

# FEZ: CITY OF ISLAM

BY TITUS BURCKHARDT.

*Translated from the German by*

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*Reviewer: Taimoaz Khan Mumtaz*

Though Fez: City of Islam was first published in German in 1960 it still remains a valuable document of a civilization and its values which have more or less disappeared for ever. Although a large number of Muslims still have traditional values and some still live in traditional environments, the outward supports, (including craftsmanship and traditional art) and more importantly, the sources of inward wisdom hikmah have nearly vanished. This is a result of the onslaught, since, the last century or so, of Western technology, its productions and most of all secular (and ultimately materialistic) modes of thought.

Nevertheless an increasing number of Muslims are becoming doubtful of Western models and, through the persevering efforts of a few enlightened individuals, becoming aware of the higher dimensions of their own tradition. It has thus become a journey of rediscovery for many, and a book such as the one under discussion is an extremely precious source for understanding the beliefs, attitudes, systems and dynamics of a traditional Islamic society. A change in the general direction of the collectivity may not be possible but individuals can always live according to their ideals. As Burckhardt says, one is inwardly always free even if outwardly one is dominated. It is this inward freedom which we have given up as a collectivity.

The book is handsomely produced. The author's style as captured by the translator is poetic, precise and illuminating. Sixteen of the seventeen monochrome plates are by the author himself, and are a priceless record of traditional Islam (these were first printed in the original 1960 German

edition). In addition the many colour plates (added for the English edition) are a visual treat.

Fez, apart from being informative, also succeeds in conveying the spirit and meaning of traditional Islam in its various aspects. The great merit of the book is in showing how Islam in the first place moulds the very soul of a people and how it consequently affects all aspects of life --- a quality common to all genuine religions. Especially when one realises the emphasis Islam places on Divine Unity --- Tawhid --- which allows it to look at all phenomena as reflections of t his Unity. This gives rise to a holistic concept of life in general. Thus, “all traditional forms, from law and morality to the art of the craftsman, are of such a nature that they can lead, from outward to inward, to the eternal meaning of life.” Each chapter, presenting various aspects of traditional culture in Fez bears out the truth of this statement.

In addition to the fact that a theocratic civilization is moulded by its religion, a divine religion providentially has the capacity to incorporate the positive qualities of a particular sector of humanity to produce equilibrium in the social order. The author brings this out in the chapter “City and Desert” by using Ibn Khaldun’s Muqaddimah to set down the pattern of political power in the area between the Mediterranean and the great deserts of further Asia, Arabia and Africa.” According to Ibn Khaldun, the “perfect condition of human society does not find its peak in the one-sided development of sedentary life but in a balance between nomadism and sedentarism.” In this scheme, city cultures degenerate with time, to be rejuvenated by conquering desert nomads, who then get absorbed by the city till their power declines to be replaced by another nomadic conquest, This pattern .is repeated periodically. The history of Morocco, as set down briefly by the author, follows this pattern thus keeping its traditional culture from degenerating.

In the same chapter an account of the nomads --- Barbarians and Arabs being the major groups --- points out the chivalric and virile qualities which they tend to possess naturally, as being the “masculine and combative virtues which Islam favours.”

Another connection between nomadism and Islam which has existed from the beginning of Islam is that nomadic tribes come together only under, “a leadership of a higher orders... prophethood or a function deriving from

it.” In all the tribal waves of conquest in the history of Morocco a religious mission led by an exemplary leader, forms the basis or catalyst.

This “quasi-natural course of events” was disrupted with the first contacts with European technology (cannons) in the 17th century. The French, through superior arms, subsequently made Morocco a protectorate in 1912. The Europeans saw traditional culture as stagnant in the light of their ideals of ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’ --- whose goal is the attainment of earthly well-being exclusively. They didn’t realize that for traditional Man the degeneration of all communities is inevitable and he lives his life with the ultimate goal of humanity in view. He therefore does not seek an earthly paradise but the creation of equilibrium in society which is conducive to his physical, psychic and spiritual well-being while constantly reminding him of the next-world. The theocentric world-view is reflected in the concept and practice of governance as well: “The prototypical Islamic state is theocratic, for in it spiritual power and temporal power are combined.” Being an “institution for this world’ it needs a real power-base which the nomadic tribes provide. As Ibn Khaldun says, “the law of religion cannot rightly demand something that is in contradiction to the law of nature.”

This statement is instructive, quite apart from the present context, in illuminating a typical Islamic criterion of judgement applied in diverse domains of life.

On the subject of Fez (Fas is Arabic) itself the book gives a comprehensive picture of the city: its physical impression, settlement patterns, commercial and civic activities - suqs, baths, inns etc. -- its civic amenities like schools, Mainmort Foundations, Administrative structure and finally, craftsmanship. The text includes accounts of traditional historians, foreign visitors, personal anecdotes, and vivid and sensitive description. These are moreover the qualities found throughout the book.

Speaking of the craftsman’s plight in the face of modern industry a conversation with a comb-maker is included. The craftsman, along with talking of the skill involved in his craft and its durability, explains that it contains a subtle wisdom and that the craft’s origin can be traced to Seth, the prophet. He concedes that everyone may not understand the elements of wisdom in its various procedures, but. “It is still stupid and reprehensible to

rob men of the inheritance of Prophets, and put them in front of a machine where, day in and day out, they must perform a meaningless task.”

Instructive insights abound throughout the book. Talking of the human dignity found universally (indicating consciousness of man’s theomorphism) Burckhardt elucidates a typical traditional-attitude: “almost anyone who has not been sucked into the whirlpool of the modern world lives his life here as if it were something provisional which does not definitively engage his soul, but which belongs to the *Divina Commedia*’ of earthly existence,” only God being eternal and the after-life much more real than earthly existence.”

Penetrating to the roots of this attitude he shows that through the regular performance of the prayers everyone is “penetrated by a common spiritual liberation... It confers on everyone a particular inward attitude, which shows... (for example) in a deep-seated courtesy that is common to rich and poor, cultivated and uncultivated alike.”

Coming down to the scale of the family, a chapter is denoted to The House. Here the author dwells briefly on the physical form, layout, decoration, methods and stages of construction and the patterns of usage. It includes insights into the symbolic significance of the art of ornamentation and calligraphy and the contemplative function of all Islamic arts.

Often the tendency to reject one’s traditions results from either the extent to which many practices, institutions, norms etc. have degenerated and atrophied or the inability to see the symbolic significance of traditional forms. For example, the Islamic injunction regarding veiling has traditionally been interpreted according to circumstances --the author cites the contrasting examples of Bedoin women as compared to city dwellers. Speaking of the latter the author says.” “Once again city customs have led to exaggeration and narrowness, which today, under the influence of the modern world, threaten to turn into their exact opposite.”

In the chapter on “Traditional Science” one gets a glimpse at the intellectual world of Islam through the sciences taught at the Qarawiyyin University namely language, theology, jurisprudence and the Qur’an. Above all one meets Mulay 'Ali a scholar and mystic, who teaches at this university and under whom in 1933-34 Burckhardt as a young man studied Arabic,

theology and mystical doctrine. One gets a first hand account of traditional teaching and learning.

On the subject of the Qur'an Burckhardt once again shows his understanding of the significance of things according to the Muslim world-view as well as the underlying basis of Muslim belief. Thus, "It is only when one considers individual Quranic verses and begins to be aware of their many levels of meaning, that one can assess the powerful effect this book has been able to exert, and realize why it has become the daily nourishment of thousands of contemplatively inclined people."

It is in Islamic mysticism or the 'science of the inward' that one finds the heart of the Islamic community. Though the wisdom of the Sufis is esoteric, it percolates throughout society in innumerable ways, including sun poetry and the art of the craftsmen who are invariably connected to spiritual orders. Burckhardt defines the basis and explains the aim of sufism (which is ultimately knowledge of God) with great clarity. The chapter 'The Go] den Chair' dealing with this subject is probably the crowning chapter of the book. Accounts of major Sufis whose influence has been felt in Morocco are given. Through these accounts, which include autobiographical writings by Sufis, one gets a taste of Islamic mysticism --- its attitudes, doctrines, methods --- as well as getting to view some of the greatest Sufis, of contemporary sufis the author's first hand meetings with sufis like Mulay Ali --- and some of the forms sufism takes in Morocco are valuable and instructive.

It is in this inner dimension of Islam that an answer may be found to counter, the irruption of the Modern World (as the last chapter is titled). One sees in the Muslim world how modern ideologies have taken over people's minds in the wake of colonialism. In Morocco too the city youth leading the independence struggle based their struggle on West-inspired political ideologies --- this influence may have come in an Egyptian or Turkish garb or been due to French education. Many of these youth were influenced, by the Egyptian Salafiyah movement "which sought to adapt Islamic Law to the modern way of life by elements of European rationalism" (not an uncommon type of movement for Muslim countries). Thus Morocco's independence in 1956 instead of halting the spiritual decline only speeded it up. This was inevitable because, "A state cannot be independent today without possessing the technical means which were invented in Europe" and

which results in the disappearance of traditional forms along with their spiritual content. To oppose this degradation one has to base oneself on perennial and objective wisdom which provides Divine criteria to judge the real value of things. In Burckhardt's own word, "only the vigilant consciousness of an inexpressible spiritual heritage can appose it; and such a consciousness is in the nature of things rare."