

Introduction

This is a new story of Islam. It is the story of the movement which was launched by Muhammad, the Messenger of God, in A.D. 610 in Makkah, and was consummated with the support of his cousin, collaborator and vicegerent, Ali ibn Abi Talib, in A.D. 632 in Medina. It covers a period of ninety years from A.D. 570 when he was born in Makkah, to A.D. 661 when his successor, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was assassinated in Kufa.

Countless histories of Islam have been written in the past and will be written in the future. The spectacular advance of Islam in the missionary field in our own times; the renaissance of the Muslim nations after many centuries of slumber; the obtrusion of oil as a new factor in world politics in this century; but above all and most recently, the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, all are acting, both in the east and in the west, as catalysts of a new interest in Islam. The Revolution in Iran, has, in fact, triggered a world-wide explosion of interest in Islam, and many new books are being written on the subject – both by Muslims and non-Muslims.

In these days when the leaders of the Christian world are quietly working to realize the old dream of Christian ecumenism, many Muslims are also looking back nostalgically toward that ideal state when Islam was monolithic.

Islam, however, was monolithic only during the lifetime of its Prophet, Muhammad, the blessed one. As soon as he died, the first crack appeared in the “monolith” of Islam. His followers – the Muslims – were polarized into two groups.

In this polarization, most of his companions were on the one side and the members of his family on the other. While the members of his family were occupied with his obsequies, some of his companions were occupied in “electing” a new leader to succeed him. During the interval between his death and his burial, the latter gathered in the outhouse of Saqifa in Medina, and elected one out of themselves as the new head of the Muslim *umma* (community).

They, then, confronted the members of the bereaved family with a fait accompli. This confrontation, most unfortunately, became a permanent feature of the history of the Muslims.

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, may God bless him and his Ahlul-Bayt (family), belonged to the clan of Banu Hashim. After his death in A.D. 632, his cousin, son-in-law and heir-apparent, Ali ibn Abi Talib, succeeded him as the new chief of Banu Hashim. Many of the companions of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, had nursed a secret antagonism toward him.

They could not show him their antagonism during the lifetime of the Prophet but once they were in control of his government in Medina, they were resolved, not to let it fall, through any miscalculation, into the hands of Ali ibn Abi Talib. The members of the family of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, were thus precluded, by human force majeure, not only from direct succession but also from all positions of authority and power in the successive governments of his followers.

The friends, followers and supporters of the family of Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, have been historically called Shia; and the friends, followers and supporters of the companions, i.e., the party which succeeded in seizing power in Medina, have been called Sunni. I shall also identify these two groups by these names.

M. Shibli, the famous Indian historian of Islam, says that almost all histories of Islam have been written by Sunni historians. This statement implies that Shia scholars did not write any histories of Islam. Why not? They did not write history for an obvious reason. All khalifas, sultans and kings were Sunni.

A Shia could not publish an interpretation of Islamic history that was divergent from the official interpretation, and he had no desire to perpetuate what he believed to be the distortions of truth. He, therefore, preferred not to write any history at all.

In this manner, it was the “official” account of the history of the early days of Islam that gained currency and found acceptance. It was the most logical thing for the governments of the early centuries of Islam to do to put into circulation only that story which was consistent with the party line.

It was also most logical for the supporters of the policies of the governments in question, to toe the party line. And in toeing the party line, if they felt that it was necessary to smother truth, or at any rate, to smother the other side of the story, it was just as logical to do so.

There is nothing strange, surprising or shocking in this attitude of the Sunni historians. The most logical thing for them to do, was, and is, to uphold the legitimacy of the events which transpired in Saqifa, where some of the companions, in a pre-emptive strike, seized the government of Muhammad, the Sovereign of Arabia.

What however is strange, surprising and shocking, is that the Western historians of Islam, i.e., the Orientalists, have swallowed up, as gospel truth, whatever the Muslim “court” historians have dished out to them as “facts.”

The Orientalists are supposedly objective, non-partisan, and in no way emotionally involved. The

outcome of a certain contest in the distant past of Islam, one way or the other, could not make any difference to them.

And yet, the works of many of them reflect, not the facts but the interpretations and propagandas of the party in power. In this sense, their works are the imitations of the books “inspired” by what the Communists call the “ruling circles” of the Muslims.

The works of the Orientalists can have scientific value only if they heed the advice of the great historian of Muslim Spain, Dr. J. A. Conde. He says:

“A sort of fatality attaching itself to human affairs would seem to command that in the relation of historical events those of the highest importance should descend to posterity through the justly suspected channels of narrations written by the conquering parties. The mutation of empires, the most momentous revolutions and the overthrow of the most renowned dynasties seem all to be liable to this disadvantage. It was by the Romans that the history of their own aggrandizement was written; the narration of their rivalry and sanguinary wars with the Carthaginians has come down to us from themselves; or if Greek writers have also treated the subject, these men were the tributaries and dependents of Rome, nor did they spare the flatteries best calculated to conciliate her favor. Scipio thus appears to us the most admirable of heroes, but is not that in part because the history of his life is the work of his admirers and flatterers? It is true that the noble and illustrious Hannibal cannot look otherwise than great and glorious even in the narratives of his mortal enemies, but if the implacable hatred and aggressive policy of Rome had not commanded the destruction of all the Punic annals, the renowned general would doubtless appear to us under an aspect differing much from that presented by the ruthless barbarian, described by Livy and accepted by his readers as the portrait of Hannibal. Therefore a sound and just discrimination forbids us to content ourselves with the testimony of one side only. This requires that we compare the relations of both parties with careful impartiality, and commands us to cite them with no other purpose than that of discovering the truth.” (*History of the Dominion of the Arabs in Spain translated from Spanish by Mrs. J. Foster, Volume I, page 1*)

It cannot be gainsaid that many Orientalists have made most invaluable contributions to the study, knowledge and understanding of Islam. It is only through their labors that many priceless treasures of Islamic history, art and literature have been rescued from oblivion, and have been preserved. It is entirely possible that many such treasures would have been lost forever if it were not for their efforts to salvage them.

Among them are men who have amazing grasp of the details of Islamic studies, and whose knowledge is encyclopedic in range. They have read and assimilated vast quantities of detail, and then they have condensed, organized and edited them in most masterly and critical analyses. Some of them devoted their lives and their fortunes to the study of Islam, and to them the world of Islam owes a profound debt of gratitude.

But notwithstanding the love of and zeal for knowledge, and devotion to truth of the Western students, it appears that when many of them interpret Islam, its history and its institutions, something goes awry. It is incredible but true that some of them show a curious inability to penetrate through the conventional and stereotyped appearance of events to the sometimes deliberately obscured facts and forces, and significant realities. And some of them fail even to see the obvious.

I have quoted above the principles of writing scientific and impartial history as laid down by Dr. Conde, who is himself a most distinguished Orientalist. The principle, viz., no expert judgments in history, rests upon plain common sense, and there is nothing mystical about it.

And yet, many of the Orientalists have accepted, with a credulity that is idiotic, the account of the events that took place immediately following the death of Muhammad, as given by the party that succeeded in capturing his throne for itself.

A most glaring example of the gullibility, and basic misperception of the Orientalists, in this regard, is the acceptance by them, as a historical “fact” of the canard that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, died without designating anyone as his successor, and that he left the problem of finding a leader for the Muslim *umma* (community) to the discretion of his followers themselves.

No Orientalist has paused, as far as I am aware, to investigate if this is true or even plausible that Muhammad abandoned the Muslims without a leader, and they had to find one in a no-holds barred, ruthless, free-for-all, struggle for power. Eschewing the laborious search for truth, the Orientalists have merely concurred with the Sunni historians that Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, had no wishes or preferences in the matter of his own succession; and whatever happened in Saqifa was, therefore, right and justified, and also, was in the best interests of the Muslim *umma* (community).

This pro-Saqifa tilt of the Orientalists has led them up a blind alley in which they cannot find answers for some fundamental questions in the history of Islam, and they find themselves caught, like the Sunni historians, in a net of paradoxes and contradictions.

Many Sunni historians and many among the Orientalists have made a deliberate attempt to minimize the importance of the role played by Ali ibn Abi Talib in the story of Islam. They are, of course, entitled to their opinions and assumptions even if these are not attested by facts. In my presentation, I have made an attempt to place the emphasis on facts.

In doing so, it has been my hope that the facts themselves would act as “judges”. Since facts are impartial “judges,” they can be counted upon to restore balance to the assessment of the roles played by the various protagonists in the history of nascent Islam. I have picked them up and have tried to string them, like pearls, into a “necklace”, so that most of them can be seen in one place.

History has no supreme court rendering verdicts; it has only fallible chroniclers. And yet, history can find its own supreme court or objective tribunal in the logic of facts.

I have another and very pragmatic reason for depending upon facts. For writing the story of the early days of Islam, there are three primary sources, viz., Al-Qur'an al-Majid (the revealed book of Islam); the Hadith (the memorials of the attributed acts and sayings of Muhammad, as transmitted by a chain of informants or narrators); and the events as recorded by Arab historians. Out of these three, the first, i.e., the Qur'an, is acknowledged by all Muslims to be divine in origin.

If a Muslim challenges the authority of Qur'an, he immediately becomes an apostate. But whereas the authority of Qur'an, as far as the Muslims are concerned, is inviolate, its verses are subject to varying and sometimes conflicting interpretations, and there is no such thing as a consensus on which or whose interpretation is right.

The Hadith also suffer from a handicap; too many of them are spurious although there are some which are acknowledged both by the Sunnis and the Shias to be authentic. I have, therefore, made an attempt to be selective in quoting only those verses of Qur'an and only those Hadith (statements of the Prophet) in the interpretation of which the difference between the Sunnis and the Shias is minimal. But historical facts belong to an area in which there is not much room for disagreement.

I have made very frequent use of quotations, both from classical and modern historians, in this book, often on the same subject or event. I have done so to present to the reader more than one point of view or more than one interpretation of the more important events. The same event seen from different angles appears different to different observers and is, therefore, subject to different interpretations.

It is in the hope that the reader shares this opinion that I have tried, on many occasions, to let more than one historian tell the same story. "Let the professionals do the job," has been my motto in the restatement of most of the vital facts of the history of Islam.

Another reason why I have presented testimony of the historians on such a vast scale, is to underpin my thesis with evidence, so that the reader, if he so wishes, may advert to sources which he may consider to be unimpeachable.

It has been said that daring as it is to investigate the unknown, even more so it is to question the known. Many of the so-called "known facts" in the history of nascent Islam are little more than pious assumptions or even pious wishes which through persistent repetition by the long chain of the generations of Muslims, have acquired the "patina" if not the status of the "articles of faith".

When I questioned some of the assumptions of many Muslims which are disguised as historical "truths", I noticed that they cannot withstand the scrutiny of critical analysis. The reader himself may, therefore, decide if he would cling to them or would accept truths some of which he might find extremely bitter and brutal. There are those people who are afraid of truth. Truth threatens their illusions, their favorite myths, and their assumptions.

These latter, through long propinquity, have become so familiar to them that they feel it is safe and

comfortable to live with them without the “intrusion” of truth. They equate truth with “insecurity.” And yet, truth alone can bring them real security. Truth must be upheld at all costs, and by all, but especially, by the historians. Truth must be upheld even if it hurts a friend and benefits a foe. The first loyalty of the historian must be to truth, and nothing whatsoever must deflect him in its quest.

The war of ideas and the conflict of opinions become even more interesting when the spotlight of investigation is turned away from philosophical concepts and abstract political doctrines to characters and personalities which played the key roles in the events under review. History springs to life with characterization; it becomes vibrant with sharply delineated characters who “make” events or act on them or react to them. They invest history with the “human interest” element, and the touch of drama.

Whatever history is – accident, or inevitable causality, or the pressure of economic determinism, or the actions of strong leaders, or the result of forces nobody understands, or the collective aspirations of a people – whatever history is, the Arabs themselves see and interpret their own history more in terms of personal action than anything else. And they may be right.

After all, as in every other area of endeavor, history is made by those who act. It consists, in the interaction, not of blind forces but of human beings. The conflicts of history are not between the abstractions of philosophy, economics or sociology but between human beings. It has been said that even in its most sociological moments, history cannot overlook the factor of human personality.

The history of the first 23-years of the career of Islam which comprehends the entire ministry of Muhammad as the Messenger of God, is made, for the most part, next to himself, by the personal actions of his collaborator, Ali ibn Abi Talib. This is the testimony of history. But it is a testimony which many historians have consistently tried to conceal. It is to this testimony that I have tried to draw the attention of the readers of this book.

But notwithstanding the past and present lopsidedness of Western historiography on Islam, there is new hope that historians of the future will make restitution for the omissions and failures of the historians of the past.

All that they have to do is not to be tendentious, and not to accept blindly those interpretations and conclusions which have become the clichés of the history of Islam, but to rediscover truth for themselves through collation and examination of the evidence.

In the introduction to the *Cambridge History of Islam*, Volume I, published by the University Press, Cambridge (1970), P.M. Holt, writes:

“The study of Islamic history is now developing, many of the apparent certainties of the older Western historiography (often reflecting the assertions and interpretations of the Muslim traditional historians) have dissolved, and it is only gradually through detailed research that a truer understanding of the past may be attained.”

The certainties of the older Western historiography reflecting the assertions and interpretations of the Muslim traditional historians have not dissolved yet but let us hope that they will, and a truer understanding of the past will be attained in due course.

An attempt to interpret the history of Islam, especially the history of its first century, is like stepping into a mine field; it's seething with controversy, diatribes and polemics, and one may approach it only extremely gingerly.

Nevertheless, interpretation remains basic to the understanding of history. Without interpretation, history becomes a mass of uncoordinated information and a catalogue of "dead" events and dates unrelated to each other.

Yet these "dead" events bounce back to life when effects are related to causes, and a concatenation of facts is established. A fact in correlation with other facts has historical significance; in isolation it may be meaningless.

Even Einstein's Relativity is the understanding of the world not as a series of events but as relations.

As stated above, there is a plethora of books on Islam but most of them are stereotypical interpretations of the story of its birth and growth, and its religious experience, just as handed down to their authors by the court historians of the government which was born in Saqifa, and its successor governments – the governments of Damascus and Baghdad. The story, however, has another side also.

A principle of the ancient Roman law was *audi alteram partem* (in any dispute, hear the other side); or *audiatur et altera pars* (let the other side be heard). Concerted human action – which is called politics – is full of immense, heart-breaking tragedies that have damaged the lives of everyone on the planet. Most would have been averted had this law been heeded by all.

This principle that in any dispute, both sides of the case should be heard – is entrenched in the legal systems of most nations, but most particularly in those of the United States and Western Europe. Thomas Jefferson was only paraphrasing this principle, without which there cannot be any justice, when he exclaimed: "For God's sake, let us freely hear both sides."

The American and European students of Islam, in most cases, have heard only one side of its story; this book is an attempt to present the other side. It is with this intent that I deliver it to the judgment of its readers.

From the cowardice which shrinks from new truth;

From the laxness that is content with half-truth;

From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth;

O God of Truth deliver us!

Transliteration

The system of transliteration employed in this book was devised with particular regard for simplicity. In most cases, those forms of spelling for names of persons and places have been used which are most familiar to Western readers, such as Qur'an, Muhammad, and Yemen in preference to Coran, Koran or Kuran, Mohammad, and al-Yaman.

At the same time, some other forms of Western usage such as Moslems, Sunnites and Shi'ites have been discarded in favor of the simpler and more correct forms such as Muslims, Sunnis and Shias.

The Arabic word for "son" is transliterated to conform with the Arabic spelling as ibn or bin, and both variants have been used.

The words caliph and khalifa or caliphate and khilafat have been used interchangeably.

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