‘UMAR B. ‘ABD AL-AZIZ’

(His Place in Muslim History)

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‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-’Aziz occupies a unique position in Islamic history: he is the only ruler, apart from the Prophet’s first four successors, who is acknowledged as a *khalīfa* in the true sense of the word. The acknowledgment, made by all schools of orthodox opinion, is formally betokened by the use before his name of the reverential title *Ḥaḍrat*, which is vouchsafed to no other rulers, with the exception of the Prophet’s first four successors, whose company he joined, across a span of six decades, to become the fifth and last of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

The intervening six decades, beginning with the accession of Mu’awiya, witnessed an increasing recession from the primary goal of Islam, namely, the establishment of a society living in accordance with the *Sharī’a*, the divine law revealed in the Qur’an and elucidated by the Prophet’s acts and sayings. A fundamental postulate of such a society was a ruler who conformed, and enforced conformity by others, to the *Sharī’a*; and this implied, among other things, his appointment by election and his conduct of affairs by consultation, as prescribed by the *Sharī’a* in both cases. The monarchical system introduced by Mu’awiya flew in the face of this postulate inasmuch as it entailed appointment of the ruler by nomination on the part of his predecessor and an autocratic form of government in which there was no room for consultation.

The society that flourished under the Umayyads was a society of an order different from the one envisaged by the Qur’an, founded by the Prophet and maintained by the first four caliphs. The territorial expansion and material progress that the Umayyads achieved, great as they were without doubt, were achieved at the expense of Islam’s *raison d’être* itself. The Umayyad empire was not an Islamic state in the true sense of that expression. It was, indeed, a replica of the Byzantine and Sassanian empires with this difference that the insitutions and conventions of those empires were reconstructed on the foundation of customs and practices surviving from the

Arabs' pre-Islamic tribal past. It was thus at best an Arabian version of non-Islamic systems of government having little to do with the system of government prescribed by Islam. Islam was no doubt the state religion, the religion of the rulers, the administrators and the fighting men, the religion in whose name holy wars were waged, spoils acquired, territories annexed and taxes levied, the religion whose laws were administered by the courts of justice Beyond these formal and nominal features, however, there was nothing Islamic about the Umayyad state: the methods of government, the relations between the rulers and the ruled, the public and private lives of the rulers and nobles, the atmosphere of the court, the ethos of the community at large were all different from what Islam had intended them to be. The rulers and their officers were too intent upon serving their personal, dynastic and tribal interests, too busy with self-enrichment and pleasure-seeking – which, in the case of some of them, included drunkenness and debauchery— , too deeply involved in palace intrigues and personal rivalries to devote themselves to building the good society enjoined by Islam. Far from doing so, some of them were lax even in performing, and inculcating the performance of, the purely religious duties prescribed for Muslims, such as the five-time daily prayers. Promoting the Islamic way of life was none of their preoccupations. What reconciled the people at large to their rule was partly a political passivity ingrained in them by the preachings and rulings of the '*ulama*' in elaboration of the Qur'anic commandment to obey God, the Prophet and the ruler, and partly the material and spiritual rewards accruing or expected to accrue from holy wars, territorial annexations and large-scale public works. Where these failed strong measures were resorted to; in fact, they were the order of the day, their object being to keep the people permanently in a submissive frame of mind, so that they could be made to fulfil their part of the divinely ordained contract between the ruler and the ruled, no matter whether the former fulfilled his or not.

It was in this milieu that 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz was born and brought up as a member of the Umayyad royal family. Spending his early years at Medina, where the traditions of piety and learning set by the Prophet and his Companions were still alive, he received instruction in the religious sciences from an eminent scholar, Salih b. Kaisan, and also heard *ahadith* (traditions) from a number of Sahabis (Companions) and Tabi 'in (the Companions' followers). This instilled into him not only a high degree of religious learning, but also a profound under-standing of Islam, which proved a dominant

influence on him in later life. Meanwhile, however, he was a typical Umayyad prince fond of gaiety, luxury and ostentation, with this difference that his extravagances were of the more innocent type. A handsome youth with a light complexion, finely chiselled features and a well-proportioned figure, though slightly inclined towards fulness, he was conscious of his personal attractiveness and omitted no means of self-embellishment calculated to enhance it. He wore expensive and sumptuous clothes, which he would often discard after wearing them only once because he thought that once he had been seen in them they became old. So lavish was his use of perfumes, especially ambergris, that he would leave gusts of fragrance behind him whichever way he passed; the sealing wax on which he affixed his signet ring would for long smell of ambergris; and people used to bribe his washerman to have their clothes washed in the same water in which his had been washed so as to get some of the scent from his clothes into theirs. He had a mincing walk, which the young maidens of Medina used to admire and imitate. Attended by an entourage of servants and slaves, he would swagger along the streets, every inch an Umayyad prince, a living embodiment of pride and self importance. If a corner of his trailing lower garment got stuck in one of his shoes, he would tear it off rather than stoop to pull it out; if one of his shoe-laces came undone, he would throw the shoes off his feet rather than stop to tie up the lace or have it tied up for him; and if one of his slaves picked up the shoes and brought them back to him, he would take the slave to task for thinking him to be so mean as to take back a thing he had cast aside. When a highly respected religious scholar pointed out to him the impropriety of wearing garment trailing on the ground because of its being against the Prophet's *sunna*, he snubbed and indirectly threatened him, saying: "Don't be like a lamp that provides light to others, but itself burns."

His love of ostentation was not confined to his personal appearance: it came into play even more conspicuously in"his style of living, an idea of which can be gathered from the single fact that when he proceeded to Medina to take charge of its governorship thirty camels carried his household effects. But he was not merely a dandy and *bon vivant*; he was also a man with a refined intellectual and aesthetic taste, who enjoyed the company of poets, men of letters, wits and musicians. He wrote verses, is credited with the invention of a number of musical tunes and was an impressive speaker, debater and conversationist with a gusto for the finer points of Arabic grammar and rhetoric, a lively epigrammatic wit and a wealth of aphorisms at

his command. Not impervious to feminine charms, he is reported to have had at least one affair of the heart, the object of his affections being a slave-girl, in whom wit and beauty were combined. He had his share of worldly ambition too, which is the only explanation that seems to fit his demolishing, as governor of Medina, the apartments of the Prophet's wives in order to utilize the the land for the extension of the Prophet's mosque, as desired by' the then Caliph, Walid, and, later, his carrying out to the letter Walid's orders to administer a hundred strokes of the whip to Khubaib b. 'Abd-Allah b. Zubair, a highly respected citizen, who had led the public opposition of the apartments, the punishment resulting in Khubaib's death.

The man who ruled the Muslim empire from 99 to 101 A. H. as the eighth Umayyad caliph had little in common with the haughty, pleasure-loving and self-centred Umayyad prince described above except the name of 'Umar b, 'Abdal-'Aziz. To cite the most comprehensive and yet the most concise description of him, that given by Dhahabi, "he was like his maternal great grandfather 'Umar in justice, like Hasan Basri in piety and like Zuhri in learning" — a combination unmatched in the whole history of Islam, the three men whom he is described as resembling being the highest exemplars of the qualities respectively attributed to them. He signalized his break with his own past and that of his family by his very first act on being informed that the seventh Umayyad caliph, Sulaiman b. 'Abd al-Malik, had nominated him as his successor: he told the people assembled in the mosque for swearing allegiance to the new caliph that, as he had been nominated without his knowledge and consent and without consultation with the people, they were under no obligation to render *ba'ia* (homage) to him and were free to elect whomever they liked as their *khalifa*. That it was he whom the people would elect was not a foregone conclusion: for Sulaimān's brother, Hishām, had already questioned his nomination as soon as his name had been announced. However, the assembly hailed 'Umar as *khalīfa*. Thus his appointment conformed to the pattern of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb's appointment and was a clear departure from the Umayyad practice of nomination by the outgoing *khalifa* ratified by homage extracted by force or threat of force. In keeping with the democratic method of his appointment he proceeded to the caliphal palace riding his own mule in preference to one of the steeds brought for him from the royal stables and ordered away the usual armed escort. His first public act as *khalīfa*, initiated on his very first day in office, was to restore to their original owners estates wrongfully acquired by

members of the royal family. Beginning with himself, he surrendered to the *baital-māl* (public treasury) all the estates he had inherited except for a small area of irrigated land, so that his annual income dropped from 50,000 dinars to 200 dinars, hardly enough for bare subsistence. He disposed of all his paraphernalia of luxury and display — his horses, his slaves, his wardrobe, his carpets, his perfumes. Even his favourite slave-girl did not escape this clearance and was returned to the heirs of her original owner. "What about your love for me?" she tauntingly asked him as she was going. "It is still there," he replied; "in fact, it is greater now than it ever was."

Dealing next with his wife, he made her surrender to the treasury all her jewellery, including a priceless diamond which was a gift from her father, the caliph ʻAbd al-Malik. Not only did he draw no salary and spend no public money either on himself or on his household, but he would not use for his private purposes any state goods or services, such as paper, candles, fuel, post horses; nor would he accept even the smallest present from anyone without paying for it. Consequently, he and his family lived in such poverty that at times his children cried in vain for milk or fruit, and on one occasion one of his daughters whom he had sent for could not obey his summons, because she had no suitable clothes to change into. He ate his meals at the free state mess for the poor, paying for them. The few clothes he had he wore till they became rags that could not be patched up any more.

He cast anger and pride completely out of his system. Thus, when a petitioner threw a bundle of papers at him, making his cheek bleed, he not only went completely unpunished, but was also granted his prayer. To a governor who had sought instructions as to whether he should sentence to death a man arrested for abusing him (ʻUmar) he replied that abusing anybody but the Prophet was not a capital offence and that, therefore, he should set the man free straightaway or, if he could not forgive him completely, abuse him in retaliation and then let him go. In public assemblies ʻUmar made himself so inconspicuous that strangers had to have him pointed out to them. Aware of a tendency to relapse unconsciously into his former swaggering walk, he charged his slave Muzāhim with the duty of checking him as soon as he saw any signs of the relapse. So modest did his walk ultimately become that people used to say that it resembled that of a monk. He would suddenly stop dead, in the middle of a speech or a dictation if he became conscious of a feeling of pride in what he was saying or dictating, or if he even suspected that he was being prompted by pride in his

power of expression.

He spent his ;days and nights in accordance with a strict and I strenuous regimen of work and prayer, his only diversion being conversation with learned and pious men, whose advice he sought and acted upon in managing affairs of state. His nocturnal devotions were more like the spiritual exercises of saints than the prayers of ordinary human beings, whose spiritual capacity and physical endurance they far transcended. In work as well as in prayer, in public as well as in private life his ruling motive was to avoid displeasing God. Indeed, fear of Judgment Day and concern about the Hereafter dominated his entire outlook and activity without, however, deteriorating into an egotistic preoccupation with his own salvation or a morbid religiosity that might have made of him a quietist or a fanatic or a bigot. He was saved from that deterioration by a healthy belief in what he used to describe as the Greater Fiqh in contradistinction to the medley of hairsplitting, chicanery, sophistry and traditions of all degrees of authenticity which passed for *fiqh* at the time and at which he was more than a match for any of his contemporaries. The principal virtues which, according to his Greater Fiqh, were dear to God were contentment and kindness---the two virtues least practised by the higher society of the day and most practised by him. While the former virtue exhibited itself in his life of ascetic self-denial, the latter did so in a boundless munificence to his subjects. He threw open the bait al-māl to the people, fixing stipends for everybody — not merely for the needy, such as the aged, the blind, the disabled, indigents, widows and orphans, but for anybody who came forward to claim his share in the common property of the community. Even prisoners were among the recipients; and, what was more, the stipends were fixed on an equal basis for all Muslims, abolishing the distinction that had existed between members of the Umayyad family and others, on the one hand, and between Arabs and *mawālī* (clients of the Arabs), on the other. A ration of grain was fixed for everybody on a similar basis of equality. For the poor, however, 'Umar provided certain special facilities, as, for example, a free public mess, repayment of their debts by the *bait al-māl*, issue of good coins for bad ones surrendered by them and, if they were blind or otherwise disabled, attendants at state expense to look after them.

As if to set off these generous measures, 'Umar abolished and remitted a number of unjust and oppressive taxes levied ' by his predecessors, such as *jizya* (poll-tax) on newly converted Muslims, *kharaj* (revenue) instead of '*ashr*

(tithe) on lands acquired by Muslims in certain regions, taxes on minting money, on melting silver, on petition-writing, on shops and houses, on marriages and on many other possessions and activities of the people. He also stopped receiving presents on the Persian festivals of Nauroz and Mihrjān. In regard to the taxes that remained in force he issued strict orders against the use of unfair or coercive methods of realization. The immediate result was a great drain upon the public treasury without any corresponding replenishment. To the governors' alarming reports on the state of the provincial finances 'Umar's reply was: "Go on giving money from the *bait al-māl* to everybody who asks for it. When there is no money left in the *bait al-māl*, fill it with rubbish." Things, however, never came to such a pass. Thanks to a restored public confidence in the government and a reawakened sense of religious, political and social responsibility in the people's minds — both due to the charisma of 'Umar's personality and the elevating effect of his just and generous policies — the influx of money into the treasury soon outdistanced its disbursement. The revenue receipts in 'Umar's time broke all Umayyad records. As regards expenditure, 'Umar's charities involved much less of it than had his predecessors' imposing edifices, extravagant court ceremonials, military adventures styled holy wars, and lavish grants to their relatives and hangers-on; and even 'Umar's charities soon reached saturation point because of a general increase in prosperity resulting from the fillip given to economic activity by an equitable distribution of wealth and by a fair taxation policy. The prosperity that prevailed in 'Umar's time was of a different order from that which had seemed to prevail in the hey-day of the Umayyad empire, that is during the reign of Walid b. 'Abd al-Malik, who had spent huge sums of public money on constructing magnificent buildings — monuments, all of them, to the grandeur of his reign, built with funds obtained largely through oppressive levies. It was presumably because he regarded such monuments as symbols, not only of human vanity, but also of royal tyranny that 'Umar set his face against building any of them. So great was his aversion that he resolved never to lay one brick over another during his reign. He was unable to adhere to this resolution literally; but the few buildings he did put up were simple and inexpensive structures, all of them but one of a religious character.

Just as he shunned the construction of grand buildings as a means of impressing the people, 'Umar avoided another spectacular activity of his predecessors, namely, *jihād* interpreted, in the narrowest sense, as war on

unbelievers. Far from launching any new military campaigns, he effected the orderly withdrawal from Constantinople of an expeditionary force that faced the prospect of being starved to death for lack of reinforcements. Peaceful persuasion and forthright incentives rather than the use or threat of armed force were his methods of dealing with adversaries, whether those of Islam or his own. Even against those inveterate enemies of the established religio-political order, the Khārijites, he relaxed the campaign he had inherited, permitting them to go freely wherever they liked so long as they harmed no Muslim or *dhimmī*. The happily paradoxical result was that the Khānrijites suspended their disruptive and seditious activities on the ground that, as the reigning caliph was a good Muslim, they had no quarrel either with him or with his government. If it was the *khalīfa's* duty, in accordance with the *Sharī'a*, to promote Islam in the sense of adding to the number of its adherents, 'Umar performed this duty better than most khalīfas, and he did so without recourse to arms. His stopping of the realization of, *jizya* from newly converted Muslims opened the flood-gates of conversion. At the same time his highly tolerant policy towards the *dhimmīs* (i. e. Jews and Christians enjoying the protection of the state on payment of a poll-tax) encouraged them to remain loyal and peaceful. There was thus no religious strife during 'Umar's reign. Religion became a unifying rather than a divisive factor: the followers of every religion and sect carried on their own religious practices and professed their own beliefs undisturbed by others. If the caliph was a devout Muslim and if he administered the affairs of the state in accordance with the *Sharī'a's* commands and prohibitions, the adherents of other religions followed their own way of life in harmony with the Muslims as their equals in all civic and legal matters.

No better proof could be demanded of 'Umar's respect for the dhimmīs' places of worhip and of his upholding their rights vis-a-vis the umar n. -Ana ai — Aziz Muslims than was provided by his ordering the restoration to the Christians of an area of land which Walid had forcibly acquired for the extension of the Grand Mosque at Damascus. As 'Umar must have expected, the order caused a stir among the Muslims; but that did not make him rescind the order: he stuck to it because he was sure that it was right and just. That the order was also wise and statesmanlike was proved by the fact that it led to a happy compromise whereby the Christians accepted another piece of land offered to them by the Muslims in lieu of the one in dispute. This liberality was the more remarkable for being practised by one who was an

ardent champion and promoter of Islam and so particular about the formal correctness of his prayers that he appointed thirteen muezzins in the royal mosque to say the *adhān* one after another in order to make sure that he would have time to walk to the mosque and be ready to start leading the prayers before the last of the muezzins had completed his *adhān*.

The Christans reciprocated 'Umar's just and gracious treatment of them with a profound veneration for him. What better compliment could a Christian have ever paid to a Muslim or for that matter to anybody than was paid to 'Umar by the Byzantine emperor when, on hearing of 'Umar' death, he said to a Muslim visitor, Muhammad b. Said: "If there was any man after Jesus Christ who could bring the dead back to life, that man was 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz." Nor were the Christians alone in revering him: the Muslims, all sects of them, did so too. The Sunnis regarded him as a *mujaddid* (a renovator of Islam) because of his great piety and learning, his following the Prophet's *sunna* in everything he did, and his reviving the traditions of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. The Shias were grateful to him for excluding from the Friday sermon the imprecations on 'Ali introduced by Mu'awiya, for the respect and consideration he showed to 'Ali's descendants and for his restoring their stipends. Even the Kharijites, as we have already mentioned, did him the honour of acknowledging him to be a good Muslim and a righteous *khalifa* -- a rare thing for them to do. The only people who disliked him were the members of the Umayyad family whom he had divested of their unlawful acquisitions and undue privileges. It was they who won the day by removing him from the scene with the aid of poison administered by a slave (whom, incidentally, 'Umar granted pardon and freedom with the advice to go to some place where nobody could find him). Their triumph, however, was short-lived: history was on the side of 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz. When the 'Abbasids overthrew the Umayyads three decades later, 1 they celebrated their victory not only by putting to death every Umayyad they could lay hands on, but also by demolishing the graves of the Umayyads' dead, exhuming their remains and publicly dishonouring them — with one exception, namely, 'Umar b, 'Abd al-Aziz. Neither the manic vengeance of the 'Abbāsids nor the pent-up rage of the people against their fallen oppressors touched 'Umar's grave. It remained intact in a church graveyard, where 'Umar had bought the land for it during his last illness in order to make sure of being buried in legitimately acquired land, gently declining the pastor's offer of a free gift and authorizing him to level his grave to the

ground after a year, for which he had bought the land — which authority the pastor, of course, did not exercise. An index to what the ʻAbbāsids thought of him is provided by an admission attributed to the ʻAbbasid caliph al-Mandi that one of the things in which the Umayyads had surpassed his dynasty was that they had produced ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-'Aziz.

It is a strange commentary on the latter-day Muslims' reading of Islamic history that the long list of their popular heroes, which ranges from conquerors, empire-builders, rulers and statesmen to saints, scholars, thinkers, jurists, scientists, writers and poets, does not contain the name of ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-'Aziz. They content themselves with honouring him by using Ḥaḍrat before his name and with pronouncing the conventional words invoking God's mercy on him. The occasions on which they do even that must be few; for ʻUmar's name is not a household word like that of, say, his illustrious namesake and model, Umar b. al-Khaitab, or, for that matter, like those of many lesser men with a more powerful appeal to the popular imagination than that of a righteous, pious, self-denying, compassionate and peace-loving *khalīfa*, even if by living, both as ruler and as man, in accordance with the spirit of the Islamic *Sharī'a* he presented to the world an embodiment of the Islamic ideal of leadership. For the popular mind ideals of this kind are abstract entities belonging to some metaphysical realm: it cannot recognize them when it sees them embodied in creatures of flesh and blood. What is, however, incomprehensible, except on the hypothesis that Islamic scholarship, especially in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent. has allowed itself to be influenced by popular preferences, is that very little that was worth writing or is worth reading has been written on ʻUmar b. ʻAbd al-'Azīz. One cannot help feeling a shock of surprise when one observes that even Iqbal overlooked him; for one would have thought that in this royal saint, no less than in any of the personalities that figure in his works and, indeed, more than in some of them, Iqbal would have found a perfect paradigm of the human virtues he extolled and to whose synthesis in flesh and blood he gave the name of the Perfect Man or its variants. However, ʻUmar has only paid the price of being what he was. His awe-inspiring moral loftiness, to mention only one of his many qualities, inspires a distant reverence more naturally than it engenders that warm admiration for superior, but imitable, virtues which transfigures men into heroes for humanity in generals — heroes in whom the common people can, with conviction, see themselves idealized.