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F. E. Peters: Islam

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Introduction: A Primer on Islam

Islam was not founded by Muhammad (ca. 570–632 C.E.); on the Muslim view, it is better understood as part of God’s merciful providence, present from all eternity but revealed at various moments in history through the agency of His Chosen Prophets. Muhammad was one of these latter, a mere man singled out by God—the divine name in Arabic, *Allah*, may obscure the fact that this is in truth the same universal God who spoke to Abraham, Moses, and Jesus—to communicate His final message to His creation. These revealed messages, warnings, and signs for all mankind were communicated verbatim and in Arabic to Muhammad over the course of some twenty-two years and are collectively called in Arabic *al-Qur’an* or “The Recitation.” The Quran was recognized by Muhammad’s scant body of followers as divinely inspired even as it was being delivered, though its codification into a single book divided into 114 chapters (*suras*) may have taken place only after Muhammad’s death. And there will be no more: the Book is closed; Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets.

The essence of the message is simple. It is a warning to submit (*aslama*, whence the noun “submission,” *islam*) to the will of God, to recognize the rights of the Creator over His creatures. For him who does submit, the *muslim*, there awaits eternal reward in Paradise; for the disbeliever or infidel (*kafir*), eternal damnation in Hell. The Muslim’s outward sign of submission is a formula of “witnessing” (*shahada*) that has become the profession of faith in Islam: “There is no God but The God, and Muhammad is His Messenger.” There flow from this declaration of heart and tongue four other primary obligations for all Muslims:

1. prayer (*salat*) said five times daily at the canonically appointed hours, with the noon prayer on Friday to be said in common. This is usually done in a mosque (*masjid*, *jami*⁵), a building that in form and function is little more than the Arabic name implies, an assembly hall, with a niche (*mihrab*) to mark the orientation (*qibla*) toward Mecca, and a minaret or tower from which the faithful are summoned to prayer at the appointed hours;

2. the payment of alms in the form of a tithe (*zakat*);
3. fasting and other abstentions during the lunar month of Ramadan;
4. and, if practical, at least one pilgrimage (*hajj*) to “God’s House,” a cubelike building (*ka’ba*) set down in a sacred precinct (*haram*) in the heart of Muhammad’s native Mecca in Western Arabia.

A Muslim life of course comprises far more than a simple one-line creed and those four other elemental obligations that make up the “Pillars of Islam.” During his lifetime, both in the Quran and in the other reports (*hadith*) attributed to him by the Muslim tradition, Muhammad gave a wide range of command and instruction that was intended to shape the lives of the new Muslim community (*umma*). Detailed prescriptions on marriage, divorce, inheritance, criminal procedure, the care of the poor and unfortunate, and many other subjects, mostly matters relating to personal status, were all parts of Muhammad’s teachings on God’s behalf. And whether they were formally revealed in the Quran or transmitted in the *hadith*, they all bore the cachet of divine authority. It is not surprising, then, that from those same two principal sources, the Quran and the “custom (*sunna*) of the Prophet,” there began to be derived the great body of Islamic Law (*shari’a*). Other legal methods might be invoked for its elaboration—the consensus of the community, for example, or a prudent analogical reasoning—but the Quran and the *sunna* of the Prophet remain the two unshakable foundations of the *shari’a*.

There ruled over the *umma*, whose astonishing political and military success within the first century of its existence created an expanding empire, the “Abode of Islam” (*Dar al-Islam*), a series of men, each acknowledged as Muhammad’s successor (*khalifa*; Eng. Caliph), and who had executive but no religious powers. Revelation was forever closed, and while the Caliphs could dispose armies, levy taxes, appoint governors or a religious judge (*qadi*), and in general exercise what was called “polity” (*siyasa*), they could not add a sentence to the Quran or a single provision to the *shari’a*.

The Caliphs were chosen in various ways, none very satisfying to many Muslims. And their impotence, and even at times disdain, in the religious sphere was a source of concern to many others, notably the partisans (*shii’a*) of Ali (d. 661 C.E.), the Prophet’s cousin, son-in-law, and the fourth Caliph of the Islamic community. His followers, always a minority in Islam, looked toward a religious, even a charismatic leader (*Imam*) to rule and guide the community. God had appointed such, they

were convinced, in the person of Ali and his designated descendants. They counted twelve Imams (on another reckoning, seven) down to a time in the late ninth century, the last of whom would return in the End Time. None of the Imams save Ali himself ever held actual political power in the *Dar al-Islam*, and the *Shi'at Ali*, or Shi'ites, as they are generally known, remained an underground, profoundly revolutionary and generally mystical movement in Islam until the beginning of the sixteenth century, when it was adopted as the "established" form of Islam by the ruling dynasty in Iran. The Sunni office of the Caliphate was formally abolished by Kemal Ataturk in 1924; the Shi'ites still await the return of the Hidden Imam.

The Law is a powerful force in Islam, whether administered by qadis in the religious courts, framed as an authoritative pronouncement (*fatwa*) by widely recognized jurists, or simply studied, debated, and explicated in schools, and there soon emerged a class of men learned in the Law (*ulama*), upon whom the responsibility of shaping an Islamic conscience and Muslim orthodoxy finally rested. Almost every intellectual in traditional Islamic society was trained in jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in what became the premier institution of higher learning in Islam, the law school or *madrassa*, which was supported, like mosques and most of the other religious enterprises in the *Dar al-Islam*, by an inalienable bequest (*waqf*) of land or property whose income subsidized building, faculty, and students alike. Sunni Islam in particular has drawn its spiritual resources, its coherence, and its religious and behavioral ideals from the teaching of the *ulama*, who in most times and most places have remained remarkably independent of government control.

It is commonplace to note that there is no sharp distinction between Church and State in Islam. In a sense this is true; Muhammad was his own Constantine. But in fact there is no Church in Islam in the sense of an organized and institutionalized hierarchy of universally recognized religious leaders with spiritual powers "to bind and to loose." The *ulama* are rabbis rather than bishops or priests—even the Muftis, the most widely acknowledged legal authorities in Sunni Islam and even, in the end, the more charismatic and "spiritual" leaders of Shi'ite Islam, the Mullahs and Ayatullahs of Iran. Nor has there ever been, at least since the death of the Prophet himself, a demonstrably "Islamic State" constructed solely on the principles of the *shari'a*. Quran and *hadith* contain no political instruction or blueprints, and rulers in the *Dar al-Islam* have governed on secular, national, or pragmatic rather than Quranic principles, leavened here and there with a sense of piety, but characterized far

more often by a tension of aspiration and practice between the princes and the *ulama*.

Shari'ah means "path," but it is by no means the only way to God in Islam. Another approach is that of the mystic, the Sufi, an alternative born perhaps out of some Muslims' disdain for the success-bred secularism of an ever expanding *Dar al-Islam* and an impatience with the sometimes frigid legalisms of the *ulama*. The Sufi, like his Jewish or Christian counterparts, seeks to approach God directly rather than simply being dutiful in the manner of the theologian. This leap into the bosom of a transcendent God struck many Muslims as either rash or blasphemous, but eventually Sufism found its legitimate place in Islam and has generated a marvelously varied literature of passion and poetry, much of it in Persian. And in the process it too suffered a kind of institutionalization: next to the "path" of the Law was laid out the "way" (*tariqa*) of the Sufi, limned, somewhat like the religious Orders of the Christian West, by an elaborate and binding body of rule and tradition and a profound veneration for its Founder.

Sufism shows in fact some modest assimilation of Christian spirituality. No wonder: from the beginning there were in the *Dar al-Islam* large numbers of Jews and Christians who were not only under no compulsion to convert to the new faith but whose freedom to practice their own was guaranteed by a sacred contract (*dhimma*) with the Muslim community. These "Peoples of the Book," as the Muslims called them, generally thrived under Islam, and Islam too thrived on their commercial energies and intellectual traditions. It was under Islam that Jews first turned in large numbers from agriculture to commerce and banking, and Christians were in the forefront of the movement to translate from Greek into Arabic the masterpieces of Hellenic philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. Aristotle arrived in the *Dar al-Islam* long before Napoleon set foot in Egypt and in his new Arabic raiment set in train an intellectual revolution as profound for Islam, and eventually for the West as well, as that later nineteenth-century confrontation with Europe. There were dangers in this meeting with the Hellenic rationalist tradition (and its Christian and Jewish variants), but Islam soon developed its own defensive weapons, notably a kind of "sacred theology" (*kalam*) to protect and strengthen its faith.

"Islam" is not, then, a very manageable term. It is a religion, surely, as we understand that word in the West, a complex of beliefs and practices characterized by the same perceptible unity, and an equally obvious variety, as Judaism and Christianity. It is as well a com-

munity sharing that common set of beliefs and practices but crosscut by ethnic, regional, and, more recently, national aspirations. It is, finally and gloriously, a civilization—urban, bookish, assured, and tranquil—with its own body of literature, monument, art, and thought: all still recognizably “Islamic,” at times sharply and obviously, at times dimly but nonetheless surely, from Morocco to Indonesia and beyond.

We turn, however, from the present to where the Muslim himself begins, to the time before Islam, even before the Age of Ignorance that preceded the coming of the Guidance, to the very beginning of Creation.

CHAPTER I

The Past, Sacred and Profane

I. The Quran on Creation

The Christians accept Genesis as Scripture—that is, God’s true word—and so their account of Creation is identical with that of the Jews, though it was originally read, of course, in a Greek or later a Latin translation, and was often commented upon in a very different way. For the Muslims, on the other hand, the Scripture called the Quran superseded the Book of Genesis; and though its source is the same as that in Genesis, God Himself, there are obvious differences in detail in its view of Creation.

It was God who raised the skies without support, as you can see, and assumed His throne, and enthralled the sun and the moon (so that) each runs to a predetermined course. He disposes all affairs, distinctly explaining every sign that you may be certain of the meeting with your Lord.

And it was He who stretched the earth and placed upon it stabilisers and rivers; and made two of a pair of every fruit; (and) he covers up the day with the night. In these are signs for those who reflect.

On the earth are tracts adjoining one another, and vineyards, fields of corn and date-palm trees, some forked and some with single trunks, yet all irrigated with the selfsame water, though We make some more excellent than others in fruit. There are surely signs in them for those who understand. (Quran 13:2–4)

Much of the “biblical” material in the Quran, or perhaps better, the Torah material in the Quran—the Quran is in its entirety “Bible” to the