

## Religion and World Order 1994 Symposium

### An Islamic Response

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Thank you very much for the opportunity to say something about the religion that is most misunderstood in the world today, namely Islam. If I were to title my little talk, I would call it "Preliminary Steps for an Understanding of Islam." I think this misunderstanding is part of a general mistake in our approach to religion, in the sense that religion is not only a theological statement but has historical dynamics that one has to take into account, and this historical dynamic involves today's Muslims as well as an abstracted Islam. To understand Islam without understanding Muslims is no understanding.

Religion is one of the areas where we often believe we can link arms in celebrating a new global culture, a stage we have finally reached where we can talk to one another. What is meant by a religion in this context is a kind of universal brotherhood, sisterhood, a common denominator of goodness, a melioristic recipe for bonding, a school of a fraternal union. In spite of its edifying objectives, in a number of instances this approach has led to subsequent disenchantment because the reality of religion subsumes a set of internal tensions. In all religions it is the tension between the real and the ideal, the expectations and the achievements, that gives us the most profound understanding of its essence.

Islam has no church; every Muslim is individually responsible for searching for the Muslim ideal, and in this sense, the tension between the real and the ideal is a key item in the life of Muslims. A somewhat unreflexive view of Islam has been the way in which, with the best of intentions, others have approached Islam. One element of Islam in the world, the revelation of the prophet Mohammed, is permeated by a discourse on ethics, on the good, and on communal goals. In this sense, the venue into Islam reaching to it through its moral ideal is commendable. Yet much of the image of Islam projected in the west is that of the sword-swinging Ayatollah, the fundamentalist on the march. The damage that this picture has brought to Islam is considerable. I would venture that concentrating on the first, unreflexive view of Islam, as simply a store of goodness, is possible even a more dangerous venue into the understanding of Islam than that of the violent fundamentalist.

In fact, were there a more inquiring approach to the comprehension of Islam, it would provide a more realistic view of the character of this religion, and would not only mitigate against misunderstanding but lead to a realization of the ways in which the ethical command of Islam are not static entities, but what I would call "emergents." What I mean by this is that the history of Islam is the history of tension between the ideals posited by the Qur'an and the ability of the Muslims to realize them.

Every historical period in Islam has given us a different synthesis of Islamic commands because these commands tend to be carried out under different ambient circumstances. At one time, Muslims were

overwhelmed by the dry-as-dust commentaries of the Orthodox jurists. Islamic mysticism came to their rescue, and brought life back into their religion. At another time, mysticism was taken over by irresponsible manipulators, and orthodoxy was brought to correct the situation. Modern Islam has once more to be seen, by those who would like to extend their hand to Muslims, not as the power of the word itself, but as the struggle of Muslims to establish the rule of the word in the historical circumstances of our own time -- circumstances which are very different from those of the seventh century when Islam was born. Just as with other religions, the history of the last two centuries has been a history of enormous external changes with which Muslims have had to grapple. They have had to combat imperialism and colonialism to decide what institutions they will allow to be copied from industrial societies and what practices will be accepted from societies where the interpenetration of religion and social institution is not as complete as it is in Islam.

Yet the old institutions have had some viability. In Islamic society, for instance, it is through the moral command of religious leaders that despots are challenged. This Islamic solution to the problem of just rule seems to have lived long enough in historical memory of Muslims to give the needed impetus for the revolution in Iran. But it was modernity that enabled the Iranian clerics to organize a system in which they challenged the ruler. When one reconstitutes these elements, the reasons for the victory of the Iranian clerics becomes more apparent: tradition is still useful for modern Muslims and Islam can serve as a theory of justified rebellion. This is an example of Islam as an "emergent." But we are not at the end of that dialectical movement: the link between the clerics as advocates and the people as complainants has now been severed, the Ayatollahs are the new rulers, but the complainants may well continue the traditional pattern of complaining by eventually beginning to complain against their new rulers, the clerics.

The method which I have used here and which attempts to find out what we might call the inner dynamic of a religion -- how it works out and what this means for Islam -- is certainly more healthy for understanding Islam than to see it as a simple repository of ethical values. It is such an approach that will have the greatest chance of establishing the bridges we desire.