

Chapter 1

ISLAM AND EUROPE

With the fading away of imperial power, which had made it possible for the West to despise other cultures, interest in Islam has revived recently, and the economic influence of oil-rich Muslim states has provided, for the first time in 250 years, a practical motive for seeking to understand the Muslim world. There is no lack of information available, and library shelves are heavy with books on Islam; but whether this spate of information has provided the keys to understanding – and to the empathy without which understanding can only be superficial – is another question. In any case, those of us who see a need to build bridges across the frontier are never satisfied. An affirmation is nothing if the signal which carries it is weak or distorted, and although it may be that all such signals, by their very nature, lack strength and clarity, the attempt must be made, repeatedly, to find the right words and the most effective means of communication.

Between Islam and Christianity, as between Islam and post-Christian culture, communication has been hampered by very particular difficulties. Occidental¹ writing about Islam – what we would now call the work of the orientalists – has only too often been rooted in the bitter polemics of the Middle Ages. From the time when Christianity came into possession of the Roman Empire until the seventh century it would have been reasonable to suppose that nothing could stop the universal expansion of the Christian message. In the seventh century Islam stopped it. From then on nothing short of a piety capable of withstanding the severest shock could save Christians from the unthinkable thought that God had made a dreadful mistake. Palestine and other lands of the Near East, together with Christian Egypt, had been devoured by a monster which appeared without warning out of the Arabian sands; the foundations of the world had been shaken and the shadow of darkness had come down upon the heart of Christendom, the Holy Land.

Since Islam was strong in arms and Christendom was weak, words were the only available weapons against what was seen first as a 'heresy' and later as a false religion of satanic origin, and all the resources of language were pressed into the service of a propaganda campaign which might have

¹ In common usage the term 'Western' refers to Western Europe and the Americas, contrasted with the socialist 'East'. It seems best, therefore, to use the term 'occidental' when referring to the white man's civilization as a whole, and this has an added advantage if it serves to remind us that Marxism is as much a product of European culture as is parliamentary democracy.

brought a blush to the cheeks of the late Doctor Goebbels. One can still catch its echoes in our time. Pope Innocent III had identified Muhammad as the Anti-Christ; almost 700 years later the explorer Doughty described him as 'a dirty and perfidious Arab'. In his *History of Europe*, published in 1936 and a standard work in schools for many years after, H. A. L. Fisher called him 'cruel and crafty, lustful and ignorant' and made reference to the 'crude outpourings of the Koran'.

The contemporary Muslim, however, is often less troubled by books which show an open and clear-cut bias, whether this arises from a narrow denominational point of view or as part of a generalized attack on traditional religion, than he is by works which are sympathetic (or condescending) in intention, but which in practice undermine the foundations of his faith. To take the most obvious example, many writers who might be considered well-disposed work on the unspoken assumption that Muhammad was the 'author' of the Qurān. To suggest that the Qurān had a human author, even if it is admitted that he was 'an inspired genius', is to do away with the religion of Islam. These authors refer readily to the 'greatness' of the Prophet; like sympathetic schoolmasters, they find in him much to admire, and they are astonished by his magnanimity to his enemies. They rebut charges that he was anything but sincere, brave and honourable and are shocked by the scurrilous charges brought against him by earlier writers. At the same time there emerges, quite unconsciously, that note of amiable condescension which – ever since the end of Empire – Europeans have adopted towards the 'backward' or 'developing' peoples of the Third World.

There is a certain ambiguity in many of these books, as though their authors were unable to decide whether Islam is or is not a truly revealed religion. Even the British Islamicist, W. Montgomery Watt, appears to be a victim of such indecision. In his assessment at the end of *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* he remarks in passing that 'not all the ideas that he proclaimed are true and sound, but by God's grace he had been able to provide men with a better religion than they had had before'. One suspects a slip of the pen here, since the author is a Christian, and Christianity came before Islam; but the ambiguity is apparent if one asks, first, why 'God's grace' should have been only partially effective in Muhammad's case, and secondly, in terms of what absolute criterion of truth some of these ideas were true and others less so. Transpose this to the Christian context and it might reasonably be asked how a believing Christian would respond to the statement that 'not all Jesus's ideas were true and sound', but that Christianity represented an advance on Greek and Roman religion.

Where Christian writers are concerned certain limitations are appropriate and acceptable. One does not expect them to be untrue to the principles of their own faith, and the fact that they are themselves believers gives them an understanding of religion as such which opens doors and may, on occasion, lead to the very heart of things; and there are some who understand very well that to speak of another religion with courtesy is not only a gesture of respect to its adherents but is also a courtesy to God in the face of the mysteries of divine Self-revelation. This

was well expressed by the Catholic Islamicist, Emile Dermenghem, in his *Life of Mohamet*¹, when – writing of ‘the barriers which must be destroyed’ – he said that ‘the sense of true relativity does not destroy the sense of the Absolute’, adding that, ‘The divine Revelation comes from the mouths of human beings, adapting itself to times and places ... What seems to us contradictory is only the refraction of the eternal ray in the prism of time’.

Even Dermenghem, despite the deep love for Islam which led him to end his life in Algeria, demonstrates that there are sticking points beyond which the Christian cannot go and perspectives which he cannot share. Many Muslims, out of a natural suspicion of a related but rival religion, distrust all Christian writing on Islam and prefer the supposedly objective works of agnostics. In this they are mistaken. Faith speaks to faith, even in dispute, while the unbeliever is dumb. And, so far as objectivity is concerned, it is not to be found in this quarter. The more closely one considers the typical Western liberal-agnostic (child of a particular culture at a particular moment in its history) from the other side of the frontier, the more unmistakably he identifies himself as a ‘godless Christian’. He may close himself to faith, but if he reacts against Christianity this is in the name of principles indirectly derived from the Christian religion, just as Asians and Africans have reacted against colonialism in the name of principles derived from their colonial masters. The open prejudices of the Christian writer are, on the whole, preferable to the hidden ones of the agnostic.

In theory the limitations of books on Islam by non-Muslims should be of little consequence. Few people, seeking a proper understanding of Christianity, would turn to non-Christian authors. Cannot Muslim writers satisfy the need that undoubtedly exists?

Most Muslim scholars seem to agree, at least in private, that there has been a singular failure to communicate across the cultural frontier. The actual means of communication – the way in which religion needs to be presented nowadays – have been forged, not out of Islamic materials, but in the West. The Muslim writer finds himself obliged to work with instruments which do not fit comfortably in his hand. Moreover, traditional Muslims, who have escaped the influence of ‘modern’, that is to say, occidental education have no understanding of the occidental mind, which is as strange to them as it would be to a Christian of the Middle Ages. Since the Renaissance, European man has ventured out beyond the barriers set up by traditional civilizations against all such straying. In doing so he may have done irreparable damage to himself, but he has become sophisticated in a way that makes other cultures seem naive in comparison. There was a time when it was otherwise. Plato could call the orientals ‘old’ in comparison with the innocent youthfulness of the Greeks; now it is the Europeans who are ‘old’, having seen too much, and being burdened with intolerable memories.

The traditional Muslim writes with authority and conviction, but he does not know how to answer the questions which dominate Western thought in the religious context. These questions seem to him unnecessary

¹ (London: Routledge), 1930.

if not actually blasphemous, and at heart he feels that his task is superfluous. The truth of the Qurān is, for him, so compelling and so self-evident that, if it does not convince the unbeliever, his poor efforts are hardly likely to do so.

For the most part, however, it is Muslims who have been through the modern educational machine who write the books which circulate in the West. The works they produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century cannot now be read without embarrassment. These men were the 'Uncle Toms' of Islam. Their defence of the religion depended, they thought, on proving that it contained nothing incompatible with the best contemporary fashions of thought and accorded perfectly with the moral and philosophical norms of European civilization. They scoured the libraries for any favourable references to Islam in the works of the 'great philosophers' (such as H. G. Wells), but were often reduced to quoting long-forgotten journalists who had found a good word to say for the Prophet or for Muslims as such. The idea that the civilization they admired so blindly might be open to radical criticism in terms of Islamic norms scarcely crossed their minds.

The situation has changed in recent years, though the 'Uncle Toms' are still with us (thinly disguised as modernists). Contemporary Muslim writers cannot be accused of taking no pride in Islam, indeed this pride is sometimes expressed in strident tones, and no one could claim that they are uncritical of Western 'decadence', though their criticism tends to miss the mark, focusing on symptoms rather than on causes. They have not, however, escaped a different kind of subservience to occidental norms. They tend to be deeply concerned with *al-Nahdah*, 'renewal', the 'Islamic Renaissance', which they readily compare with the Renaissance in Europe. Yet the European Renaissance was, from the religious point of view, a rebirth of the paganism which Christianity had supplanted, and it was the source of that very 'decadence' which Muslims perceive in Western life and thought. Their inherent hostility to Christianity blinds them to the fact that forces and ideologies which destroyed one religion may as easily destroy another; or, if they do see this, they believe that Islam's inherent strength and its capacity to absorb and Islamicize alien elements will protect it from subversion. This is, to say the least, a dangerous gamble.

Those who have close contact with Muslims will be accustomed to hearing, with monotonous regularity, the parrot-cry: 'We will take the good things from Western civilization; we will reject the bad things'. It is strange that any Muslim should imagine this to be possible. Islam itself is an organic whole, a *gestalt*, in which everything is interconnected and in which no single part can be considered in isolation from the rest. The Muslim above all others should understand that every culture has something of this unity and should realize that the modern civilization created in the West, even if it seems constantly to change shape as in a kaleidoscope, forms a coherent pattern in terms of cause and effect. To draw one fibre from it is to find that this is attached, by countless unseen filaments, to all the rest. The small fragment of 'good', lifted from the pattern, brings with it piece after piece of the whole structure. With the light come the

shadows; and with everything positive come all the negative elements which are related to it either as cause or as effect.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is almost unique among Muslim writers in his understanding both of traditional Islam and of the forces of subversion at work in the West, makes this point: 'Words and expressions have been used by many [of these writers] in such a way as to betray the state of cultural shock and often the sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* the West from which they suffer. Their writings reveal most of all a slavery of the mind to the norms and judgements of Western civilization. Moreover, these norms are usually hidden under the veil of an "Islam" of which there often remains little more than a name and certain emotional attachments, an Islam which has become devoid of the intellectual and spiritual truth which stands at the heart of the Islamic revelation.'¹

The view first put forward by more or less hostile orientalist that Islamic civilization became decadent, 'stagnant' and 'sterile', from the moment it no longer produced scientists (as the term is now understood), that is to say around the thirteenth century of the Christian era, is uncritically accepted by modernists and 'fundamentalists' alike. This is compensated by a passionate faith in the present or imminent 'renaissance', and they do not see that decadence (if the word has any application) is greatly to be preferred to deviation. Decadence is a symptom of weariness and laxity, whereas deviation takes the form of a malignant activity or dynamism directed towards false goals. Better a sleeping giant than a mad or demonic one.

The inclination of many contemporary Muslims to turn their backs on a thousand years of historical and cultural development has its roots in the eighteenth century, before the West had made its impact upon Islam. There were at that time twelve particularly influential 'reformers' teaching and preaching in the *ḥaramain* (the 'two sanctuaries', Mecca and Medina). They called for the purification of the religion from every element that could not be traced directly to the Qurān or to the sayings and practice of the Prophet, and they condemned *taqlīd* (blind adherence to the opinions of earlier scholars), much as Protestants in the Christian world had preached a return to scriptural sources some 350 years earlier.

Muslim scholars have always been great travellers, at home everywhere in the 'House of Islam', and only five of these men were Arabs, the others being of Indian, Moroccan and Kurdish origin. Pilgrim-scholars from every corner of the world would stay in the *ḥaramain* for a year or two to study under them before returning home, and in this way their views were swiftly disseminated. But, with hindsight, the most important of the eighteenth century reformers was Muhammad Ibn Abdu'l-Wahhāb (1703–1792). He had studied in the *ḥaramain* and travelled widely before returning to his village in a remote part of the Arabian peninsula, there to ally himself – with momentous historical consequences – with a tribal chieftain named Saud, whose descendants now rule over the greater part of the peninsula. Appalled by the contrast between the Islamic ideal and the Muslim world discovered in the course of his travels, he concluded that

¹ *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* (Longman), p. 122.

few of the Muslims of his time had any right to call themselves Muslims; with passionate conviction and great eloquence he preached a simple and uncompromising doctrine of pure transcendence and of unquestioning obedience to the revealed Will of the Transcendent; there was no place in this doctrine for mysticism, the allegorical interpretation of the Qurān, syncretism or adaptation. This was true monotheism and everything else was false, damnable and un-Islamic.

Time has passed and the cult of simplicity has only too often degenerated into a cult of banality, a process which has been hastened by the experience of Western domination. Islam, we are told, is so simple and straightforward, so easy to understand and to follow, that it has no need of explanation or interpretation. God is King. Man is His slave. The King has issued His orders. It is for the slave to obey these orders or be damned. All would have been well – the ‘Christians’ would never have triumphed – had not the pure religion been overlaid in the course of the centuries by a web of theological speculation, mystical extravagance and complex philosophy, with the result that the Muslims allowed their inheritance to slip from their grasp, until the decadent civilization of the West was able to overcome and dominate ‘the best of nations’. All that is required to reverse this lamentable situation is a return to the Qurān and to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet. ‘Throw the books away’ has become something of a slogan. We have the Scripture, and that should suffice any man.

It is indeed true that the essentials of Islam are clear and simple. As the final revelation of God’s Guidance to His creatures it presents a stark confrontation: Man stands naked before his Maker, without any intermediary and with nothing to blur the immediacy of this encounter. The rules governing personal life and social life have been set out with a clarity which leaves no room for misunderstanding; and, when all is said and done, the divine Mercy compensates for human weakness. No doubt this would suffice if human nature contained no complexities and no fissures, and if we had not been endowed with a searching intelligence which must analyse before it can achieve synthesis. The rich development of Muslim thought and religious speculation over so many centuries is sufficient proof that this is not enough.

Islam has been described by Europeans who have lived and worked in the Arab world as a ‘Boy Scout religion’, and it is precisely in this way that many of its spokesmen present it; an image that bears no relation to the splendours of the Baghdad Caliphate, Muslim Spain, the Sassanids in Iran, the Timurids in Central Asia, the Ottomans at the height of their power, and the host of philosophers, mystics and artists who were the glory of these various crystallizations of Islamic civilization. Boy Scout precepts do little to answer the questions we ask or to assuage the soul’s anguish. They satisfy neither Westerners nor educated Muslims, and the only reason that more of the latter have not drifted away from the religion is that, on the one hand, they have been able to interpret it as a political ideology (in an age obsessed with political ‘solutions’) and, on the other, they have nowhere else to go. The European or the American who turns his back on Christianity is still heir to a rich culture and has no reason to feel that he has become a ‘non-person’. The child of Islam who turns away has empty

hands and no longer knows who he is. Islamic culture is neither more nor less than an aspect of the religion; there is no secular culture whatsoever. Moreover, the community is still essentially a religious community, and to quit the religion is to leave the community.

However, it is not only contemporary Muslims who question the need for profundity, the need for theology and for a metaphysical approach to religion. Many Christians do the same, to the great impoverishment of Christianity. God has chosen to create in certain men and women a type of intelligence which, by inner necessity, asks far-reaching questions about the nature of reality. This is a divine gift, though not without its dangers, as is the case with all gifts; it has, therefore, certain rights, including the right to receive answers to the questions which arise spontaneously within it. In a sense these questions are posed by God Himself so that He may answer them and thereby enrich our understanding, and we are assured that He never gives us a genuine need without providing for its satisfaction. Questioning minds may always and everywhere be in a minority, but it is precisely these – the questioners – who are the ultimate formers of opinion. What the intellectuals doubt today will eventually be doubted by simple people.

Ideas which, on their first appearance, seem most abstract and farthest removed from the affairs of ordinary men and women have a way of percolating through the whole fabric of society, though they often suffer distortion in the process. Given the very nature of modern civilization (and the nature of its origins), the ideas current in our time are destructive of religious faith unless this faith is protected by an intellectual armour – and intellectual weapons – suited to the conditions of the late twentieth century. The traditional arguments in support of faith are no longer entirely effective, and it no longer seems ‘natural’ to believe in God and to believe in states of being beyond this present life. Since the Qurān addresses itself specifically to ‘those who think’ and who ‘meditate’ and, in effect, commands us to make full use of our mental faculties, Muslims are under an obligation to deepen and develop the intellectual bases of their faith and have no excuse for relying on unthinking obedience and emotional fervour to protect it against the searching questions of our time.

The cult of simplicity or of platitude is expressed not only in expositions of Islam as a way of life but also in modern interpretations of the Qurān. One need only compare a popular modern commentary, sentimental or banal, with the great medieval commentaries, those of the rationalists, whose intellectual instruments were derived from Greek philosophy, those of the Sufis, who plumbed the depths of meaning beneath the surface of the text, and those of the grammarians, who analysed subtle shades of meaning behind every word and phrase, to see what an impoverishment has taken place.

This might best be illustrated by direct quotation, but it would be unkind to ridicule the efforts of sincere and pious men to communicate their love for the Book in this way; the point can be made just as effectively by means of a parody or pastiche without identifying the original from which, in fact, it departs very little. This commentary is on the opening verses of *Sūrah* 91: ‘By the sun and its radiance; by the moon which reflects

it; by the day which reveals [the earth], and by the night which enshrouds it...'. The medieval commentators discovered profound significance in these simple lines, interpreting their symbolism with astonishing subtlety and speculative daring. The modern commentary runs something like this: 'The oath refers first to the sun's rising, and how beautiful this is! The sun is at its clearest when it rises and it shines with a pure light. It is the source of our physical life, and how generous God is to give us life! Then there is the moon with its beautiful light, whispering to the human heart and inspiring poetic thoughts. How nice it is to sit in the moonlight! Then comes the oath by the day, when the sun shines and the earth is lit up; but when night covers the earth it is the opposite to what happens in the day. The sun no longer shines. Everything is concealed from our sight and we are in darkness. How incomparably the holy Qurān describes all this and how inspiring these verses are!' And so on, weaving words together to fill page after page, with the best of intentions but little meaning.

Sincerity and good intentions do not guarantee effective communication, but the failure of most contemporary Muslim writers to express themselves in what is really an alien idiom merely reflects the extraordinary situation of Islam in the post-colonial period and in a world shaped entirely by occidental values and by ideologies which originate in the *Dar-ul-Harb* (the 'House of Conflict', the world beyond the frontiers of the Faith). It could be said that the Muslims 'awakened' (if, for convenience, we use this dubious term) to find themselves on a planet occupied by their enemies, obliged to imitate these enemies in everything if they were to survive their rude awakening. To understand just how extraordinary this situation is from the Muslim point of view, it is essential to understand something of the history of the confrontation between these two civilizations.

Within a century of the Prophet's death in 632 of the Christian era the Muslim Empire stretched from the borders of China to the Atlantic, from France to the outskirts of India, and from the Caspian Sea to the Sahara. This astonishing expansion had been achieved by a people who, if they were known at all to the great world beyond the Arabian peninsula, had been dismissed as ignorant nomads. They had overrun something above four-and-a-half million square miles of territory and changed the course of history, subordinating Christianity to Islam in its homelands in the Near East and in North Africa and Spain, forcing the Roman Empire of Byzantium onto the defensive and converting the Empire of the Persians into a bulwark of Islam. Human history tells of no other achievement comparable to this. Alexander had dazzled the ancient world by his conquests, but he left behind him only legends and a few inscriptions. Where the Arabs passed they created a civilization and a whole pattern of thought and of living which endured and still endures, and they decisively determined the future history of Europe, barring the way to the rich lands of the east and thereby provoking – many centuries later – the voyages of exploration to the west and to the south which were to nurture European power.

By the year 720 the Muslims had crossed the formidable barrier of the

Pyrenees and all Western Europe lay open before them. They were defeated by the Franks in a battle between what are now the cities of Tours and Poitiers, but it is doubtful whether this battle was in any sense decisive, and in any case the eastern wing of the army was already penetrating the Swiss Valais. It seems more likely that the dark forests which lay ahead appeared uninviting, and the bitter chill of the so-called temperate lands must have seemed like the chill of death itself; and no doubt the great wave of expansion had, for the time being, exhausted itself and reached its natural limit. A few miles more and the story would have been very different, with a Sultan on the throne of France, his Emir in a palace by the Thames, and Europe's offspring populating North America under the banner of Islam.

The rapidity with which Islam spread across the known world of the seventh to eighth centuries was strange enough, but stranger still is the fact that no rivers flowed with blood, no fields were enriched with the corpses of the vanquished. As warriors the Arabs might have been no better than others of their kind who had ravaged and slaughtered across the peopled lands but, unlike these others, they were on a leash. There were no massacres, no rapes, no cities burned. These men feared God to a degree scarcely imaginable in our time and were in awe of His all-seeing presence, aware of it in the wind and the trees, behind every rock and in every valley. Even in these strange lands there was no place in which they could hide from this presence, and while vast distances beckoned them ever onwards they trod softly on the earth, as they had been commanded to do. There had never been a conquest like this.

In the centuries which followed the abortive expedition into France the threat to Western Europe was never far removed. Islam was the dominant civilization and Christendom was confined to an appendix to the Euro-Asian land mass, closed in upon itself and never really safe except in those periods when the Muslims – so often their own worst enemies – were divided among themselves. The Crusaders came to Palestine and were, in due course, driven out, and in the thirteenth century the Arab world was devastated by the Mongol hordes; but the Mongols were converted, to become champions of Islam, as were the Turks. Constantinople fell in 1453, and soon the Ottomans took up the challenge represented by the European enclave. Belgrade was captured in 1521 and Rhodes in the following year. Sulayman the Magnificent entered Hungary and won a great victory at Mohács, and in the 1530s the French King, Francis I, sought his support against the Hapsburgs and encouraged Ottoman plans for the invasion of Italy. A few years later it was the Protestant princes who negotiated for Muslim help against the Pope and the Emperor, and the Sultan made his preparations to enter Germany.

The threat may have been an empty one, for by then Europe was overtaking the Muslim world in effective power, chiefly owing to technical improvements in firearms and shipbuilding; but it echoed the age-old threat which, through almost nine centuries, had shaped the European's perception of the world. The 'menace of Islam' had remained the one constant factor amidst change and transformation and it had been branded on the European consciousness. The mark of that branding is still visible.

The tide, however, was turning. In 1683 the Ottomans besieged Vienna

for the last time. They were already a spent force, and this fact was acknowledged in the Treaty of Carlowitz, signed in 1699. The world of Islam, if it could still be called a 'world', had already been on the defensive for some years, and the defences were cracking. The British were in India and the Dutch in Indonesia, and the Russian capture of Azov brought to the Balkans the Muslims' most implacable enemy, then as now.

Almost a thousand years separated Carlowitz from the Muslim advance into Southern France; less than three hundred separate us from Carlowitz, three hundred years in which Europeans could, at least until very recently, try to forget their long obsession with Islam. It was not easily forgotten. 'The fact remains', says the Tunisian writer Hichem Djaït, 'that medieval prejudices insinuated themselves into the collective unconscious of the West at so profound a level that one may ask, in terror, whether they can ever be extirpated from it.'¹

Certainly, the years of imperial power were years of forgetfulness. Writing in the late eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon had thought it necessary to devote nine of the seventy-one chapters of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to Islam. European historians of the following century could ignore it. And yet we do not have to search far to find the familiar note of fear and detestation making itself heard again, even while the glories of Empire were still undimmed. John Buchan's *Greenmantle*, published in 1916 and probably read by every English schoolboy over the following twenty years, dealt with a threat to civilization more terrible than all the Kaiser's troops, the threat of 'resurgent Islam'.

As so often in previous centuries, the children of Europe were encouraged to go to bed with nightmares of the green-turbaned hordes crying '*Allāhu akbar!*' and descending upon civilization to reduce it to cinders. To change public opinion and popular beliefs is uphill work but to reinforce them is easy. Buchan would not have written *Greenmantle* had he felt obliged to argue his case against Islam, but there was no need to do so.

The nightmares, however, were all on one side. Throughout the greater part of their history, Muslims had no cause to be obsessed with Europe and, except during the relatively brief episode of the Crusades, could afford to ignore it. During the Middle Ages Muslim scholars, preachers and traders travelled throughout the world of Islam between Spain and Indonesia, their passport the declaration of faith – *Lā ilāha illa 'Llāh* – and their adventuring made easy by the fact that hospitality and assistance to the wayfarer are a religious duty. The scholar from Muslim India was at home in Morocco, and some of the early mystics travelled so far and so widely that one wonders what possible means of transport they can have used, other than the legendary magic carpet.

Many, particularly the traders, travelled beyond the *Dār-ul-Islām*. A traveller from Cairo could cash his notes of hand in Canton. But they kept to the civilized world and did not venture into darkest Europe – where they would almost certainly have been killed – although they must have gained some knowledge of the region from the Christian scholars who came to the great universities of Muslim Spain in search of education. An early writer

¹ *L'Europe et l'Islam* (Paris: Collection Esprit/Seuil), p. 21.

argued, with much good will, that the white man (contrary to popular belief) was no less intelligent than the black man of Africa; but on the whole medieval Europe beyond the Pyrenees appeared to be a region of squalor and barbarism. The Europeans who invaded Palestine as Crusaders, savage in warfare, without respect for women and children, and dirty in their habits, can have done little to alter these prejudices. The Muslims could not be aware of the secret spiritual life of Christendom, hidden from their sight in monasteries and hermitages, just as the modern European knows little of the secret spiritual life of the Muslims, seeing only the outward masquerade.

Even before the Crusades, a certain Sa'id Ibn Ahmad of Toledo had written a book on the 'categories of nations', dividing humanity into two kinds, those concerned with science and those ignorant of it. The first group included Arabs, Persians, Byzantines, Jews and Greeks; the rest of mankind consisted of the northern and southern barbarians – the whites and the blacks. The idea that Frankish religion and philosophy might be of some interest occurred to no one. Writing at the end of the fourteenth century Ibn Khaldūn, one of the greatest historians of all time, ignored Western Europe except for mentioning that he had heard reports of some development in the philosophic sciences in that region of the world. He added, 'But God knows best what goes on in those parts!' This was at the height of the European Middle Ages and less than a century before Europe broke bounds and 'discovered' the Americas. While a considerable number of works had been translated into Arabic from Greek, Persian and Syriac, there is only one known case of the translation of a Latin work before the sixteenth century.

There was, no doubt, another reason for this lack of concern. Whereas the very existence of Islam was an intolerable affront to Christianity, Muslims had no problem in accepting the existence of these 'people of the book'. A Christian who confessed to believing that Muhammad had received a true message from God would have been a heretic, ripe for the stake. In total contrast to this, the Muslim is obliged to accept the authenticity of Jesus, while believing nonetheless that the Christian message was not the last word. The Qurān makes it clear that the denial of any bearer of a divine message is equivalent to a denial of all the messengers and their messages, including the Qurān itself. 'Whosoever believes all that he is bound to believe,' says a well-known credal statement, the *Fiqh Akbar I* (attributed to Abū Hanīfa), 'except for saying, "I do not know whether Moses and Jesus (Peace be upon them) are – or are not – among the messengers [of Allah]"', he is an infidel'.¹ Muslim acceptance of Jews and Christians, particularly in Spain while it was part of the *Dār-ul-Islām*, was not a question of 'tolerance' in the modern sense of the term but of religious obligation; equally mandatory was the

¹ Muhammad is reported to have said: 'If anyone testifies that there is no deity other than Allah, who has no partner, and that Muhammad is His servant and His messenger, [testifies also] that Jesus is Allah's servant and messenger – His Word which He cast into Mary and a spirit from Him – and [testifies] that Paradise and hell are real, then Allah will cause him to enter Paradise whatever he may have done'.

Christians' insistence, when they conquered Spain, that Jews and Muslims must either convert or be put to death.

While the Muslim world enjoyed a security which must have seemed destined to last for ever, extraordinary things were happening in the region which Ibn Khaldūn had dismissed as 'those parts'. Ironically, it was from Islam that the 'barbarians' had received the books of Greek philosophy and science, now translated from Arabic into Latin, and a process of fermentation had been started. Unable to integrate the 'new learning' into its structure on a selective basis, as Islamic civilization had done, Christendom – as an integral whole, sufficient unto itself, embracing every aspect of life and answering all the questions that a Christian had the right to ask – began to disintegrate; what had previously been no more than hairline cracks were forced upon by ideas which the structure could not contain and European man, bursting all bonds, developed in directions never before tried or taken by humanity.

Just as the process of decomposition releases explosive gases – or just as water, running downhill, generates energy – so the Christian world, in the process of fission, generated immense material power. The Church of Rome could no longer impose restraints on the development of this power, which obeyed its own logic and its own laws, and with the coming of the industrial revolution, and the uncontrolled growth of applied science, the energies which had been released possessed the instruments which could be effectively exercised in conquest and exploitation.

Now inward-looking, and perhaps over-confident, the Muslims had scarcely noticed what was happening. While the peripheral regions of the *Dār-ul-Islām* came under alien rule, the heartland remained closed in upon itself, forgetting that the world changes and that worldly dominion is, as the Qurān teaches, a transient thing. The shell which had protected the heartland proved to be no more than an eggshell. It was broken by Napoleon when he arrived in Alexandria in July 1798, with plans for marching on Mecca and some talk of himself becoming a Muslim. The Egyptians could do nothing to stop him; it was the Englishman, Nelson, who destroyed his dreams of a new Islamic empire with himself at its head. From then on there was no effective resistance. There were heroic episodes – the Emir Abdu'l-Qādir in Algeria, Shaml in the Caucasus, Dipō Nagaro in Indonesia, the 'Mahdi' in the Sudan – but by the end of the First World War almost the whole Islamic world was under foreign domination.

The impossible had not merely become possible, it had happened; and no great insight was required for the Muslims to see that they themselves were at least partly to blame, so that guilt was joined to the humiliation of defeat and subjection. Despite Western superiority in armaments, technology and administrative skills, disaster could not have fallen so swiftly or so totally had the Islamic world remained true to its faith and to the obligations of its faith. No matter what had been accepted in practice – men being what they are – Islam cannot in principle be divided into separate and mutually hostile units without self-betrayal. An Islamic world united from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the outer islands of the Indonesian archipelago and from the Aral Sea to the Sudan would have been no easy prey. Just as the disunity and internal rivalries of the *Ummah*

had made possible the temporary triumph of the Crusaders in Palestine, so now these vices had laid it open to total subjection and would, in the 1980s, still frustrate all high ambitions.

What had occurred was not simply a matter of physical conquest. Those who had previously made their impact upon the Muslim world had either been militarily strong but culturally weak (as were the Mongols) or *vice versa*. Now, in their encounter with Western power, the Muslims met physical force joined to cultural dominance. Had the experience of colonialism been one of savage oppression the wound would have been relatively shallow, leaving only a superficial scar. The dead are soon buried, and massacres are forgotten. But this was, for Islam as for the rest of the non-European world, an experience of tutelage to well-intentioned masters who thought it their moral duty to instruct and improve the 'natives', and who showed polite contempt for the deepest values by which these 'natives' lived; and polite contempt for a creed or a deep-rooted tradition is far more deadly than persecution. These masters destroyed, not bodies, but souls – or at least the nourishment upon which human souls subsist.

Although the conquerors called themselves Christians, they were not, for the most part, men of religion in any sense familiar to the subject peoples, for they alone were not totally possessed by the religious idea and by the sense of the sacred. They were – or appeared to be – people indifferent to the essential but devoured by the inessential and therefore immensely skilled in dealing with inessentials. Like Mussolini in a later period, they knew how to make the trains run on time. There was no way in which they could understand or be understood by people for whom the sacred took precedence over everything else.

The Europeans withdrew, but left their sting behind. Except in Algeria and Indonesia, it cannot be said that they were driven out. Their empires collapsed from a lack of will, from self-doubt and from weariness following on two great wars, as well as from economic factors; but in abdicating they still tried to do their duty by imposing upon the newly independent nations entirely inappropriate systems of government and administration. There may indeed have been no alternative, since traditional patterns of rulership and of social life had, to a large extent, been destroyed; but nowhere was there any question of restoring the *status quo ante*, and in recent years we have seen in Uganda (a particularly striking example) the results of the deliberate undermining of the traditional authority on the eve of independence.¹

The independence movements in the colonies and protectorates came into being, not through a return to indigenous values on the part of those concerned, but through the absorption of occidental ideas and ideologies, liberal or revolutionary as the case might be. The process of modernization

¹ Sir Andrew Cohen's well-intentioned and liberal-minded destruction of the Kabaka had results which might not have been achieved by deliberate malevolence. The Kabaka, he thought, stood in the way of 'progress' and 'democracy'; for these two terms we are now forced to substitute 'chaos' and 'barbarism' so far as Uganda is concerned. There are today many educated Muslims who share Cohen's contempt for traditional patterns of rulership. They too may prove to have been agents of darkness.

– a euphemism for Westernization – far from being halted by this withdrawal, was in fact accelerated. The enthusiasm of the new rulers for everything ‘modern’ was not restrained, as had been the enthusiasm of their former masters, by any element of self-doubt. The irony implicit in this whole situation was tragically apparent in the Vietnam war, when the people of that country fought, not to preserve their own traditions or to gain the right to be truly themselves, but under the banner of a shoddy occidental ideology and for the privilege of imitating their former masters in terms of nationalism and socialism. The West was at war with its own mirror image in a vicious Dance of Death.

It is often said that although only thirty years have passed since Europe (with the exception of Russia) shuffled off its imperial burden, it is no longer possible to imagine a state of mind, a state of inner self-confidence, which took the imperial role for granted. How could those red-faced sahibs have been so sure of their own righteousness? The young find pictures of viceroys and governors strutting under the palm trees in peculiar hats hilariously funny. And yet there has been no fundamental change. Western values remain the standard by which all are judged and most accept to be judged. Much of the self-confidence which enabled the sahib of an earlier generation to keep a crowd of natives in order with only a swagger-stick in his hand persists, since it is taken for granted that the rest of the world must play by the rules which Western civilization has laid down, rules which are the product of European history. The European powers are a small minority in the United Nations, but a glance at the Charter of that organization is enough to show that it contains not one principle derived from any other source, and the same is true of international law as it is at present understood. The opinions, prejudices and moral principles of the former colonial masters remain as powerful as were European arms in the past, and the only escape attempted has been down a blind alley, the Jewish-European doctrine – or pseudo-religion – of Marxism, with its mixture of Christian heresies, Judaic Messianic dreams and dubious science.

The key-word is ‘civilization’. One may be a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist or, for that matter, an Eskimo *shaman*; there is just one condition that is obligatory for all – one must conform to ‘civilized values’ on pain of being condemned as ‘backward’. Frithjof Schuon has defined ‘civilization’ as ‘urban refinement in the framework of a worldly and mercantile outlook’, hostile both to virgin nature and to religion,¹ and in origin the word means no more than living in cities (commonly regarded in the past as places of spiritual corruption and physical dirt). It is nonetheless a very potent word and even the most ardent revolutionary, in the Muslim world as elsewhere, fears being described as ‘uncivilized’. Anti-colonialism on the political level has proved to be a kind of opium of the people, preventing them from noticing that what matters most is the way in which their minds have been colonized.

The consequent traumas, which afflict the greater part of the non-European world, have been intensified among the Muslim peoples by

¹ *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Perennial Books), p. 9.

special circumstances and affect almost every public manifestation of Islam today, on the intellectual level as also on the political one. In the attempt to beat the West at its own game, alien ideas and ideologies are adopted and 'Islamicized' overnight, simply by tacking the adjective 'Islamic' on to them, and one should not be surprised if this results in an acute attack of indigestion. Politically, defiance of the West is seen as the most effective way of re-asserting 'Islamic values', regardless of how deeply these values may have been corrupted, and regardless of the fact that hysterical behaviour in response to insults – or imagined insults – is totally contrary to the spirit and ethos of Islam. It becomes almost impossible for the observer, unless he possesses a touchstone within himself, to disentangle what is truly Islamic from what is merely a convulsive reaction to the traumatic experience through which the Muslim world has passed; nor are the majority of contemporary Muslims sufficiently self-analytical – or sufficiently self-critical – to make this distinction.

This would suffice to explain much of what is happening now in the world of Islam, as it does many of the crises occurring in the Third World in general, but for Muslims there is an additional factor which keeps old wounds open; as they see it, Western military and political power is still firmly established in the midst of the *Dār-ul-Islām* under cover of the state of Israel.

The Palestine question is so fraught with emotion that one would be glad to escape the necessity of mentioning it. Necessity, however, cannot be escaped, and the existence of the state of Israel in Palestine (the first territory beyond the Arabian peninsula to be conquered by Islam) is the key to the political orientation of the vast majority of educated Muslims in our time, the cause of most of the troubles which have afflicted the Arab world over the past forty years and a constant factor of instability in the Middle East. There are those who would add that it is also, potentially, a trigger for nuclear conflict. The United States and the European Community might be less inclined to indulge in wishful thinking on this issue if they understood a little more about the Muslim perspective.

In the first place, Muslims do not in general share the occidental obsession with 'race'. Europeans and their American cousins, even when they are quite free from any hostile prejudice, automatically identify people in terms of their racial origin. The Muslim, on the other hand, identifies and judges a man or a woman primarily in terms of their religion. A 'Jew' is a faithful adherent of Judaism just as a Muslim is an adherent of Islam, even if his grandfather happened to be a Jewish Rabbi (as is the case with an eminent contemporary writer and scholar, Muhammad Asad); as it happens a surprisingly high proportion of European and American converts to Islam over recent years have been of 'Jewish origin', no doubt on account of the strong affinities between these two religious perspectives.

What the West sees in Israel is the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish 'race', just recompense for centuries of persecution at the hands of Europeans. Whether or not the citizens of the new state happen to be individually 'religious' seems quite irrelevant. The Nazis did not inquire into a man's piety before sending him to the gas chamber.

What the Muslim sees in Israel is European and American settlers estab-

lished in a Muslim country with the support of the former imperial powers, maintained there by American arms and apparently determined to extend their territory still further into the *Dār-ul-Islām*. A 'secular' Jew is, for him, a contradiction in terms. So far as he can judge, most Israelis, particularly those in the ruling group, are not Jews at all. They look like Europeans, they talk like Europeans, they think like Europeans and – most important of all – they exhibit precisely those characteristics of aggressiveness and administrative efficiency which the Muslim associates with European imperialism.¹ The parallel with the Crusades is painfully obvious. Westerners have again come to Palestine; they again occupy the Holy City of Quds (Jerusalem). The misfortunes of the Jews as a 'race' – the pogroms and the holocaust itself – were certainly not the fault of the Muslims. Europe's guilt is Europe's business, and they do not see why they should be expected to suffer for it. 'Why do you not give the Jews some of the choicest lands of Germany?' King Abdu'l-Aziz Ibn Saud asked President Roosevelt. He might as well have suggested, no less reasonably but no more profitably, that the Americans, if they felt so strongly on this subject, could quite well spare one of their own forty-eight states (Texas perhaps) as a home for the Jews. The 'white man', as the Arabs see it, is more inclined to give away other people's territory than his own.

Many Muslims are convinced that Western support for Israel can be ascribed quite simply to hypocrisy. They believe that Europe and the United States created Israel as a means of ridding themselves of their Jewish populations. However absurd this accusation may seem to Europeans and Americans the fact remains that Zionism arose as a reaction to anti-Semitism and, in the view of its founders, 'needed' anti-Semitism. Theodor Herzl himself was not afraid to say that 'the anti-Semites will become our surest friends and the anti-Semitic countries our allies'. Precisely because, in his time, prejudice against people of Jewish origin was diminishing and the process of assimilation accelerating, it was all the more necessary to emphasize that Jews were 'different' and did not really 'belong' in the countries of their adoption, an opinion in which the anti-Semites heartily concurred. Herzl was warned by a friend, the President of the Austrian parliament, that this emphasis upon the 'separateness' of the Jewish people would eventually 'bring a bloodbath on Jewry'. Fifty years later it was the holocaust and the sense of guilt prevailing in Europe and the United States (which could have saved so many lives by an 'open door' policy towards Jewish refugees) that made possible the establishment of the state of Israel.

This was made easier by the Palestinians' self-identification as 'Arabs'. It was – and still is – assumed by many people in the West that this is an indication of their racial origin. In Islam the term 'Arab' is applied to anyone whose first language is Arabic; it tells us nothing about his

¹ It is true that the oriental Jews, the *Sephardim*, now outnumber the 'Westerners', the *Ashkenazim*, in Israel and are beginning to exercise decisive influence on government; but in politics appearances are more important than facts. The impression that Israel is a Western colonial enclave is reinforced by public attitudes in Europe and America. It is interesting, for example, to note that Israel is the only non-European country to participate in the annual Eurovision Song Contest, watched by an estimated 500 million viewers, yet no one finds this peculiar.

ancestry. In fact the Palestinians are descended from the ancient Canaanites, to whose 'blood' (if one must speak in racialist terms) a dozen invading peoples added their quota: Philistines, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs and Turks, to name but a few. The only point to be made is that the Palestinians are not a people who took possession of the land by force; they were 'always' there.

Finally, Muslims – with their first-hand experience of colonialism – can see plainly enough that the notion of settling people from elsewhere in a Third World country against the wishes of the indigenous inhabitants could only have arisen in the context of colonialism and as a manifestation of the colonialist mentality. Here again the public statements of the founding fathers of Zionism seem to them to support this view. The Zionist pioneers were necessarily men of their time, and their time was the high noon of 'imperialism'; they shared with their fellow-Europeans a set of values and beliefs which justified and even glorified the colonization of Asia and Africa in the worthy cause of bringing civilization to the 'natives'. It is little wonder, for example, that Aaron Aaronsohn, addressing an audience of French *colons* in Tunisia in 1909, should have drawn attention to the fact that Jewish immigration into Palestine began in the same year as the French colonization of Tunisia, 1882, and compared the Jewish settler in Palestine to the French settler in Tunisia.

For educated Muslims who identify with the Palestinians, the humiliation of being treated as 'natives' who could be pushed aside to make room for white men and women was intensified by the failure of superior Arab forces to dislodge these 'settlers'. At the very time when Western imperial power was making a discreet withdrawal elsewhere in the world, they were again forced to recognize their own impotence in the face of this power. Humiliation begets rage, and this rage has now sunk deep roots even in the more distant outposts of the Muslim world, most particularly among the young. Turbulent emotions are not easily analysed but one has the impression that these young people reserve their most bitter resentment, not for the Israelis, but for the Americans. To some extent they understand that the Israelis act as they themselves might act under similar circumstances; they cannot, however, forgive the nation but for whose support the state of Israel could not survive in its present form.

This has resulted in a distortion of history which, if it is not soon corrected, may have the most bitter consequences for all of us. However 'decadent' the United States may appear in Muslim eyes, this might be seen as a lesser blemish in comparison with the aggressive atheism of the Soviet Union. For the first time since the Prophet's triumphant return to Mecca, Islam has come face to face with a power determined to eradicate the religion as such and to convert Muslims from faith to infidelity. Were it not for the Palestinian question – the Palestinian trauma – this, surely, would be the overriding concern of contemporary Islam. Some 45 million Muslims live under Soviet rule in Central Asia and the Causasus. For sixty years they have struggled to preserve their faith, and to preserve the principles and customs of Islam, despite almost constant persecution. In all this time they have received no effective support from the worldwide community whose right to call itself the *Ummah* depends upon fulfilling

the primary duty of aiding those of its members who are persecuted for their faith.

The unqualified support given by the United States to Israel has persuaded a great number of Muslims that the Soviet Union represents a lesser evil. Since they can only maintain this view if they blind themselves to the facts, ignore the plight of their co-religionists victimized by Soviet imperialism and misunderstand the nature of the modern world, they now live in the midst of political fantasies which bear no relation to the realities of the situation.

Although Europeans and Americans have recently – and largely for economic reasons – recognized the need to understand the Muslim world, it cannot be said that much progress had been made. The obstacles are, as we have seen, formidable, but the survival of that sector of humanity which still acknowledges that religious faith has a right to exist may yet depend upon these obstacles being overcome. A reconciliation with Islam, on the political as well as the religious level, is now essential to the future of the West and should be amongst its highest priorities. Precise figures cannot be established, but it seems likely that there are now at least one billion Muslims and this represents, to say the least, a decisive weight to be placed in the scales of the balance of power. The *Ummah* is divided by national boundaries and national rivalries but, at the grass-roots from Morocco to Indonesia, the sense of unity and of common interest has survived the vicissitudes of history and is still the primary focus of the peoples' loyalty.

'Thus have we appointed you,' says the Qurān, 'a middle nation' (or 'a community of the middle way'), 'so that you may bear witness to the truth before mankind ...' (Q.2.143). Islam is a 'middle nation' even in the purely geographical sense, spanning as it does the centre-line of the planet; a 'nation' which is the heir to ancient and universal truths, and to principles of social and human stability (often betrayed but never forgotten) of which our chaotic world has desperate need; a nation which witnesses to a hope that transcends the dead ends against which the contemporary world is battering itself to death.

In the midst of a humanity polarized between East and West, North and South, Islam represents both a connecting link and a centre of gravity. Division, defeat, subjection and political confusion have not entirely destroyed the Muslims' sense of priorities. 'In a world of materialism, hedonism and technology,' wrote a Jesuit priest recently in *The Times* of London, 'the Islamic masses still contrive to make God and not technology the central certainty of their lives ... Meanwhile, between Marxism and Americanism, the choice must sometimes seem a poor one to people who decided long ago, and have seen fit to stand by their decision, that man cannot live by bread alone ...'¹

Everywhere today we see the dislocation produced by the impact of the modern West upon beliefs and cultural patterns which could not survive the encounter; whole peoples now exist in a spiritual and psychological vacuum. The world of Islam was shaken, if not to its foundations, at least

¹ 'Examining the root cause of Islam's present discontents', Francis Edwards, S. J., *The Times*, 26 January 1980.

throughout its structure, but it has survived relatively intact – in this case one might speak of an irresistible force having come up against an immovable object – and provides us with the only fully surviving exemplar of a different way of living, a different way of thinking, a different way of doing things. Its link with the past has not been broken. ‘From Indonesia to Morocco,’ writes Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ‘for the overwhelming majority, Islamic culture must be referred to in the present tense and not as something in the past. Those who refer to it in the past tense belong to a very small but vocal minority which has ceased to live within the world of tradition and mistakes its own loss of centre for the dislocation of the whole of Islamic society’.¹ The Muslim attitude to time itself is different from that of the Christian. History, for the Muslim, is never something dead and buried. The Companions – and the Prophet himself – together with the great and pious men of earlier ages, seem to keep company with the living, and in a sense the *Ummah* includes them, though they are in Paradise and we are encapsulated in this present time. Modern man lives in futile and illusory dreams of the future; for the Muslim, the past is not merely *there* but also, in a certain sense, *here and now*.

The medieval Christian would have understood the Muslim very well if he had allowed himself to do so. Modern man cannot even understand his own forebears, having become over recent centuries a type of creature never before seen on earth, governed by beliefs which correspond to nothing in the traditional and religious heritage of mankind. If he could understand the Muslim he might begin to understand himself before he blunders into self-destruction.

For the ‘average man’, secular, agnostic (or quite simply unaware of religion as a reality on any level) and rootless, Islam may open the door to a whole universe of discourse, familiar to his ancestors but strange to him; for the Christian, there is the experience of a closely related religion which has taken a completely different path to Christianity and has maintained its role as the dominant force in a whole civilization, intellectually, culturally, and socially. But, in considering the differences between Christian and Muslim, one must distinguish between those that are essential and those that are peripheral. The place in which the religions meet is, as it were, a secret chamber in which man, stripped of his temporal dress, is alone with God, or in which the relative is seen as no more than a shadow of the Absolute. From this centre the radii diverge, to be differentiated in terms of theology, moral law, social practice and, finally, in terms of human ‘climate’.

On the one hand there are the differences between the religions as such (in the way they perceive Reality) and, on the other, the differences between societies and individuals moulded by a particular tradition; and, in the latter case, the most significant factor is what people take for granted, what appears to them self-evident. What counts on the periphery is the ‘flavour’ of the religion and of the culture it has shaped, or the spiritual and human ‘climate’ within which its adherents live out their lives and interpret their experiences.

¹ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

It is important to know what a religion is in itself, but one should also be aware of what it is thought to be and how it is expressed in the prejudices and instinctive assumptions of ordinary people. The modern Westerner, persuaded that he has a right to 'think for himself' and imagining that he exercises this right, is unwilling to acknowledge that his every thought has been shaped by cultural and historical influences and that his opinions fit, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, into a pattern which has nothing random about it. Statements which begin with the words 'I think...' reflect a climate created by all those strands of belief and experience – as also of folly and corruption – which have gone to form the current state of mind and to establish principles which cannot be doubted by any sane and reasonable man in this place and at this point in time.

The climate in which the ordinary Muslim lives has been at least partly determined by the environment into which the religion was providentially projected and in which it developed: the desert and, so far as the Turks and Mongols were concerned, the steppes of Asia; in other words, the 'open' – open space and clear horizons at the end of the world – and this is the polar opposite of the human world of cities and cultivated fields and, ultimately, of the man-made antheap. Frithjof Schuon has remarked that the genesis of a new religion amounts to 'the creation of a moral and spiritual type'. 'In the case of Islam,' he says, 'this type consists of an equilibrium – paradoxical from the Christian point of view – between the qualities of the contemplative and the combative, and then between holy poverty and sanctified sexuality. The Arab – and the man Arabized by Islam – has, so to speak, four poles: the desert, the sword, woman and religion.' The sword, he adds, represents death, 'both dealt and courted', while woman represents 'love received and love given, so that she incarnates all the generous virtues, compensating for the perfume of death with that of life. ... The symbiosis of love and death within the framework of poverty and before the face of the Absolute constitutes all that is essential in Arab nobility ...'¹

This nobility is still to be found, though not always among public figures in the Arab world or among those who have appointed themselves the official spokesmen of Islam; but what of the mass of the people conditioned by the Islamic climate? For the most part inarticulate, they cannot speak for themselves, and we are obliged to rely upon neutral observers. Such an observer is Paul Bowles, an American novelist who has lived for many years in Morocco. He might be described as 'neutral' because his interest has been solely in the people around him; he has had no concern with religion, except as he has seen it exemplified in their daily lives and habits of thought, and in an essay entitled 'Mustapha and Friends' he summed up his observations in a fictional portrait of a typical Moroccan boy whose Western equivalent would live only for football and discotheques. This makes his 'Mustapha' a kind of test case for comparison between the social periphery of Islam on the one hand and, on the other, the contemporary Western world.

It must be admitted that many Muslim academics and leaders of opinion

¹ *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy* (World of Islam Publishing Company), p. 91.

would condemn this portrait and identify Bowles as just another foreigner ill-disposed towards the 'Arab nation' and towards 'resurgent Islam'. They could not deny a certain authenticity to the portrait, but they would see 'Mustapha' as representing something that is to be overcome in a return to the pure faith, a survivor from a past that is better forgotten. Unlike Christianity, they might say, Islam is a religion of this world, a religion of social responsibility and political idealism; 'Mustapha' must be disciplined and taught true Islam so that he can parade with other, more worthy, young men under a revolutionary banner shouting 'Death to So-and-so!' and 'Down with the corrupt servants of imperialism!'

This is a matter of opinion. Poor 'Mustapha' does not know much about imperialism, but then he is free from the complexes and inner torments which afflict his more educated brothers, and he is not aware that the religion he takes for granted must be used as a means to re-establish the pride of the Arab nation. No doubt he could be described as feckless; but 'Mustapha' is one of 'the people' (in whose name the slogans are coined) and, throughout Islamic history, while rulers have murdered each other, while doctors of law and theology have argued, and while reformers have reformed, the people have gone their way and taken little note of what the great men thought or did. It may even be that 'Mustapha' and his friends will outlive the great men; the Prophet, curiously enough, seems to have had a few 'Mustaphas' around him, whom he treated with an amused kindness and tolerance which has not always been imitated by the religious authorities of later times.

'Mustapha,' says Bowles, 'may have little education, or he may be illiterate, which is more likely. He may observe his religion to the letter, or partially, or not at all, but he will always call himself a Moslem. His first loyalty is towards fellow Moslems of whatever country . . . The difference between Mustapha and us is possibly even greater than it would be were he a Buddhist or a Hindu, for there is no religion on earth which demands a stricter conformity to the tenets of its dogma than that supra-national brotherhood called Islam. Even the most visionary and idealistic among us of the Western world is more than likely to explain the purpose of life in terms of accomplishment. Our definition of that purpose will be a dynamic one in which it will be assumed desirable for each individual to contribute his share, however infinitesimal, to the total tangible or intangible enrichment of life. Mustapha does not see things that way at all. To him it is slightly absurd, the stress we lay upon work, our craving to "leave the world better than we found it", our unceasing efforts to produce ideas and objects. "We are not put on earth to work," he will tell you, "We are put here to pray; that is the purpose of life . . ." Such social virtues as a taste for the "democratic way of life" and a sense of civic responsibility mean very little to him.'

Mustapha is 'the adventurer *par excellence*. He expects life to have something of the variety and flavour of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and if that pungency is lacking he does his best to supply it. A whole-hearted believer in dangerous living, he often takes outrageous chances', due, says Bowles, to a 'refusal to believe that action entails result. To him, each is separate, having been determined at the beginning of time, when

the inexorable design of destiny was laid out . . . It is the most monstrous absurdity to fear death, the future, or the consequences of one's acts, since that would be tantamount to fearing life itself. Thus to be prudent is laughable, to be frugal is despicable, and to be provident borders on the sinful. How can a man be so presumptuous as to assume that tomorrow, let alone next year, will actually arrive? And so how dare he tempt fate by preparing for any part of the future, either immediate or distant?

'The wise man is complete at every moment, with no strings of hopefulness stretching out towards the future, entangling his soul and possibly making it loath to leave this life. Mustapha will tell you that the true Moslem is always ready for death at an instant's notice . . . He has a passion for personal independence. He does not look for assistance from others . . . since all aid comes from Allah. Even the gift of money a beggar has managed to elicit from a stranger in the street will be shown triumphantly to a friend with the remark: "See what Allah gave me" . . . It has never occurred to him that a man might be able to influence the course of his own existence. His general idea about life is that it is a visit: you come, stay a while, and go away again. The circumstances and length of the stay are beyond anyone's control, and therefore only of slight interest.'¹

This portrait, despite certain distortions of perspective, is rich in implications and may perhaps indicate more clearly than any amount of theorizing the gulf which separates those whose minds have been formed in an Islamic climate from the 'common man' of the Occident. The social and educational strata of contemporary Muslim society are sharply separated, and the gulf must be bridged on more than one level if understanding is ever to be achieved.

¹ *Their Heads are Green*, Paul Bowles (London: Peter Owen), pp. 83–89.