

Author's Introduction

The history of the future will show that the 1970's and 1980's were the most important turning points in the political history of Islam and the history of Muslim political thought. What future follows these turning points is a different issue. What matters is that a great development has occurred, which is supported by numerous varying experiences both in the Muslim world and internationally.

It has to be said that the future of Islam—Islam as a religion and as a historical, cultural and social reality—is strictly related to the present reality. This situation results from the past history of this religion and especially the way it enters the new era, its interaction with the latter and its internal capacities and potential. These three factors, and especially the latter one, have had and will have the greatest share in the future developments related to the present situation.

Meanwhile, what matters is that the essential share role of Islam itself as a source of development and change should not be forgotten. There are many people who study the developments in the history of Islam and contemporary Islam without considering its inherent capabilities and potential or its direct immediate effects while considering it as a historical, cultural and social reality that is merely subject to the present developments, rather than as a reality that, besides the mentioned characteristics, has an independent creativity and activity. One cannot study the developments of divine religions without considering this last point.

There is no question that religion itself, since it is believed in by its followers and thus enters the scene of the society, is itself subject to historical and social laws. The question is whether there is a meta-historical reality behind it. If we accept that religion has a metaphysical reality that has somehow been injected into the history, we also have to accept that studying it without this characteristic and merely as a factor out of history will lead us to false conclusions. If we accept this, we will logically have to accept that this meta-historical element will show reactions to various social, intellectual and political currents proportionately to its principles and characteristics. In order to know these reactions, one has to consider its foundations, characteristics, potential for change and adaptive capacities in the same way that one studies the historical, social, economic and cultural conditions.

There has been a modern wave of Islamic radicalism throughout the Muslim territories in the last few decades in which has affected both Shi'ites and Sunnies. In those days, and especially after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Islamism reached its peak, it seemed that the two schools would react similarly to the new current. However, later when the excitement subsided, it was clarified that the two would go through the new period in two different ways and proportionately to their historical experiences, jurisprudential and theological principles and sociopsychological structure. This difference, as it is the outcome of two different historical experiences, also results from two different jurisprudential and theological systems. The present situation of either of the two in transition through the new period is in agreement with its doctrinal systems as it is in harmony to its historical experience.

To know the present situation, these two points have to be sympathetically and precisely studied and evaluated and it should be particularly noted out how each of the two schools, in their entirety, have formed the psychological, social and religious structure of their followers and what potentials and capabilities each of them has on accordance to the developments, pressures and necessities of the present era. The clarification of this point, rather than denying it, while contributing to a better understanding of the present situation, can outline the future situation to a certain extent as well.

The discussion here is not a polemical discussion, nor a discussion of the values and of which experience and interpretation of Islam have been right and which have been wrong or for setting forth controversial issues to doubt or weaken Muslim brotherhood or unity. Certainly, a scholarly impartial discussion of the intellectual, doctrinal, historical and psychological distinctions of the parties and the causes and consequences of each, will contribute to a deeper and more honest knowledge, and will further contribute to brotherhood and unity. The result of denial of realities by the believers and committed is that will provide and explain the same in a distorted way.

Understanding, sharing thoughts and actions, mutual responsibility and participating in the shared destiny of each other can be achieved if the parties know each other honestly and bravely and show themselves as they are. This will not be achieved in the world today except by knowing and at the same time respecting each other.

The minimum result of such knowledge is that the parties will not have expectations from each other that are beyond their principles, capacities and limitations. Unfortunately, this has been a problem that Muslims have always faced and are still facing. They should know who they are and who the other party is, what goals they follow and how they interpret them. They should know the way they have to cooperate in order to achieve them.

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The book you are reading is an extension and elaboration of four lectures from fall 1987 in the hall of the Contemporary Arts Museum. The purpose of the lectures at that time was to provide the main backgrounds of Shi'ite and Sunni political thought, how they were formed, what factors influenced them,

and how they have reacted and are reacting to the deep and rapid developments, pressures, and necessities of the contemporary period. Finally, they were aimed at making it possible for the two parties to have a clearer picture of the other, to know the theological and jurisprudential limitations and obligations, the historical experiences and doctrinal structure of the other and their mutual expectations in coordination with these principles, foundations and capacities.

Although this and the related discussions were warmly welcomed, putting them in writing was delayed.

The four chapters of this book are based on the lectures. If the book was to be compiled independently and without considering the lectures, the order of the outlining of the chapters would be different, putting many discussions in separate chapters. However, for certain reasons, the most important one of which was shortage of time and the extensiveness of the discussions and the variety of problems in the contemporary period, this was not accomplished. This also resulted in a large number of notes, some of which are lengthy. I hereby apologize to the reader for this.

Finally, I would like to express thanks to Ayatullah Ja'far Subhani, head of Imam Sadiq (‘a) Research Institute, whose facilities, especially the library, benefited me in the compilation of this book, and also Mr. Baha'uddin Khorramshahi, who was its editor. Mr. Mustafa Tajzadeh had the greatest share in holding procuring the lectures, which I greatly appreciate.

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