IDEALS AND REALITIES OF ISLAM*

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Ten years ago as I was returning from a professional conference in the Midwest bad weather closed the local airport and threw me together with a colleague in world religions for a long train ride home. The redoubling was bothersome, but it turned out not to be a total loss for in the course of it my companion said something memorable. Long hours together and our shared inconvenience lowered inhibitions to the point where, around midnight, they triggered a confession. 'I've been teaching world religions for fifteen years', my friend confided, 'and I still don't know what the Upanishads are talking about, 'As their meaning had come pouring through to me on first reading I could scarcely believe my ears, but my friend was only half through and the balance of his statement left me as dumbfounded as its beginning, 'but when I get to Islam'—wreaths of smiles and relief—'I'm home!' The reason this astonished me was that my difficulties with Islam over the years had rivaled his with Hinduism. Carlyle's admission concerning the Quran had be-come an annual litany: 'As toilsome reading as I ever under-took. A wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite. Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through {it]'. I wince to think how far I could have extended his admission to my reading of Islam generally.

With a single sentence my friend brought home to me more compellingly than anyone before or since the extent to which temperamental (karmic?) differences affect our responses to the great traditions. It is not for that reason that I mention it, however, but because it sets the stage for the most succinct way I can identify my debt to the author of the book in hand. Thanks to him, and to the companions in Islam to whom he has introduced

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* Both sets of images come from Frithjof Schuon whose Understanding Islam (George Allen & Unwin, 1963) Dr Nasr acclaims on page 40 of the present book the best work in English on the meaning of Islam and why Muslims believe in it'. The book has a valuables equel, Dimeasloits of Islam, 197e, by the same author and publisher.

me, my train friend's simpatico with that tradition no longer surprises. No other faith now interests me more, and in none are explorations more rewarding. Over the Arab world too the heavens have opened.

The name of Seyyed Hossein Nasr first came to my attention through an invitation to a supper party in his honor at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions. An out-of-town conflict forced me to decline, but my wife accepted and I returned to raves of an evening with one of the most impressive men--and beautiful women, his wife—my wife could recall. On the strength of her hyperbole I took pains the next time he visited Cambridge to invite him to my class. His lecture was a landmark. I shall pass over his presence as a person and refer only to what he said. Beginning with the paradox that what is deepest in tradition is also most accessible to outsider—'The Gita belongs to the world, but try to read The Laws of Manu and you go mad'—he proceeded to unfold Islam from its mystical [Sufi) center. For the first time I saw unmistakably that Islam contained treasures I had not suspected, treasures that could be discerned not only by Muslims but by me.

II

Each of the great religious traditions contains at some level the fullness of truth: truth sufficient unto salvation. This substantial truth 'outs' in these traditions, however, in guises that are conspicuously different. To see how revelation surfaces differently in different traditions is rewarding, but readers of this book, products in the main of a civilization shaped by Judaism and Christianity, face special difficulties in seeing truth in Islam. Conceptually as well as geographically Islam is the West's closest neighbor; we share not only common borders but a common theological vocabulary, though we use it at times to say different things. These commonalities would bode well for understanding were it not for an awkward fact toward the meeting of minds

proximity guarantees nothing. Family disputes are the most virulent kind, and bad blood is nowhere more evident than along borders.

Barriers to Euro-Arabian understanding that have arisen from political conflict I leave to historians, remarking only that recognition is growing of the extent to which Western accounts have been biased in the West's favor ;, Norman Daniel's Islam and the West: The Making of an Image outlines the history of the distortion in the greatest detail to date. To say that there are no objective grounds for charging that the Muslim world has been more violent than the Christian is, we now see, if any-thing an understatement. I he stereotype of Islam as a 'religion of the sword' was forged in animus as much as in ignorance.

Unlike the animosities that were born of politics, theological differences bear directly on this book, so I shall mention several. Islam denies the divinity of Christ it takes explicit stands regarding social structures, and it claims to be the final revelation, superseding Christianity in ways comparable to those in which Christianity claims to 'fulfill' Judaism. Nothing any-one says will totally relieve the tensions these claims provoke, but this book does, I think, help to turn them into creative tensions, tensions that tone up the Christian positions them-selves by bracing them against alternatives in which even outsiders can detect a certain logic.

a. Islam and Society. H. Richard Niebuhr's minor classic, Christ and Culture, delineates five stances Christianity has assumed toward its social milieu. Defining culture as 'the artificial secondary environment [including social organization, customs and values] which man superimposes on the natural', he points out that Christianity has positioned itself against culture, with culture, above culture, paradoxically toward culture, and with intent to transform culture. Islam harbors no such range of options. The Christ left the social and religious spheres disjoined—'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'—is not surprising; given the historical circumstances he had no alter-native, for his people, being

subjugated, had no political options. When his religion triumphed under Constantine it had to take on, so to speak, the social order beginning with the Council of Arles, 314 A.D., but by then its foundations had set; social guidelines could be added but not incorporated. Muhammad's circumstances were different so it is not surprising that revelation surfaced differently through them. During its first decade; his mission was persecuted, but no ethnic difference divided him from those in power, and the power-odds he faced, though formidable, were not insuperable. The stance toward social issues these circumstances permitted is instructive. The Prophet never disdained society and politics nor relegated them to secondary importance as if his mission were essentially to men's souls standing solitary before their Maker. Society was his medium as much as was spirit ; indeed, society was an aspect of spirit, for if man is unity, replicating in microcosm the unity of God himself, how can his social dimension be divorced from salvation? As the Prophet rose in the end to power, he provides history's clearest glimpse of the way an instrument of revelation, a 'Messenger of God', deals with affairs of state when confronted by them. Moses is his closest approximation in this respect, but he remains approximation only inasmuch as the society with which he dealt was exclusively tribal whereas Mecca and Medina were full-fledged cities. In assuming axiomatically that issues of power with all their ambiguities and complexities fall too under God's aegis, Muhammad made it impossible from the start for Muslims to dismiss the earthly as the worldly, the social as the profane.

It was part of his mission to reduce 'worldly' and 'profane' to null classes.

b. Christ's Divinity. Islam denies it; nothing this book says is going to change that. But note: (1) Regard for Christ is not precluded; the Quran hails him not only as prophet—authentic channel of God's revelation-- but as unique among these in having been born of a virgin. (2) Muslims can understand what it means to love Christ and try to emulate him, for their affection for their own Prophet and efforts to follow in his steps are no less

fervent. (3) Insofar as it is a question of faith's having a center, here too Islam has its counterpart, the Quran occupying in Islam a position roughly equivalent to Christ's in Christianity.

It remains true, however, that Islam is not a 'centered' religion to the degree that Christianity is. Where the latter rides imagery of center, pivot, and focus, these fitting Christ perfectly, Islam is like a block. Or to change the metaphors, if Christianity is like a centering fire, Islam is like a sheet of snow.' Importance adheres to its totality, through which it spreads more or less evenly, unifying and leveling concomitantly. The totality is, of course, God and his will-filled Being in the world. The Quran is the window to this totality, and this as we have noted, gives Islam a kind of center, but one sufficiently different to be termed inverse. It is, as it were, a diffused center—only paradoxical formulation will do—in that it be-comes adequate, i.e. central, only insofar as it gathers man's total will and deploys it onto the total world, every aspect, every corner, in the ways the 'uncreated Book' enjoins.

c. The Final Revelation. Each of the great historical revelations is, as we have said, in its own way complete. From a planetary perspective, however, there is in Islam's claim to be the final revelation and Muhammad the 'Seal of the Prophets' a plausibility which to other faiths is thought-provoking if not disturbing. (I) We have seen that the Quran incorporates the social order into the religious. This is, on the one hand, a recovery, it having been so included in all early—'whole'; tribal and ethnic—cultures. The inclusion is likewise logically indicated; the sacred/profane dichotomy may be required as an expedient in times and places, but it can never from the religious point of view be considered normative. Buddhism and Christianity, the other universal and missionary religions, do not embrace society. The ethnic religions—Hinduism, Judaism, and, in a different way, Confucianism and Shinto—do, but with a specificity which makes them unexportable. Islam (a) addresses society (b) in terms that are simple and supple enough to apply to a variety of cultures—to date from Morocco to Jakarta—yet not vacuous ; it is this double fact that makes it look as if it has the religious/social complex

distinctively in hand. (2) By not deifying Muhammad, which deification would require that he be the devotional focus of everyone, and by explicitly recognizing other 'People of the Book' too as: recipients of revelation, Islam eases the tension between - historical faiths. That Hindus, Buddhists, and Chinese are not listed among such people is no obstacle. As they lay outside the Prophet's world, they are no more excluded by his silence than revelations on distant planets would be excluded by the Quran's neglect of them.

The differences cited thus far are sharp and specific and therefore, like rough edges, the ones most likely to bruise and discomfit. Traditions can also be compared at a more abstract level, however, in which case they don't conflict, they are simply different, like different worlds: animal and mineral, or Jupiter and Mars. Granted that the difference is one of emphasis only, Christianity appears as a religion of the will, Islam as a religion of the intellect.

Christ enjoined his disciples to be perfect; the Quran doesn't.

I have heard Muslims say that if God had wanted another sinless species he would have created man as angel; as it was, He created him between angel and demon to complete the ladder of possibilities. When I first heard this view it sounded like a counsel of complacency, like rationalization for human weaknesses. Today it looks otherwise. Christ's injunction makes not only an extravagant demand: it is a demand that focuses on man's will. The Christian's will is constantly being put to the test; heroism permanently beckons. By comparison Muslim injunctions are indeed pedestrian, but for a reason—this is the insight that has recently come to me, again through Mr. Schuon. Islam's Shari'ah (Law, Chapter IV) is a far-reaching codex, not to perfect the will—that aim would accord to will a centrality that would divert from other concerns—but rather to calm it ; place it in equilibrium so that life can get on to other things, specifically to contemplation: perception of the divine immutability and perfection. Correlatively, whereas the pitfall for

the Christian is sin, for the Muslim it is forget fullness. In the end the goals converge; the merciful see God and those who see God become merciful. But along the way the routes diverge.

III

Every depiction of a faith proceeds from a perspective, and I find myself wanting to set forth systematically, if only in capsule, the perspective from which I see Professor Nasr's depiction proceeding. The wish arises in part from the thought that it may help the import of certain passages in the book to body forth more amply, but also because it is a perspective which I believe deserves attention in its own right, being in my judgment the one which at this juncture in human understanding best equips us to see the truth in each of the historical traditions without prejudicing the truth in others.

Ultimate reality, name it the Absolute if you will, is beyond the reach of mind and language. It is 'the Tao that cannot be told', the Brahman that is Nirguna (without qualities), Israel's I AM, the Godhead of Christian apophatic theology, and Islam's Allah as the Supreme Name Itself. From this indescribable Absolute, Pure Being derives; as it is immaterial it doesn't register on man's senses or laboratory instruments, but unlike the Absolute it can be conceived. On this level stand 'the Tao that can be told of, Saguna (qualified) Brahman, Yahweh, the Logos, and Allah. After this come the archetypes or noumenal being, and then the phenomenal world in which we discernibly live: the spetio-temporal-material world of multiplicity, change, and individuation.

These are the four principal levels of existence. Religions are concerned with the relation of man's phenomenal life to the upper spheres. There are two lines of connection. First, as the Absolute would not be such were it anywhere absent, it must be in man. It is, in the form of Intellect, capitalized to indicate that the word is used in this book in a technical sense I shall

presently indicate. Intellect is present in us all, but it is too deep lying for most persons to detect, so a second link to the Absolute is needed. This is Revelation, the way the Ultimate erupts overtly, for human collectivities on the phenomenal plane.

First, intellect Professor Nasr writes: 'The intellect is not reason which is, at best, its mental image. Intellects is not ratio'. Ratio we know; it is reason as generally understood in the modern West. What is intellect us?

In India it is known as buddhi the faculty that understands directly, not indirectly by reflection through the lower mental faculties (manas, mind) among which reason rightfully dominates. Meister Eckhardt speaks of it when he writes: 'There is something in the soul which is unmated and uncreatable this is the intellect'. St. Thomas is on its track when he characterizes intellections as intuitive knowing in contrast to ratio which thinks discursively. Plotinus, Proclus, Dionysius, St. Bonaventure, and Nicolas of Cuss all in one way or another make intellection central to their epistemologies ; there is no point in adding other names. Intellectual knowledge is direct knowledge in that it operates without intervening concepts. It is adequational in that it adequates the knower to its object; it knows by becoming what it knows and thereby transcends the subject-object dichotomy. In so doing it offers itself as the only complete knowledge, for distinction implies distance and in cognition distance spells ignorance. As the object of the intellect is timeless and one and the intellect can be adequated to this object, indeed at some level is this object, it follows that the intellect too is trans-personal and eternal in some respect. Which is why Greek gnosis says, 'Know thyself', Christ said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you', and it is written in the Hadith, 'Who knows himself knows his Lord'.

If the foregoing seems obscure to the point of unintelligibility, that is precisely why it must be supplemented by another map showing where man is and pointing the way to his destiny. This complementing map—there is one to fit the terrain of each of the great historical traditions, but they all

belong to the same genre—is provided by revelation. People differ in psycho-spiritual makeup as much as if not more than in body build. In relatively few is intellect in the technical sense here used prominent enough to render the preceding page intelligible, to fewer still will it seem plausible, and for almost none will it be self-evident. In Islam, these few are Sufis. Because their number is small, and equally because they too had to get where they are and be stahilized there, the Absolute must connect with man in other, more exoteric ways, exoteric here denoting ways that connect with more obvious human faculties: man's capacity to understand language and be moved by convincing example. Revelation in its verbal and personified modes.

God surfaces verbally in the Islamic tradition in the Quran. For most Muslims divinity discloses itself more there than through the intellect, but even for them the book is far from transparent. All sacred texts present difficulties ; in the final analysis these spring from the incommensurable disproportion between Spirit with its infinity and the limited resources of human language. 'It is as though the poverty-stricken coagulation which is the language of mortal man were under the formidable pressure of the Heavenly Word broken into fragments, or as if God, in order to express a thousand truths, had but a dozen words at his command and so was compelled to make use of allusions heavy with meaning, of ellipses, abridgments, and symbolic syntheses.'* This holds for all sacred texts, but the Quran presents Westerners with special difficulties springing from the Arab's taste for verbal symbolism and 'depth' reading. The Arab extracts much from a few words. When, for example, the Quran notes that 'the world beyond is better for you than this lower world', or announces, 'Say Allah! then leave them to their empty play', it can evoke for the Muslim a mystical doctrine as profound and complete as any more explicitly catalogued. Moreover, many phrases and verses in the Quran function as mantras; commencing as sentences that convey thoughts, they become transformed, through use, into

beings, powers, or talismans. The soul of the pious Muslim comes to be woven of these sacred formulas. In them he works, rests, lives, and dies.

As for the Prophet—the way Being erupted in the Arab world in a human life—he serves as a kind of heavenly mold, ready to receive the inflow of Muslims' intelligence and will. With their wills, Muslims love him and seek to imitate him to the smallest details of everyday life. With respect to intelligence the Prophet represents unfathomable Lagos. When Christ said, 'No man cometh unto the Father but by me', it is the Logos who spoke For the Christian this universal Word is appropriately identified with Jesus of Nazareth. For the Muslim it is the Quran as conveyed through Muhammad. Paralleling Christ's human and divine natures, Muhammad is not the Absolute, yet the Absolute truly and distinctively announces itself through him. F. Schuon, Understanding Islam, pp. 44-45.

IV

But I am beginning to trespass on the book. Let me close by returning for a moment to its author.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is a contemporary man or no such man exists. To begin with, he knows science. I merely teach at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; he holds an, M.I.T. degree, atop which stands one from Harvard University in the history of science. At the same time he remains integrally rooted in tradition, in his case the tradition of Islam. It remains for him normative; science he knows, but it is revelation that he reveres. I chanced to be passing through Tehran in 1970 while newspapers were carrying front page announcements that he had been appointed to head that year's official hajj from Iran, the pilgrimage to Mecca which annually draws from that land some 20,000 participants.

His range can be described another way. He is a ranking scholar; his publications are innumerable and he rides the international conference/lecture circuit with the intellectual elite of our time. Concomitantly he is a man of piety. I have been in gatherings with him only to have him slip away because one of the stipulated hours for prayer had arrived.

To claim that anyone speaks for Islam as a whole would be presumptuous, but Professor Nasr may come as close to dung so as anyone today. When the Aga Khan Chair of Islamic Studies was established at the American University of Beirut he was appointed its first occupant. I hear that the lectures there delivered, subsequently expanded into this book, have been well received not only in his own Shiite land, but by the Sunni 'ulama' in India, Pakistan, and the Arab World. Perhaps it is enough to cause the reader to turn the page expectantly.