

## THE FIRST EXPANSION OF ISLAM:

### FACTORS OF THRUST AND CONTAINMENT

Viewed from Mecca, its place of origin, or from Medina, its first capital, the expansion of Islam is impressive not least because it extended in every direction. There is one area of limited failure nearby, in the Ethiopian highlands across the Red Sea; otherwise a cohesive Islamic belt stretches with only minor interruptions or enclaves into India, Central Asia, past the Bosphorus, throughout North and much of West Africa into the center and down the Eastern coast of the Black Continent—not to mention, apart from minor concentrations elsewhere, for example in the Western hemisphere, the solid blocks of Muslims in Indonesia, parts of China and the Southern Philippines.

Speculation has been generous in supplying theories to account for the success as well as the limitations of the geographical outreach of Islam. Compatibility or incongruity with arid or semi-arid zones, tropical forests and savannahs, accessibility to nomadism, physically and intellectually, a negative affinity to moderate, let alone cold climates—all such endeavors to order and

explain a highly differentiated complex of facts by means of one or the other principles of organization are rather easily disproved by a glance at a historical atlas, or where they seem to fit, at least partially invalidated by consideration of ethnic, socio-economic and, above all, political (and military) factors.

It is a datum of history, as simple as it is incontrovertible, that during the first phase of Muslim expansion—almost entirely carried forward by Arab leadership with Arab manpower and extending from about A.D. 633, the beginning of planned raids on Persian and Byzantine territory, to about A.D. 751 the consolidation of Muslim control over Central Asia by the turning back of the Chinese at Talas—no area was lastingly acquired, or converted to Islam which was not brought under continuous political domination by a Muslim government. This is as true for Spain (later lost to Christianity) as it is for Iran, Transoxiana, or the Ifriqiya. Besides, the initial Muslim expansion failed to obliterate any organized states of the same or superior administrative texture as the caliphate which it did not manage to crush at its very inception, such as Iran, or by a single major military effort, such as Visigoth Spain.

Within the span of activity of one generation Muslim political control reached its limits owing to three reverses—the siege of Constantinople had to be lifted in 717, Charles Martel stopped the Muslim raiders between Tours and Poitiers in 733 (rather than as usually stated, in 732), the victory of Marwan b. Muhammad over the Khazars in 737 proved ineffectual and the exit into the plains of Southern Russia remained closed to the Arabs. (In India, stabilization for almost three centuries was reached in 713 with the conquest of Sind and parts of the Punjab.) The Chinese defeat of 751 consolidated a previously won area of influence but did not open an avenue of conquest eastward. And yet, the ability of the caliphate to extend its sway as far as it did on the thin demographic base provided by its Arab ruling caste is perhaps the true miracle of the development of early Islam. The fact that conquest did not as a rule entail forcible conversion no doubt helped to secure the acquiescence of the overrun. So did the advantages accruing from integration in an enormous political compound. It must never be left out of sight that however desirable Islamization would appear to many Muslims and frequently,

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to the Muslim government as well, the immediate aim was, down to a fairly recent past, the establishment of Muslim control. The country rather than the souls of the inhabitants was to be won for Islam.

The *dār al-islām* is ultimately to absorb the *dār al-barb*, the "household of submission" the "household of resisters."<sup>1</sup> Resistance must be overcome. For to the Muslim, the finality of his faith can and must be realized in terms of political structure which guarantees the sway to the Religious Law, the *sharī'a*. But since this very law admits the unconverted monotheist individual conversion remains secondary to a hierarchical ordering of religious communities. Such ordering requires Muslim dominance.

As late a reformer and conqueror as 'Uthmān dan Fodio (1754-1817), the founder of the kingdom of Sokoto (in today's Northern Nigeria), stated: "The government of a country is the government of its king without question. If the king is a Muslim, his land is Muslim; if he is an Unbeliever, his land is a land of Unbelievers."<sup>2</sup>

It is true that even before the incisive changes brought about by the Mongols or occurring in their wake Islam acquired adherents in South Central Russia and that Muslims from other parts of the *dār al-islām* came to settle there, for example in Gurkūman (near Kiev).<sup>3</sup> It is also true that the Rūs, at times against Khazar obstruction, traded with the Muslims to the South East; nor is there any inclination to play down the importance and hence, the influence, of Islamic contacts as far North and West as Scandinavia. But however high the significance of trade relations and the (erratic) diplomatic relations may be assessed, it cannot be claimed that connection with the European North and even with European Russia as a whole has in any way whatever contributed to form the faith, the power structure and the civilization of Islam. The converse statement may be made for pre-Mongol Russia and for Scandinavia, although it may have to be conceded that one or the

<sup>1</sup> To use Kenneth Cragg's sensitive rendering in his *Sandals at the Mosque* (London, 1965), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Tanbīh al-ikhwān*, trans. H. R. Palmer, "African Affairs" (*Journal of the Royal African Society*), XIII (1913-14), 407-414; XIV (1914-15), 53-59, at XIV, 53 (Section iii of *Tanbīh*).

<sup>3</sup> For the localization of Gurkumān cf. C. E. Dubler, *Abū Hāmid el Grenadino y su relación de viaje por tierras eurasiáticas* (Madrid, 1953), pp. 232-233.

other political move of Varangians and Rūs was motivated by a desire to bypass the Khazars or in other ways to keep open the trade routes to the Muslim territories. One need but reflect on the contribution of Byzantium to its Northern neighbors and that of the Central Asians to the edifice of Islam to become aware of the marginality of the Islamic connection with the European North. It may be useful to restate that the basis of this judgment is essentially religious and cultural; it does not militate in any way against due appreciation of the migrations of objects and techniques of material civilization.

To comprehend somewhat more precisely than has hitherto been suggested, its development and with it its powers of attraction and absorption, the following aspects of the growth of an Islamic civilizational area must be envisaged and their implications followed through.

(1) Religious Islam precedes political Islam but only by a brief span. In conquering vast masses of land, for the most part to the East (North East) and the West of their homeland the Arabs, in the second half of the seventh century, established themselves as a thin *Herrenschicht*. Ideally at least and according to the hopes of the rulers, to be an Arab would coincide with being a Muslim. There was no eagerness to admit others to Islam and to rule. But there was, increasingly, the attraction of power—not always to be distinguished from that of the Muslim religion as such—and the need for assistance and identification on the part of some at least among the subject groups. The *dirigeants* of that power nucleus which was early Islam could not but use available traditions, skills, techniques, attitudes in solving as they arose, the problems implicit in managing a multinational empire and in preserving an intellectual identity in a culturally superior milieu.

The irruption of the Arabs into Byzantium reminds one inevitably of the earlier irruption of Germanic peoples into Rome. Leaving considerations of dimension and stability to one side, the decisive difference between the Germanic and the Arab invasions was the Arabs' sense of spiritual superiority of which pride of language and pride of race were integral parts. The greatest and last of God's prophets had been an Arab bringing a revelation in Arabic. There was no urge to "Romanize," to

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become civilized by integrating into “classical” culture, however inferior in almost every area of human attainment the conquerors may objectively have been vis-à-vis their Byzantine or Sassanian subjects.

The language curtain held and so did the sense of religious election, with religious precedence entailing a sense of collective moral and political superiority. The bearer of the higher truth rules as of right. The spiritual possessions of the communities, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, which the Muslim revelation has rendered obsolete, are *bonne prise* when serviceable and compatible—more realistically put, when needed and assimilable—; otherwise they must be shunned. Adoption of earlier achievement of the non-Muslim heritage is a natural process during the great age of the Islamic development (through the tenth century). Political supremacy and the self-assurance of the elect make borrowing into a joyful enlargement of the material and the psychological horizon. Rarely is there a trace of that xenophobic combativeness which is the constant companion of a feeling of inferiority. So the evolution of Islamic culture must be visualized as the clustering about a potent magnet of metal parings that are drawn into its field; the magnet remains the basic constant however dense the agglomeration of parings around it and however restlessly the hand holding it may, in fact, be moving in search of suitable and badly needed parings to cover the magnet’s bare, blank sides.

(2) Islamic civilization may thus rightfully be described as having grown out of a blend of cultures, provided it is kept in mind that this process of creative combination or integration divides into two phases. The first both precedes and coincides with the preaching of the Prophet himself in which pagan, Jewish and Christian elements are readily identifiable. His doctrine prejudged, as it were, orientation and range of spiritual receptivity of the Arab Muslims entering the larger world in consequence of the conquests, by skating out areas of compatibility—the one Creator God, the finality of Revelation, the confinement of man to the human condition, a style of religious behavior coloring if not determining social and political mores, these positions and postures represent so many positive and negative affinities that would render possible absorption of some and compel rejection of other

elements in the intellectual universe of Greek Christendom, Greek philosophy, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and later, Hinduism, most alien of all systems encountered.<sup>4</sup>

The fundamental "options" had been made irrevocably when the Empire was established; they had not been lived and thought through; their problematics had not yet been fully explored or even experienced; and they needed formulation. This formulation, tied as it was to the circumstances which created the need for it, reflected the challenges against which the Muslim identity had to be realized; "Islamicity" itself was affected and, on the whole, enlarged and enriched by contacts whose dangers were neutralized by the double compactness of Arab power and Arab solidarity.

To the Arabs, the new religion had opened new ways of self-realization. It had made possible social, cultural and, first of all, political and religious achievements, from curbing of the corrosive particularism of the tribes (whose resurgence was to contribute in no small measure to the early displacement of the Arabs from imperial leadership) to the winning of an empire buttressed by the religious unity of the rulers; and it had allowed to sweep aside an obsolete societal setting by helping the townsman to supremacy over the nomad and rural settler. The attraction of power on one hand, fissures, ethnic, religious and social, within the conquered territories on the other, compensated for a certain intellectual rawness. Neither at the founding of the caliphate empire nor, for example, at the decisive arrival of the Muslims in India, almost four centuries later, was Islam associated with the culturally leading local stratum or was able immediately to furnish such a stratum from its own recruits. But this initial culture differential did not impair the spread of Islam; it was, besides, overcome fairly soon by dint of a process of attraction and ingestion which left the continuity of the community intact, making it in fact the more self-assured as the basis of identity shifted from the political to the cultural sphere.

The absence of a competing power gave Islam the time to

<sup>4</sup> The syncretistic movements in seventeenth and eighteenth century India although affecting in large measure Muslims and Hindus who, in the last analysis, did share the same cultural background bear out, by their failure, the alienness of the fundamental outlook of the two religious groups; they have resulted in a keener *prise de conscience* of their spiritual individuality and hence have tended to accentuate separateness and antipathy.

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consolidate. Consolidation, in this context, has two aspects. (a) The creation of a large and continuous domain which under the logistic conditions of the age was practically self-sufficient, drawing its political motivations overwhelmingly from within; (b) the implementation of that universalism which was inherent in the original message but found itself in rivalry with a conception of Islam as preserve, prerogative or privilege of the Arabs (and their military associates in rulership), a conception which, apart from the realities of the seventh century, had some Koranic support to point to but which, in the last analysis, confused the circumstances of revelation with its ultimate intent. In fact, the consciousness of this universalism, i.e., the appropriateness of the faith and its practices to all mankind and its corollary, its detachment from the conditions of its original locale, was developed early and is traceable in explicit statement to no later than the ninth century (and probably sooner).

(3) To the outsider Islam appeared above all as a style of life identifying a community. The very grouping of its principal beliefs and obligations accentuated the devotional act and community practice. This practice would accommodate local custom but more importantly perhaps, be open to various types of religious experience: the security of legalistic and ritualistic regulation as much as the submergence of the barrier between creature and Creator in communal ecstasy or the relentless self-subjugation of the ascetic bent on that divine mercy which can never be merited and held with certainty. Infringement on divine unity, the negation of prophecy or the assertion of its continuance and renewal past the death of Muhammad, explicit denial of the authority of Scripture and the Prophet, and separation from the community—these were the unforgivable grounds of exclusion. Behavior proved belonging. Theology, however sophisticated and specific it was to become, and the Law with all its shrewd precision, never succeeded in abolishing the latitudinarian localism of the community whose actual differentiation from country to country, school to school, only rarely affected (before modern times) an intense feeling of cohesiveness, remarkable especially in view of the size of the community and its lack of formal organization.

The Muslim style of life eliminated the remnants of the Graeco-

Roman, though to some extent incorporating it, and the Iranian insofar as it tended to an independent posture, blended uncertainly with the Latin and Germanic in Spain, and clashed for ineffectual domination with Hinduism. In a less conspicuous manner its impact broke against the older Armenian and Georgian cultures, barricaded as they were behind their languages and the religious tradition of Christianity that had become inseparable from ethnic and national identity. Political domination was both too erratic and unrewarding to expose Georgians and Armenians to that sustained pressure which alone could have shattered their resistance. Islam had nothing to offer. It did not come as liberator from prolonged sectarian tribulation, its bearers were culturally strangers and racially as alien as the Byzantine and Persian attackers had been.

Pirenne has been criticized for charging the Arab conquest of the Eastern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean with the final breakup of the Mediterranean unity which was the greatest achievement and the heartpiece of the Roman Empire, and the subsequent northward turn of the Carolingian state; it was pointed out that trade, especially luxury trade, continued, the pilgrims visited the Holy Land as before, and that it was much sooner than the emergence of Arab Islam that the basic economic and political changes occurred which were to result in the shrunken outreach of the Germanic Middle Ages as contrasted with even the last stages of the Western Roman Empire. Yet it cannot be denied that the establishment of Muslim control eliminated the Latin and, in terms of cultural interaction across the sea, rendered ineffective the Greek centers on the long North African coastline; nor can it be denied that Muslim control resulted in the development of an autonomous zone that received its determining impulses from the East and whose principal concern with the Mediterranean was to extend domination; and even this impulse was irregular and tended to weaken after the conquest of Sicily. Besides, the contacts of raids and piracy, a modicum of dispensable trade and voyaging, in no way compensated for that unity of the Mediterranean which was, in a sense, the basic and the decisive fact of the Graeco-Roman period. From the seventh century onward the Mediterranean is divided among three culture areas and never less than three sovereign powers whose kinship is in



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their cultural ancestry and spiritual aspiration, but that do their best to encroach upon, and, failing this, to insulate one another.<sup>5</sup>

There has not been enunciated a Pirenne thesis in regard to the steppes and forests north of the Caucasus; it would presumably be difficult to argue for political isolation and economic and cultural decline in what is now European Russia as a result of the Muslim advance to Derbend. In fact, the connections between Iran and the North (or Northwest) do not seem to have suffered; if anything, trade and the import of artifacts would seem to have increased.<sup>6</sup> But it suffices to read the report of an Ibn Fadlān (921/22) and au Abū Hāmid of Granada (1080/81-1169/70; the relevant travels extend with interruptions from 1131 to 1153) to realize the distance between the culture of the North and the culture(s) of Islam. The Arab travellers report in a tone one might use of savage and at best, of strange and bewildering men and peoples. Where there are Muslims they are recipients not contributors; they are, in every sense of the word, on the outside, and no urge is felt to win those lands for the faith. Beyond the orbit of Turkic groups affinity to Islam appears to end. The pagan culture of the North is still intact and when it succumbs it yields to Christian encirclement. The ruthless self-assurance of the Norseman is reminiscent of the ruthless self-assurance of the early Arab conqueror. The same fascination of power that surrounded the Arab Muslims radiated from the Northern conquerors of Russia. The superiority of Byzantium emerged from bitter testing. No shared spirituality drew together two areas that geography and the limitative stabilization of Islam tended to keep apart.

<sup>5</sup> It is perfectly true that most major traits of the early Middle Ages in the West, economically as well as culturally, were in evidence way before the Arab invasion. But this invasion made the Tyrrhenian Sea into a frontier and the southern (and eastern) coastlands of the Mediterranean into foreign country—in point of mores, language, culture, religion, style of public and private life. The underlying similarities would not have sufficed to make the visitor from Christendom feel at home. Marc Bloch succeeded in evoking the significance of the change brought about by the Muslim conquest in one brief and balanced page; cf. “Une Mise au point: les invasions,” *Mélanges historiques* (Paris, 1963), I, 110-141, at pp. 122-123.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the article, rich in references, by T. Lewicki, “Il commercio arabo con la Russia e con i paesi slavi d’Occidente nei secoli IX-XI,” *Istituto Universitario orientale di Napoli, Annali*, n.s., VIII (1958), 47-61.