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Cyclical History: The Political Basis of Islam as a Centripetal and Centrifugal Force

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Abstract

The political basis of the religion of Islam can be considered both a centripetal and centrifugal force. The intrinsic connection between religion and the concepts of unity, order, and authority, which had initially transformed the disordered, primitive, underdeveloped Arabian territory into an ordered, urbanized empire, later led to the division of the community over issues of succession and leadership. While some form of separation of the spiritual and political spheres was accomplished, secularization in the Western sense never was attempted in this age. Initially, politics was thought to be only a part of the “larger quest for religious salvation” (Lapidus 153), and government was perceived as the “fulfillment of cosmic and divine purposes” (188). However, greed and worldly pursuits corrupted this Islamic view of the relationship between politics and religion and led to the decline of the unified Muslim society and the return to the point of origin in the cycle of history.

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In the attempt to rationalize and respond to the drastic change and rapid disintegration of the perceived social order, Islamic political theorists of the post-imperial era looked to the philosophical proposals of the ancient Greeks, namely Plato and Aristotle, for guidance. After the fall of the 'Abbasid empire, many Muslim scholars found an explanation for the collapse in the ancient concept of history as a cyclical process. This explained the movement of time as not unidirectional and finite, but rather a circular movement of events, in which every point precedes and follows another and an "eventual return" is inevitable. This type of historical progression is reflected in the rapid transformation of Arabia from a primitive, tribal, divided region into a highly organized empire and its equally swift decline. The close relationship between the religious and political spheres was both a centripetal and centrifugal force in early Islamic civilization, accounting for the progression from disorder to order and consequently the return to the starting point.

The term history has two very divergent meanings. Its most rudimentary definition is the movement of time. However, historical time may be perceived and measured in many ways. In *The History of Civilizations*, the French scholar Fernand Braudel speaks at length about the three "time-scales." The traditional, shortsighted concept of time is the rapid succession of events. The second level of understanding focuses on conjunctures, the grouping of events into trends, phases, and episodes. The third plane of time measurement is characterized as "longue duree" involves the "quasi-immobile time of structures and traditions," themes which have shaped civilization since its conception and continue to do so in the present (Braudel xxiv). This perception of history as slow moving, static, and silent existed in ancient

and medieval thought and played an integral role in the development in the cyclical view of movement of time.

The idea that events and episodes in history move in an eternally recurring cycle, without an obvious origin or end is believed to be of Babylonian origin and is present in the writings of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. This theory proposes that time does not progress linearly toward a distinct conclusion, but instead that moments are arranged in a circle, ensuring the inevitable revisit of original circumstances. This proposal, in the opinion of Aristotle, “thus secures continuity and identity of composition” (Mahdi 231). Every episode in history is preceded and followed by another and these points are connected by “the ‘foundations,’ the underlying structures of civilizations” (Braudel 28).

The notion of the cyclical evolution of time is present in several passages in the accounts of Aristotle. He defines the stages of development as investigation, accomplishment, and finally defeat and loss. He further asserts that the search for “our ancestors in the remotest ages” is based upon two distinct forms of faintly remembered tradition. The first is the mythical form, the “ancient relic of once perfected philosophy,” that divinely expresses truth. The second form is the remains of formerly faultless political and legal expertise (Mahdi 232).

Aristocles, popularly known as Plato, had an even more profound impact on the idea of recurring and repeated historical trends. In the *Republic*, by way of dialogue between Socrates and his brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, outlines the elements of the ideal state and the characteristics of the model ruler. No sooner does he propose this political utopia, based on the domination of the ignorant and unjust by the moral and wise, than he offers the reasons for its eventual demise. The internal character of individuals, he states, mirrors that of the society and that “each of us has within himself the same parts and characteristics of the city” (Plato 100). The tripart mind, composed of the rational, desirous, and passionate elements, is represented within the community in the contending ideals of values of wisdom, courage, and self-discipline. The balance of these components is the basis of morality and justice, yet it is easily disturbed when one part fails to fulfill its function. Plato

proposes that the perfect individual, and thus utopian state is not sustainable, deteriorating, forming myriad classifications of governments, spanning from oligarchy, to democracy, to tyranny. This ascension to political perfection and resultant decline is characteristic of the cyclical view of history.

In another prominent work, *On Philosophy*, Plato defines “sophia” as “the movement from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge” (Mahdi 232). He also proposes five phases of wisdom in the cycle of the developed civilization. The first is knowledge derived from the necessary development of devices when met with a lack of resources and means of survival. The second is the creation of arts, things of “beauty and elegance” The advancement of politics and law is considered the third stage of wisdom. The fourth is understanding of the elements and nature, labeled “natural science.” The highest form of wisdom is the comprehension of “things divine, super-mundane and completely unchangeable” (Mahdi 233).

These categories of wisdom are arranged clockwise in the circle of history, indicating that the perfection of one aspect of knowledge leads to the successive stage. Movement within this cycle is dependent upon two factors. The first is man’s concern for his own well-being and the satisfaction of his desires and requirements. Aristotle believed that “necessity itself may be supposed to have been the mother of all indispensable inventions” (Mahdi 234). The second condition for continuous, progressive movement is the conception of divinity and god. Once phase five has been completed and the highest wisdom achieved, history is returned to its origin and the cycle begins anew. “Necessity, human nature, the experience of the soul, and the phenomena of the heavens give every cycle a definitive beginning, direction, and end- which is philosophy” (Mahdi 234).

The thirteenth century Islamic philosopher, al-Farabi sustained the tradition of inquiry into the idea of a cyclical progression of society. His theories are heavily based upon the opinions of his predecessors, however there are several deviating and novel ideas present in his teachings. Al-Farabi maintains the five successive levels of wisdom developed initially by Plato, but he believes that the ascent toward the divine truth is propelled

by the “refinement of the methods of investigation- from the poetic to rhetoric, sophistry, dialectic, and demonstration” (Mahdi 236). He was not convinced that the accomplishment of step five equated finality, instead proposing that the end could be prevented or delayed. This could be achieved only through the perfect balance of religion, philosophy, and political authority.

The rise and decline of the early, unified Islamic society can be rationalized in these terms. In a relatively short span of time, the underdeveloped, divided territory of Arabia, dominated by countless autonomous clans and tribes, was transformed into a centralized, cohesive, and highly bureaucratic Islamic empire. The political and religious aims of its leaders were closely allied and led to the creation of a politically unified Muslim community, known as the “ulama.” While the revolutionary social and political basis for the spread of Islam had initially combined the various tribes into one entity, later disagreements led to an unstable relationship between the spheres of power and spiritual belief. The result was the fragmentation of the community into opposing sects, which, along with external pressures, led to the complete collapse of the ‘Abbasid Empire and the concept of an amalgamated Islamic society.

Prior to the genesis of Islam, Arabia was pastoral, politically fragmented, and largely pagan. The neighboring urban, monotheistic, and unified Byzantine and Sassanian empires influenced the region. “Arabs in the fertile crescent region shared political forms, religious beliefs, economic connections, and physical space with the societies around them” (Lapidus 10). However, the vast Arabian territory was not fully under the auspices of either body in terms of culture or authoritative control. It instead maintained its own distinct identity and sustained a unique, albeit rudimentary legal and political system.

Power and authority were based on tribal affiliation and common ancestry. Although these clans had no codified system of law, they were bound by popularly accepted rules that evolved alongside the tribe in respect to spirit and values. “The sole basis of law lay in its recognition as established customary practice” (Coulson 9). However,

there was no establishment responsible for the enforcement of these unspoken laws. Instead, punishment of the criminal lay in the hands of the individual who suffered the injustice and inter-tribal clashes were solved violently. This pervading disorder was eliminated with the coming of a new faith based on regulations, ethic, and notions of an urbane community.

The divine revelations of the prophet Muhammad led to the birth of a revolutionary religious, social, and political movement. Spirituality and social consciousness were intertwined at the outset, a major factor in the formation of Islamic society. As a result of the socio-political origins of Islam, many of the first converts were “those people most dissatisfied with the changing moral and social climate of Mecca” (Lapidus 21). Dissatisfied with the status quo, the poor, migrants, and members of weak clans, turned to Islam in hope of a better life. Indeed, “Muhammad’s preaching was... an implicit challenge to the existing institutions of society” (21). Religious, political, social, and economic thought were synthesized, creating a complex system of belief that attacked the society in its entirety and established a cohesive Muslim political unit, in which common religious beliefs were stronger than the bonds of blood relation.

The unification of the preexisting small tribal units led to the creation of a vast Islamic empire and “large-scale Arabian federation” (Lapidus 28). The challenges of managing this immense territory and the diverse people in it were mammoth. The conquests led to the control of areas formerly governed by the Sassanian and Byzantine empires, as well as regions dominated by undeveloped societies, such as the Arab Bedouins and the Berbers of Northern Africa. The presence of myriad races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions necessitated the centralization of control and the formation of the Caliphate, the political and religious successor to the prophet.

Due to the enormity of the empire, diversity, and the fact that “cultural unity did not destroy clear and lively regional characteristics,” the Caliphate was forced to assert strict control over the domain (Braudel 78). The imperial powers quieted the underlying tension between the old and new arrangements by

tightening the grip on the community. The Umayyad dynasty reasserted control through the movement of the capital to Damascus, resumed conquests, and the “major revision of rules and principles of taxation for the sake of greater uniformity and equality,” requiring all landowners to pay the tax regardless of class (Lapidus 50). The ‘Abbasid dynasty followed suit, relocating the capital to Baghdad, abolishment of the caste supremacy, and the formation of Arabic as a *lingua franca*. Although it was necessary for the governing bodies to employ such tactics of centralization during this age, the population of Arabia was relatively unified in respect to religious harmony, cultural synthesis, and political solidarity. In addition, the institution of the Caliphate was highly developed and influential.

The organization of the political foundations of Islam during this period was accompanied by equally significant advancements in the legal sphere. The basis for Islamic law is the holy Quran, a religious text that is dominated by legal and ethical thought. The five pillars, ritual prayer, almsgiving, pilgrimage, the fast of Ramadan, and the belief of the unity of god and the prophethood of Muhammad, were the basis of Islamic religious law. While the Quran touched on many legal subjects, it often did not have solutions to general concerns or supply a simple, straightforward code of law. Instead, the evolution of law was hindered by textual ambiguity and omission. Therefore, the “status quo [was] often tacitly ratified unless it [was] expressly emended” (Coulson 19). This allowed room for extremely varied systems among the diverse territories and personal interpretation. This uncertainty and flexibility, coupled with the infiltration of foreign legal practice, led to widespread disagreement, the rise of sects, and the breakdown of the unity and order, which the religion of Islam had instilled in the region.

The single most significant internal factor for the decline of the unified Islamic empire was the division of Muslims into legal schools and distinct political groups. “Disputes concerning the right of succession to leadership produced a period of civil war, a series of revolts, and the

formation of political factions hostile to the central power” (Coulson 21). Following the assassination of Uthman, the Muslim community divided into two separate political groups as a result of disagreement on succession. The Sunnis supported Ali as the rightful ruler, the Sunni accepted Mu’awiya, and the Kharijis demonstrated hostility towards both candidates. The deviation over the rightful ruler evolved into division concerning the nature of political authority in broad terms. The Sunni viewed the Medinan, Umayyad, and ‘Abbasid caliphs as rightful. The Shi’a “maintained that leadership was a matter of divine right, the ruler deriving his authority from the hereditary transmission of divine inspiration” (Coulson 104). The Kharijis believed that the ruler ought to be elected by the community. These sects were further divided into specific legal schools, such as the Sunni schools of Hanifi, Maliki, Hanbali, and Shafi’i and the Zaydite, Isma’ilite and Imamite branches of the Shi’a sect.

These lasting differences in political beliefs have since their formation divided the “ulama,” preventing collective, pan-Islamic political movements. The rise and fall of the ordered, unified Islamic empire rapidly took place in the first three centuries of the faith’s existence. The Muslims had attained the five levels of wisdom: indispensable affairs, literary and visual art, politics, natural science, and religion, the highest truth. In order for society to stagnate at the highest stage of truth and development, the required balance and of philosophy, religion, and politics was necessary. Al-Farabi’s hope the civilization could remain the height of the cycle, instead of plunging into the depths of disorder, is reminiscent of Plato’s theory of the tripart mind, in which a balance between the mental elements was the foundation of justice. In order for the Islamic society to have maintained its status at the end of the cycle of time, it was imperative that the balance between these components be sustained. However, this was not the case. The fragmentation of the Muslim community as a result of concerns of power shifted the balance of power into the domain of the political arts.

Therefore, the political basis of the religion of Islam can be considered both a centripetal and centrifugal force. The intrinsic connection between religion and the concepts of unity, order, and authority, which had initially transformed the

disordered, primitive, underdeveloped Arabian territory into an ordered, urbanized empire, later led to the division of the community over issues of succession and leadership. While some form of separation of the spiritual and political spheres was accomplished, secularization in the Western sense never was attempted in this age. Initially, politics was thought to be only a part of the “larger quest for religious salvation” (Lapidus 153), and government was perceived as the “fulfillment of cosmic and divine purposes” (188). However, greed and worldly pursuits corrupted this Islamic view of the relationship between politics and religion and led to the decline of the unified Muslim society and the return to the point of origin in the cycle of history.

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