

medieval islam

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Gustave E.
von
Grunebaum

A vital
study
of Islam
at its
zenith.



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MEDIEVAL ISLAM

历史

A Study in Cultural Orientation

GUSTAVE E. VON GRUNEBAUM

SECOND EDITION



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PREFACE

THIS book has grown out of a series of public lectures delivered in the spring of 1945 in the Division of the Humanities of the University of Chicago. It proposes to outline the cultural orientation of the Muslim Middle Ages, with eastern Islam as the center of attention. It attempts to characterize the medieval Muslim's view of himself and his peculiarly defined universe, the fundamental intellectual and emotional attitudes that governed his works, and the mood in which he lived his life. It strives to explain the structure of his universe in terms of inherited, borrowed, and original elements, the institutional framework within which it functioned, and its place in relation to the contemporary Christian world.

A consideration of the various fields of cultural activity requires an analysis of the dominant interest, the intentions, and, to some extent, the methods of reasoning with which the Muslim approached his special subjects and to which achievement and limitations of achievement are due. Achievements referred to or personalities discussed will never be introduced for their own sake, let alone for the sake of listing the sum total of this civilization's major contributions. They are dealt with rather to evidence the peculiar ways in which the Muslim essayed to understand and to organize his world.

The plan of the book thus rules out the narration of political history beyond the barest skeleton, but it requires the ascertaining of the exact position of Islam in the medieval world and its significance. This plan also excludes a study of Muslim economy, but it leads to an interpretation of the social structure as molded by the prime loyalties cherished by the Muslim.

The Muslim approach to scholarship and literature is investigated, but the individual result attained by the Muslim scholar or writer, however important in the history of science or poetry, is touched upon only inasmuch as it documents a cultural trait not otherwise traced. In this context the structure of thought is regarded as more important than the particular ideas and the limitations of poetical ambition as significant as the successful

poem. The Muslim scale of values becomes patent through the analysis of the supreme purpose of his existence rather than through the detailing of individual value-judgments.

As the Muslim lived in a composite civilization, the impulses guiding selection, rejection, and integration of foreign elements will be revealing. An attempt to list borrowed traits, however, would be entirely out of place.

To trace the temper and flavor of the Muslim Middle Ages may then be called the object of this study; with the qualification, however, that the writer considers the fine arts outside his ken.

Except for proper names such as Allah and Mohammed, for which English usage has evolved a familiar spelling, oriental names and terms are presented in the manner of transliteration customary in American orientalist periodicals.

The maps following the Table of Contents are adapted from Reuben Levy, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Islam* (London, 1930-33), by permission of the publishers, The Rationalist Press Association London.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

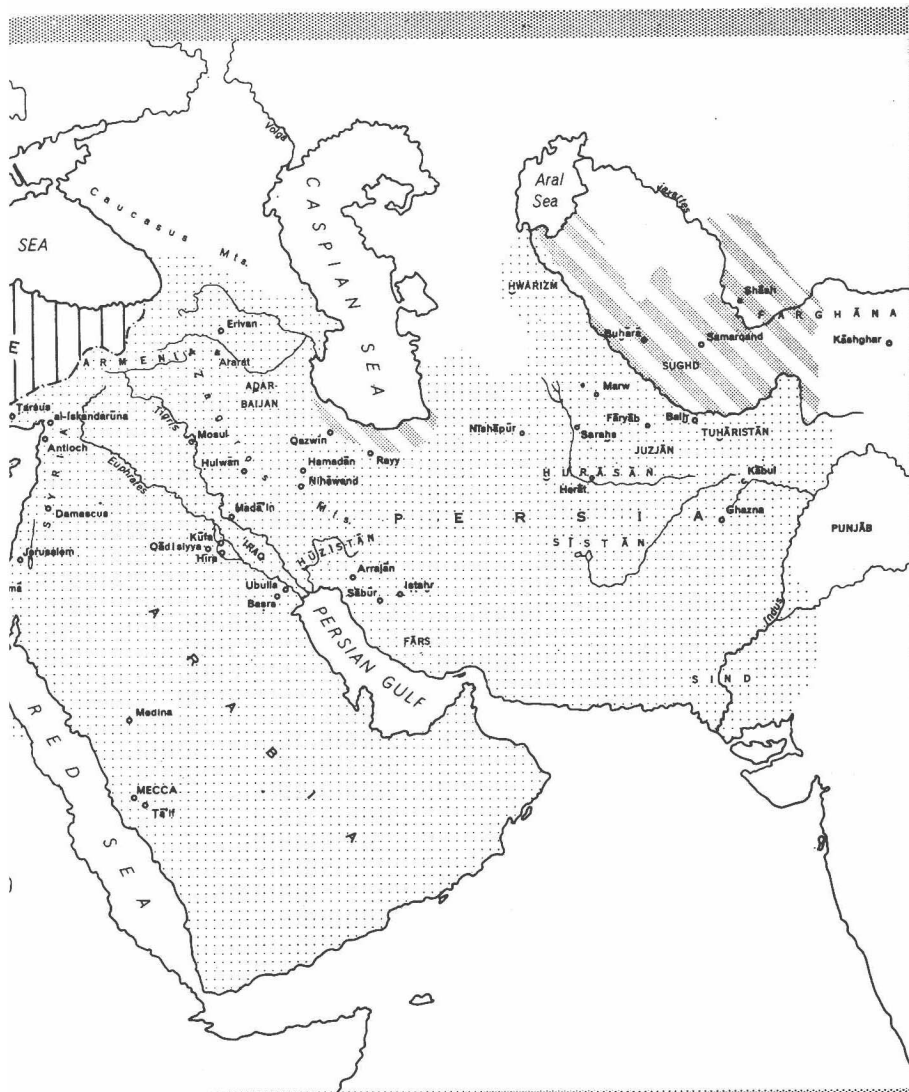
The opportunity has been seized to correct a number of misprints as well as of errors—some of them ferreted out by helpful reviewers. In a few cases additional information could be incorporated in the body of the book; but most addenda (indicated in the text by asterisks) had to be relegated to a separate section at the end. In either case the newly presented material has been included in the Index.

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MEDIEVAL ISLAM



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CHAPTER ONE

ISLAM IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD: THE MOOD OF THE TIMES

I

MEDIEVAL history west of India records the growth, decline, and mutual relationship of three political and cultural units—Islam, Greek Christendom, and Latin Christendom. These units represent compact blocs only when set against one another. During their early development each is ruled by a central government, and political theory never ceases to uphold the fiction of unity when actually the territory of each of the three power blocs has been divided among a varying but, on the whole, increasing number of princes. Although out of touch with contemporary reality, this fiction of unity reflects a powerful sentiment of cultural oneness within the area of each bloc and, to a certain extent, retards and obscures its decomposition.

Religion determines the demarcation of the blocs for the most part. Inadequate means of communication and inadequate public finances due to widespread substitution of payment in kind for payment in money make the intervention of the state spotty and jerky. The functions of the state are mostly limited to protection of its territory and its faith. Authority is concentrated in the capital or around the person of the ruler and quickly thins when the distance from this center increases. Wars usually involve a small proportion of the population as combatants, and battles between relatively weak forces decide the allegiance of vast expanses of land.

The trend toward political atomization is reversed only toward the end of the period. Throughout most of the Middle Ages man is a Christian or a Muslim first, a native of his own home district and subject of the local lord next, and only last a Frenchman, an Egyptian, or a German.¹ The gradual reversal

¹ Cf. the characteristic statement of the Byzantine scholar and ecclesiastic, George Scholarius Gennadius (d. 1468): "Though I am a Hellene by speech, yet

of the strength of these loyalties marks the close of the Middle Ages.

The crucial problem of the time is the relation between the temporal and the spiritual power. This relation was least troublesome in Islam, where the spiritual power never was formally organized, while the temporal remained satisfied with the role of a *defensor fidei* without arrogating the right of developing or even interpreting the body of religious doctrine. Occasional reversals of this attitude caused no change in the general ideas of function and limitation of the state. In Greek Christianity the solution of the conflict was sought and, in a measure, reached by administrative subjection of the leading cleric to the leading official: the Byzantine emperor appointed the patriarch of Constantinople. In the West, pope and emperor fought each other throughout the period, with the papacy slowly losing out as the age drew to a close. In a sense, every state in the West went through an embittered civil war, while the struggle between church and state went on tenaciously from generation to generation.

All three power blocs were heirs of the Roman Empire. Roman territory formed a considerable proportion of their area. Latin and Greek Christianity claimed legitimate succession to the Rome of the Caesars. In the Byzantine Empire the continuity of Roman law and administration never was broken; the West was careful to conceal the rift. The use of Latin as the language of administration, religion, and education gave substance to the Holy Roman Empire's pretense of perpetuating the glories of the ancient world. By origin Islam had no claim to a share in the Roman tradition. But in taking possession of provinces that either passed directly from Byzantine to Arab authority or had been an integral part of the Western Empire only a few generations before the Muslim invasion, Islam appro-

I would never say that I was a Hellene, for I do not believe as the Hellenes believed. I should like to take my name from my faith, and if any one asked me what I am answer 'A Christian.' . . . Though my father dwelt in Thessaly I do not call myself a Thessalian, but a Byzantine; for I am of Byzantium" (*Disputatio contra Judaeum* 2; quoted by S. Runciman, *Byzantine Civilisation* [London, 1933], p. 29).

propriated traditions of law, of administration, of finance, even of philosophy, literature, and architecture; and it was only the transfer of this heritage to the terms and conceits of the Arabic language and its harmonization with koranic requirements that gradually made the Muslims forget that process of borrowing of which in the beginning they had been clearly aware.

Measured against Constantinople and Rome, Islam was the upstart. It had no past, no historical tradition. And so, one feels tempted to say, Islam took unto itself the historical backgrounds of the Roman, the Persian, and the biblical worlds. Islam was born as an Arabian religion. But the memories of the Arabian peninsula were vague and did not reach far back into the past. When Mohammed connected his mission with the teachings of Christians and Jews and when he revealed that the great Arab sanctuary of the Ka'ba in Mecca had been consecrated by Abraham, he gave greater depth to Arab historical consciousness, he prolonged the memories of his people back to the day of Creation, and he gave them a spiritually significant tradition of holy history to supplement their ill-kept records of events of local importance.

The conquest of Persia provided the Arab mind with another set of concepts and memories. The appropriation of biblical history had put the Muslims at the end of one great development; the acquaintance with Persian history made the Muslim state heir of another which, while of slighter religious significance, was of equal imaginative value and whose lesson in statecraft considerably excelled that furnished by the edifying legends of scriptural origin.

And it was from the Greeks and Romans that the Arabs learned abstract thinking and the forming and handling of an abstract terminology.

Despite constant wars and a great many territorial changes, the over-all structure of the medieval world remained surprisingly stable for many a century. The internal upheavals within the areas of the great blocs left their relative situation more or less unaltered. The very speed with which Islam occupied its territory, never to add nor to lose much thereafter, made the

distribution of the civilized world definite as early as the middle of the eighth century.

Islam's recession in the extreme West, the loosening of its grip on Spain and Sicily, and the abandoning of its raids on southern France and Italy proceeded as slowly as did the gradual submergence of the Byzantine Empire under the ever recurring waves of Muslim attack. For eight centuries the Byzantines withstood the onslaught of Asia, and again for eight centuries the Muslims in Spain resisted the Christian resurgence. The battle swayed back and forth over the centuries, and most of the time its numerous reversals blinded the contemporary world to the true direction of the development. The Crusaders came but were repelled or absorbed. Except for the steady encroachment of the East on Byzantium, the power blocs expanded, not against, but away from, each other. Latin Christianity won northern Europe, broke into the regions along the Baltic, and converted the Western Slavs. Greek Christianity evangelized large parts of the Balkans and spread to Russia. Islam won new adherents in India, central Asia, and Africa. But no spectacular change occurred in the westward extension of the Muslim area between 732, when the Franks blocked the Muslim march into central France, and the fourteenth century, when the Turks pushed deep into the Balkan Peninsula.

In exactly one hundred years, between the death of the Prophet in 632 and the Battle of Tours and Poitiers, Islam carved out its dominion. During the last ten years of his life Mohammed had built up a state centered on Medina firmly controlling the Hījāz and parts of the Najd and more loosely imposing its authority on other sections of Arabia proper. His death was the signal for the nominally converted Bedouins to revolt. When this centrifugal movement had been crushed, expansion set in with incredible swiftness. Syria was torn from the Byzantines, weak and weary after a bitter struggle with Persia and even more embittered religious controversies within. In 638 Jerusalem fell. Only two years later Egypt was invaded, its conquest sealed when Alexandria surrendered in 647. In the meantime Persia had been overrun, and the Battle of Nihāvand (641) had put an end to effective large-scale resistance, although

it took another decade before the power of the last Sassanian ruler was completely eliminated and the king himself assassinated by a disgruntled subject (651).

The chronology of the Arab movement to the West is not entirely clear, but in 670 the soldiers of the caliph had advanced into what is today Tunisia and founded the city of Qairawân. Determined resistance of the native Berbers and of the Byzantine garrisons in various seacoast towns slowed up the Arab advance, but by about 700 the country had been cleared of Greek troops and the Berbers subdued. It seems that a sizable percentage of the Latinized and Hellenized population of the cities emigrated to Spain and Sicily. At any rate, the vestiges of ancient civilization were quickly obliterated.

Only ten years later Africa was sufficiently secure for the Arabs to use it as a base for an attack on Spain. In July, 711, the Visigoth Kingdom collapsed in the defeat of its army at Jerez de la Frontera. A few more years and the Arabs felt strong enough to cross the Pyrenees. But despite temporary successes on French soil, where they maintained themselves for about half a century in the south around Narbonne, their aggressive impulse was spent after they had met defeat at the hands of the Franks.

Some time earlier, in 717, the Arabs had tried for the last time to take Constantinople. Their failure at both ends of their front did not exactly stabilize the borders, yet it did decide the general area within which the history of the three power blocs was to unfold. The relinquishing by the Arabs, some time in the eighth century, of the ambition to build up a considerable navy in the Mediterranean is a telling symptom of the caliphs' acquiescence to the status quo. The reconquest of Crete by the Byzantines in 961 underlined the decline of Muslim sea power.

The Muslim conquests had been directed, at least in name, by one central power whose seat was moved, owing to shifts in the internal situation, from Medina to Iraq, then to Damascus and again back to Iraq. When Baghdad was selected as the new capital (762) and the empire rose toward the peak of its cultural splendor under the early 'Abbâsids, the process of disintegration had already set in. In 756 Spain declared itself independent of

the central government, and half a century later the caliph's writ was no longer valid in North Africa. Shortly after, the weakness of the 'Abbâsids became apparent in the East as well. The tendency toward the formation of regional powers operated in Europe, too. In 843 the Treaty of Verdun divided the Western Empire into three parts destined never again to coalesce. But just as the higher unity of the Holy Empire continued in the minds of Latin Christendom, so did the unity of Islam remain unbroken in spite of the fragmentation of the caliphate.

The great innovation of the Islamic state or states was to make the area of Muslim political domination and that of Muslim religion coextensive. Until the reconquest of Spain and the decline of the Turkish power in the seventeenth century, there were no sizable Muslim minorities in Christian lands. Muslim law provided for the accommodation of Christian or Jewish populations within the framework of the Muslim state, but it did not until very late provide for the contingency of a Muslim group living in permanent subjection to an unbelieving prince. Thus during our period the withdrawal of the Muslim army from a district usually entailed a recession of the Muslim faith—one more factor strengthening isolation.

It is true that hardly a year went by without wars between Muslim and Christian princes. It is, of course, equally true that these wars, and to an even greater extent the commercial relations which continued in spite of them, appreciably affected the domestic history of each of the power blocs involved. Nevertheless, the relative self-containedness and self-sufficiency of the three major units remain the outstanding characteristics of medieval history. On the whole, the motivation of their political and cultural development lay within their own confines; their problems—economic, political, religious—were predominantly domestic. And it is clear that their contemporaries thought so, too. Practical politics was mostly confined to the bloc of which the planning statesman controlled some part. There is always something utopian about the Western projects to win back the territories occupied by Islam. Lack of information and the technical inadequacy of the age strengthened the natural isolation of the blocs. The spiritual leaders of each bloc were very sure of the

vitality and value of their civilization. They were mildly interested in, perhaps even appreciative or envious of, the neighbor's achievement; but there was no wish to change with him, to imitate him, or to remodel essentials on the basis of his superior performance.

Each civilization was convinced of its spiritual superiority, of possessing the unadulterated truth, of contributing, by and large, the best adjustment to the business of living ever made. Curiosity with all the unspoken self-assurance it implies was probably the dominant trait in medieval intercultural relations. Even the outsider's superiority in one field or another did not shake in any way the quiet conviction that one's own world was that of the elect and that, whatever its weaknesses, it was the best and, at any rate, the only one where life was worth living.

The attitude toward the outside world of Athens in the fifth century B.C. and that of Boston during the fifty years preceding the first World War present a small-scale parallel. What went on abroad was of interest, it was relevant in many ways, and it should be taken notice of, but the native *polis* was a cosmos in miniature, and it was a gallery of fellow-Athenians, fellow-Bostonians, fellow-Muslims, to whom you played wherever you happened to live and whatever the stakes of your play.

II

Medieval history, then, as recorded at the time, appears for the most part confined to events affecting no more than one of the three great power blocs. What is more, to the contemporary mind those events sprang from the conflict of forces peculiar to his own unit. The same factors—distance, relative economic self-sufficiency, difference of language, religion, and everyday habits—make for isolation and also accentuate and perpetuate that keen antagonism between Europe and Islam, Islam and the Eastern Empire, the Eastern Empire and Europe, which is the most salient and the most permanent feature of historical development from the rise of Islam to the downfall of Constantinople.

Man in the Middle Ages made, on the whole, little or no ef-

fort to comprehend the outsider whose status as an infidel disqualified him as an object of dispassionate inquiry. Almost every response to the foreign world is colored by an element of political volition, be it propaganda or self-defense. But while medieval history portrays the protagonists' conflict over fundamentals, those fundamentals stand revealed as largely identical as soon as the sameness of problems, principles, methods, and aims is envisaged rather than the disparity of the individual solution, procedure, and style of argument or action.

The Muslim lived in the Ptolemaic universe of the Byzantine and the Byzantine's thought was as theocentric as his own; the Muslim's scale of values and his political ideas did not, in themselves, preclude the Byzantine's understanding, or even his sympathy. The same observation would hold good for the relation of the Latin Christian to both Muslim and Greek. And it is only on account of the comparative dimness of vision with which Islam encompassed the Latin world that the basic kinship of concepts and attitudes is more manifest when Muslims and Greeks are confronted with each other.

The identity, or near-identity, of the fundamental structure of their civilizations may have contributed in no small measure to the acrimony of their rivalry, but it preserved the basic unity of the medieval world, marking off the outsider as a barbarian even as exclusion from Greek culture had marked him off in antiquity. The antagonism of the three blocs was beyond reconciliation, but their struggle was meaningful in the sense that all the combatants fought on the same plane and that, therefore, the slogans and reasoning of one party could be understood by the other. The general trend of medieval history may be described as a tendency toward the disruption of this fundamental unity of Christendom and Islam—the end of the Middle Ages marks the end of both identity of structure and equality of achievement.

A common source or unilateral borrowing can readily be established to explain any agreement on essentials. Such an explanation, however, is hardly relevant in this context, since the contemporaries whose orientation is to be retraced, while aware of intercultural parallels, were outside the sphere of religion, al-