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## Islam: The Contemporary Scene

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# Islam: The Contemporary Scene

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PETER G. GOWING

**I**SLAM is today the religion of more than 430 million people, constituting the second largest (after Christianity) religious community in the world. One out of every seven human beings is a Muslim. Muslims can be found all over the world, but they are found predominantly in a wide belt stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific across Africa, parts of Europe, and West, South and East Asia.

Controlling nearly three dozen sovereign independent states which cover about 1/6 of the land surface of the globe, Muslims occupy a special position in international politics—sometimes called the “Muslim bloc”—and they possess tremendous potential for emerging once more in history as a leading power and civilizing force.

In addition to the independent states under Muslim rule and having Muslim population majorities, it is estimated that 147 million Muslims live in non-Muslim majority areas such as China, India and the Soviet Union. The more than a million and a half Muslims of the Philippines come under this category. It is because they are found in so many vital geographical areas of the world that Western nations have begun to take a special interest in studying Islam in order to understand its relation to the life of the Muslims. Moreover, because of the impact which Western colonialism, political and social ideals and technology have had on their history and way of life, Muslims themselves are showing interest in study-

ing Islam in order to know to what extent they may be able to adopt modern ways without losing their religion.

When Muslims talk of themselves collectively they frequently use the phrase *dar al-Islam*, the "household of Islam." In a paper of so small a compass, we can do little more than summarize the dominant characteristics of *dar al-Islam* as we find it in the contemporary world. We can, perhaps, point with profit to three such characteristics.

#### POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL DISUNITY

First, the household of Islam is, at the present time, politically and ideologically divided. Most of the three dozen independent Muslim states mentioned above came into being since the end of World War II. They are young nations, then, beset by the problems which accompany newly won freedom. Nationalism and national self-interest provide the mainsprings of their internal and external policies. They are jealous of their individual independence—and after centuries of foreign domination, first under the Ottoman Turks and more recently under the colonial powers of Europe, they find themselves pulling in different directions and talking in contradictory terms. The ideal of Pan-Islam, the ambition of dictatorship, the self-preservation of absolute monarchy, the desire of democratic self-rule, boarder disputes, internecine power struggles, the infiltration of Communism, the whims if demagogic leaders—all these are elements in the current outer disunity seen everywhere in the Muslim world. The tensions between Nasser's United Arab Republic on the one hand and the Kingdoms of Jordan and Saudi Arabia on the other, testify to this disunity. So do the troubles between Morocco and Algeria; the recent warfare in the Yemen; and the violently changing political color of Iraq. Closer to home, the "confrontation" of Indonesia (which has, with the possible exception of Pakistan, the largest concentration of Muslims of any nation on earth) and the new Islamic state of Malaysia also testifies to Muslim political disunity.

Among the Arab countries of the Middle East, the one external fact which seems to give them a measure of unity

is their common hostility to the state of Israel—but it is precisely because they are politically so divided that they are powerless to do anything effective about Israel (a circumstance good for Israel, of course, and good for world peace as well). The internal and external political divergencies of Muslim lands retard their orderly development and economic well-being and militate against their following common policies towards common goals.

Even so, many observers feel that the detrimental political disunity of the household if Islam is only a passing phase. The young and vigorous Muslim states are moving through an inevitable stage on their way to an integrated Muslim world, which an increasing number of them realize is the answer to their innumerable problems.

Destined to be of far more consequence than the current political disunity is the ideological disunity of *dar-al-Islam*. Three schools of thought compete for adherents. One school maintains that religion should be sacrificed to modernization; another insists that modernization be sacrificed to religion; and a third and growing school of thought argues that it is possible to reconcile modern life and the old religion. The struggle between these three viewpoints is painful.

The modernists—those who have been open to Western influence—feel that traditional Islam impedes the social, political, economic and technological advancement of the people. They feel that if the Muslim nations are to survive in the present age many of the ancient customs and ideas of Islam will have to be abandoned. Modernists argue for a separation of church and state—an unthinkable notion to the traditionalists. Mustapha Kemal of Turkey and Reza Shah Pahlavi of Persia were pioneers among the modernists who, by ruthless measures backed by force of arms, sought to propel their people into the modern world.

A hard core of traditionalists remain, however, and are able to find considerable support among the masses. They are religious leaders, for the most part, who cleave to the Qur'an, both literally and mystically interpreted, as the rule

for the whole of life. In their view, *dar al-Islam* has nothing to do with the non-Muslim world. Its chief aim is not keeping pace with the West but submitting in all things to the will of Allah. Traditional Islam is a complete way of life in which social conventions and religious beliefs are closely integrated.

The influence of the traditionalists is still strong enough to give the Muslim world generally a distinctly conservative character; and every effort at social and technological advancement is confronted by this conservatism. This is true, for example, with respect to lifting the status of women and delivering them from the confines of *purdah* (the practice of seclusion symbolized in the wearing of the veil). Fanatical religious leaders have fought the abolition of *purdah* tooth and nail, and while it has been abolished in many Muslim lands, it continues to be practiced in others. Islamic conservatism is also seen in divergent attitudes towards education. In Muslim countries, often two systems of education, regarded as diametrically opposed, vigorously compete for students—one system offering an up-to-date scientific education and the other offering a classical religious education in Islamic doctrine and law. In short, the modern temper, progressive and activist, is at odds with the fatalism which still pervades traditional Islam and which supports much of the apathy and inertia found in some segments of Muslim society.

But between the modernists and the traditionalists stand the increasing number of reconcilers who are able to find in the principles of Islam a flexibility which allows them to explain and interpret with the greatest freedom while still keeping the faith intact. They advocate what they call "absolute *ijtihad*" or free interpretation of Islamic doctrines and jurisprudence. *Ijtihad*, they feel, is a task only for those well qualified by training and experience to shape the mind of the community—men who understand both the ways of the modern world and the message and aims of Islam. The reconcilers are persuaded that only by free interpretation can the laws and wisdom of the past be harmonized with the experience and insights of the present. Reconcilers thus side with

the modernists in feeling that the impact of the West cannot be denied or ignored; and they side with the traditionalists in the view that the unique witness and mission of Islam cannot be repudiated. While conditions within the household of Islam do not yet permit the widespread practice of absolute *ijtihad*, indications are that it is the hope of the future, and more and more Muslim intellectuals regard it as the solution to ideological disunity.

#### FRATERNITY OF FAITH

The second characteristic of *dar al-Islam* in the contemporary world is its sense of fraternity. This may seem to contradict the first characteristic—its political and ideological disunity—but in reality it does not. The members of the household of Islam regard one another as brothers in the faith despite their differences, and unless one understands that fundamental fact, he will never understand contemporary Islam. Islam is aware of itself as a unique community of belief which is essentially different from any other, a community which belongs together and does not belong elsewhere. Muslims draw a line through all humanity: on one side is *dar al-Islam*, the household of Islam, or the household of “submission”; and on the other side is *dar al-Harb*, the “household of war”—that is, the household of those yet to be brought to submission to the will of Allah. This distinction between the two households is militantly maintained by Muslims everywhere, though it is interpreted variously from place to place. For example, it is not uncommon among the Maranao Muslims of the Philippines to refer to their national government (which is in the hands of Christian Filipinos) as the *gobirno a sarawang tao*—“the government of foreign people”. In Nigeria, Muslims openly call non-Muslims *kafiri* (infidel, unbeliever). This sense of otherness, or community, transcends the obvious diversities of race, language, economics, culture, geographical location and history which divide and subdivide the teeming household of Islam. Some non-Muslims assume that because Muslims have no outward form of unity higher than a fragmentary nationalism they can thus have no real consciousness of Muslim singularity in the face of the non-Muslim

world. This is not the case. As we study the contemporary *dar al-Islam* "we find a community of faith, worship and allegiance recognizably itself—people claiming to be Muslims through an almost endless variety of otherwise diversive factors."<sup>1</sup>

The non-Muslim world, and more especially the Christian world, would do well to ponder the fact that Muslims *practice* brotherhood of faith across racial and social distinctions to an amazing extent. In this connection, William Ernest Hocking of Harvard once remarked: "Islam has an effective fraternity which crosses racial bounds with an ease which Christianity professes but Christians seldom attain." In a paper written in 1947, Dr. Eddy Asirvatham, a Christian scholar from India who taught at Boston University, prophesied: "If Christians do not soon overcome distinctions of class and race and Hindus do not eradicate caste exclusiveness, Islam is bound to spread even more vigorously among the peoples of Asia and Africa than is the case today."<sup>2</sup> Professor Asirvatham's prophecy is being fulfilled before our very eyes.

#### RESURGENT ISLAM

Which leads us to the third characteristic of *dar al-Islam* in the contemporary world: it is militantly missionary. The period since World War II has seen a remarkable resurgence of Islam associated generally with the national aspirations of the different Muslim peoples. Islam is not the only non-Christian religion undergoing resurgence at the present time, to be sure. Hinduism and Buddhism are likewise showing reinvigoration. But not since the 7th and 8th centuries when Arab warriors welled up out of the Arabian peninsula and spread Islam across three continents at the point of the scimitar has there been anything to compare with the phenomenal expansion of Islam in Africa and Asia today. *TIME* magazine for January 11, 1963 reported that there are 100 million Mus-

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Eddy Asirvatham, "What is Islam?" (mimeographed paper), p. 14. The quotation from Hocking is Asirvatham's, p. 13 .

lims on the African continent and that the simple doctrines and disciplines of Islam win about nine million converts a year, which is approximately nine times the conversion rate to Christianity. While there are no authentic statistics on the relative rate of advance by Islam and Christianity in Africa to substantiate TIME's estimate, the fact remains that Islam is far outdistancing Christianity in winning new adherents in areas which before World War II were regarded as fertile fields for Christian missions.<sup>3</sup>

What is happening in the Muslim areas of the Philippines provides an excellent illustration of the character of Islam's missionary activity in both Africa and Asia. Since World War II Muslim missionaries and visitors from Egypt, Arabia, Pakistan, Malaya and Indonesia have come to the Philippines in impressive numbers and have stimulated a revitalization of Islam among the Muslim Filipinos. A great many new mosques have been built all over so-called Moroland; *madrasas* (Qur'anic schools) have been founded in the chief cities and towns of the Muslim areas; a number of distinctly religious societies and associations have emerged providing an organizational cohesiveness Muslim Filipinos had not known before; there has been a revival of interest in performing the pious duties of Islam; and religious rites and customs have been reformed along orthodox lines. In fact, *purdah*, never before common in Philippine Islam, has been introduced in some places in a modified form. The Muslim Filipinos have become so self-consciously Muslim that the long-used and popular name "Moro" now offends many of them. Filipino Muslims are in close contact with the Muslim world—not only because foreign Muslims visit here but also because Filipinos by the hundreds go on the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) each year, Filipino Muslim leaders (such as former Senator Domacao Alonto) travel to Egypt and Pakistan and attend international Islamic gatherings, and Filipino students go abroad to study at various Islamic educational institutions. Thus

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Hughes, "Christianity and Islam in West Africa", *The Christian Century* LXXXI/9-10 (26 Feb. and 4 Mar. 1964), 264-267, 298-302.



far, about a hundred young Filipino Muslims have studied at Al Azhar University in Cairo under scholarships provided by the Egyptian government.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Muslim governments—notably the United Arab Republic, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—have sponsored and underwritten this missionary activity in Africa and Asia. And Muslim mission societies of one sort and another have sprung up to channel money and personnel into the enterprise. The enterprise has been phenomenally successful—alarmingly so to non-Muslims. Three factors in particular have favored this success. In the first place, the process of becoming a Muslim is very simple and uncomplicated—requiring little more than the confession that there is one God, Allah, and that Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah. Secondly, Islam does not make the demands of social and cultural readjustment that some religions do of converts—Islam accepts people more or less as they are, where they are. In Africa, for example, unlike many Christian groups, Islam does not demand of a polygamous convert that he put away all but one wife, or that he move to a new village for converts, away from his past environment. And, thirdly, Islam emphasizes its sense of fraternity, built on a common faith and overriding all other differences. Muslim nations are ready to give tangible evidence of this fraternity by providing material aid to indigent and illiterate converts in the form of grants of money, scholarships, preachers, teachers, libraries and the like.

The re-emergence of its religion as a militant missionary faith is the great new fact of *dar al-Islam*—a fact with which the non-Muslim world in general and the Christian world in particular must come to grips.

#### POTENTIAL FUTURE

In closing, let us return to a statement made in the beginning: the household of Islam possesses tremendous potential for emerging once more in history as a leading power

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Peter G. Gowing, "Muslim Filipinos—Present Condition and Future Prospects", *Silliman Journal* IX/4 (1962), 305-316.

and civilizing force. Muslims themselves are very much aware of this potential, while at the same time they are not unaware of the obstacles to its realization. Everywhere throughout Islam prophetic voices are calling for the foresight and statesmanship to wean Muslims from divisive nationalism and mistrust. These same voices call for unity in a common program of work, common aims, common values and a common society. One such voice is that of the prominent Pakistani Muslim journalist, Sayyid Hasan Mutahar:

We hope it is eminently clear that a united Muslim world may become probably by far the most powerful single bloc in the world. Economically it will be self-sufficient and will be in control of the major oil production of the world. Hence, politically, it will be an important force which may act as a third bloc preventing either the United States or the Soviet Union from taking any steps prejudicial to world peace. It may at the same time, if this united [Muslim] world is inspired by [the] basic teachings and values of Islam, introduce fresh vitality into the present-day decadent world where license rather than freedom is the ruling principle, where rationalism has been carried to such an extent that man has almost forgotten how to respond emotionally to the deeper spiritual urges of his being, where scientific materialism and technological civilization have introduced such an ideology as that of material welfare without spiritual basis.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Muslim World at a Glance", *Muslimnews International* II/2 (July, 1963), 25.