

Why the Reversion to Islamic Archaism?

A Middle Eastern analysis from 1981

Lafif Lakhdar

1981

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In order to gain a critical understanding of the persistence of Islamic archaism and all its paraphernalia, one must approach it through the logic of its own history, as well as that of the Arabo-Muslim bourgeoisie of the 19th and 20th centuries, which is radically different from the process of European history and from the residual folkloric Christianity of the present-day West.

The modern schizophrenia of Islamic integralism

A 2002 Preface to 'Why the Reversion to Islamic Archaism?' by Harald Beyer-Arnesen

"The true prophet, therefore, is not merely an inspired man who has the unusual powers of performing miracles. He is primarily a statesman and a legislator."

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), "the Machiavelli of Islam"

"Experience has shown, however, that powerful, countervailing cultural forces operate: the audio-visual media emit hedonistic messages which undermine the notion "Islam is the solution." The consumer culture's attraction, the lure of "Made in USA" sneakers and movies, bewitches many amongst the shabab (youth) upon whom the elderly leaders had pinned their hopes. More dismaying yet, are the local knockoffs, such as the North African hybrid of Arabic and rock music, dubbed Rai. Increasingly, Islamist voices can be heard asking, "Perhaps all we can wage is a rearguard battle. Isn't it likely that our present achievements are doomed to death by attrition?"

Emmanuel Sivanin in "Why radical muslims aren't taking over governments"

About the life in Islamic cities between the 11th and 15th century, we find the following passage in Albert Houranis *A History of the Arab Peoples*: "Those who were openly active were women of poor families. To the extent to which a family was wealthy, powerful and respected, it would seclude its women, in a special part of the home, the harim, and beneath the veil when they ventured from the house into the streets of public places. An Egyptian jurist of the Maliki school, Ibn al-Hajj (b. 1336), said that women should not go out to buy things in the market, because they might be led into improper acts if they sat with shopkeepers: 'some of the pious elders (may God be pleased with them) have said that a woman should leave her house on three occasions only: when she is conducted to the house of her bridegroom, on the deaths of her parents, and when she goes to her own grave"

Not everybody was as 'pious'. Hence, Philip K Hitti could write about an earlier period, in his *History of the Arab's*: "Alcoholic drinks were often indulged in both in company and in private... prohibition, one of the distinctive features of Islam religion, did no more prohibit than did the eighteenth century amendment to the constitution of the United States: Even caliphs, vizirs, princes and judges paid no heed to religious injunction." Today, many a pilgrim on his return from Mecca, and after having engaged in such heavy spiritual work as throwing stones on a sculpture symbolising Satan in the town of Mina, pays Dubai a visit to satisfy worldly desires for whisky, and other more modern symbols of the rule of you know whom. But then, was not the messenger of Allah also a merchant and the founder of a trading empire?

But ... "For example, in May 1942, shayks from [Jam'iyyat] al-Gharra' and [Jam'iyyat] al-Hidaya [al-Islamiyya] led large protests demonstrations in Damascus denouncing the women who exposed

their faces in public, promenaded on the arms of their husbands, and went to cinemas," (Philip S. Khoury: *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920–1945*, I.B. Tauris, London 1987).

Another, if smaller, historical leap. In 1967, in Ba'hist Syria, there appeared an article in the *Jais al Shab* (the People's Army) entitled "*The means of Creating the New Arab Man*" containing the passage: "*God, religion, feudalism, capitalism and colonialism, and all the values that prevailed under the old society are no more than mummies in the museum of history, and absolute belief in man's ability should be treated as the only new value.*" Demonstrations followed and were brutally crushed, but the author of the offending article was sentenced to life imprisonment as well, and in the next three years the government built more mosques than had been done in the last thirty. 6 years later, the code word used in the October 1973 war against the Zionist state of Israel was "*Badr,*" a direct reference to the battle that had established the supremacy of the prophet Muhammad over the unbelievers. Assad also referred to the war as a jihad against "*the enemies of Islam*" and the Syrian forces as the "*soldiers of Allah*". And in 1975, Sylvia G. Haim could write in the preface to a new edition of her *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology*: "*Public prayer has become part of the appeal of today's socialist leaders in Libya, in Egypt, and in Syria... Islam it is claimed is the font of all praiseworthy theories.*"

In a collection of essays by Mu'ammad al-Qadhafi and his nearest comrades-in-power from 1973, Ibrahim al-Bishari writes: "*The idea of **jihad** has a material and moral character; this is jihad by means of the word. Jihad with the Sword, for the sake of God, using every method, must govern our relations with the outside world in order to spread our message. Islam lays it down that war is to cease by means of armistice (hudna), or mutual promises (muwa'ada), and it is to cease only for a limited period fixed in advance, but when the Muslims are again powerful, war must be declared and waged.*" This is nothing but orthodox Islam.

To understand the ideology of Islam it is critical to understand that the prophet-merchant Muhammad was beyond anything else the founding father of worldly empires.

"*Why the reversion to Islamic archaism?*" was first published two decades ago as part of two issues of *Khamsin: Journal of Revolutionary Socialists of the Middle East* addressing "*Politics of Religion of the Middle East*". Laff Lakhdar had in Lebanon previously published political critiques of religion, and co-written twenty-four theses on Black September (the crushing of the Palestinian resistance movement in Jordan by the armed forces of the King in 1970) with Mustpha Khayati, the Tunisian author of situationist texts such as the *Class struggles in Algeria*, as well as the pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student of Life*, which gained fame during May 68 in France.

Published in 1981, Lakhdar's essay is obviously not up to date, which does not mean it has become less relevant, and not only in the 'Islamic World,' which was never quite a world apart. Also for many living where capitalist social relations first developed in full scale, the question of why the reversion to Islamic archaism has become much closer on the background of different but interconnected phenomena. Call it 'globalisation,' immigration or September 11; 'neo-liberalism,' war, poverty, stupefaction or alienation; racism, 'codes of honour,' secularisation, commercialisation and women's emancipation. For sure an old world is breaking down and a new one has little idea where it's going, or has not yet been born.

Laff Lakdar ends his story within the first period of Khomeinism in Iran, which connects us in time to the beginning of the last Afghan wars, as well as the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88. A war between the most contemptible product of the preceding nationalism of the Arab Renaissance party

and a reborn religious nationalism (where in the words of Lakhdar, Islam could “*congratulate itself on having caught up, five centuries too late, with the Europe of the Inquisition*”) – both mystifying more or less the same, glorious pasts. What can you expect from ‘liberation movements’ that cannot help but constantly refer with wounded pride to imperial pasts? Empires have never had much to do with freedom from oppression and exploitation. Too much history is the tragedy of the day. It contains no past nor future that anyone would want to live, except maybe great men of power. Pax-Americana and pax-Islamica never differed much. It is the old history of exploitation, oppression and slavery.

The particular class composition of much of the historical core areas of Islamic dominance, partially as a product of indigenous history, partially of colonialism and the impact of global capitalism, has tended to make the position of the social strata traditionally most inclined to fascistoid ideologies strong, and the working class weak. The attraction to figures as Musa Nili and Hayder (the Brave), better known as Mussolini and Hitler, was not only due to the establishment of a settler colonialist state called Israel. To this, the line of home-gown butcher-saviours have been too long, and the continued influence of honour and shame and ‘manly values,’ and the celebration of submission, too strong. But there is nothing pre-determined about this. It is a product of oppression both by the word and by the sword. And, it must be added, we are most of the time talking about a minority, if a powerful and vocal one, dominating a ‘silent majority’ living their lives as best as they can. Islam foremost enslaves Muslims. And it is precisely the authoritarian, semi-secular regimes that has made the continuation of this state of affairs possible.

The failure of pan-Arab nationalism to deliver what it promised, which was not much to wish for in the first place, whether as Nasserism or Ba’thism, is an important element in Lakhdar’s historical exposure. Surprising to many is no doubt Lakhdar’s description of how Saudi Arabia with its petro-dollars was once seen by many as yet another saviour challenging ‘the West’ – if hardly capitalism. This was also the time that the sponsoring by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates of madrasas, mosques, and other religious institutions around the world, really took off – to counter the growing influence of Iranian Khomeinism. We see the beginning of what might be called a true globalisation of Islamic integralism, where also parts of the world that earlier had been little exposed to this kind of fanatic breed of dogmatism, though nominally Muslim, were drawn into the circle. It should be remembered that this also meant a confrontation with the traditionally strong pagan influences in popular Islam, in particular in the countryside. The state ideology of pure, dogmatic Islam of the Sharia, of worldly Sunni jurisprudence, takes center place. Islam is in a paradoxical way the most secular religion there is (sharing many common traits in particular with Judaism and the Bible of the Old testament in this respect), and its more popular and elitist spiritual elements are precisely those the Islamic integralist want to cleanse it off, so that nothing is left but Law. That this, in this day and age, cannot even create Order but only bloody chaos, in minds as well as in daily reality, is yet another paradox.

With its emphasis on root-learning and indoctrination from early age, the importance of “schooling” for building a global Islamist infrastructure cannot be underestimated. It is amazing that in the beginning of a new millennium, two-thirds of all Saudi PhDs are in ‘Islamic Studies.’ So what shall these students do when they finish, to say nothing of their poorer brethren elsewhere? Also more traditional campuses has for long been a prioritised battle-ground for Islamists. “A study of 1,384 Syrian fundamentalist imprisoned between 1976 and 1981,” writes Dilip Hiro, “showed 27.7 per cent to be college or university students and 13.3 per cent professionals, the corresponding figures for the Egyptian being 40 per cent and 6 per cent.” (*Islamic Fundamentalism*, Pal-

adin Grafton Books, 1988.) Many become state bureaucrats, teachers & and unemployed. Hamas, a Palestinian offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood, for long was a non-combative faction within the Palestine resistance movement, and used the time to conquer much of the means of education. Or to refer to Bassam Tibi: *"In line with the historical described legacy, the Islamist of our time put the goal of taking over the institutions of education at the top of their agenda. In Algeria, for instance, the educational politics of 'Arabisation' preceded the rise of political Islam. In similar vein, the Turkish fundamentalists pursue the politics of cultural Islamisation as their priority."* Audio-tapes, and to a lesser degree, video-tapes have also for long been a popular way of spreading the message, *"from the Kalashnikov to the tape-recorder,"* as the saying goes.

As always the position of women became the main battleground between **strong secularising forces** & a critical aspect that must not be overlooked & and the refuge of outmost reaction. *"By accepting to live in bondage to this Divine Law, man learns to be free,"* in the words of a former Minister of Law and Religious Affairs in Pakistan, A.K. Brohi, which reminds one of something a certain Trotsky once said about slavery and 'socialism' not being necessarily opposed, as well as the Leviathan of the English 17th century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes.

To dwell deeper into this material, concrete studies of the societies and histories Islamic integralism operate within and global socio-economical forces, are needed. Cultural ones not excluded. This would also reveal the forces struggling against a return to old and new life-denying ideologies, whether of the 'East' or 'West'. The question of the emancipation of women remains central, and is also what is gonna makes this edifice crumble in its foundation. There is a certain truth in the words of the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi: *"The Muslim system is not so much opposed to women as to the heterosexual unit. What is feared is the growth of the involvement between a man and a woman into an all-encompassing love, satisfying the sexual, emotional and intellectual needs of both partners. Such an involvement constitutes a direct threat to the man's allegiance to Allah, which should be the unconditional investment of all man's energies, thought and feelings in his God."*

Or should we say to very worldly rulers. This hardly captures everything there is to say about that topic. But it expresses something about that males are also oppressed by this ideology, and why secularising forces will succeed, maybe in a strange alliance with more spiritual, heterodox and pagan undercurrents within Islamic cultural traditions, as well as for sure, purely metaphorical, opportunistic and privatised interpretations of the *"words of Allah,"* as has become a norm within most of what remains of what was once Christianity. It took hundreds of years to significantly weaken this once so strong and oppressive force. The last thing needed is a replacement.

An interesting phenomenon was captured by Jeremy Seabrook in an article in *The Guardian* (December 20, 2001) with the telling title: *"The making of a fanatic: Young men with broken dreams of a business career are turning to fundamentalism"*. He writes:

"You see them everywhere on the streets of Dhaka, Jakarta, Karachi, the boys with their qualifications: a Master's in personnel, a diploma in management, a degree in marketing. You meet them on the battered buses, in the dusty parks, in the flyblown eating-houses, clutching copies of their "biodata" in plastic folders. They are on their way from house to house, giving tuition to the children of the middle class. These are the representatives of the pinched under-employment of a generation raised on the promise that if only they study business, they will be sure of a managerial job, big money, a security greater even than that guaranteed by government service."

Business culture has seized the imagination of the young all over the world. It has brought new hope to a generation whose educational aspirations have been transformed by its revelations of wealth-creation. They carry textbooks, published in the US, pages of which they learn by rote. Many are from poor families, from small towns and distant villages, who have sold precious land or gone into bottomless debt for the sake of a better life for their children. For them, to study in the capital enhances prestige — distance from the homeplace, it seems, adds value, no matter how academically thin the object of study, no matter how shaky the institution.”

Unlike what is the case of fairy tails, this new chimera seldom has a happy ending. But that the people referred to were caught in the Islamist net first after having sought a future within the latest craze of hyper-modern corruption, tells us much about the future of Islamic integralism. It has nothing to offer other than what is contained in the last phrase of the watchword of the Muslim Brethren, namely *“Death for the Glory of Allah is our greatest ambition”*. And unlike what a western media, deceived by Islamic propaganda and its own stupefaction wants us to believe, human beings of flesh and blood grown up with an Islamic faith, fear death no less, and wants no less to live than the rest of us. Therefore, Islamic integralism will fade away and give room for those who seek life and a world no longer dominated by exploitative and oppressive social forces. The future lies closer to the music of Rai and the rebellious youth of Kabyle, than it does to the caves of Afghanistan.

Islamic integralists are fighting a war they cannot win in the long run. The last desperate battles before being overtaken by the realities, for better and worse, of the modern world. Overtaken by emancipatory forces on one side and commodification on the other. Lafif Lakhdar was essentially right in stating: *“Contrary to what Islamic propaganda claims, and many western leftists believe, today’s Iran does not represent the reinvigoration of Islam but its swan-song, except that it lacks any beauty.”* What remains to be answered is how long this death-dance will take, how much pain it will give birth to, and how much, and for how long, it can hold back the emergence of conditions needed for a libertarian class struggle to gain strength. The question of why it emerged in the first place, it would take volumes to adequately answer.

Islamic integralism — not a Reformation

Let me explain: some orientalists, such as the American Richard Michel, see in the activist Islamic movements a potential for reforming Islam. In other words, a way of rationalising it, thus bringing it closer to western liberalism. Such writers have clearly succumbed to the comic temptation of analogy and to the lazy facility of repetition. For, if one sets up a parallel between the contemporary Islamic Brotherhoods and the European Reformation, one is just making a mockery of concrete history.

Seen historically, the Reformation is an integral part of the making of the modern world, of the birth of nations and their languages from the ruins of the Holy Roman Empire and its celestial counterpart — the Church. This process led, through a long route of development, to the explosion

of the third estate — a fact of decisive importance, without parallel in the modern history of Islam — an explosion which brought forth the French Revolution and hence modern nations and classes.

The Islamic movements are located in a completely different historical context. To conflate this context with that of the Reformation is to misunderstand the origins and development of the current movement of Islamic integralism, as well as its historical antecedent — the pan-Islamic movement of the 19th century.

Pan-Islamism took form under the political direction of the Ottoman sultan himself and the ideological direction of al-Afghani and ‘Abduh. Its aim was to defend the caliphate (the empire) which was slowly but surely breaking up as a result of the combined thrusts of European economic and ideological penetration, and of the nationalist demands of the Balkan peoples, especially the Serbs and the Bulgars who were struggling for emancipation both from the domination of the Ottoman rulers and from the religious domination of the ecumenical patriarchate who still hankered after the idea of a grand new empire with Greece at its centre. Blinded by their pro-Ottoman prejudices, the believers in pan-Islamism did not realise that times had changed and that the era of modern nation-states had succeeded that of the empires of former times. True to itself, pan-Islamism was keenly opposed to the secular and liberal anti-Ottoman tendency of the Arab Christians — Shibli Shumayyil, the Darwinist, was one of their leading spokesmen — during the last quarter of the 19th century. This latter tendency considered the only answer to European penetration and Ottoman despotism to be the complete adoption of the European model of civilisation as well as the separation of the Arab provinces from the empire and hence the formation of a modern nation.

Pan-Islamism countered these liberal demands with its famous old rubbish about the need for a just despot modelled on the second caliph, ‘Umar, who would impose on his subjects a bovine discipline for fifteen years before guiding them step by step to the age of reason. To the idea of the formation of a secular Arab nation comprising Muslims, Christians and Jews, pan-Islamism replied with the Muslim nation in the Koranic meaning of the term — that is a community of believers. They even thought that they could stop the Arabo-Muslim provinces of the empire from breaking away by unifying Sunni Islam through the merging of its four rites.

This response to the challenge of European modernism was not only anachronistic — it was also uncertain. The leading spokesman of pan-Islamism, al-Afghani, vacillated from one position to another. This high priest of pan-Islamism sometimes opted for pan-Arabism which implied the break up of the empire; a staunch pro-Ottoman, he at times advocated the Arabisation of the empire, which would mean that the Turks, the dominant element in the empire, would be in an inferior position; a militant opponent of socialism, as a theory imported from Europe, he at times predicted the universal victory of socialism; an ideologist of Islamic fundamentalism, he at times (probably under the influence of Free-Masonry, of which he was a member) advocated the merging of the three monotheistic religions in a new synthesis which would be superior to each of them. This idea was openly heretical. His disciple ‘Abduh, after having taken part in the ‘Urabi uprising (1881 — an anti-British and anti-authoritarian revolt, violently condemned by the sultan) later recanted.

This confusion and incoherence of pan-Islamism are closely linked to the decline of the Arab-Muslim world since the second half of the thirteenth century, and to its having been conquered, for the first time in its history, by bourgeois Europe.

In the last analysis the followers of pan-Islamism reflected the feelings of the big pro-Ottoman land-owners. These landowners owed their position to the first attempt at privatisation of

the crown domanial estates, which was carried out in the semi-modern, semi-oriental state of Muhammad 'Ali. They were aware of the threat which European influence presented to their interests. Besides, British domination was to encourage, at their expense, the growth of a new rural class based on small and medium land-owners. It is this very class which constituted the core of the modern Arab bourgeoisie.

The pan-Islamism of the 19th century, known as *al-Nahda* (Awakening), is in no way comparable to the Reformation and still less to the Renaissance, which was a return to the pre-Christian values of pagan Graeco-Roman civilisation. Even the Counter-Reformation was a progressive movement in comparison with contemporary Muslim integralism. The latter began in 1928, that is after the first world war, which marks the beginning of the decline of the capitalist mode of production, whose crisis since then has been permanent. Henceforth all variants of the bourgeoisie are regressive. Besides, one cannot, without making a fool of oneself, identify the path of the history of the Arabo-Islamic world with that of modern Europe. The dynamics are quite different.

An impassioned criticism of the religious illusion; successive revolutions — commercial, cultural, scientific, philosophic, bourgeois, industrial — and finally the creation of the nation-state; this sums up the essence of Europe's history since the Renaissance.

The Copernican earthquake, the heresies, the Enlightenment, 1792, 1848, 1871, 1917 were so many mortal blows to religion and to mystical obscurantism. Priests had already become a species doomed to extinction and Christianity is a shadow of its former self thanks to the anti-Christian currents which the French Revolution brought forth. From the fury of the direct democracy of the Revolution, year 11 to Freud, who demonstrated that the mechanisms and pulsations of the unconscious owe nothing to a Great Supervisor, religious indifference bordering on atheism became internalised in the collective unconscious of the greatest number. Whereas in the Islamic world the mosque still wishes to dominate everything, in the West television every evening plays admirably the roles of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and thus turns church, family, and soon school, into as many anachronisms.¹

God having been put to death by the bourgeois revolution, and the church having become marginalised, the nation-state appears upon the altar at which all citizens, irrespective of racial and religious origin, take communion.

Within this profoundly profane Europe the nation-state imposed itself through the dual process of assimilation of the bourgeoisies and of ethnic or religious minority groups, and the marginalisation of national and religious particularisms. It was that outcome of the bourgeois revolution which cut the umbilical cord linking the modern bourgeoisie to its medieval ancestors.

Bourgeoisie without bourgeois revolution

In the Arabo-Muslim world this process has not taken place and the nation-state did not see the light of dawn. The modern Arab state — an abortion of the project for a state which Napoleon attempted to implement in Egypt, which was taken over by Muhammad 'Ali and which still survives today with a modernistic facade and caliphate foundations — has not succeeded in rising to the rank of the nation-state. It has remained a confessional state, subject to the following cycle:

¹ See my pamphlet *The position on religion* (Arabic) Dar al-Tali'a, Beirut, 1972.

composition, decomposition, recombination. It has in the main remained inveterately despotic and denominational. Religion, in this case Islam, plays the role of a catalyst for the collective memory of the *umma*, the Koranic nation, undifferentiated and cemented by divine law. As the bourgeois *patrie* has not been created, the wars that the Arabo-Muslim bourgeoisie has been fighting from one decade to the next are not patriotic wars but jihads.

For lack of a bourgeois revolution, the Arab state, although bourgeois in its social and anti-proletarian role, has not been able to attain its true development into a self-sufficient modern state which does not need to lean on the crutches of Islam. Its denominational character, since Islam is proclaimed the state religion, prevents it to date from creating a true national cohesion. This could only be carried out in a non-denominational state which would result from a fusion and recasting of all the present components of its national bourgeoisie. Since they have not succeeded in this respect, each Arab state is a mosaic of particularisms of all sorts whose creeds, ethnic loyalties, dialects and mental outlooks are different and contradictory. Syria, Iraq and Lebanon are dramatic examples of this. This explains why at times of crisis regional, tribal, ethnic or confessional bonds often blunt the edge of social interests and the horizontal division of Arabo-Islamic society, which is unconsciously experienced as a juxtaposition of clannish partisanships (*asabiyat*) rather than as a society of open class struggle.

The fact that there is still no secular dimension within the Arab state means that the Christians and the Jews, not to mention the free thinkers, are still subject in effect to a status of *dhimmi* (tributary) as they were fourteen centuries ago.

The secularisation of the Arabo-Muslim state, so bitterly opposed both by the pan-Islamism of the 19th century and by present-day Islamic integralism, was never insisted on by any party or Arabo-Muslim thinker. True, al-Kawakibi recommended the union of Christian and Muslim Arabs – but within the framework of the sacrosanct Islamic caliphate whose caliph must be a Qurayshi (Arab from Muhammad's tribe). Similarly, the Arab uprising of 1916–1919, which was supported by Great Britain, only attacked the Ottoman order to appeal to “*all true Muslims to overthrow the atheist government which had dethroned the sultan and confiscated his property*”.² Even the Egyptian National Party which considered itself to be Jacobin was fiercely anti-secular. They attacked Qasim Amin for having recommended a measure of emancipation for Muslim women within the confines of a slightly re-interpreted Islam. Their leader Mustafa Kamit jumped for joy when a law court annulled the marriage of a Muslim lady with a Copt journalist. Worse still, the party's paper, *al-Mu'ayyed* made a concerted attack on the Copts for not having converted to Islam.

The present leaders of the Arab bourgeoisie are in this respect faithful to their predecessors. Qadafi has recently stated that “*Arab nationalism is part of Islam ... It is not normal that there be in the Arab homeland an Arab who is not a Muslim. The Christian Arab has no right to belong to the Arab nation, whose religion is not his own.*”³ Just as the fully fledged subject in Medieval Europe was a Christian the true “citizen” in the Arab world is a Muslim.

Qadafi says out loud what his Arabo-Muslim colleagues whisper to each other. King Faisal told Sadat when the latter had come to tell him of his decision (along with Syria) to open hostilities against Israel in 1973: “*It would be catastrophic to declare war together with a Syria governed by*

² The circular of Husain Ibn 'Ali, leader of the revolt, in M. Atias, *The great pan-Arab revolution* (Arabic), Damascus, 1978.

³ Interview in the Lebanese daily *al-Safir*, 10 August 1980.

the Ba'thists and the 'Alawis [a sect of Shi'i Islam]. To ally with Ba'thists is to risk disaster. But with 'Alawis especially, it would be tantamount to courting a double disaster."⁴ This morbid confessionalism is explained by the conditions which gave rise to the Arabo-Muslim bourgeoisie and by its vital need to resort to Islam for its survival. This bourgeoisie emerged not in a revolution but as the result of a lame compromise with its colonialist opposite number; for it was born from agriculture and not from industry. Finally it is a late arrival on the scene, a class whose birth, after the first world war, coincided with the beginning of the decline of the bourgeoisie on a world level. In order to remain in command when faced with the challenge of the 'people', it could only rely (apart from the armed forces) on Allah and Islam as the principal mystification of the toiling masses, since it had not succeeded, due to its immense economic backwardness, in setting up the modern mystifications inherent in political and trade union pluralism. Its incapacity to create a prosperous economy capable of satisfying the quantitative demands of the proletariat left only Islam as an ideological weapon for paralyzing the social dynamics, blocking the intellect of the masses, maintaining the sub-animal status of women and mystifying the class struggle. The struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed degenerated — often through the efforts of the political and religious establishments — into a sterile confrontation between Muslims and non-Muslims, Sunnis and Shi'is. In short, Islam, as its etymological meaning indicates, was able to force its subjects into submission.

Being decadent from birth, the Arab bourgeoisie was incapable of creating either its own market or its own national unity. Hence its allegiance to the imperialisms of today and to the Ottoman empire of former times. 'Urabi, in the midst of the war against the British expeditionary force, refused to publish and to refute his excommunication as an *'asiy* (rebel) by the Ottoman sultan — this excommunication was obtained moreover thanks to the promises and threats of the British. When the Khedive and the British spread it about in the Egyptian army the latter became demoralised. The soldiers of the first national Egyptian uprising no longer wished to die as rebels rather than as martyrs bearing the blessing of a Turkish sultan. More than forty years later, Sa'd Zaghlul — the father of secular Egyptian nationalism refused to support the abolition of the Ottoman empire by the Turks themselves, "because," he said, "the multitude is very sensitive to this subject". Muhammad Farid, leader of the Egyptian National Party, went even further when he wrote that "The Muslims of Egypt owe it to themselves to link themselves forever to Turkey, which is the capital of the Islamic caliphate, without the slightest consideration for their history in Egypt or elsewhere." We find in the words of an Egyptian Jacobin the fundamental thesis of the pan-Islamism of Afghani: "The nationality of Muslims is only their religion".

From failed pan-Islamism to ineffectual modernism

Although the ideological demarcations between the discourse and the confessional practices of the Arab-Muslim bourgeoisie on the one hand and pan-Islamic fundamentalism on the other are tangled, a new fact did emerge — the defeat of pan-Islamism. In 1919, Islam appears to be the loser. The 'Home of Islam', apart from North Yemen, Afghanistan and what was to become Saudi Arabia, was totally under European domination. The recipe of the pan-Islamists — an Islam reunified and purified by a return to the sources and thus able to defy the European challenge — turned out to be ineffectual. Its original contradiction, between the need to accede to power and therefore

⁴ Recounted by Sadat, see *al-Ahram*, 4 September 1980.

to modernism, and the tendency to regress to a primitive Islam full of taboos, incompatible with the demands of power and modernity, became flagrant. This contradiction in fact expresses the historical impossibility of the realisation of this double aim. In the epoch of permanent crisis, it was impossible for the Islamic bourgeoisie to catch up with advanced capitalism; and at a time when the world market was being unified under the dictatorship of mass consumption, it was impracticable to return to a pure and undiluted, austere and inward-looking Islam.

The abolition of the Islamic caliphate by Ataturk in 1924 and the separation of the Arab provinces from Turkey meant that pan-Islamism, whose centre was the Ottoman empire, became meaningless. By setting up, thirty-three years after Jules Ferry, republican schools which were compulsory and non-denominational and opting for the European model of life, Ataturk rehabilitated the tendency of Shibli Shumayyil, the rival of pan-Islamism. Moreover, this was to be the tendency of the new westernised Arab-Muslim intelligentsia which began to emerge between the two world wars. Traditionalist Islamic discourse was no longer a central theme. Their leading spokesman, Taha Husain, even went as far as to mock the rhetoric of the Koran which was unanimously considered as the one and only divine miracle to authenticate the message of Muhammad. He crossed swords with the traditionalists whose writings were nothing more than nauseating lamentations about the Judaeo-Christian "*plot*" to undermine Islam. Taha Husain was condemned even by the most enlightened leaders of the Arab bourgeoisie. He and his fellow-thinkers were more representative of their Parisian teachers than of their own feeble-minded bourgeoisie which did not put up with the slightest criticism.

The intelligentsia of the period between the two world wars was in advance of the bourgeoisie, but behind the times — and failed in its absurd attempt to reconcile fundamentalist authenticity with commercial modernism, the specificity of traditionalism with the uniformisation which the world market imposed. In short, they wanted to identify with the bourgeoisie, and to be themselves at one and the same time. Drawing their own conclusion from their failure almost all the modernist intellectuals recanted before the end of the 1940s and tuned into the religious stupidity of the bourgeoisie, which had in the main remained prisoner of the bric-à-brac of 'Abduh's pan-Islamism, but within the confines of an Islam which had definitively broken up.

In the meantime in Egypt — epicentre of the Arabo-Muslim world, and the model for its evolution — the liberal bourgeoisie under the leadership of the Wafd, a bi-denominational and therefore implicitly secular party, also failed in its task of modernising the economy. The other bourgeoisies came to the same impasse. When the failure of the liberal faction of the bourgeoisie was complete, the statist faction took over: 1952 in Egypt, 1954 in Syria, 1958 in Iraq and finally the civilian Neo-Destour in Tunisia, 1956.

Once in power, the modernist, authoritarian faction of the Arab bourgeoisie, with its belief in a planned economy, appeared to the old fashioned faction of the Muslim bourgeoisie as 'communist' in Egypt, Syria and Algeria and as 'westernised' in Tunisia. All the more so as the pro-Soviet tendencies of the former and the pro-western tendencies of the latter were obvious. In the Middle East the pan-Arab message checked the influence of pan-Islamism. Some agrarian reforms, while not greatly improving the situation of the fallahin, encroached upon the interest of the old landed bourgeoisie, which in many cases included or had close ties with the clergy.

The Arab state, even under the modernists, remained true to form, hypocritical and bigoted; the speeches of people such as Bourguiba or Nasser were constantly interspersed with as many quotations from the Koran as they were with statistics. Nevertheless the reform projects were ill-suited to a profoundly traditionalist Islam. The 1962 Charter in Egypt prattled about scientific

socialism, as did the Charters of Algeria and Syria in 1964. In Tunisia a code of personal law was introduced in 1957 which was ultra-modern and quite unique in the Muslim world. It forbade polygamy, which is permitted in the Koran. Divorce, reduced to a business transaction, was made symmetric, whereas Islam — the summit of male chauvinism — makes it the sole privilege of the husband. To get an idea of the Muslim clergy's hostility to measures of this type, recall that immediately upon achieving power, the Khomeinist government repealed the restrictions that the previous regime had imposed upon a husband's unilateral right to divorce his wife.

The ultimate in the relinquishing of Islamic dogmas was Bourguiba's abolition of the fast during the month of Ramadan in 1958 in an attempt to deal with the drastic fall in production caused by the fast.

As a result of the economic and legislative measures taken by the modernist bourgeoisie where in power, society began to break up and the family to fall apart. The rapid rise to riches of the new bourgeoisie, legendary for its corruption, favoured the emergence — in societies in which family or community solidarity was still a matter of honour — of an utilitarian outlook bent on money and success. In short, the old form of society was eroded and the traditional economy was destroyed without anything new taking their place. The failure of the modernisation of the economy was ubiquitous. To this economic failure, the modernising bourgeoisie added in 1967 the military defeat by Israel. The occupation of the whole of Jerusalem, the second most sacred place of Islam, afforded the bitterly, persecuted Muslim Brotherhoods another un hoped for argument to set the middle classes, the social mainstay of those in power, not only against Israel and the USSR but also against the Arab governments *whose "lack of faith brought about the whole catastrophe"*⁵

Internal causes of Islamic integralism

The old liberal bourgeoisie of land-owners and compradors, seriously weakened and discredited by its own failure, could no longer claim to be able to replace the more modern statist bourgeoisie. Only the religious faction, who moreover had the advantage of never having directly exercised power, could do that. All the more so as they were alone in having dared to face those in authority even when the latter seemed to be at the height of their glory. The anguish evoked by the defeat, the permanent crisis of the regimes, which the consequences of the war only deepened, and finally the black sun of melancholy which hardly ever sets in this region, favoured birds who only fly in the twilight moments of history — the religious pulpiteers. At the times when the air is filled with doubts and questions, they come forward to offer the afflicted masses their demagogic recipe — a return to Islamic archaism.

The fact that the Islamic integralists are the only mass opposition party in the Arab world is due not only to the successive failures of both the liberal and statist factions of the bourgeoisie. There are other reasons, both internal and external, which interact with each other. These deserve a closer look.

Christianity was first modernised to adapt it to the new Europe. Since the Renaissance it has been exposed to implacable criticism from Copernicus to Freud, not to mention heresies and revolutions. For lack of a powerful industrial Arab-Muslim bourgeoisie with its own intelligentsia, contemporary Islam has remained sheltered from any sort of subversive criticism. However, as

⁵ This is the ending of what seems to be the first tract of the Muslim Brethren in Egypt, July 1967.

much, if not more than other religions it is sensitive to any type of criticism be it social or scientific. For the Koran has its own bit to add to the biblical absurdities of Genesis. The earth is flat; the sun “goes down in a boiling spring near to a people”; the stars “of the neighbouring sky” are destined to be “thrown at demons”; “seven heavens and as many earths” were created by Allah. The Universe, it is true, is infinitely huge and poor Allah might well be unable to make head or tail of it. But when it comes to man — a minute being — there is less excuse. From among a myriad of examples: sperm, if we are to believe a verse in the Koran, is not secreted by the testicles but comes from somewhere “between the loins and the ribs”. Woe betide the Creator who does not even know the anatomy of his own creatures.

Even well-informed Muslims do not yet know that Allah, who swore in the Koran “to always keep his word”, did not keep his promise to keep the Koran intact. ‘Uthman, the third caliph, when collating the Koran, put on one side the three other versions brought by three distinguished Companions of Muhammad: Ubayy, Ibn Mas’ud and ‘Ali who was to become the fourth caliph. Similarly they are not aware that their Koran was inspired not only by Allah but also by Satan: the “satanic verses”, which for some time permitted the people to worship the idols of the Meccans in order to win them over.

The Arab intellectuals of today shun any criticism of Islam, of the most abominable of its dogmas, and even the translation or publication of books clarifying the genesis of Islam such as Maxime Rodinson’s *Mohammed*. The main explanation for this is the fact that the Arab intelligentsia as a whole has made a compact with the left and right factions of the bourgeoisie — factions which differ from each other as much as Tweedledum from Tweedledee.

In the Arab world, those who think for themselves and are capable of elaborating a criticism of all the sacred or profane mystifications come up against the political and religious censorship of the present Arab state — a censorship which is infinitely worse than that of the caliphate state. The fact is that the best Arab poets and thinkers of the early centuries of Islam would not be able to exist in the present day Arab world — people like Abu Nuwas, who loved wine and goodlooking boys; al-Ma’arri, who was radically anti-religious; or even al-Jahiz with his free libertine style, who was nevertheless considered as one of the leading thinkers of the mu’tazilite school.

As proof, consider the tentacles of a censorship which has not even spared the translations of the works of antiquity and of modern times. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* the chaos of the beginnings of the world has been transformed into a certain order of Allah. Plato’s *Republic and Symposium* and the Greek tragedies and comedies are radically purged of any references to homosexuality or remarks which outrage conventional morality. In the *Divine Comedy*, Muhammad is no longer to be found in the eighth circle of the Inferno. In 1954, ‘Abd al-Rahman Badwi collected and translated the articles of the Arab freethinkers of the Middle Ages, entitling the collection *Atheism and Islam*. The book was rapidly withdrawn from circulation, and nothing more was heard about it. In Syria, since 1971, censorship has been preventing the publication of the translation of Marx’s *German Ideology*. My own writings, published in Lebanon before the 1973 war, are forbidden everywhere else. They sometimes manage to get through the *cordon sanitaire* which extends from the Gulf to the Atlantic, thanks to the practice of smuggling, not always for purely commercial aims.

This stupid and totalitarian censorship is part of an unspeakable generalised dictatorship. The Arab bourgeoisie’s only means of mitigating the under-development in the techniques for lying in the mass media — its television is still not credible — are strong-arm methods from which the whole of society suffers. There is no legal means of defending oneself. Even the few appearances

of democracy left by the European colonisers such as the liberty of the press, the party system, the right to strike – are abolished in the name of sacrosanct economic development. While retaining a veneer of westernisation, the *dirigiste* Arab state has retrieved its memory of the caliphate.

In the Maghreb, the masses, given their desire for a Messiah and the demagogy of the nationalist elites, imagined that independence would be a home-coming, a return to their traditional culture and to their community solidarity where “*all Muslims are brothers*”. The nationalist elites, once in power, did not of course keep their promises. For them independence meant their own independence from the masses. Worse still, the post-colonial state behaved towards the latter with the same cruelty as the colonial state.

In this claustrophobic and decadent Arab society which had no perspective, the most ridiculous mysticisms could develop. The context, it is true, was ideal. A profound and generalised falsification of both social and inter-personal relations, the fatalism of Islam which, once internalized, prevents a person from being himself or herself, from thinking and acting as oneself from seeking the truth of one’s own destiny in oneself and not in Allah.

The occupation by Israel of the Arab territories provided the integralists with an unhoped-for pretext: it could be interpreted as a “*just punishment from Allah on all those who had abandoned his religion*”.

The intergralist Muslim sects, haloed with their martyrs from 1954 to 1966, especially in Egypt, swarmed clandestinely. Worse still, they became credible. All the more so since they were favoured by the fact that the unspeakable authoritarianism of those in power left practically no means of expression or autonomous organisation. Only the mosques were protected from censorship. They became places where the masses whose ranks were broken by despotism reviewed a political-religious indoctrination.

Then came the October war with its parade of intense Islamic propaganda, and the oil boom which enabled Libya and especially Saudi Arabia to distribute their petrodollars to the integralist groups everywhere in order to undermine left-wing extremists, or pro-Soviet groups as in Syria. Even at the time when the modernist statist bourgeois faction was still credible, Saudi Arabia was used as the prototype by repressed or persecuted Islamic archaism; and its emergence following the October war on the ruins of Nasser’s Egypt as the leader of the Arab world gave the Brotherhoods of Sunni Islam not only more subsidies, but the model of an Islam true to itself. The propaganda pounded out by western media – depicting Saudi Arabia as the new giant with the power of life and death over western civilisation – stimulated, in old and young alike, the nostalgic old desire for the return of Islam to its former strength.

External causes

These are the *internal* causes which favour a massive return to Islam. There are also external causes: the decline of the West, and its attempt to take advantage of the Islamic movements.

The decline of the West has become obvious. Its dying throes shake the economic, ethical and aesthetic order; its traditional ideologies ‘socialist’ as well as liberal – are dead. In short, it no longer presents even for itself a feasible project for civilisation. The Arab-Muslim intelligentsia, which had formerly earned its daily bread by circulating the latest cultural fashions of this same western civilisation, is now thrown back on its own resources and outdated values. As though by some magic power, it has now begun to rediscover the long-forgotten virtues of the celebrated

Return to the Source advocated by the pan-Islamism of a bygone age. Thus Zaki Najib Mahmud, grown grey in the service of American positivism, realises at the end of his life that he had “*considerably under-estimated*” *al-turath*, the Arab-Islamic heritage, which — if we are to believe him — is capable after all of rejuvenating good old Arab society! Others in turn have suddenly discovered, more than two generations after the Dadaists, the bankruptcy of 18th century rationalism which had promised to usher in the reign of reason in everyday life — a belated discovery of a bankruptcy which was already clearly visible in the debris of the First World Butchery. Yet others have discovered that the alcoholism, drug addiction and youth vandalism rampant in the West are all due to the decline of religious feelings, and they would like to protect their own society from these evils. In short, the fact that the Arab-Muslim intelligentsia as a whole, which only yesterday was looking to the West, is now withdrawing into itself is grist to the mill of Islamic integralism.

The monotheistic religions arose from the ashes of ancient civilisations. The present return to religious archaism (which, in varying degrees, is taking place all over the world) is nourished by the putrescence of ‘our’ civilisation, which constantly reminds man of death and makes the apocalypse a daily occurrence. Within one generation it has led to two world carnages which resulted in twenty and fifty million deaths and several hundred million wounded and permanently shocked. There is now talk of a third world war. Two great powers, the USA and the USSR, have at their disposal sufficient nuclear arms to destroy our planet five times over. In the industrialised societies people are dying of obesity. In the third world, fifty million human beings — of whom fifteen million are children — die from malnutrition every year. That is as many people die of malnutrition every year, as died in the second world war.

The West does not only encourage the return to Islamic archaism by its own decline, but even more by its intrigues. Both Europeans and Americans have long been forced to seek the help of Islam in the suppression of embryonic social struggles in Muslim countries and in opposing their Soviet rival. Moreover, the latter used to try to exploit Nasser’s pan-Arabism against the West.

M. Copland, the former chief of the CIA in the Middle East, revealed in his book *The Game of Nations* that as from the 1950s the CIA began to encourage the Muslim Brotherhood to counteract the communist influence in Egypt. This trend has become more pronounced since then.

We hear the same tune from Giscard d’Estaing, who confided to members of his cabinet before taking the plane for the Gulf in March 1980: “*To combat Communism we have to oppose it with another ideology. In the West, we have nothing. This is why we must support Islam.*”⁶ Brzezinski, the chief adviser to the White House, discovers in religious wars still other virtues: “*The religious troubles in the Middle East could arouse a common desire to find a definitive settlement between the Arabs and Israel.*”⁷ It is therefore clear that the coming to power of Khomeinism in Iran has in no way altered the West’s determination to manipulate militant Islam. Future Islamic governments would be, especially at the outset, difficult clients, but clients all the same.

Restructuring the Arab world

The West’s need to ally with Islam is considerably more compelling than the brevity of the declarations would lead us to believe. As in Latin America, the American bourgeoisie attempts

⁶ “The President in the land of 1001 wells” in *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 8 March 1980.

⁷ Declaration reproduced in the Tunisian daily *al-Sabah*, 6 February 1980.

to democratise as far as possible outdated dictatorships of the Iranian type within its sphere of influence in the Islamic world. In fact, the traditionalist caste-like dictatorships, the clannish patriarchal type of governments — as in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates in the Gulf, or elsewhere — which forbid any change in power, are incompatible with two major requirements: that of the new international division of labour and that of the remodelling of the map of the Arab-Muslim world.

The restructuring of the saturated world market, demanded by the new reorganisation of the international division of labour undertaken by the multinationals, requires in turn a restructuring of the political powers in the regions concerned, so that they can play their role there. The leading technology on which the development of the highly profitable economic sectors of the future depend, such as computers or micro-electronics, will be the monopoly of the West with the USA in the lead; the outdated or polluting industries (steel, naval construction), specialisation in certain types of agriculture and some sub-contracted industries, will be the lot of the third world. The possessors of the manna, in the form of petrodollars, will have to play the role of international bankers financing the projects evolved by western experts for the ‘development’ of certain underdeveloped countries. The implementation of this new international division of labour is dependent in the Arab-Muslim world on the remodelling of its map.

The balance of power in this area between the Ottomans, British and Russians, which was upset by the consequences of the first world war, was restored by a new balance between British and French. These two divided between them the spoils of the defeated Ottoman Empire. In their turn, the consequences of the second world war meant the wane of British and French imperialism and the rise of American and Russian imperialism. In 1920 there was the Treaty of Sévres and in 1945 there was Yalta. But after the departure of the British and the French and their replacement by the Americans and the Russians there was no proper agreement to ratify the new *de facto* balance of power. The Arab-Muslim world has remained a shady area open to all rivalries. The intensification of the world crisis now demands a new imperialist distribution of the energy market (the USSR needs 18 per cent of the Middle East oil), access to raw materials and spheres of influence. In short, a new Yalta, or world settlement, is required for oil, since the alternative is open bargaining or open confrontation.

All the states, apart from Israel, and perhaps Egypt, will probably have to change their frontiers, their populations, their name and, naturally, their patrons.

The map which will emerge from this new Yalta will probably be an outcome of the break-up of the present states into denominational mini-states, which may then be regrouped into federations or confederations. The keystone of this attempt to politically re-structure the Arab-Muslim area will be the rise of the new middle classes. Local technocracies have considerably developed due to the export of oil and to the spread of education. Their ambition is to participate in public affairs, hitherto monopolised by the tribal-dynastic castes. This participation, which implies a degree of modernisation of the states in question, is (if we are to believe the specialists of the multinationals and their computers) going to prevent both autonomous popular movements and possible pro-Soviet *coups d'état*, even in Saudi Arabia. But how can this be achieved? In Brzezinski's own words, by the manipulation of the “*existing forces*” with the aim of changing the out-dated socioeconomic *status quo*, before Moscow does so to its advantage.

Henceforth, it would be preferable not to risk military *coups d'état* except in cases of extreme emergency. True, armies have for decades been the agents of change which the West has manipulated as it desired; but the situation has now changed. Thirty years ago, given the widespread

weakness of all the social classes, they were the only organised force capable of disciplining the toiling masses which were too turbulent at the time. Then they failed in their task of modernising the economy. Worse still: a series of *coups d'état* — beginning with Egypt, then in Syria, Algeria, Libya and finally Ethiopia — had started off in Washington and ended up in Moscow.

When the tactic of the *coup d'état* had been exhausted, the West thought it had found a replacement in the religious movements. These movements were the mouthpiece of the urban and rural middle classes, and of the mystified sub-proletariat which crowded into the poverty belts surrounding the prodigal capitals. It is possible that the idea was not to give over all the power to the clergy but preferably to manipulate the religious and secular opposition as a whole to clear the way for the technocrats. Once the battle was won, the clergy would return to their flocks and would busy themselves with the management of their estates. (However, the example of Iran is not too encouraging ...) In short, the idea was to replace the anachronisms by modernist, liberal formations with a religious outlook or backing. *Modernist* means: capable of setting up an economy enmeshed, by the very constraints of the laws of the market, with that of the West. It also implies the ability to maintain an army efficiently equipped and trained, but closely linked to the western system of defense. There is also the need to look after the interests of the multinationals whose guardians they are to be. *Liberal* means: capable of exploiting to the utmost parliamentary mystification and political and trade-unionist pluralism in order to enlarge and consolidate the social basis of the regime. *Religious outlook or backing* means: the re-forging of the good old alliance between the sword and the Koran in order to check any rebirth of radical social movements, and if possible to destabilise the Muslim republics in the USSR. Translated into Koranic terms, this is what Carter wanted to see implemented in this area “*friendly governments, Islamic and liberal, who respect human rights*”.

Given the explosive contradictions at work, the economic situation approaching bankruptcy almost everywhere, there is nothing to ensure that the will of the Master of the White House be done. Neither the crowned monarchy nor the jackbooted republic was able to extricate this part of the world from its chronic, general crisis. Will the turbanned republic be able to do so?

Nothing is less likely. The Islamic movements, given their composite social nature and especially their lack of an even remotely credible programme, are not capable of coming to power, or of staying there for any length of time.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The double failure of the first rising of the modern Egyptian bourgeoisie in 1919 which achieved neither independence nor a constitutional government; Ataturk's abolition of the Islamic caliphate in 1923; the rise of fascism in Italy which impressed the majority of the average traditionalist Muslim intelligentsia; the rise of stalinism in the USSR which attracted the attention of the left-wing Christian intellectuals, who were also fascinated by the impotent cult of power; finally the grimness of the inter-war period dominated by the general feeling of defeat of western civilisation with its basis in the cult of science and of reason — all these created an environment which favoured the irruption of the irrational into contemporary history.

In this setting, the Fraternity of Muslim Brethren was founded in Egypt in 1928, only a few months before the emergence of the crisis of 1929 which was to lead to the second world war. Their organisational model was based both on esoteric Muslim sects of the Middle Ages and on

modern fascism. Article 2 of their statutes states that members must undertake “*to submit to iron discipline and to carry out the orders of their superiors*”. Their charismatic “Supreme Guide” is, like a caliph, beyond all questioning. As from their founding, the Brethren chose to collaborate with the regime in power. Thus they immediately came to terms with the “*iron hand*” government of Muhammad Mahmud, then with that of the dictator Isma’il Sidqi and even with the Suez Canal Company; the latter contributed £500 to their funds, in order to encourage them to dampen the ardour of the youth of the secular Wafd party, which at that time had broken with the British. (The Brethren were the only Egyptian group to have a newspaper.)

In fact, their nostalgic appeals for the restoration of the Golden Age of Islam, the crossed swords and the Koran which served them as emblems, symbolising to perfection the morbid ideal of the practice of death, attracted to their cause a whole part of the frustrated petty bourgeois youth, who were horribly repressed, a prey to all sorts of fears and hostile to any pleasurable activity. In short, the palace and the British used the Brethren as an anaesthetic.

During the second world war, despite their sympathy for the Axis, the Brethren supported the Allies, apparently for tactical reasons. In effect, they were able to use the mosques for their propaganda and to establish themselves especially in the schools and in the countryside.

As a result of their truly Machiavellian tactics, the Organisation of the Brethren became, in less than thirteen years, the most formidable mass party. In 1941, the Brethren allied with the Sa’dists, the party in power, which was close to the palace. As soon as the latter was ousted from the harem, they had not the slightest hesitation in joining forces with its rival and successor, the Wafd. When the Wafd was in turn eliminated from office, they allied once again with the same Sa’dists who, it is true, allowed them to set up a paramilitary Organisation, *al-Jawwala*, with 20,000 members. Later they allied with the National Committee of Students and Workers, spear-headed by the communists. Not long after, they opposed the Committee by supporting the government of the famous Isma’il Sidqi, leader of the Sa’dists. But just before the elections, the latter broke his alliance with the Brotherhood, which by that time numbered half a million members and sympathisers. In December 1948, suspecting that the Brotherhood wished to take power, al-Naqrashi, the head of the government, outlawed the movement. Their response was immediate. Al-Naqrashi was assassinated by a medical student, a member of the movement. For a whole year, the authorities manoeuvred Hasan al-Banna’, the Supreme Guide of the Brethren, from one compromise to another, until he disowned his own followers by publicly declaring that “*they are not brethren and even less Muslims*”. He was finally killed in 1949. His successor, the magistrate Hasan al-Hudaibi, allied the Brotherhood once again with the palace, and was even solemnly received by King Faruq, who stated in his presence and with his agreement: “*Since the British will soon leave Egypt, our only enemy now is communism*”. But when Faruq was ousted by Nasser in 1952, the Brethren supported the latter with the same fervour. However, the honeymoon did not last long. When Nasser decided to limit landed property holdings to 200 acres, the Brethren suggested the figure of 500 and demanded at the same time that the new government undertake to re-Islamise society and the state. In 1954 they attempted to assassinate the Ra’is. Their Brotherhood was disbanded. In 1959, it was clandestinely re-formed, and once again decapitated in 1965. Sadat, himself a former member of the Brotherhood, allowed them to reappear in 1972 and to publish a journal, *al-Da’wa* (the Sermon). Similarly, the Muslim International founded by al-Banna’ in the 1930s was reconstituted in Cairo. Through it, Egypt, amongst others, gave aid to the armed vanguard, the Mujahidin, who are at present fighting the Syrian regime.

In the writings of the Brethren, any social programme is conspicuous by its absence. Al-Banna' justified his refusal to outline a programme by his desire to "avoid the possibility of a great schism between the various Muslim rites and confessions". When one fine day the leaders of the paramilitary Organisation of the Brotherhood informed him that they were in a position to take power, he challenged them to submit to him within a week an Islamic radio programme for the first week of the *coup d'état* - a task which they were incapable of fulfilling.

After the death of the leader, it fell to Muhammad al-Ghazali, an ideologist of the Brotherhood, to risk undertaking the project. In his book *Islam and the Economic Orders* he devotes a whole chapter to the "intermediate economic order" of Islam. After dismissing "that Jew, Marx" with a few words, he reveals to us the secret of the Islamic economic order, "alone capable of saving humanity". What is it? "It is the economic order", he writes, "which was implemented in Fascist Italy, in Nazi Germany, and which is still in force in Britain, thanks to state control of the big firms and to the state holding over 50 per cent of the shares in these firms".⁸ Clearly, "the Islamic economy" is simply state control and militarisation of the economy, as practised since the first world war. Rather more subtly, Sayyid Qutb, another of the Brotherhood's thinkers, does not have faith in any programme. In 1964, one year before his execution by Nasser, he published his swan-song whose title sounds as a call for the re-Islamisation by the sword of an apostate society: *The Jahiliya of the 20th Century (Jahiliyat al-qarn al-'ishrin)*. *The Jahiliya*, the period of pre-Islamic paganism, is usually depicted as "inadmissible permissive", full of *joie de vivre* and with no ethic other than love, wine and hunting. And Qutb says: "Give us power and you shall see; we shall obliterate all trace of this paganism".

In other countries, other Islamic organisations proved equally incapable of elaborating a programme for their Islamic state. In 1972, when the government of the United Arab Emirates invited Hasan al-Turabi, the Supreme Guide of the Brethren in the Sudan, to write an Islamic Constitution, his reply was at first negative — "This is a difficult task", he said. But they would not take no for an answer, and with the help of petrodollars he managed to do it. This was the constitution which allowed Shaikh Zaid Ibn Sultan to be the absolute boss of Abu Dhabi.

Even the Syrian Muslim Brethren have not been able to overthrow a hard-pressed minority regime with which they had been openly at war, despite massive aid from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere — mainly because they are incapable of producing a programme likely to attract the other forces hostile to the regime.

In my opinion, this is an open admission of the historic impossibility of the implementation for any length of time of an Islamic society in a world which commodity production and its consequences have unified and predisposed to an alternative order, where the return to religion has no place.

Return to what?

Given their inability to address the downtrodden masses with a programme that makes any sense, the integralists — consummate demagogues that they are — have opted for the facile slogan of return to primitive Islam, the Islam of the four *al-Rashidun*, the "rightly guided" early caliphs, who supposedly differed from all their successors in their strict respect for the Koran and their adherence to the procedure of consulting the communal council of believers. Al-Afghani even

⁸ *Islam and the economic orders* (Arabic), Dar al-Kitab, Beirut, pp 62–3.

speaks of a return to the era of the libertine caliph, Harun al-Rashid, when Islam more than in any other period — played the role of a mere state ideology. It is therefore a question of a return to the imperial power of Islam but not to the Islam which respects its dogmas.

It will be obvious that the Koran, the transhistorical constitution of the Islamic *Umma*, has never been entirely respected, even by the four caliphs. Muhammad never hesitated for a moment to cut out verses which the evolution of his sermons, or the demands of his alliances had rendered anachronistic. Thus the well-known Meccan verse in favour of the *mustad'afin* (the downtrodden) was replaced by another favouring those with property: “*We have, said Allah, favoured some and not others as far as riches are concerned*”. Muhammad however had a water-tight alibi — did he not claim to be in touch with Allah himself, whose acts are unscrutable?

The period of the four caliphs was in no way the ‘Golden Age’ which contemporary legend depicts. There were cruel struggles for power. Of the four “*rightly guided*” caliphs, only Abu Bakr died a natural death — and *his* caliphate was exceptionally short. The three others were assassinated: ‘Umar by a Persian slave; ‘Uthman at the hands of one of Abu Bakr’s own sons, ‘Abd al-Rahman; and ‘Ali by Muslims just as pious as himself. Less than 37 years after the founding by Muhammad of the first Arab-Muslim state at Medina, the Community of Believers, whom he had always instructed to remain united in the faith and in the law, in one monolithic block, split into two groups, which were mortal enemies.

Since the caliphate of Mu’awiya, the fifth caliph, and the consolidation of the conquering Arabo-Muslims as a ruling class, the Koran has been continually trampled underfoot by the caliphs of Islam, who only used it as a sort of philosophy of history, a state ideology, to justify the redistribution of power and of goods.

The Shi’ites do not demand a return to the times of the four caliphs. Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman are described as “usurpers”. Indeed, ‘Ali was reluctant to swear allegiance to them, and disapproved of their rule. And if ‘Uthman beat him in the bid for power, it was effectively because he refused to follow the example of Abu Bakr and ‘Umar. The insurgents who assassinated ‘Uthman were moreover in league with him.

Iran

A return to ‘Ali’s caliphate — from first to last a period of open civil war — would mean a return to one of the most troubled times of the whole history of Islam. In this respect, Iran has succeeded.

Some Islamic ideologists consider that in Khomeini’s Iran, Islam has gone beyond the confines of Wahhabi reformism, with its pan-Islamism and its creed of the Jihad, and has entered upon its ultimate evolution: the revolutionary stage. Intellectually incapable of understanding their own period, they do not realise that Khomeinism, in a period when the revolution can only be social, contains absolutely no project which is in any way progressive.

On the contrary, in Iran Islam can congratulate itself on having caught up, five centuries too late, with the Europe of the Inquisition. Recently, Bani Sadr, the Head of State, wondered in his *Inqilab Islami*: “*Is it true that an Inquisition-like tribunal has been set up in the university?*”. But the Holy Inquisition was set up throughout the country at the outset under the crosier of that blood-thirsty psychopath, Ayatollah Khalkhali.

This inquisition is not the work of the Islamic Republican Party alone, but of all those in power. They are incapable of dealing with the crisis, and can only resort to appeals for austerity and the practice of violent repression. The Iranian working class lost more than 70,000 members in the struggle to get rid of the Shah. Their only reward is a medieval religious dictatorship plus the horrors of inflation (70 per cent), of unemployment (4 million unemployed), and the humiliation of public whipping for the simple act of drinking beer, or because a woman bathed on a beach reserved for men. The two million drug addicts, mainly located in South Tehran, were given six months to kick the habit – otherwise they will be executed.

This cult of death may well fascinate a large number of middle class youths, who are the victims of emotional blocks, and are frightened of freedom and libertarian ways. It is however no solution in face of the real problems which shake the very foundations of Iranian society.

A person such as Khomeini, who suffers from historical sclerosis, and who in his book *Islamic Government* deals with such serious problems as the buggery of a poor donkey by a poor Muslim, and who is incapable of creating an Iranian bourgeoisie, can only return to the American fold or fall under Soviet influence. “*We are less independent today*”, admits Bani Sadr, “*than we were under the Shah. Our budget depends on the credit of foreign banks. Our dependence on arms and foreign military experts is quite simply tragic.*”⁹ Has Bani Sadr, the spiritual son of the Imam, finally grasped that in a world unified by the violence of the laws of the market Iran cannot be independent, whether the Imam, present or absent, likes it or not? Has he understood that the Koran cannot be applied in one area of capital importance: the banking system? Before the Shah left, this Islamic economist calmly promised those who wanted to listen that he would abolish the banking system, “*as it is incompatible with the prohibition of usury in the Koran*”. Has he now realised that this abolition requires the fulfilment of nineteen conditions which would take nineteen years? Obviously, the logic of capital is stronger than all the prohibitions of all the religions.

The middle classes, who at first idolised Khomeini in the belief that they had found in him the universal miracle cure, now turn away from him to await the *coup d'état*. The sub-proletariat, who served him as cannon fodder, now suffer more than ever with the repression of Khalkhali. The proletariat are engaged in a permanent struggle in their work-places to counter the intervention of the Islamic committees, and only stop specific strikes to return to their permanent go-slow.

Contrary to what Islamic propaganda claims, and many western leftists believe, today's Iran does not represent the reinvigoration of Islam but its swan-song, except that it lacks any beauty.

The fallacy of a new Islam, which many people have fallen for, is now beginning to be dispelled. The awakening of the ‘ordinary people’ could be fatal for it. In fact, the ‘ordinary people’, although contaminated by the plague of Koranic fatalism, are everywhere dissatisfied by this over-abstract Allah – too distant and too impenetrable to play a role in their daily life. This is why the ordinary Muslim, both in Africa and in Asia, is so fond of totemic and pagan cults under the facade of Islam. He reveres fetishes, amulets, marabouts and tombs which help him to deal with the suffering of everyday life, to cure ills and to foretell the future. This humble Muslim, once the first surprise and the enthusiasm is over, appears as unwilling and even resistant to a literal application of Koranic barbarity which condemns him to asceticism, castration, flagellation and stoning. In a moment of frankness, Hasan al-Banna’ admitted in 1947 to the members of his Brotherhood that the first obstacle they would meet on the path to the re-Islamisation of secular Muslim society, in

⁹ The Beirut daily *al-Anwar*, 24 September 1980.

his opinion, would be the hostility of the people. “*I must tell you*”, he said, “*that your preaching is still a closed book to the majority. The day when they discover it and realise what it aims for they will resist violently and oppose you tenaciously*”. He added ‐ “*You will first have to confront the ignorance of ordinary people concerning the truth of Islam.*”¹⁰ In fact, for the people Islam is more of a refuge than a set of deadly dogmas — take for example the public transgression this year of the fast of Ramadan in countries such as Egypt and Iran where Islamic discourse dominates.

The return to Islamic archaism is part of the process of totalitarian uniformisation of all the aspects of cultural consumption. Outside the confines of the dominant model — that of Islam for the Muslim and of Christianity for the Christian, that of Judaism for the Jew and that of the media for all — thinking is forbidden. There is no room left for free and critical reflection. The arbitrary in Khomeini’s Iran encroaches even on the freedom of choice in clothing for women and in choice of food for all.

Under the rule of a mercantile civilisation, which impoverishes more each day and is in its own way bigoted, any creation becomes necessarily heretical. When Khomeinist moralism becomes the norm, any reflection or ‘abnormal’ act can only be punished.

Apart from its exemplary punishments, Islamic archaism has nothing new to offer. It appears to me to be part of the process of the break-up of the state in a world which is becoming un-governable. If the Islamic movements were to take power following the failure and the expected fall of Khomeinism, they could only profoundly destabilise the Islamic world which is already smitten with crisis, terrorism and open or masked civil war. It is however obvious that Islamic archaism cannot come to power, or remain in power in an acceptable manner. Its force is already spent before it begins.

“*After the death of God*”, says Nietzsche, “*the most difficult thing to overcome is his shadow*”. His sinister shadow is this stupid and stupefying society, which produces and reproduces religion and spectacle; this society of exploitation, of radical alienation, of emotional plague, of loneliness, of insecurity, of degeneration, of generalised passivity, of representations which represent nothing but themselves, of waste and malnutrition, of fear and war. If religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, it will cease to exist when that creature is no longer oppressed but has become the creator of his own daily history.

¹⁰ *Sayings of the martyr Hasan al-Banna*, pamphlet published by *Ibad al Rahman* (the Lebanese Brethren), Beirut, 1960.

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Lafif Lakhdar
Why the Reversion to Islamic Archaism?
A Middle Eastern analysis from 1981
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