

IRAN AND ISLAM

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A Mazdean shadow over the Judeo-Christian tradition, is also at the basis of Islam. This is supported by Marshall G.S. Hodgson,¹ who asks and answers himself:

Arabia was not quite isolated from the nations prior to the coming of Islam. Hodgson notes: "Arabs were becoming mercenaries and allies in the great power struggles" between Sasanians and Romans which shifted much of the sea trade to the Arabian overland routes in order to bypass troubled frontiers. The Romans and Sasanians sponsored their own Bedouin tribal kingdoms – Ghessenids and Lakhmids respectively. "The Lakhmid forces seem to have been sufficiently well placed to have helped decide a contested succession to the Sasanian throne." The Quraysh tribe of Mecca enjoyed a special place among the Bedouins because of their trade initiatives with other nations as well as other tribes. Among many active dignities there was "a vague figure, Allah, 'the God' par excellence, regarded as a creator-god" but "as with many 'high gods', he had not special cult." Hodgson states that "it is clear that the Quraysh rather favored the Sasanians over either Rome or Abyssinia" who "had made expeditions in the area." When the Abyssinians tried to overthrow a Jewish dynasty in Yemen, they "were ejected by Sasanian forces, evidently gladly received in the Yemen. Hodgson also notes that the Bedouins "were keenly aware of "higher cultures in which they "had little share," and in particular of the confessional communities that played so prominent a part in urban civilization. Some Arab tribes that had even adopted for themselves, to some degree or other, one of these religious allegiances in place of the not very lively tribal paganism of their ancestors." Along with Christianity and Judaism, "On the east coasts of Arabia, Zoroastrianism was also important." So "When Muhammad preached a religion of one God, or prophets, and of Hell and Paradise, the terms he used could be understood by many Arabs, even among the pagans." (pp. 153-7). Even though Muhammad asserted that there was only one God, Allah, "For a time, Muhammad may have preached the new cult without insisting on the overthrow of any of the old cults; once he even tried to find a place for a cult of the greater, Meccan goddesses as intermediaries, subordinate to that of Allah." (p. 166). Before migrating to Medina,

1 *The Venture of Islam*, Volume I, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1974, p. 43. Mary Boyce has also written on this.

Mohammad “may have regarded his mission, till then, as directed chiefly to his own people.” (p. 171).

Some authors maintain that the Iranians were not converted by force or other punitive measures but they readily converted to Islam because they found it more appealing. However, the Iranians held on to their own faith long after the Arab conquest. As Hodgson reports, the Arab troops “were ready to use force even against other Muslims” and “the Caliphal state stood now (around 661) as a more mundane imperial power, no longer based directly on Islam. Rather it was supported internally as well as externally by a particular complex of military and physical power which was partially supported in turn by Islamic faith.” (p. 218).

Like the Sasanun's monarch, notes Hodgson, the Caliph who from a simple commander among equal believers was raised to a magnificent figure, remote in a world of awesome luxury, walled off by an elaborate courtly etiquette, whose casual word was obeyed like divine law. Even the first Abbasid Caliph, al-Saffah, set the Abbasid pattern chiefly in the sense that he slaughtered indiscriminately, treacherously and according to the accounts, with gross brutality as many members of the Umayyad family as he could lay hands on. He ordered that even the dead be desecrated. Among other tales is this: at one point he pretended to relent in his bloody search for Umayyad scions and invited all that remained to a banquet in token of forgiveness. Sitting at the meal, they were cut down by attendants; a carpet was spread over their dead and dying bodies and the banquet continued in the same room to the sound of their groans. The story is scarcely credible but illustrates what people thought of the Abbasid dynasty” which was promulgated as a better alternative to the Umayyad dynasty.

Ultimately, the Caliphs could not trust Arabs in their army and recruited Turks in their army. But by the time of Mutawakkil (847-861), notes Hodgson, “The Turkic troops were discovering that if they depended on the Caliph alone, so did he on them” and “Al-Mutawakkil was set on the throne in the first place at the will of the Turkic guards” and finally “the Turkic slave soldiers murdered al-Mutawakkil and freely installed his son in his place, unhindered by any section of the public. For ten years (861-870), a series of four short-lived caliphs tried vainly to evade the power of the Turkic soldiers who made and unmade them” (pp. 485-6), and who ultimately started their own dynasty. Such developments came to compromise both the principles of Islam and the military power of the Arab caliphs, which however led to further persecution of the minorities and even “She'a shrines were obliterated” along with Dhimmis” (p. 486). As Hodgson reports: “The communally religious books of the Mazdeans were despised and shunned even more readily than those of Christians and Jews (though even this

condemnation was not made inevitable by the Qur'an); they were felt to be obviously false and he who even looked at them was suspected by betraying Islam. But the works of history and belles-letters, as well as of natural science, could not be so readily condemned. Moreover, it was this secular Pahlavi tradition that had embodied the cultural support and legitimization of the absolutism of the past. In the name of the caliphate itself, some Muslims had appealed to its cultural standards as socially indispensable as well as humanly insurpassable. Here the Muslim exclusivity worked more subtly". (p. 449).

Since unlike Greek, Pahlavi did not long survive among the Muslim Iranians, "there came to be little direct contact with the great human works of the pre-confessional periods in the Axial Age and "perhaps made for a relative spiritual impoverishment of it as compared with the major civilizations contemporary with it." (pp. 450-1).

"Muhammad," observes Hodgson, had been called the prophet armed," but "it is more helpful to say that he was the prophet of the Ummah, the confessional community." Muhammad's community "was designed to transform the world itself through action in the world.

"But," ponders Hodgson, who is totally empathetic to Muhammad's mission "such a vision led inevitably to the sword. When those whose interests will suffer by reform also wield power, maintaining jointly sufficient force to put down any individual objections, reform will require changing the basis of power. In the twentieth century, Gandhi has brought to the fore methods of creative non-violence for producing basic changes in social power. But short of these methods, a serious intention of social reform has commonly implied at least readiness on the part of the reformers to use physical compulsion to meet and overcome the compulsion used by those already in power. That is, it has implied readiness to wage war—and to commit all the violence and deceit this necessarily entails.

It is not just a Christian squeamishness, I think, that points to Muhammad's military measures as a central problem in his prophethood. Every virtue carries with it its own characteristic defects, every perception of truth is accompanied by its own temptations to falsehood. In any tradition, greatness is in part to be measured by success in overcoming the peculiar failings which necessarily accompany the peculiar excellence of the tradition. Christianity has its own pitfalls. A peculiar test of Islam lies in how Muslims can meet the question of war. In the loyalty and risk of warfare, a man used to find the supreme virtue of dedication to a goal beyond himself to the point of readiness to give up his life. But warfare—apart from the acts of individual injustice it necessarily involves (since individuals are treated as elements in a mass)—is at the same time the supreme expression of that claim to exclusive validity for one's own position, which must be

fatal to the open search for truth. Such a claim to exclusivity has been, indeed, a standing temptation of all the monotheistic communities. Muhammad's prophethood, in fulfilling the monotheistic tendency toward a total religious community, at the same time left his community confronted with that temptation to a spirit of exclusivity that went with any vision of a total community and that received appropriate expression in warfare. The resulting problems came to form a persistent theme of Muslim history." (pp. 185-6). There is therefore little surprise that almost total conversion of Iran to Islam had something to do with its military or ideology and single mindedness zeal in spreading Islam. However, as Muhammad readily accepted Zoroastrians as "people of the Book" and even welcomed the Zoroastrian soldiers stationed in Yemen who accepted Islam as *Abna* (noble), as already seen, the harsh treatment meted out to the conquered Iranians would have hardly met his approval or standards.