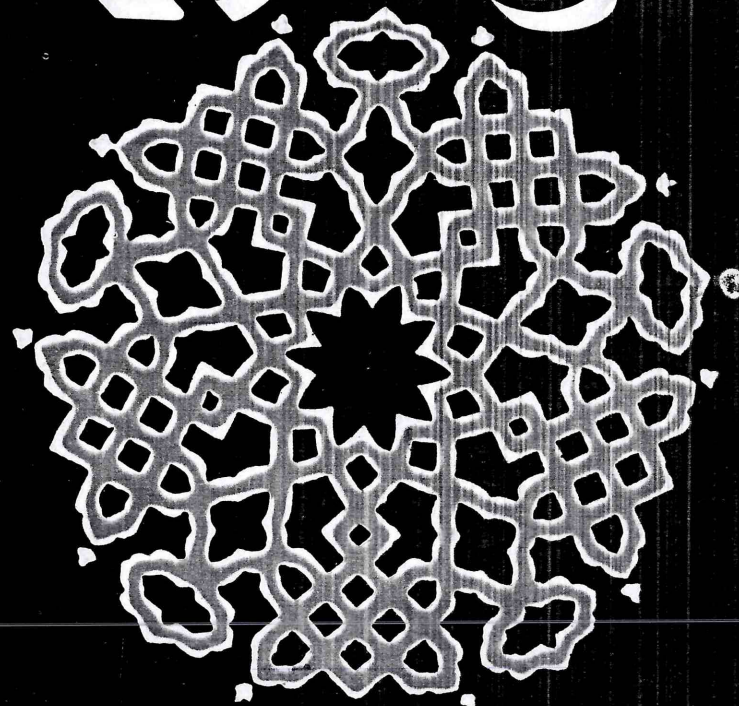
Islamic Life and Thought



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Religion and Secularism, Their Meaning and Manifestation in Islamic History

I

Those whose minds have been nurtured on Western thought turn inevitably to the concepts of religion and secularism when they wish to study the Islamic world. But words do not always have the same meaning within differing contexts. This is especially true in the perspective of different civilisations. Therefore, it is necessary to define what is meant by religion and secularism in relation to Islam before discussing their significance in Islamic history. To anyone familiar with Islam, it is only too obvious that these terms do not have the same meaning in languages connected with Muslim civilisation as they have in various European languages. In fact there exists no term in classical Arabic or Persian which is exactly synonymous with the word 'secularism'.[1] Nor is there in Islam the distinction between the religious and secular, or the sacred and the profane, as there is in Christianity.

In the unitary perspective of Islam, all aspects of life, as well as all degrees of cosmic manifestation, are governed by a single principle and are unified by a common centre. There is nothing outside the power of God and in a more esoteric sense nothing 'outside' His Being, for there cannot be two orders of reality. *Lā ilāha illa'Llāh* means ultimately that there is no being or reality other than the Absolute Being or the Absolute Reality. In essence, therefore, everything is sacred and nothing profane because everything bears within itself the fragrance of the Divine.

In such a perspective, the meaning of religion and secularism appears in a new light. Religion becomes the revelation sent by God to man to guide him towards Unity and to help him become what he always 'was' but has forgotten; that is, to make him remember and

regain the celestial beatitude which he once enjoyed before falling into the prison of the senses. Religion may be considered ultimately as the Divine guide by the help of which man can overcome the ontological barrier separating him from his Divine Origin, although in essence he has never been separated from it. Moreover, religion becomes not a single instance of Divine guidance but all the revelations sent through the 124,000 prophets mentioned in traditional Islamic sources to the peoples of all ages and nations, of which the last in the present cycle of humanity is Muḥammad – upon whom be blessings and peace.[2] So it is that the Prophet claimed not to have brought anything new but to have re-stated the Truth claimed by all the previous prophets and to have re-established the primordial tradition (*al-dīn al-ḥanīf*) which is the Truth lying within the nature of things.

The mystery of creation lies in the fact that God, despite His perfection and His plenitude, brings into being a world which, although nothing but Himself, does not share His perfection. In fact, manifestation means imperfection, because it means separation from the source of all goodness. It is this separation which, although an illusion with respect to the Divine, is nevertheless quite real with respect to cosmic existence, and which is the source of all secularism, or of all that is, from the human point of view, non-sacred or non-divine.

Secularism, therefore, may be considered as everything whose origin is merely human and therefore non-divine, and whose metaphysical basis lies in this ontological hiatus between man and God. Of course in reality even this void is a symbol of the Divine, just as Satan is the ape of God, but, from the point of view of man in his earthly imperfection or what in Christianity is called the state of 'fallen man', this separation is real with a reality matching that of the Divine order itself. Thus in man's social and historic existence secularism has come to acquire a reality as great as religion itself. Or, in today's world, in which to most modern men God seems to be nowhere and in which He has become eclipsed by the shadows of forgetfulness, it has even come to occupy the centre of the stage and to claim all rights for itself.

Considered from this point of view, religion in Islam means first of all the Islamic revelation and all the truths, both exoteric and esoteric, revealed in the Holy Quran and interpreted by the Prophet in his sayings and traditions. In the case of the Shi'ah the sayings of the Imams are included along with those of the Holy Prophet. Secondly, religion means all the teachings and institutions of Divine origin revealed through other prophets before Islam, many of which Islam, through the universality and synthetic power which is its *raison d'être*, integrated into its own perspective.

Similarly, secularism implies ideas and institutions of purely human origin, not derived from an inspired source. Therefore, we should not

consider anything that does not lie specifically within the teachings of Islam as secular, nor everything practised by those who profess Islam as necessarily religious. The Pythagorean-Platonic wisdom derived from the Orphic mysteries and inherited later by the Muslims cannot be called secular, and some of the apologetic writings of the Muslim modernists cannot be considered as religious, although they may be dressed in Islamic terms.

II

Islamic history presents several instances in which foreign ideas have intruded into the world view of Muslim civilisation, ideas which have in more than one instance been secular in the sense defined above. As mentioned earlier, the first set of historical circumstances in the career of Islam concerned the Arab environment in which Islam was revealed. There were many 'pagan' Arabic practices and traditions such as blood-feuds, absolute allegiance to the tribe, and cults of idol worship which were banned in the unitarian and universal perspective of Islam. Islam waged a battle against many such elements, not only during its early life in Arabia, but also in another form during the Umayyad caliphate. During the first struggle of its terrestrial existence, Islam succeeded in freeing itself from becoming a local Arabic religion, but nevertheless it acquired a certain Arabic character, since all revelation is coloured by the world in which it is first revealed and it is also spoken in the language of the people to whom it is revealed. Furthermore, despite the victory of Islam over 'pagan' ideas, the aftermath of the battle of Ṣiffīn and the later establishment of the Umayyad caliphate by Mu'āwiyah mark the first intrusion of secularism into the political life of Islam in the sense that politics, or at least a part of it, became divorced from divinely revealed principles and fell into the arena of power politics in which human ambition was the dominant factor.[3]

In spreading northward into what was previously the domain of the Persian and the Byzantine empires, Islam encountered another set of political, administrative, and fiscal institutions and laws which presented a challenge to the unified structure of the earlier Medinan community. By the power of integration inherent within Islam, many of these institutions were Muslimised and absorbed into the structure of Muslim society so that they lost their foreign attributes. Yet other adaptations of Byzantine and Persian customs and procedures, especially in the fields of taxation, introduced a certain heterogeneity into Islamic law which later played an important part when much of the law in the Muslim world was secularised during the thirteenth/nineteenth

and fourteenth/twentieth centuries. There were also cultural movements of a national character in this encounter between Islam and the Persian and Byzantine civilisations in the second and third centuries AH, especially among the Persians. The latter were finally absorbed into the bosom of Islam and at this point no major secular ideas were able to penetrate the Islamic world view.

During the succeeding period, the intrusion of an ancient political institution became a reality as the Abbasid caliphate weakened in the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries. At the very moment when al-Māwardī was defining the function of the caliph, the power of the caliphate was for all practical purposes being replaced by that of local princes. However, it was not until the establishment of the Seljuks that the existence of a third authority, the *sultān*, became recognised alongside that of the Sacred Law and the caliph. In this new adjustment, which is reflected in the writings of such theologians as al-Ghazzālī and especially in the *Siyāsat-nāmah* of Khwājah Niẓām al-Mulk, the sultanate, an institution based on Sassanid models and alien to the early political organisation of Islam, became recognised as the necessary factor for the preservation of religion in society.[4] This view was accepted to such an extent that many of the Sufis, philosophers and scientists of the Mongol period, such as Najm al-Dīn Rāzī and Khwājah Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, wrote in its support.[5]

Turning from social and political matters to cultural and intellectual questions, once again we meet with the introduction of foreign elements into the Muslim world – this time, the vast heritage of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations, Persia and to some extent India. But here also a close study reveals that the Muslims accepted only those elements of this heritage which were ultimately of an inspired origin and not the secular and naturalistic aspects of the Graeco-Roman heritage which ultimately led to the death of classical civilisation. So we see the Muslim sages turning eagerly to the teachings of the Pythagorean-Platonic school and the writings of the Aristotelians viewed through the commentaries of the neo-Platonists. The Muslims, much like the Jewish philosopher Philo, considered these sages the heirs to the wisdom of the prophets, and in their wisdom they saw the reflection of the doctrine of Divine Unity taught by the sacred scriptures.

Similarly, Muslims made the scientific heritage of Alexandria their own, because these forms of knowledge, like other ancient and medieval cosmological sciences, sought to show the unicity of Nature and the interrelatedness of all that exists.[6] Therefore, far from being secular modes of knowledge, they were closely related to the central theme of Islamic wisdom, unity, and throughout Islamic history, the sciences and religious and metaphysical doctrines were knit together,

as in the Jābirian corpus or the *Rasā'il* of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. For example, the mathematics of the Greeks and the Hindus were united in the writings of the Muslim mathematicians, thereby creating or giving further development to several new branches of this science including algebra. But here, too, mathematics was considered not a secular technique but more as the ladder of Jacob extending from the sensible to the intelligible world and as the science which the Pythagoreans considered to be the key to the treasury of Divine mysteries.

There were, of course, also aspects of the classical culture which scarcely interested the Muslims, among them the secularist philosophies of the Epicureans and of some of the Cynics or the naturalism of the atomists. The one element of potential secular nature, however, which did penetrate into the Islamic world view was the rationalism inherent in Peripatetic philosophy. Rationalism, basing itself on the exclusive validity of judgement of the human reason which is but a reflection of the Intellect, tends towards the secular by nature, because human reason, although real on its own level, is but a limitation and dispersion of the Intellect and to that extent rooted in that illusory void which separates our existence from Ultimate Reality. This rationalism, based neither upon Islamic revelation nor on other inspired doctrines which are largely gnostic and illuminationist rather than rationalistic, was for several centuries the main source of potential secularism in the cultural life of Islam. It manifested itself primarily in the form of various philosophical and theological movements. The most famous of these was that of the Mu'tazilites and it was not weakened until the fifth/eleventh and sixth/twelfth centuries. At that time, under the pressure of both theology and Sufism, the danger of the suffocation of spiritual life under rationalism was curtailed, and the scene prepared for the expansion of the sapiental doctrines of sages like Shaykh al-Ishrāq Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī and Ibn 'Arabī. In this challenge, the spiritual principles of Islam met secularism in its most basic form, and in restricting its influence enabled the Islamic world to continue its life upon the foundations established by the Quranic revelation.

III

The most devastating attack of secularism upon Islam did not begin until the thirteenth/nineteenth century, and then by a civilisation which, unlike that of the defunct Greeks, was materially more powerful than the Islamic world and politically and economically interested in overcoming it. This attack, facilitated by internal weakness within much of the territory of Islam which had set in during the latter part of

the twelfth/eighteenth century, and the partial destruction of some of the Sufi brotherhoods by new forms of puritanical rationalism like Wahhabism in Arabia and the *Ahl-i ḥadīth* in India, began to affect nearly every realm of Muslim life, including law, government and administration, education, and even religion itself.[7]

In the field of law, through a series of changes or *tanẓīmāt* carried out in the Ottoman Empire, that part of the law which from the beginning had remained outside Quranic legislation was converted to various European codes. These codes did not originate from theocratic societies like Byzantium and Persia but from the modern West, which ever since the Renaissance has moved with ever-increasing speed towards the complete secularisation of all life and the divorce of things from their spiritual principles. The acceptance of European codes for commercial and civil matters has been followed in the fourteenth/twentieth century by the demand for the 'modernisation', which always means secularisation, of even personal law which is clearly outlined in the Holy Quran. And so we find such well-known modernists as al-Zahāwī, Ṭāhir al-Ḥaddād and many others pleading for the legal 'equality' of women in the European sense within a secular law and apologists like Sayyid Amīr 'Alī feeling ashamed of the Islamic conception of the status of women because it does not agree with the modern European view.[8]

In the field of government, there has been no uniformity of action. Each Muslim land has a political form peculiar to itself. It may be said in general that throughout the Islamic world, many ideas concerning government and administration have been spread which are not only of non-Islamic origin but which are, moreover, fruits of the various revolutions of the past two centuries in Europe. Each of these has aimed at a greater degree of secularisation of the society. Among these ideologies, not the least of them is Western-style nationalism, which in most areas of the Muslim world has become a powerful force in the secularising of Islamic society.

Nowhere is the intrusion of secularism into the Islamic world more evident than in the field of education. Here, from the thirteenth/nineteenth century onward, schools on a European model and teaching European subjects have often been built by Muslim authorities. The original hope was to enable Muslims to overcome their European invaders. However, the consequence of such schools has been the growth of a segment of Muslim society into a class with views differing radically from the majority of Muslims and the creation of serious rifts in the Muslim social order.[9] To see this difference of approach, it is enough to speak with a student of a modern university in the Muslim world and compare his ideas with those of a student from a religious school or *madrasah*.

The new education represents an important factor in the introduction of secularism. This is especially true not so much because of the subject-matter taught but because of the point of view from which the subjects are taught. The medieval Muslim schools also taught mathematics, the natural sciences, languages, and letters, besides theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy. However, the modern subjects bearing the same name are not simply the continuation of the Islamic sciences, as is claimed by many Muslim apologists.

It is true that the modern sciences have borrowed many techniques and ideas from the ancient and medieval sciences, but the point of view in the two cases is completely different. The Islamic sciences breathed in a Universe in which God was everywhere. They were based upon certainty and searched after the principle of Unity in things which is reached through synthesis and integration. The modern sciences, on the contrary, live in a world in which God is nowhere or, even if there, is irrelevant to the sciences. They are based on doubt. Having once and for all turned their back on the unifying principle of things, they seek to analyse and divide the contents of Nature to an ever greater degree, moving towards multiplicity and away from Unity. That is why, for the majority of Muslim students studying them, they tend to cause a dislocation with regard to the Islamic tradition. Unfortunately, not everyone is able to see the heavens as both the Pedestal of God's Throne and incandescent matter whirling through space.[10] Therefore, by teaching the various modern European arts and sciences which are for the most part alien to the Islamic perspective, the curriculum of the schools and universities in the Muslim countries has injected an element of secularism into the mind of a fairly sizeable segment of Islamic society.

Finally, in the field of religion itself, secularism has made a certain encroachment in the form of rationalism or of various apologetic tendencies.[11] The movement begun by Jamāl al-Dīn Astarābādī, known usually as al-Afghānī, and Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh to consider once again the basis of Islamic Law and theology was marked often by a tendency to belittle or even deny elements that were not in conformity with modern thought. This finally led to the neo-Wahhābī Salafiyyah movement in Egypt and spread to other lands, including Persia, where a few of the religious leaders like Sharī'at-i Sangilajī became its advocates. Even more in India, where modernism has spread more in the philosophical and educational fields than in the Middle East, nearly all of the modernist leaders from Sir Aḥmad Khān and Sayyid Amīr 'Alī to contemporary figures have been influenced to some extent by secularism. Although most of the above mentioned authors still thought within the unified view of Islam, some, like the Egyptians 'Alī Abdal-Rāziq, Shaykh Khālid, and Ṭaha Ḥusayn (at

least in his early period), moved a step further and preached openly the separation of religion from temporal life, recognising secularism as a legitimate pole of life alongside religion. In Persia and other areas of the Muslim world, the Bahā'ī movement has introduced Western and secular ideas in a religious dress and has played some role in spreading secularism among certain classes of the countries involved.

We see, therefore, that in nearly every domain of life the unitary principles of Islam are challenged by secular ideas and the Islamic world is faced with the mortal danger of 'polytheism' or *shirk*, that is the setting up of various modern European ideas as gods alongside Allah. As to what will be the outcome of this struggle between a weakened defender and a materially powerful enemy it is difficult to predict. Certainly the Islamic world cannot hope to return to a homogeneous and integrated life while the ever increasing disorder in the Western world continues. Moreover, Islam is not exclusively a way of love like Christianity and therefore cannot remain oblivious to any form of knowledge. The way of Islam is essentially gnostic. Therefore it must have a response to other systems which claim to expound a science of things and must be able to place all orders of existence within its universal perspective.

Whatever the immediate outcome of this struggle, there is no doubt that ultimately the clouds of illusion and unreality will fade away. No matter how much secularist thought may appear dominant, it has no more substance than the fragile and changing human nature from which it derives its being. When the illusion of the separation between the soul and the Divine Self is removed, we realise that there is but one Principle dominant in every mode of manifestation, and that the reality we saw in secularism as a competing principle with religion has been no more than the reality of the fantasies of a soul not yet awakened from the dream of negligence and forgetfulness.

Notes

1 However there is the word '*urfī* which refers essentially to law, *dunyawī*, which means this-worldly in contrast to other-worldly, and *zamānī* which means temporal as opposed to eternal, but none of these has exactly the same meaning as secular.
2 Actually Islam, in the most universal sense, means reassertion of the Truth which always was and always will be and of which all orders of existence partake including Nature.
3 See Gibb, H. A. R., 'An Interpretation of Islamic History. I', *Muslim World*.
4 See Lambton, A. K. S., 'Quis custodiet custodes? Some Reflections on the Persian Theory of Government', *Studia Islamica*, vol. V, 1965, pp. 130 ff.; and Binder, L., 'Al-Ghazali and Islamic Government', *Muslim World*, XLV, No. 2, July 1955.
5 See *Mirṣād al-'ibād* of Najm al-Dīn Rāzī and the *Nasirean Ethics* of Ṭūsī.
6 See Burckhardt, T., 'Nature de la perspective cosmologique', *Études traditionelles*, vol. 49, 1948, pp. 216–19.

7 For a detailed study of Western influence on these and other aspects of life in the Ottoman Empire, see Gibb, H. A. R., and Bowen, H., *Islamic Society and the West*, Oxford University Press, 1957 on. Needless to say, modernism, which is for the most part synonymous with secularism, has also affected the daily life of the Muslims, their dress, architecture, city planning, interior decoration, diet, and other aspects of similar nature which have a profound influence on the whole of man's outlook. Although we cannot delve into this question at the present moment, we wish to emphasise the importance of these factors in preparing the way for the spread of secularism.
8 For a thorough study of modernism in Islam see Gibb, H. A. R., *Modern Trends in Islam*, Chicago, 1947.
9 'It is important for us to appreciate the breadth of this rift between religious and secular education in Egypt and its far reaching consequences. Not only has it ranged school against school and university against university, but it has contributed more than any other factor to the division in Muslim society . . . ranging orthodox against 'Westernizer' in almost every department of social and intellectual activity, in manner of dress, living, social habits, entertainment, literature, and even speech'. Gibb, H. A. R., *Modern Trends* . . . , p. 42. The same could be said of Persia, Pakistan, and most other Muslim countries.
10 For a profound discussion of this question, see F. Schuon, *L'Œil du cœur*, Paris, 1974, pp. 95–7.
11 See L. Gardet, *La Cité musulmane*, Paris, 1954, pp. 350–62.

2

The Concept and Reality of Freedom in Islam and Islamic Civilisation

In the modern world one concept which is most affected by the dominance of secularism is that of freedom. The discussion of the concept of freedom in the West today is so deeply influenced by the Renaissance and post-Renaissance notion of man as a being in revolt against Heaven and master of the earth that it is difficult to envisage the very meaning of freedom in the context of a traditional civilisation such as that of Islam. It is necessary, therefore, to resuscitate the concept of man as understood in Islam in order to be able to discuss in a serious way the meaning of freedom in the Islamic context. It is meaningless to try to study the notion of freedom in Islam from the point of view of the meaning which has been attached to this term in the West since the rise of humanism.

It might be said that most of the discussion in the West concerning freedom involves in one way or another the freedom to do or to act, whereas in the context of traditional man the most important form of freedom is the freedom to *be*, to experience pure existence itself. This is the most profound form of freedom but it is nearly completely forgotten today because modern man who is so fond of collecting experiences has ceased to remember what the experience of pure existence, which is a reflection of Being Itself and which is at once beauty, consciousness and bliss, means and therefore how precious is the freedom which makes this experience possible and, from another point of view, issues from this experience.

Humans are, according to the Islamic perspective, created in the 'image of God' and are also God's vicegerents (*khalīfah*) on earth. But they are both, by virtue of their servitude to God which makes it possible for them to receive from Heaven and to administer on earth. By virtue of their centrality in the cosmic scheme, proven in reverse if proof is necessary for the sceptic by the nearly complete destruction they have brought upon the environment, they participate in the

Divine freedom, and by virtue of being earthly creatures they are beset by all the limitations which a lower degree of existence implies. God is both pure freedom and pure necessity. Man as the theophany of the Divine Names and Qualities, or as the 'image of God', participates in both this freedom and this necessity. Personal freedom lies in fact in surrender to the Divine Will and in purifying oneself inwardly to an ever greater degree so as to become liberated from all external conditions, including those of the carnal soul (*nafs*), which press upon and limit one's freedom.

Pure freedom belongs to God alone; therefore the more we *are*, the more are we free. And this intensity in the mode of existence cannot be reached save through submission and conformity to the Will of God who alone *is* in the absolute sense. There is no freedom possible through flight from and rebellion against the Principle which is the ontological source of human existence and which determines ourselves from on high. To rebel against our own ontological Principle in the name of freedom is to become enslaved to an ever greater degree in the world of multiplicity and limitation. It is to forfeit the illimitable expanses of the world of the Spirit for the indefinitely extended labyrinth of the psycho-physical world, where the only freedom is to pursue an ever more accelerated life of action devoid of meaning and end.

Infinity resides in the centre of our being, a centre which is hidden from the vast majority of those who live on the periphery of the wheel of existence. Yet only at the centre are we free in an absolute and infinite sense. Otherwise each of us is limited in both our powers and rights *vis-à-vis* God, nature, and other human beings. To seek infinity in the finite is the most dangerous of illusions, a chimera which cannot but result in the destruction of the finite itself. 'Infinite freedom' exists only in the proximity of the Infinite. At all lower levels of existence freedom is conditioned by the limitations of cosmic existence itself and is meaningful only with respect to the limitations and obligations which the very structure of Reality imposes upon us.

The principles outlined briefly thus far form the background of all Islamic thought on freedom, but the degree to which they are explicitly formulated depends upon the perspective within Islamic civilisation in question. The Islamic intellectual world is a hierarchic one in which the same truths are reflected in differing forms on various levels and modes of understanding ranging from the exoteric law to pure esotericism. Here it is sufficient to discuss the concept of freedom as understood by the jurisprudents (*fuqahā'*), the theologians (*mutakallimūn*), the philosophers and Sufis to grasp its basic meaning within the Islamic world view.

The jurisprudents are concerned with the codification of Islamic

Law (*Sharī'ah*) and their discussion of freedom is naturally from a juridical point of view rather than a metaphysical one. Nevertheless the metaphysical background is present even in their juridical discussions for they are dealing with the same *homo islamicus* to whom the whole of the Islamic revelation is addressed. The jurisprudents envisage human freedom as a result of personal surrender to the Divine Will, rather than as an innate personal right. For them, since we are created by God and have no power to create anything by ourselves (in the sense of creation *ex nihilo*), we are ontologically dependent on God and therefore can only receive what is given to us by the source of our own being.

Human rights are, according to the *Sharī'ah*, a consequence of human obligations and not their antecedent. We possess certain obligations towards God, nature, and other humans, all of which are delineated by the *Sharī'ah*. As a result of fulfilling these obligations we gain certain rights and freedoms which are again outlined by the Divine Law. Those who do not fulfil these obligations have no legitimate rights, and any claims of freedom that they make upon the environment or society is illegitimate and a usurpation of what does not belong to them, in the same way that those persons who refuse to recognise their theomorphic nature and act accordingly are only 'accidentally' human and are usurping the human state which by definition implies centrality and Divine vicegerency. Islam holds this conception not only for its own followers but also for the followers of all other religions who, therefore, as religious minorities, are given rights under their own religious codes.

The technical discussion of freedom (*ḥurriyyah* in Arabic and *āzādigī* in Persian) as far as jurisprudence is concerned usually involves the question of slavery, the means whereby slaves are freed, the duties free men have towards them, etc. But in a more general sense, not necessarily bound to the technical term *ḥurriyyah* itself, jurisprudence defines human freedom in the context of a Divine Law which concerns not only our relation to God but also our relation to nature, to other men and even to ourselves since we are not free to do anything we wish with our own lives, which we have not created. For example, suicide is considered as a great sin because it is the usurpation of the right of God. Man is not free to take his life because he did not bring it into being in the first place. On this question Islam stands at the very antipodes of the agnostic existentialism which envisages complete freedom for human existence without considering the source, and also the end, of this existence. The *Sharī'ah* also imposes limitations upon human freedom, but in return bestows a sacred character upon human life which in turn makes possible a greater inner freedom. Ultimately the limitations imposed by the *Sharī'ah* are in the direction of removing from human life certain negative possibilities and freedoms to do evil. They aim to establish the maximum amount of equilibrium in the human collectivity which then serves as outward basis for the inner life which in turn leads to freedom in its most universal sense.

As far as the theologians are concerned, the most famous school among them, namely the Ash'arite, negates human freedom (*ikhtiyār*) completely in favour of a determinism (*jabr*) which is all-embracing. Other theological schools such as the Mu'tazilite and most of the Shi'ite schools do believe in human freedom in its theological sense and reject the total determinism of the Ash'arites. Altogether the debate concerning free will and determinism is a central one to *kalām* and nearly every theologian has participated in it. The debates are in many ways the reverse of what is seen today among philosophers some of whom seek to safeguard the free will of the individual in one form or another before materialistic determinism, whether it be biological, behavioural, or of any other sort, while others try to defend these forms of determinism. Among Muslim theologians there has been, of course, no question of an outward 'material' factor determining human freedom. The problem has always been the relationship of human will to the Divine Will and the extent to which the latter determines the former.

Muslim theology, especially in its prevalent Ash'arite form, tends toward a totalitarian voluntarism not seen usually in Christian theology, but there are many other views among Muslims. It is also important to remember that, despite all the debates among theologians, men did and do continue to live with a consciousness of their free will and hence responsibility before God. As the remarkable dynamism of Islamic history proves, the Muslims are not at all the fatalists they are made out to be in Western sources. But their reliance upon the Divine Will and awareness of the operation of that Will, as shown in their incessant use of the term *inshā'Allāh* (if God wills) in daily discourse, is more noticeable than in most other cultures. The debates of the theologians reflect this general religious concern for submission to the Divine Will and conformity to Its injunctions. Nevertheless no rational theology could overcome certain dichotomies and polarisations, which the theological debate of the subject created, so certain hardened positions were then pushed to extremes. Theologians went so far as to deny human freedom against both the immediate experience of man and the religious injunctions concerning men being held responsible before God for their actions.

The philosophers in general reacted severely against the theologians on this question and asserted fully the reality of human freedom. The early Muslim Peripatetics such as al-Fārābī, Abu'l-Ḥasan al-'Āmirī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) as well as the Andalusian philosophers such as Ibn

Bājjah (Avempace) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) were greatly interested in political philosophy and well acquainted with Plato and Aristotle and even with some of the Stoics. On the question of freedom, however, they regarded the problem from the point of view of the Islamicised political philosophy of al-Fārābī rather than in purely Greek terms. For all of them, the *Sharī'ah* (which al-Fārābī equated with the Pythagorean-Platonic *nomos*) was a reality, as was the Islamic community (*ummah*) and the legitimacy of political rule derived from the source of revelation, whether this was seen in terms of its Sunni or Shi'ite interpretations. The reality of human freedom was asserted by them, but in the context of the nomocratic society of Islam and not from the point of view of a secularist humanism. Later Islamic philosophers such as Mullā Ṣadrā reverted mostly to a more theological and religious debate about free will and determinism and shied away from the discussions on political philosophy of the kind seen in an al-Fārābī or Averroes. But they too were adamant in asserting the reality of human freedom and also the necessity to conform to the Divine Will which rules over both the cosmos and human society and which alone can prevent men from becoming imprisoned in the narrow confines of their own passions.

Finally something must be said about the Sufis who more than any other group in Islam have spoken about freedom. The verses of such Sufi poets as Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ are replete with the word *āzādigī* and similar terms denoting freedom. In one of his most famous verses Ḥāfiẓ says:

غلام همّت آنم که زیر چرخ کبود زهر چه رنگ تعلّق پذیرد آزاد است

I am the slave of the spiritual will of him who
under the azure wheel
Is free (*āzād*) from whatever possesses the colour
of dependence.

The goal of Sufism is union with the One Who is both Absolute and Infinite, Who alone is beyond all limitation, the One Who is absolutely free. The Sufis therefore consider freedom (*ḥurriyyah* or *āzādigī*) as being almost synonymous with the goal of Sufism itself. However, for them freedom does not mean individualism, for their whole aim is to integrate the individual into the universal. Rather, for them freedom means to gain inner detachment through the help of the revealed forms, whether they be cultic or artistic, forms which are outwardly limited but open inwardly towards the Infinite. Sufis, therefore, have always been the most rigorous in the observation of forms, in regard

for the *Sharī'ah* and its meticulous practice; yet they have 'broken' these forms from within and attained complete freedom. They have, moreover, done so not in spite of the revealed forms but because of them. No one can transcend what he does not possess. The Sufis transcended forms not by rebelling individualistically against them but by penetrating their inner dimension which because of the sacred character of these forms opens unto the Infinite. Sufis also practised detachment and were often indifferent towards worldly authority. But there were also those among them who were outwardly rich or who even wielded political power. But in both cases there existed an inner detachment and spiritual poverty (*faqr*) which alone make inner freedom possible, for men lose their freedom to the extent that they become enslaved not only by external factors but also by passionate attachments and by their needs, whether these be artificial or real. Freedom in Sufism means ultimately deliverance (*najāt*) from all bondage and an experience of the world of the Spirit where alone freedom in its real sense is to be found.

The realisation of freedom in Islamic civilisation must be studied also on several levels, especially those of action and thought as well as the actual possibility of attaining inner freedom and deliverance. On the level of external action, the immediate question which arises is that of political freedom *vis-à-vis* forms of a government following the period of the first four 'rightly guided' caliphs. Much has been written about 'Oriental despotism' and the lack of freedom of men in various Islamic states in the face of political and military authority. But it must be remembered that for ages the Divine Law remained as a protective code whose bounds even the most ruthless ruler could not transgress. There remained within Islamic society a continuous tension between the political authority of the caliph, sultan, or *amīr* and the religious scholars (*'ulamā*), who played a major role in protecting the *Sharī'ah* and, therefore, those freedoms of the individual guaranteed by the *Sharī'ah*.

Also it is important to mention that the *'ulamā'* do not play the same role in Islam as the clergy do in Christianity. As mentioned earlier, there is no sacerdotal hierarchy in Islam; instead there is an element of 'sacred democracy' in this tradition which enters directly into daily religious life and has much to do with the guarantee of considerable religious freedom in the life of individuals and the community. The role of the *Sharī'ah* and its institutions as protection for the community against arbitrary military and political oppression needs to be emphasised especially since most modern studies on the subject only view the external political institutions and not the personal relationships, family structure, individual rights, etc., all embraced within the comprehensive fold of the *Sharī'ah*.

The lack of an organised religious structure is combined in Islam with the lack of a strictly defined creed in the Christian sense and therefore a much less rigorously defined notion of what is doctrinally acceptable. In Islam, orthodoxy is defined by the testimonial of Islam or *Shahādah, Lā ilāha illa' Llāh* (There is no divinity but the Divine), which is the most universal formulation possible of Divine Unity and not a closely defined theological formulation. There has also been no institution in Islam to define the meaning of the *Shahādah* and its legitimate interpretations. Of course, there *is* orthodoxy in Islam without which, in fact, no truth and no tradition is possible. But this orthodoxy has not been defined in any limited sense nor has there been a particular religious institution to decide who is orthodox and who is not. The community (*ummah*) has been the ultimate judge in the long run. Those in Islamic history who were persecuted or even put to death for their words or writings, such as Ibn Ḥanbal the jurist, al-Ḥallāj the Sufi, or Suhrawardī the Sufi and philosopher, were all involved in political situations with religious implication, the problem of al-Ḥallāj being, however, of a rather special nature. But even cases of persecution such as those cited are few in comparison with what is found elsewhere. By and large, the Islamic tradition has provided a vast umbrella under which views as different as those of a Rhazes and an Ibn 'Arabī have been expressed and taught. If there has been tension, it has usually been between the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of the tradition but this is a tension which is of a creative nature and lies within the structure of the Islamic tradition itself.

The most crucial test for the actual realisation of means to attain freedom in Islam has been the degree to which it has been able to keep alive within its bosom ways of spiritual realisation leading to inner freedom. And in this matter of central concern, as far as man's entelechy is concerned, Islam has been eminently successful. Over the ages and despite all the obstacles which the gradual darkening of man's outward nature has placed before authentic spiritual paths, Islam has been able to preserve intact to this very day ways of attaining freedom in its absolute and unconditional sense, that is in the sense of complete detachment from everything except God, which is in fact exactly how Sufis have defined freedom or *ḥurriyyah*. Its spiritual techniques and methods, contained mostly within Sufism, are doors which open inwardly to the only freedom which is real and abiding but which is imperceptible to the outward eye. Any discussion of the concept and reality of freedom in Islam must take into account, besides outward manifestations of freedom on the plane of action, the inner freedom which is related to the experience of being itself, and which transforms us in such a way that outward forms of freedom gain a completely different meaning for us. In modern times, men may have gained many

outward forms of freedom but they have also lost that most fundamental freedom which is the freedom to be oneself, not the coagulated cloud of the ego with which we usually identify ourselves, but the immortal soul which resides in the proximity of the Self and which enjoys immortality and freedom because of its very nature.

3*

The Sharī'ah and Changing Historical Conditions

I

In the tension between tradition and modernism, one of the most acute problems faced by the contemporary Muslim is the relationship between the *Sharī'ah*, and especially the parts belonging to the domain of personal law, and modern theories and legal practices. However, being neither a jurisprudent or *faqīh* in the traditional sense, nor an advocate in the modern one, but rather a student of Islam and Islamic civilisation in its intellectual and spiritual aspects, we feel it our duty to confine ourselves to the analysis and clarification of the general principles which underlie the very issue implied by the subject of this essay. The discussion of their detailed application we leave to those more competent in matters of jurisprudence.

It must be made clear that in discussing Muslim personal law, we are dealing with the *Sharī'ah* and not simply man-made laws. Thus, the emphasis is more on religion than on law, as these two terms are used in European languages today. Every discussion of Islamic Law involves the most basic religious beliefs and attitudes of Muslims. This is because in Islam the Divine Will manifests itself concretely as specific law, and not abstractly as more or less general moral injunctions. Christianity teaches that God asks man to be charitable or humble as the teachings of Christ clearly indicate. However, one is not told how in a concrete sense one should apply these virtues, so that the general

* This essay is the development of a paper which was delivered originally in India some years ago on the occasion of a colloquium on Muslim personal law. It is, therefore, concerned as much with a particular 'climate' and situation as with general principles. Also certain arguments have been repeated as a result of the particular circumstances in which this paper was delivered and the conditions which resulted from the cogency of the subject matter for the millions of Muslims of India whose personal lives depended upon the conclusions reached in the colloquium.

religious teaching remains on an abstract level unaffected by changes in the concrete laws which govern human society. That is why Europeans, as well as modernised Muslims who are more at home in Western culture than in their own, cannot understand the insistence of traditional Muslims on preserving the letter of the Divine Law.

It could be said quite justifiably that the modern West is not the product of Christianity. Yet even those who oppose Christianity in the modern world cannot eradicate *ad hoc* two thousand years of a heritage which they carry in their souls in spite of themselves. This heritage manifests itself clearly when such a question as Muslim personal law is approached. Here, the attitude of secularists and Christians, and also many modernised Muslims, is the same. All is based on the general attitude taken towards law in Western civilisation derived mostly from the particular nature of Christianity as a 'way of love' without a Divine Law.

What must be taken into account is the profound difference between the Semitic and more particularly Islamic conception of law on the one hand and the modern one on the other. The Semitic conception, shared by Judaism and Islam, sees law as the embodiment of the Divine Will, as a transcendent reality which is eternal and immutable, as a model by which the perfections and shortcomings of human society and the conduct of the individual are judged, as the guide through which man gains salvation and, by rejecting it, courts damnation and destruction. It is like the Law of Manu of Hinduism and the *dharma* which each human being must follow in order to gain felicity. To discuss law in Islam is therefore as essential to the Islamic religion as the discussion of theology is to Christianity. To discuss, much less change, Islamic Law cannot be done by anyone except those competent in the *Sharī'ah*, no more than Christian theology could be discussed and doctrines of the Christian church altered by any other than those vested with authority in such matters. It would be as unthinkable from the Islamic point of view to change Muslim personal law through any simply elected legislative body as it would be to change doctrines of the Christian church through a similar body of laymen. It is only because the similarity of the role of theology in Christianity to the Divine Law in Islam is not understood that the validity of such an analogy is not accepted by so many people today.

Let us now examine how the *Sharī'ah* is related to the world in which we live. To many people, reality is exhausted by the physico-psychological world which surrounds us and what does not conform to this world is considered to be unreal. Islamic doctrine, like all other traditional metaphysics, is based on the belief that reality is comprised of multiple states of existence (*marātib al-wujūd*) of which the physical world is the lowest and furthest removed from the Divine Origin of all

reality. Therefore the *Sharī'ah*, being an eternal truth belonging to a higher order of existence, is by no means abrogated if it does not conform to the particular conditions of a certain point in space or moment in time. Rather, it is the world which must conform to the Divine Law. The Law loses nothing if it is not followed by men. Conversely man and his world lose everything by not conforming to the Divine Will of which the *Sharī'ah* is the concrete embodiment.

These days we are often told that we must keep up with the times. Rarely does one ask what have the 'times' to keep up with. For men who have lost the vision of a reality which transcends time, who are caught completely in the mesh of time and space and who have been affected by the historicism prevalent in modern European philosophy, it is difficult to imagine the validity of a truth that does not conform to their immediate external environment. Islam, however, is based on the principle that truth transcends history and time. Divine Law is an objective transcendent reality, by which man and his actions are judged, not vice versa. What are called the 'times' today are to a large extent a set of problems and difficulties created by man's ignorance of his own real nature and his stubborn determination to 'live by bread alone'. To attempt to shape the Divine Law to the 'times' is therefore no less than spiritual suicide because it removes the very criteria by which the real value of human life and action can be objectively judged and thus surrenders man to the most infernal impulses of his lower nature. To say the least, the very manner of approaching the problem of Islamic Law and religion in general by trying to make them conform to the 'times' is to misunderstand the whole perspective and spirit of Islam.

Islam has always considered the positive aspect of the intellect (*'aql*) and man's ability to reach the cardinal doctrine of Islam, that is to say the doctrine of Unity (*tawḥīd*), through his *'aql*. In fact, the Quran often describes those who have gone astray from religion as those who cannot 'intellect' (*lā ya'qilūn*). But this is no licence for rationalism and an *ad hoc* treatment of the *Sharī'ah* as judged by human reason, because man can reach *tawḥīd* through his own *'aql* only under the condition that this *'aql* is in a wholesome state (*salīm*). And it is precisely the *Sharī'ah* whose practice removes the obstacles in the soul which prevent the correct functioning of the intellect and obscure its vision. It is the *Sharī'ah* that guarantees the wholesomeness of the intellect so that to change the *Sharī'ah* through the judgement of human reason with the excuse that the Quran has ordered man to use his intellectual faculties, is no more than sheer sophistry and a chimerical manner of leading simple souls astray.

II

We may ask why the question of changing Muslim personal law has been posed at all in so many parts of the Islamic world. Having briefly outlined the nature of Islamic law, we must now turn to two elements which deserve to be analysed: one the question of change and the other personal law. In traditional Muslim sources, there is no term to denote personal law, because theoretically the *Sharī'ah* covers all human life, both personal and social. If such a term has come into recent usage and has even found its way into contemporary Islamic law (the adjective *shakhṣiyyah* being usually used for personal), it is because even during the Umayyad period the *Sharī'ah* was in practice not applied fully in certain realms such as that of general taxation. Also, many political dealings of Muslim rulers remained outside its injunctions. That is why the so-called reforms carried out by many Muslim states in their attempt to introduce certain European codes, such as the *Tanẓīmāt* of the Ottomans, did not profoundly affect the structure of Islamic society. What has remained intact through the ages has been that aspect of the *Sharī'ah* which concerns directly the human person, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. These are thus labelled as personal law. This domain has been the refuge and stronghold that has enabled Islamic society to remain Islamic in spite of the various forms of political institution that have ruled over it in past centuries. Therefore what is under discussion is the last refuge of the legal aspect of the *Sharī'ah* in Islamic society as a whole.

As for the question of change involved in the subject matter of this essay, it lies in that complex set of factors which characterise modernism in general, in the West as well as in the East. First of all, through the spread of belief in that false idol of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European philosophy, namely progress, many in the East unconsciously equate change with progress. And, since they have surrendered their intelligence to the dictum of historicism, they evaluate all things in the light of change and becoming rather than with regard to their immutable aspect. They thus equate the immutability of the Truth with solidification and petrifaction. Secondly, the structure of Western civilisation, even before modern times, was such as to view law only in its mutable aspect. This trait has been inherited by modernism, which is naturally a product of Western civilisation. Christianity was by nature an esotericism (*ṭarīqah*) externalised. It was devoid of a *Sharī'ah* so that it had to integrate Roman law into its structure in order to become the religion of a whole civilisation. Therefore, even if Roman law had a Divine aspect from the point of view of Roman religion, it was not an integral part of the Christian revelation, so that the Christians never regarded their law in the same manner as did the

Jews and Muslims, or the Hindus for that matter. That is the basic reason why Westerners cannot usually understand the meaning of the *Sharī'ah* and Westernised Muslims approach the problems of Islamic Law in the modern world from the point of view so prevalent today.

To this misunderstanding must be added the psychological factors which are the result of centuries of pressure imposed by the West on all Oriental civilisations. In the minds of many Muslims, there is a sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the West, which forces them to be its blind followers and to regard their own tradition either with disdain or at best with an attitude of apologetic acceptance. In that state of mind, they usually try to change those aspects of their religion and law which do not conform to today's fashions and which, to cover one's intellectual and spiritual weakness, is called 'keeping up with the times'.

For example, let us take the question of polygamy, which is far from limited to Islam (we remember that Charlemagne had many wives). Many modernised Muslims feel embarrassed by this feature of the *Sharī'ah* for no other reason than that Christianity eventually banned it and that in the West today it is forbidden. The arguments against it are not so much logical as sentimental and carry mainly the weight and prestige of the modern West with them. All the arguments given, based on the fact that polygamy is the only way of preventing many social ills of today, have no effect on those for whom the fashion of the day has replaced the *Sunnah* of the Holy Prophet. One can speculate that, if modernism had originated in the Himalayan states rather than in Europe, the modern Muslim apologists would not have tried to interpret the teachings of the *Sharī'ah* as permitting polyandry, as today they interpret its teaching only in the monogamous sense which is current Western practice.

Of course we do not propose that Muslims should remain oblivious of the world around them. This is neither desirable nor possible. No Islamic state can avoid owning trains and planes, but Muslims can avoid hanging surrealistic paintings on their walls. By this is meant that there are certain conditions in twentieth-century life which the Muslim world cannot alter and with which it must live while others can be avoided. The whole difference lies in the attitude towards the modern world. One can regard a situation as one in which it is difficult to practise the *Sharī'ah* fully, not because the *Sharī'ah* itself is imperfect, but because the conditions in which we live have fallen short of those immutable principles which of necessity ultimately govern all things. One can still follow and practise Islamic Law in such conditions by following the teachings of Islam itself, for the Prophet even allowed prayers to be said on horseback in time of war.

Or one can, as is so common today, take the world as the sole reality and judge the validity of the *Sharī'ah* according to its degree of conformity to this world. This attitude is totally un-Islamic and is like putting the cart before the horse. Such an attitude makes the world and man's imperfect judgements informing it take the place of God. Such an attitude commits the sin which theologically is the gravest of all in Islam, namely *shirk* or 'polytheism'.

Islam is a way of peace based on the establishment of equilibrium between all human tendencies and needs, which must of necessity serve as a basis for all man's spiritual strivings. The *Sharī'ah* is the maker and preserver of this equilibrium and the personal laws play a particularly significant role in keeping this human order and equilibrium. Were this equilibrium to be destroyed, both inner and outward peace, which everyone seeks today but rarely finds, would disappear. All 'reforms' and changes – especially in matters of personal law – proposed today should aim to preserve and build rather than destroy this equilibrium whose chief symbol in Islam is the square Ka'bah. The question of changing Islamic personal law should be approached with the spirit of belief in the *Sharī'ah*, thereby attempting to apply and preserve it to the extent possible in the modern world, and to build the life of Muslim society according to it. It should not be approached with a firm belief in all 'values' and norms prevalent in the West today according to which one should seek to change Islamic Law. These practices and 'values' which seem permanent today are as impermanent as the most impermanent aspect of human nature upon which they are based.

If the question of changes in Islamic Law is approached by the Muslim intelligentsia in the spirit thus proposed, it will be seen in a completely different light. The rift between the Western-educated classes and the rest of the Muslim community will pass and everyone will realise the real significance of the *Sharī'ah* as the basis of stability in human life. They will also learn that, although to concern oneself with matters pertaining to Islam is the duty of every Muslim, applying the *Sharī'ah* in detail to newly created situations is a question of *fiqh* that should be dealt with by the *fuqahā'*. If one understands the real nature of the *Sharī'ah*, one would think no more of passing on a sick person to someone who is not a physician than to turn over matters concerning Muslim personal laws to one who is not a specialist in the *Sharī'ah*, that is to say a *faqīh* or *'ālim* who specialises in *fiqh*. Otherwise, in both cases, the patient, whether he be an individual or a society, faces the danger of a graver malady and even death.

III

In conclusion, it may be added that the blind following of Western ideas in matters concerned with law, as in so many other domains, will

never solve any basic problem of Islamic society. It is a form of *taqlīd* or blind following much more dangerous than the traditional type of *taqlīd* which has always been decried by Muslim sages over the ages. Only by accepting the validity of the *Sharī'ah* and especially of the personal laws promulgated by it and by relying upon these laws can Islamic society face the problems of the modern world. And only through the *Sharī'ah* can meaningful change be brought about. In fact the value of any change can only be gauged *vis-à-vis* a permanent truth. If we were to lose the *Sharī'ah*, we would lose that very thing for whose subsistence we are trying to 'reform' our present society. In such a case, our reformations would only become deformations. Thus we would only let loose forces which would disrupt the very basis of our society and open doors which would enable individual whims and fancies to exert themselves over the Divine Norm which alone gives meaning to human life.

4

The Immutable Principles of Islam and Westernised Education in the Islamic World

The introduction of Western educational systems into the Islamic world is one of the major elements which have brought tension and heterogeneity within the very matrix of Islamic society. This factor, in addition to the constant contact between many Muslim scholars and students with educational institutions in the Western world itself, has brought to the centre of the stage the crucial question of the relation between the immutable principles of Islam and philosophy, methods and contents of Western educational systems. This disparity, incongruence and usually open conflict between Islamic and Western educational systems and their aims must be examined and studied seriously by all those who are interested in the welfare of Islamic society and its future.

Two contending educational systems have created in the Muslim world today a chasm between a Western-educated minority and a majority which on both the popular and intellectual levels is rooted in traditional Islam. A generation of Muslims in many lands have become trained in a mode of thought, based on modern science and philosophy, which makes it difficult for them to understand the language of the traditional works in which Islamic wisdom is contained. One sees in many parts of the Muslim world two men belonging to the same country and even speaking the same language externally, but who do not understand each other because they are using different systems of reference and worlds of ideas. At the same time, for over a century, a large number of works have been produced by Western orientalists, many of whom have been hostile to Islam, and in fact have written on Islam not because of their love of the subject but in order to refute it. Yet these works, even the prejudiced and distorted ones, are the only sources available on Islam to those trained in the modern educational system and they appeal to many by what appears to be their 'scientific' method and language.

To this situation is added the need of different parts of the Islamic

This collection of essays by one of the best known contemporary Muslim scholars writing in the English language covers many facets of Islamic life and thought. The author has brought together studies dealing with practical as well as intellectual aspects of Islam in both their historical and contemporary reality. Although concerned with the scholarly dimension of the subjects with which he deals, the author devotes himself especially to the contemporary significance of such themes as religion and secularism, the meaning of freedom, and the tradition of Islamic science and philosophy. The traditional perspective of the author runs throughout all of these studies and provides a unified framework for the work despite the diversity of the subjects treated. The essays, many of which have appeared over the years in various journals and collections on Islamic studies, have been rewritten and revised in the light of later research and scholarship as well as certain issues which have become of special contemporary significance. Considering the current interest in the Islamic world in the West and the necessity felt by many to gain firsthand knowledge of Islam as both religion and civilisation, the present work is a timely addition to the small collection of writings in European languages which provide veritable keys for a better understanding of Islam and Muslims while remaining faithful to the perspective of the Islamic tradition.

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