfection, [they] at last beget the attributes of unity and infinity, simplicity and spirituality. Such refined ideas, being somewhat disproportioned to vulgar comprehension, remain not long in their original purity; but require to be supported by the notion of inferior mediators or subordinate agents, which interpose between mankind and their supreme deity. These demi-gods or middle beings, partaking of human nature, and being more familiar to us, become the chief objects of devotion, and gradually recall that idolatry, which had been formerly banished by the ardent prayers and panegyrics of timorous and indigent mortals.

But the pendulum is bound to swing once again:

as these idolatrous religions fall every day into grosser and more vulgar conceptions, they at last destroy themselves and by the vile representations which they form of their deities, make the tide turn again towards theism. But so great is the propensity, in this alternative revolution of human sentiments, to return back to idolatry, that the utmost precaution is not able effectually to prevent it. And of this, some theists, particularly the Jews and Mohametans, have been sensible; as appears by their banishing all the arts of statuary and painting, and not allowing the representations, even of human figures, to be taken by marble or colours; lest the common infirmity of mankind should thence produce idolatry.

The historical material which inspires Hume's admirable theory is obvious: it is the struggle of Jehovah against the Baalim of Canaan, of the Reformation against Popery,<sup>17</sup> and of Islam with its own pluralistic tendencies. He comments explicitly on the parallelism: