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# Islam at the Dawn of the New Christian Millennium

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr

The year two thousand is in itself not of any vital millennial or eschatological significance for Islam as it is for Christianity, or at least for many Christians, and it does not mean an automatic beginning of a new era for Muslims as even many secularists in the West, who no longer accept Christian millennial ideas, envisage. As far as eschatological expectations are concerned, Muslims expect the coming of the Mahdī, who will then prepare for the second coming of Christ (and not the return of Christ directly, although like traditional Christians they also expect his return). Some Muslims, in fact, point to an enigmatic saying (*ḥādīth*) of the Prophet of Islam which asserts, “The life of my community shall be one and a half days” and interpret it to mean one thousand five hundred years on the basis of the Quranic verse that a day with the Lord is like a thousand years. Also, Mahdīism and the expectation of the fairly imminent appearance of the Mahdī is widespread in many circles in the Islamic world today and is of great significance. In this discourse, I shall use the number 2000, associated with the birth of Christ, more in an emblematic fashion as far as the Islamic world is concerned and discuss the various aspects of the faith, practice, teachings, intellectual life, and civilization of Islam as we enter what for both the Christian and the secular West is the beginning of both a new century and a new millennium.

First, it must be noted that the element of faith (*īmān*) in Islam and the practice of its tenets remains very strong among the vast majority of Muslims and they have become strengthened rather than weakened in the last decades of the twentieth century among the modernized classes and also among people such as the Palestinians, Bosnians, Chechnians, and Kosovars, who have suffered great tragedies during

these years. One usually counts the followers of various religions quantitatively; for example, there are some fifty million Christians in France and fifty-five million Muslims in Egypt. But such accounts veil the question of the degree of attachment to one's faith. It is enough to visit a major Cairo mosque, such as Sayyidunā Ḥusayn's, and a major church in Paris, such as St. Sulpice, to observe the difference involved at this point in history. This is not to say that there are not numerous devout Christians outside of Europe and many in Europe itself. Rather, this difference is mentioned so that those acquainted only with the situation of Christianity and Judaism in Western secular societies do not judge the place and role of Islam in the Islamic world in the same manner. The presence of faith and the following of religious prescriptions, especially the acts of worship (*'ibādāt*) in Islam (which should be compared more to the practice of Christianity in the West in pre-modern days rather than today), are bound to continue. There is no sign that, in the near future at least, the forces of secularism will be able to affect Muslim faith and worship in the same ways that they affected the faith and practice of Christianity in Europe during the past few centuries and especially in recent times. This having been said, it is also necessary to assert that the quality and depth of faith has diminished and its vision narrowed among many Muslims. The light of Truth, especially, has become more difficult to find and paths leading to its attainment less accessible than before, in accordance with the predictions of the Quran concerning the latter days.

Faith in Islam has remained strong and most likely will continue to be so into the foreseeable future for most Muslims. However, Islamic civilization, which was created on the basis of the Quranic revelation and through integration of pre-existing elements in accord with the Islamic view (helping to create a totally Islamic ambiance, both material and intellectual), began to be seriously threatened from the nineteenth century onward with the spread of colonialism and modernism in the Islamic world. Since Islam is a total way of life, the partial destruction of its civilization, as observed in the domains of education, culture, art and architecture, and so on, has had an impact on the all-encompassing character of the religion and the degree of attachment to its all-embracing tenets and must, therefore, also be considered in any projection that one makes about Islam as a religion in the narrower sense of the term. Interestingly enough, while the presence of secularism and modernism upon the Islamic world have increased rather than decreased during the past half century along with the nominal inde-

pendence of Muslim countries (and despite further devastation of the traditional living space of Muslims), there is now also observable an attempt to revive Islamic civilization itself. The current call for the dialogue of civilizations, which came originally from Iran and has been adopted as a theme of the United Nations for the year 2001, is itself a sign of the Muslims' desire to preserve their distinct civilization despite the numerous challenges which such an undertaking faces in its encounter with forces of much greater worldly strength. To ponder the future of Islam, it is therefore necessary not only to deal with the religion but also to delve into civilizational factors which are directly related to the faith as well as into the challenges that Islam faces as both a religion and a world civilization spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific and with an ever more significant presence as a religion in Europe and America.

## **II. Islamic Responses to Existing Challenges**

### **A. Colonialism and Secularism**

To understand the present state of Islam and, hence, its most likely immediate future, it must be remembered that Islam does not function within the same politico-social matrix as Christianity in the West. In the Occident, from the end of the Middle Ages onward, Christianity became ever more marginalized from the domain of public life and also from the arena of intellectual activity by forces which were born and nourished from within the Christian European society of the day and not as a result of external domination. In contrast, Islamic countries, with few exceptions, were dominated directly or indirectly by external colonial powers which, even after their departure, left behind a political class that, although native, possessed a mental perspective akin to the worldview of the West and distinct from the prevailing beliefs and *Weltanschauung* of the vast majority of those over whom they ruled in the name of independence and nationalism. Nor has this situation changed in most places even today. Islam is challenged in many parts of the Islamic world not only from the outside but also by the so-called "ruling elite," which relies upon the power of the West and could not survive for long without its support. Obviously, this situation poses a major challenge for Islam, which cannot accept the privatization and subjectivization of religion and does not enjoy the

freedom to respond creatively on the basis of its own nature and genius to the problems that the modern world poses for it.

In this context, the question of law is particularly significant. As is well known, Islam possesses a Sacred Law (*al-Shari'ah*) which is as central to it as theology is to Christianity. This Law has its roots in the Quran and the wonts (*sunnah*) of the Prophet. It is immutable in its principles and yet a growing reality, like a tree whose roots are firmly sunk in the earth while its branches grow from season to season. For the traditional Muslim, the *Shari'ah* represents the concrete embodiment of the Divine Will and to practice Islam means to follow the *Shari'ah*. However, in most Islamic countries during the nineteenth century, the *Shari'ah* was set aside in favor of various European codes by either the colonial powers or modernized Muslims themselves influenced by Western ideas of secular law based on premises very different from the Islamic conception which sees God as the ultimate Lawgiver (*al-Shāri'*)—a view which would be easily understood and, in fact, confirmed by Orthodox Jews and, in the realm of moral laws, by Christians, as well. But for Muslims, the *Shari'ah* concerns not only moral laws but also everyday laws governing human society.

The outward political independence of Muslim countries after the Second World War caused the majority of people to expect a return to the practice of the *Shari'ah*. When this did not happen and the secular laws promulgated by the modernists failed in many ways, a battle set in within the Islamic world itself. One sees this tension between “ruling elites,” which support a secular understanding of law and favor economic and political institutions based on European models, and the majority of Muslims for whom legitimate laws and legal institutions mean essentially the *Shari'ah* and its complements (which jurists had accepted as *qānūn* over the centuries and for which *Shari'ite* legitimacy had been established). Sometimes this tension turns to riots and suppressions and sometimes into open revolt and confrontation, as we have seen in Egypt and Algeria during the past decade.

This tension, which is a concrete and widespread aspect of the more general confrontation between traditional Islam and modernity, has led in recent decades to activist movements which often employ Western political ideologies and methods and yet oppose the West and which have been dubbed “fundamentalism,” a most unfortunate term that has nevertheless become prevalent. As a result, we now have in the Islamic world not only traditionalists and modernists, but in reality traditionalists, “fundamentalists,” and modernists, rarely with clearly

defined boundaries between them. As long as the pressure of modernism and now also post-modernism upon the Islamic world continues and this tension is not resolved within Islamic societies, confrontations to which the world has been witness in recent years will continue. It is important to mention, however, that there is no equivalence, numerically and qualitatively speaking, between followers of traditional Islam and members of the other two groups that vie with each other for power. In terms of governance, all the contemporary states in the Islamic world, even those that possess a traditional structure, are controlled by either the modernists or by so-called fundamentalists, but not by traditional Islam which, however, remains strong and manifests its influence within institutions controlled by other groups and is likely to continue to do so in the near future while its power and influence increases intellectually and spiritually, especially among the more modern educated classes.

The Islamic world is not only challenged by secular laws left over from the colonial period but also by a secularized view of the world and forms of knowledge which were brought through domination by the modern secularized West. These forms of knowledge have spread their influence since the end of the colonial era. The worldview that grew out of the Renaissance and the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution in the West divorced knowledge of the natural world from theology. This process was followed gradually in other disciplines reaching into the humanities and what has come to be known as the social sciences, which were infected by scientism and positivism since their very inception in the nineteenth century and were even conceived under the influence of these philosophies. The result for the West and, consequently, for segments of Islamic society influenced by modern Western thought was, on the one hand, the dominance of the quantitative and rationalistic view of the world as consisting of dead matter in motion in which life and consciousness were but accidents and in which God's Will could not be operative, and, on the other hand, the spread of a whole educational system based on a secularized view of knowledge which, interestingly enough, was also propagated by Christian missionaries in the Islamic world who usually preferred a secularized Muslim to a devout one as a possible subject for conversion.

Traditional Islam sees the cosmos as reflections of the Divine Names and Qualities and their interactions. For example, the universe reflects the Divine Name *al-Ḥayy* (the Living) and is therefore alive. The same

holds true for the other Names. Life and consciousness are not accidents in an otherwise dead cosmos. Rather, they are manifestations of realities that are part and parcel of God's creation. Furthermore, God is not only the creator of the world but also its sustainer and ruler. For Islam, He cannot under any condition be reduced to the role of the "clockmaker," favored by so many proponents of classical modern science. As for education, Islam has refused throughout its history to separate knowledge from the sacred and the category of "secular science" is alien to its unitary view of knowledge. The traditional Islamic schools and universities (*madrāsahs*) reflect this view of knowledge in their curriculum, philosophy of education, content of courses, and so on.

Needless to say, this major challenge posed to the traditional Islamic view of the world and of knowledge in general caused diverse and complicated reactions. These issues continue to loom very large on the horizon of Islamic intellectual life. In the Muslim world today, governments of all political persuasions, from the left to the right and from secularist to so-called Islamic, as well as many religious scholars who are not aware of the real nature of modern science (which most of them equate blindly with the Quranic concept of *'ilm* or *scientia* that is so highly extolled in the Sacred Text), continue to praise without reservation modern Western science. The main reason is that they see the power that this science bestows upon its possessors without which many feel that the Islamic world cannot free itself from the political and economic, not to speak of military, domination by the West.

And yet, during the past few decades, voices have arisen in the Islamic world about the danger of a secularized science for the Islamic worldview and for the Islamic religion itself, especially since Islam is a religion based upon the knowledge of the nature of reality which ultimately issues from and returns to Reality (*al-Ḥaqīqah*) or God Himself, one of whose names is *al-Ḥaqq* or Truth/Reality. Different views continue to be debated as to what is "Islamic science" and whether the Islamic world should develop its own Islamic science or simply adopt modern secularized science. There have been no responses to this question that have been universally accepted by all the intellectual elements involved in such debates. But at least since we began to discuss these matters forty years ago and challenged the prevalent views of many Muslim thinkers, both modern and traditional, who for different reasons were preaching the blind acceptance of modern science, the intellectual scene in the Islamic world has changed a great deal and

there are now many voices concerned with the deeper theological and spiritual questions issuing from the confrontation of Islamic religion and modern science. As we enter the new Christian millennium, this issue is bound to remain central to Islamic religious and theological thought. Furthermore, it is also likely that the interreligious dialogue, especially between Islam and Christianity which has been taking place during the past decades, will spread more and more into the domain of the relation between religion and science.

As for education and the various disciplines of knowledge taught in schools, the colonial experience left most Islamic countries with two educational systems, one Islamic and the other Western, which was either brought by foreigners, most of whom were missionaries, or established by modernized Western-oriented Muslim "elites" on the model of Western institutions of learning. These two types of institutions possess completely different philosophies of education. As a result, in most Islamic countries, especially those which first confronted modernism and which had also been major intellectual centers of the Islamic world (such as Egypt, Turkey, Persia, and Muslim India), a deep chasm began to appear in society between two educated classes with the same ethnic background, religion, language, etc., but unable to understand each other because they interpreted the world through two different prisms. Strangely enough, with the political independence of Muslim countries, this dichotomy and breach only widened and also spread geographically to societies such as Saudi Arabia, the Yemen, Oman, Afghanistan, the Sudan and many others which had mostly functioned before with only their traditional educational system.

The question of integrating Western modes of learning into the Islamic perspective and creating a single educational system — which would be Islamic and yet able to expand to include modern disciplines — began to occupy the minds of many Muslim intellectuals from the fifties and sixties onward and led to the first world conference on Islamic education, held in Mecca in 1977. This effort led to the establishment of several Islamic universities, the preparation of integrated curricula, and the movement called the "Islamization of knowledge." Although these efforts have not been completely satisfactory, they remain a major Islamic intellectual concern. How to make educational institutions imported from the West more Islamic or expand existing traditional *madrasahs* to embrace modern disciplines is being debated across the Islamic world and many different solutions have been pro-



posed and implemented. These range from the integration of the oldest of all Islamic traditional *madrasahs*, the Qarawiyyīn in Morocco, as the Faculty of Theology within the modern University of Rabat; to the expansion to include schools of medicine and engineering in the greatest center of Sunni learning, al-Azhar in Cairo; to the creation of creative interaction in Persia between the traditional *madrasahs* of Qom, Mashhad, etc. (also called *hawzah*) and Western style universities. None of these attempts has as yet been totally successful. But the effort is underway and is bound to continue in future years as a central pre-occupation of Islamic thought. The great impact of this issue and how it is resolved within Islam and Islamic society can hardly be exaggerated.

## **B. The Advent of Modern Technology**

Closely related to both the issues of science and education is that of modern technology which continues to penetrate to an ever greater degree into the Islamic world, as elsewhere, supported as it is by governments for both internal and external reasons. In an earlier period, the Islamic world did have its Luddites, but in recent decades few obstacles have been placed before the rapid spread of Western technology and few Muslim thinkers have bothered to delve into the religious and spiritual implications of the use of the modern machine on a vast scale. In fact, many of the more recent religious leaders, even those who support traditional views theologically, have championed the wholesale adoption of Western technology with as great a rapidity as possible and this holds true whether one is speaking of Saudi Arabia with its traditional monarchy or Persia with its Islamic revolutionary government. In Persia, where in such cities as Qom, the religious center of the country, the traditional scholars (*'ulama'*) remained until recently aloof from modern modes of life, matters have changed to such a degree that now most religious students in Qom have mastery of the computer. Some visitors have reported that the libraries of Qom are more "advanced" than the Vatican library in making their holdings available on the Internet.

This attitude of indifference to the religious, moral, and spiritual consequences of modern technology in the Islamic world is now, however, beginning to change for two reasons: problems issuing from modern genetic engineering (along with related activities) and the environmental crisis, both of which are directly caused by the imple-

mentation of modern technology. The intrusion of modern medicine into the very fabric of human life and the penetration of genetic engineering into the inner structure of living things have caused much alarm not only among many Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and followers of other religions, but also in many Islamic circles, as have the ethical implications of organ transplants and cloning. As for the environment, the rapid deterioration of the natural environment globally has caused many Muslims, who thought until recently that this was simply a Western problem, to turn reluctantly to the issue of Islam's attitudes and teachings about the environment. There is no doubt that in coming years both of these issues, which are in fact inter-related on many levels, will become more and more central to Islam on both a theoretical and a practical level (as they have also become for Christianity). Islam has to reformulate, in terms that are clearly understood by the present generation, its philosophy or, rather, theology and metaphysics of nature, to which so many verses of the Quran are devoted. It must also clarify its ethical teachings concerning the non-human world and expand the teachings of the *Shari'ah* upon foundations already contained therein to embrace a full-fledged environmental ethics based upon the Islamic religion and not simply a rationalistic philosophy which would create an ethics having no efficacy among the vast majority of Muslims. Such efforts will also be of great importance in the future for Islamic intellectual life as well as for the daily life of the Islamic community.

Modern Western technology has brought with it not only forms of production that alienate man from his work and bestow power to its owners, allowing them to dominate to an ever greater degree those not in possession of new technologies, but it has also made possible a massive flow of information and hitherto unimaginable possibilities of communication on a mass scale associated with modern forms of printing, telephone, radio, cinema, television, and now the Internet. While these means have made possible a small flow of ideas and information from the Islamic world and other non-Western cultures and civilizations to the West, the direction of the flow remains almost completely in the other direction with the result that non-Western cultures are bombarded as never before by alien ideas, images, and lifestyles. The consequences of this phenomenon for the Islamic world are considerable and need to be analyzed on several levels and in a number of different domains.

### C. Popular Culture and Lifestyle

On the most palpable level, there is the ever-increasing bombardment of Islamic society, and especially its youth, with the products of Western, and especially American, pop culture and the hedonistic aspects of Western life. The new media do not emphasize the presentation of the music of Virgil Thompson or Leonard Bernstein but of rock and roll (one should not forget the lewd meaning of the term *rock* when it was first used in this context), not classical American ballet but the most sexually suggestive dances performed by the young in ambiances hardly conducive to the cultivation of religious discipline and the sobriety that Islam emphasizes as a central characteristic of the religious life. Quantitatively speaking, more than Marx, Heidegger, Russell, and Sartre, it is the Michael Jacksons and Madonnas who pose a challenge to Islamic society as a whole as they are so attractive to a large number of the young, especially in bigger cities. The idea of rebellion by the young and even the specific American notion of “teenager,” which is a specific term found only in American English and not in other languages — certainly not Islamic ones — as well as practices involving drinking, use of drugs, sexual promiscuity, etc., are all anathema to Islam’s teachings about society in which obedience to God’s laws, the significance of the family, respect for elders and especially parents, and abstention from alcohol and sexual activity outside of marriage are strongly emphasized. Like Christianity and Judaism in the West, which spend much of their energy confronting such issues, Islam is already forced to face such problems on a smaller scale and is bound to do so on a greater scale in the future. Many have said that the major challenge of the West to the Islamic world comes not so much from philosophy and ideology as from new lifestyles, especially as they concern the young. Without in any case diminishing the importance of the intellectual and philosophical elements, I also wish to emphasize how important the question of lifestyle is. Already, the emulation of Western dress and adoption of many aspects of Western lifestyle by earlier generations of modernized Muslims have caused much tension and contention within the Islamic world. In the future, this tension is certain to increase as new technologies of communication make the impact of modern and post-modern Western culture much more pervasive and intrusive and as there are ever-stronger Islamic reactions.

There is another, more substantial, point involved in this question of lifestyle: the relation between man and woman. Islam is based on a doctrine about the nature of reality and of God, who is the ultimately Real. Spiritual perfection can be attained by living according to the Divine Norm. But Islam is also a community, an *ummah*. The laws of the *Shari'ah* were promulgated with the *ummah* in view. The new wave of ideas concerning the role of women that has been cultivated in the West, called feminism, challenges many aspects of the Islamic understanding of the relation between man and woman, the family, and the society at large. Although there are different strands of feminism in the West, most of them are secularist and seek to change even the language of the Bible and, in any case, base themselves on the idea of a quantitative equality between men and women in all realms. In contrast, for Islam, while men and women are equal as immortal beings before God, they have been created in a complementary fashion like the *yin* and *yang* of Far Eastern doctrines. The question of working outside of the home, participation in economic and political life, etc., are all secondary to the basic metaphysical and theological issues involved.

Western feminism is not only concerned with the question of the status of women in the West but also considers itself to have a global mission like the Christian missionaries and propagators of so many other ideas and ideologies that have come out of the West from Marxism to liberal democracy. The attempt of Western feminism to penetrate aggressively to the degree possible into the Islamic world by both internal and external means has spawned many local movements in various Islamic countries ranging from emulation of the most secular strands of Western feminism (that is particularly opposed to Islam for many complicated reasons) to what is now called Islamic feminism. In this domain, as in so many others, the Islamic world is faced with ideas and agendas that are imposed upon it from the outside, very much in contrast to the West itself. In any case, on the social level, this question is one of the most important facing the Islamic world today. Many different solutions have been proposed and implemented, as one can see in differences in the role now being played on the social level by women in Nigeria, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and Indonesia, just to give examples of several major Islamic countries. There is little doubt that Islam as a religion will continue to be involved in the coming decades with the question of the role, rights, and duties of women in its own realm while it studies, not as a source

of emulation but as an ongoing social experiment, what is occurring in the West and especially America — which keep experimenting with different possibilities, many of which have hardly had a positive outcome as far as marriage and divorce, the rearing of children by both parents, and even “fulfillment,” about which so much has been said, are concerned.

#### D. The Political Realm

There are many other zones in which Western ideas have forced or acted as catalysts for responses within the Islamic world. Since Islam is not only a private religion but is also concerned with public life, a particularly important domain in which there is a great deal of turmoil at this juncture of Islamic history is the political. A combination of complicated factors related to the colonial experience, the imposition of foreign forms and ideas of government, nationalism issuing from the French Revolution, reassertion of Islamic values, tension between modernized and traditional classes within Islamic society and, of course, global *Realpolitik* and the continuous political and economic domination by the West have made it very difficult for many parts of the Islamic world to find a satisfactory political *modus vivendi*. This whole issue has been made more complicated by the fact that Islam has always held the unity of the *ummah* as an ideal. The unity of the Islamic world remains a cherished goal despite the existence of present forms of nationalism. It might, of course, be said that this issue is a political and not religious question, but such an interpretation is a Western and not an Islamic one. For Islam, religion is never separated from the political domain in the sense of “giving unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” and will not be so in the future. The question, therefore, is not how to emulate the American idea of the separation of church and state, but how will the state reflect Islam and Islamic values? At least that is the case for most Islamic countries, there being a few exceptions, such as Turkey. But even there, history will tell whether an early twentieth-century idea, based upon European definitions of secularism now dominant among the ruling classes in that country, will continue to survive in this new century at a time when even in America religion increasingly challenges the monopoly of secularism in the public domain.

With the traditional political institutions, especially the caliphate and the sultanate described by classical Islamic thinkers, destroyed in

most Islamic lands, the question of the form of government, the source of its legitimacy, the relation between its authority and that of the *Shari'ah* as interpreted by the traditional scholars ('*ulamā'*), and the place for the voice of the people and the '*ulamā'*' loom large on the horizon. There is little doubt that in this new century of the Christian calendar much of the energy and attention of Islamic thinkers will be devoted to these issues and the means to achieve the goal of greater political unity among Muslim peoples and nations. Moreover, the different attempts made during this century to define what is an Islamic state — from the traditional models of Morocco and Saudi Arabia to three different understandings of the Islamic state in the neighboring countries of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan — will surely continue. There will be a fluid and unstable situation in many lands, pitting so-called fundamentalists against Western-supported modernists and each one against the traditionalists and even, in some cases, modernists against Western-supported traditional institutions with the color of an earlier form of so-called fundamentalism, as seen in Saudi Arabia.

In many Muslim countries, Islamic political thought is now also much concerned with the question of freedom and its meaning in an Islamic context, with democracy and participation of the people in the political process, and with many other issues for which the West has often been a catalyst (although for economic and political reasons of self-interest the West has not been particularly anxious to support those who speak of Islamic democracy within the Islamic world, at least not in countries whose governments are favorable to the West). Such concerns also, of course, include the issue of human rights, which is defended in the West for the most part on a secular basis. In the Islamic world, there are those who claim that this issue is simply a part of the arsenal of Western policy to be used when convenient. Others are trying to define human rights from the point of view of Islam and in light of human responsibility before God, which always preceded human rights in classical Islamic thought. Islam teaches that God gave human beings social rights as well as certain rights over the world of nature in light of man's responsibility before God concerning himself, human society, and God's creation. Religious thinking along those lines is bound to continue and there is likely to be much cooperation between Muslim thinkers and those in the West and elsewhere who, speak of the necessity of a global declaration of human responsibility,

before overemphasis of only *human* rights puts an end to human life on earth.

### **E. Formulation and Application of Islamic Economics**

As with politics, so with economics. Islamic thought has had to concern itself with issues posed for it by modern economic systems based upon philosophies alien to the ethos of Islam. In response to economic theories and practices of both capitalism and socialism, Islamic thinkers have dealt extensively in recent decades with what has come to be known as Islamic economics. This type of intellectual activity as well as applications to concrete situations are not only of concern to economics but also to Islam itself as a religion as Muslims see it. In fact, Islam has never separated economics from ethics and what is called economics today has always been envisaged and practiced in the Islamic world in the context of the *Sharī'ah*. Furthermore, Islamic thought cannot remain impervious to many current economic theories and practices such as the charging of interest and consumerism. With increasing pressure to create a global economy, the Islamic world will experience external and internal pressure to conform even more than before to foreign economic ideas and practices. But by token of the same fact, a significant part of Islamic intellectual effort will necessarily be concerned with Islamic economics, including the question of economic justice and the implementation of Islamic ideas in situations even more difficult than those found today.

## **III. Contemporary Islamic Theological Concerns**

### **A. General Theological Issues**

Having discussed the domains of concern to Islamic thought, it is necessary now to return to the heart of the religion itself as it confronts the future. As far as what Christianity would call dogmatic theology is concerned, Islam rests firmly rooted in the certainties of its traditional worldview. No matter how much Western Orientalists have tried to cast doubt about the celestial origin of the Quran, the Sacred Text remains the verbatim Word of God for all Muslims (the one or two voices to the contrary being irrelevant no matter how celebrated they might have become in the West). As for the *Ḥadīth*, historical challenges have been fully recognized and Islamic responses provided,

although debates continue on the basis of traditional Islamic criteria and only rarely within the matrix of Western historicism. Altogether as far as the nature of God, prophecy, revelation, angelology, and eschatology are concerned, Islam does not face the same crises that Western Christianity has encountered in modern times nor is this reality likely to change in the near future. Modern Western theological debates about the gender of God or whether He is immutable or changing, as claimed by process theologians, are alien to Islamic concerns. Furthermore, because of the still living reality of Islamic metaphysics, it is most likely that Islam will be able to continue to provide intellectual responses to the challenges of modernism in the form of historicism, rationalism, empiricism and the like, and not to surrender parts of its theological worldview to modernism, as has happened in many of the Western churches. When people talk about traditional and modern interpretations of Islam, they must understand that the debate does not involve so much the nature of God, eschatology, or the practice of the rites of the religion (as we see in the West in debates between more traditional and modern interpreters of religion), but rather interpretations and applications of the religion of Islam to the social and human domains.

It is necessary to add that since the encounter with modernism, many Muslim thinkers have tried, through different means, to create a new chapter in Islamic theology (*kalām*). This effort goes back to Muḥammad ‘Abduh and the late nineteenth century, although that early effort was quite limited and, for the most part, unsuccessful. This type of activity is bound to increase in the future especially as more Muslims educated in traditional *madrasahs* become acquainted more deeply with Western thought and the roots of prevalent Western ideas. In fact, the Islamic response to the challenges of modern and post-modern thought has deepened during the past few decades. The trend begun in several Islamic countries to teach what the Persians call *kalām-i jadīd*, or “new theology,” will undoubtedly continue and expand. This “new theology” is not, however, a break with traditional theologies as has happened in many churches in the West, but applications of Islamic principles to new challenges posed by modernism, ranging from Darwinism to Comptianism to Freudianism to logical positivism and, more recently, to deconstructionalism and the like.



## B. Relations between Sunnism and Shi'ism

A further theological question of importance marks a new chapter in Islamic religious thought. It is the re-examination of the relation between Sunnism and Shi'ism. These two branches of Islam have had polemics and sometimes conflicts with each other over the centuries. These polemics became intensified with the founding of the Shi'ite Safavid state in the sixteenth century, which faced the powerful Sunni Ottomans. The result was that religious and theological differences became entangled in political contentions and rivalries between the two empires. Furthermore, throughout the colonial period, full use was made of Sunni versus Shi'ite differences by British and other colonialist powers, in order to divide and rule.

In the nineteenth century, Wahhabism set itself strongly against Shi'ism with tragic consequences in Iraq and Arabia. But from the 1950's onward, a strong movement was begun in Egypt, in cooperation with Persia, to create peace and better mutual understanding between Sunnism and Shi'ism. Established in Cairo by the then-Shaykh al-Azhar Maḥmūd Shaltūt with the aid of a number of Shi'ite '*ulamā*,' the center was known as *dār al-taqrīb* and its function was similar to that of ecumenical organizations seeking to create better understanding among various Christian churches. From that date onward, the '*ulamā*' of both Sunnism and Shi'ism (excluding, of course, most Wahhābī/Salafī scholars) have been in favor of better mutual understanding and respect and have been closer to each other than perhaps at any other period of Islamic history.

During the last decades, however, the fire of hatred between the two major branches of Islam has been lit in many places for different political and ideological reasons as one sees in Iraq, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and especially Pakistan and India, where conflict between the two groups has reached unprecedented proportions. The situation has called for a renewal of the efforts of the *dār al-taqrīb* and many Islamic scholars are now devoting much time to rethinking the theological and religious differences between Sunnism and Shi'ism and to bringing about greater internal understanding within the Islamic world itself. This new theological and religious effort in the direction of greater internal dialogue and ecumenism will likely persist and occupy many Muslim thinkers in the future, complementing the dialogue with other religions.

### **C. The Continuity and Rejuvenation of Sufism**

Islam does not only possess a Law governing human society and embracing what is usually understood by religion today and a wealth of theological thought. It also possesses an inner, or esoteric, message, which came to be crystallized mostly in Sufism and which deals with the purification of man's inner being and the full realization of Unity (*al-tawhīd*). Early on, two forces in the Islamic world began to oppose Sufism and its vast influence upon all aspects of human society — modernism and that puritanical rationalism identified with the Wahhābī/Salafī movement. But far from dying out, Sufism has continued to flourish among traditional elements of society and, during the past few decades, to an ever-greater degree among Western educated classes. This trend is likely to persist as Sufism also continues to draw many people in the West to the inner teachings of Islam. Sufi metaphysics, cosmology, psychology, and spiritual methods as well as art (especially in the form of poetry and music) constitute the intellectual and spiritual heart of Islam and are bound to play an ever greater role in the life of those Muslims seeking responses to the philosophical and artistic challenges of the modern world and deeper religious meaning in a world that seems ever more chaotic.

The rising vitality of Islam as a faith also implies continuity in the creation of sacred art in this tradition, whether it be calligraphy, architecture, or Quranic psalmody. Each makes possible the experience of the sacred in the ambience of everyday life. Sufism has an inalienable link with traditional Islamic art, which has suffered much in many domains during the past century, especially as far as architecture is concerned. Therefore, the revival of interest in Sufism should have a salutary effect upon both the survival and the revival of various Islamic arts, a revival which began a few decades ago and which is seen today in many lands from Morocco to Persia to Indonesia. Despite the horrendous invasion of ugliness in the name of progress and modernism in many Islamic cities, the revival of Islamic art and architecture is certain to grow along with the revival of Sufism and the reformulation of its teachings in a contemporary and more easily accessible language.

The new interest in Sufism is also related to the need for the solution of another major challenge faced by Islam, namely, the diversity of religions or what is currently being called *religious pluralism*. Christian theology has been concerned with this issue for many decades and

numerous theologians and philosophers of religion, both Catholic and Protestant, have tried to create a “theology of religious pluralism” in a Christian context. The Quran is perhaps the most universalist of all sacred scriptures in the sense of asserting openly that religion begins with the origin of the human state itself, that God has revealed religion to all peoples, and that He has created diverse religions so that followers of various religions would vie with each other in piety and virtue. On the basis of these teachings, many scholars and theologians throughout Islamic history showed much interest in what has now come to be known as comparative religion or *Religionwissenschaft*. But it was most of all the Sufis, such as Ibn ‘Arabī and Rūmī, who expounded the meaning of this universality. And during this century, it was from the same Sufi tradition that those in the West, such as René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon who spoke of the unity of traditions and the “transcendent unity of religions,” drew in much of their inspiration. It remained for the latter and several other traditional authors to expound for today’s humanity the Quranic doctrine of the universality of revelation in its fullness.

#### **D. The Religious Significance of Religious Diversity**

The question of religious diversity is widely discussed in the Islamic world today and there is much interest in carrying out religious dialogue not only with Christians and Jews but also with Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Taoists, and others. Most likely this trend will continue and expand in the future, drawing a larger number of Muslim thinkers into circles of discussion and necessitating a more general appreciation of the classical Sufi and contemporary traditionalist metaphysics which alone can provide a matrix for the understanding of religious diversity without relativization and sacrifice of “the sense of the Absolute,” which lies at the heart of religion. One cannot imagine the future of Islamic intellectual activity without this strand of thought constituting one of its main elements.

### **IV. Islam and Post-Modernism**

In light of what has been said, it might be asked whether Islam and post-modernism can co-exist. If Islam is understood as a total way of life embracing the domains of action as well as thought, the external as well as the inner world of its adherents, then the answer to this ques-

tion is “no” in the same way that Islam as a totality cannot co-exist with modernism. Post-modernism opposes in many ways the theses of modernism but not in the direction of the reassertion of the reality of the Sacred and intellectual and spiritual certitude. On the contrary, it opposes all forms of certitude, all “absolutes,” all that is permanent and abiding. It seeks to deconstruct the sacred structures of religion and even sacred scripture itself. While modernism emphasized rationality and rationalism, post-modernism rejects even the knowledge gained by the use of man’s limited reason—not to speak of the intellect and revelation, which are the twin sources of ultimate knowledge in all traditions including Islam. For Islam to co-exist with such a worldview would mean accepting that which is totally opposed to all for which Islam stands—opposed to the acceptance of the Absolute and our total surrender to the revelation that descends from It. Coexistence is, in fact, itself problematic unless one speaks from the point of view of expediency. Coexistence means the existence of one reality beside another. In principle, that cannot be accepted if one of the realities is based on the negation of the Divine. The very ground upon which the other worldview stands substitutes for the Divine a radical secularist understanding of the nature of man and the world and the goal of human society. The Sacred demands of us all that we are. As Christ said, a house divided unto itself cannot stand.

On the plane of practicality and expediency, however, the matter must be seen in a different light. Islam can still exist and function in any ambiance that gives its followers the freedom to practice their religion at least inwardly and privately, if not in the general public arena. Such an ambiance could include one dominated by post-modernism, as one sees in many contemporary Western societies. In fact, the very relativization of values and cultural norms preached by post-modernism, which seeks to trivialize or destroy sacred traditions while superficially accepting certain of their tenets, allows at the same time a certain “space” to be created within which religions, whether they be Judaism, Christianity, or Islam or, for that matter, Hinduism and Buddhism, can be practiced to some extent. But, of course, such “spaces” are not allowed to cover the whole living space of the post-modern world and therefore conflicts are bound to arise in certain domains, as we see even in the case of Christianity and Judaism, which have existed in the West for two millennia.

Perhaps a more pertinent question would be to ask whether post-modernism itself is a stable or a transient reality and whether *it* can

survive before the light of sacred traditions in general and Islam in particular. One must never lose sight of the rapidly changing nature of post-modernism as well as the manifestations of modernism. Where are the philosophies and ideologies, such as structuralism and Marxism, which were so fashionable only two or three decades ago? What fads will parade as the latest and most important pattern of thought in the West a few decades from now? One thing is certain: philosophies rooted in the Immutable continue to attract the minds and souls of many long after "timely philosophies" have been relegated to oblivion. Islam is a religion based upon the nature of the Absolute and the primordial and immutable nature of man, beyond historical contingencies. Like other religions rooted in the Divine, it is destined to survive long after post-modernism ceases to attract certain Western minds and is relegated to a chapter in Western intellectual history.

Questions such as the relation of religion to politics, the nature of knowledge, the source of ethics, the relation of private ethics to public life, the rapport between religion and science (including the social and human sciences), and many other issues which are of concern to post-modern philosophers are also of great interest to Islamic thought. There is every possibility of dialogue and discourse on such subjects, and some have, in fact, already taken place. Through such discourse, Islamic thought will make a greater impact on the general intellectual and cultural discourse in the West and such discussions will also affect issues and subjects of religious thought in the Islamic world itself. But this does not mean coexistence on the intellectual and principal plane unless Islam gives up its claim to the truth and the possibility of its attainment (as have the typical post-modern thinkers) or unless post-modernism relinquishes its views and ceases to be post-modernism. As far as Islam is concerned, the possibility of the acceptance of the relative as the only meaningful category and the banning of the very category of truth from intellectual discourse is suicidal and most unlikely to be accepted.

On the practical level, however, living in the same *Lebensraum* with proponents of post-modernism has already occurred for the many Islamic communities living in the West. What is important to consider here, in thinking about the future, is not only how religion in general and Islam in particular can survive in a world dominated by modernism and post-modernism, but also how and whether the modern world itself can survive for long while clinging to all those ideas — such as secular humanism, rationalism, individualism, materialism,

and now, more and more, irrationalism—that have defined modernity and laid the basis for post-modernism, ideas which the traditional Islamic worldview continues to reject.

### **V. To Live Faithfully as a Muslim Today and Tomorrow**

For a Muslim, the meaning of living Islam faithfully today and tomorrow has not changed essentially from doing so yesterday and the day before because the relation between man and God transcends time. As Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī says in a famous poem:

There is a link beyond asking how, beyond all comparison,  
Between the Lord of man and the soul of man.

That link (*ittiṣāl*) is beyond all externalities, beyond all temporal and spatial exigencies. In whatever situation a Muslim finds himself or herself temporally or spatially, he or she can practice Islam faithfully by remaining aware of that inner link and by surrendering his or her will to that of the “Lord of man.” The more difficult question is how to remain faithfully a Muslim externally in a world that, in so many ways, denies the reality of the Sacred and the rights of God. Within the Islamic world, the problem is how to live according to the *Sharīʿah* and as part of the *ummah* in a world in which the homogeneity of the traditional ambience has been destroyed, where the Sacred Law is no longer the “law of the land,” where nationalism has segmented the unity of the *ummah*, where many economic practices are not in conformity with Islamic tenets, and where much of the urban setting no longer reflects the ethos of Islam. In such a situation, to live faithfully as a Muslim means, first of all, to live inwardly as a person of faith, to practice the sacred rites which Islam makes possible under all circumstances and without the aid of any ecclesiastical figures, since the priestly function is divided among all Muslims. It means to practice Islamic ethical teachings and, for those who have the possibility and ability, to follow the spiritual path of inner purification. And it means to seek to live in the larger society according to Islamic norms and practices and to encourage fellow Muslims to do so by exhortation and example. It also means to abide by the truths of Islam on the intellectual plane and to combat intellectually all that would destroy the vision of reality based upon Unity (*al-tawḥīd*). It means to live in prayer, to seek the truth and to search for and create the beautiful, for

beauty is inseparable from truth. All of this means that one must carry out continuous inner exertion (*jihād*) in the path of God. The Prophet called this the greater *jihād*. Performing the smaller *jihād*, which means outward struggle for the defense and protection of Islam, depends on complicated circumstances which are not the same for all Muslims and which must be discussed separately for each particular case.

The situation of Muslims living as a minority in the West, India, Burma, Russia, China, or any other country, is similar inwardly to Muslims living in *dār al-islām* or Abode of Islam itself. What is different is that Muslims living as a minority do not bear responsibility for the general norms and law of the society in which they live but they do bear the responsibility for living righteously as Muslims and protecting the possibility of living within their homes and communities as Muslims. Strangely enough, this latter task is now more difficult for Muslims living in such lands as China, Burma, and parts of India — countries where they have lived for many centuries and in some places for over a millennium — than in the West. This is paradoxical because, in older days, Europe was more virulently opposed to an Islamic presence on its soil than the Asian societies mentioned (as can be seen by the fate of Muslims in Spain after an eight-hundred-year presence). Today, however, the situation is reversed, if we exclude the incredible genocide of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo, to say nothing of the Russian brutalities in Chechnya. There are now sizeable Islamic communities in most European countries and Islam has become part of the mainstream religious scene in America. For those Muslims living in the West, the challenges of a secular and hedonistic culture are greater than in non-Western societies but there also exists the freedom to practice their religion, at least privately, especially in America where certain constraints seen in France and some other European countries are not to be found (although local problems continue to manifest themselves here and there). In these circumstances, the way to live faithfully as a Muslim is essentially to practice the faith individually and strengthen the local Islamic communities to the extent possible, without there being the burden of responsibility for society at large which living in an Islamic society places upon the shoulders of Muslims who are members of such a society. It is the duty of all minority Muslims who claim to practice their religion to remain steadfast in clinging to that inner “link,” in surrendering themselves to God’s Will, and in practicing Islamic ethics to the highest degree they are able. It also means to bear witness to the truths for which Islam stands and to con-

front, through intellectual dialogue and discourse, the errors which parade as norms today. In this task, they share much with Jews, Christians, and other religious groups, with all of whom Muslims have the duty to have a rapport of mutual respect and friendship. Such is the promulgation of the teachings of the Quran and *Ḥadīth* concerning the relation of Muslims to the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*), which means, in its most universal sense, those who accept the Oneness of the Divine Principle and follow a religion revealed by the One. Needless to say, Islamic teachings also emphasize that Muslims must exercise the same respect vis-à-vis religious communities living as minorities among them as they are expected to exercise when they themselves live as minorities.

## VI. Concluding Comments

When one looks upon the horizon into this new century and millennium of the Christian calendar and ponders upon Islam as a religion and way of life, one is led to make the following observations: The faith (*īmān*) of the vast majority of Muslims will become stronger, if not always in depth, and the tradition will remain a living reality in both its external and inward dimensions as Law and Way. The intellectual and spiritual traditions of Islam, whose expressions have been renewed and activities revived in the latter half of the twentieth century, are also bound to continue their process of rejuvenation and revival, especially among modern educated Muslims. These traditions will also be of ever-greater attraction to non-Muslims in quest of wisdom and the means for its attainment. Likewise, the revival of traditional Islamic art is certain to gather further momentum even in the face of the onslaught of secularist art and culture in the Islamic world. Moreover, globally, especially in America, Islam seems most likely to spread while the newly established Islamic communities in the West will have to guard their authenticity as they sink their roots in the new terrain.

At the same time, the crises alluded to in the intellectual, cultural, and social domains are likely to persist. As the Muslim intelligentsia, seriously grounded in the Islamic tradition, becomes more deeply aware of the nature of modern and post-modern thought in all domains — ranging from philosophy to the natural sciences to the humanities and social sciences — Islamic answers provided to these intellectual challenges will grow in depth and seriousness. Nonethe-



less, the tension and confrontation observable in the intellectual and educational domains will drag on for some time, especially since new waves of disorder and even chaos in modern Western civilization are reflected almost immediately within the non-Western worlds, including, of course, the Islamic. The Islamic world does not have the luxury of isolating itself in order to solve its own problems. The fact that during the twentieth century the West has always decided the agenda—even if other civilizations have mustered the strength to participate in serious intellectual and cultural dialogue—will probably continue.

As for culture, most likely in the near future it will be the popular culture (especially of American origin) that will be a major challenge to Islamic society, mesmerizing the youth across the width and breadth of the Islamic world. This flood will become even more extensive as a result of the much more intrusive means of communication, which are even now spreading from cities and towns to villages in the Atlas Mountains and Anatolia, the forests of Bangladesh, and the far away islands of Indonesia. The effort spent by Muslims—from religious scholars, educators, and parents to governments—to combat the erosive influence of much of this imported popular culture will almost certainly consume much of the energy of the Islamic community.

On the social plane, the trends of the past few decades, including increasing urbanism and the pressure to break down the traditional family structures coming from various forms of feminism and various stresses of the modern style of living, will doubtless persist. In the late twentieth century, most feminists in the Islamic world were from the modernized classes and not especially noted for their religious devotion. Most likely, then, the trend toward an “Islamic form of feminism,” if such a term is still appropriate to use, will become strengthened as will the greater participation of fully practicing and pious Muslim women in social and economic activities outside the home, as one can see even in a country such as Persia. Likewise, the new urban classes, coming from more pious layers of Islamic society than the older upper classes in urban areas, will strengthen rather than weaken the Islamic presence in cities despite the uprooting that urban growth, at the expense of the countryside, implies.

In the domain of economics and politics, it is difficult to see how in the foreseeable future a completely stable situation can be created. In the economic field, Islamic ideals and practices have to contend with a much more powerful, so-called global, economic order. Consequently, they must remain content with creating islands here and there where

Islamic economic theories can be put into practice — and also seek to preserve what remains of traditional Islamic economic practices in the bazaars as well as the countryside. There is no doubt, however, that many Muslims, even those living in the West, will seek to relate economics to ethics and will refuse to allow economics to even be considered in principle as a legitimate field independent of ethical and, hence, religious concerns.

Political tensions and turmoil driven by the legacy of colonialism will continue as long as the Islamic world is not really independent. On the one hand, areas still under foreign rule and annexed by colonial expansion during the past few centuries, ranging from certain parts of the Balkans to the northern Caucasus, to Palestine, Kashmir, Western China (which until the nineteenth century was Eastern Turkistan) and to the southern Philippines are destined to witness further tension and strife until political problems are solved on the basis of the sovereign will of the people living in these lands. On the other hand, within the main areas of the Islamic world, contention between traditional, so-called fundamentalist, and modernized or secularist groups will likely spread. The question of the meaning of an Islamic state, Islamic democracy, the rule of God's religion vis-à-vis the rule of the people, the meaning and role of secularism, the relation between religion and the state, the unity of the Islamic world versus local national authority, and many other central issues will be increasingly debated, leading, from time to time, to conflicts as a result of constraints within Islamic societies as well as pressures exerted from the outside.

As far as religion in its most central sense is concerned, the most important challenges to Islam are, on the one hand, that of secularism in all its forms including philosophical skepticism and scientific naturalism and materialism (despite the loss of the significance of the term *matter* in modern physics) and, on the other, the diversity of religions or religious pluralism. As the Islamic world plunges into civilizational dialogue and discourse with other religions on a more public scale, many of the most important new chapters in Islamic thought will probably be devoted to the subject of the unity and diversity of religions and all the accompanying issues ranging from the metaphysical to the ethical. This interreligious discourse is also likely to be complemented by a greater intensity of dialogue among various schools within Islam itself, especially Sunnism and Shi'ism.

These and other issues and factors are likely to push forth new manifestations and flowerings of Sufism: its spiritual teachings (along with

other aspects of Islamic esoteric teachings as contained in Shi'ism), its philosophy so pertinent to the understanding of religious diversity, and its art and literature. During the past century, both so-called fundamentalists and modernists in the Islamic world opposed Sufism. However, during the past few decades a new wave of interest in Sufism has been observable in many Islamic countries. And it has been primarily through Sufism that Westerners have come to gain a grasp of the deeper meaning of Islam. While opposition to Sufism may persist in certain circles, its spread both within and outside the Islamic world is also likely to continue and even accelerate. The incredible interest in America in the poetry of one of the greatest masters of Sufism, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, even if it be an Americanized version, is not a passing fad but rather a sign of the ever more extensive influence of Sufism and its teachings in the West, where it provides a path toward perfection for those qualified to follow it, as well as the means for recollection of much that has been lost for those Christians and Jews seeking to rediscover the deeper dimensions of their own tradition. Within the Islamic world itself, Sufism and other philosophies issuing from the esoteric dimension of the Islamic revelation, such as Shi'ite gnosis (*'irfān-i shī'ī*), are alone capable of providing answers to many of the philosophical challenges of modernism as well as the challenge of taking into serious consideration the presence of other forms of the Sacred. This source is, therefore, bound to be tapped to an ever greater degree in future years as Muslims grapple more seriously with questions of the presence of two *others*: one the secular, which denies the validity of all religious views, and the second, religious views of reality other than the Islamic.

Having said all of this, it is necessary to remember, however, the principle so emphasized in Islam: the future is known to God alone. All human extrapolations, in fact, shall fall short with the smallest unforeseen perturbation. The predictions of futurologists bear witness to this assertion. All the projections here, therefore, are made with the utmost humility and with full awareness of the fragility of human existence and the possibility of unforeseen factors which can burst at any moment upon the scene in completely unpredictable ways. This is particularly true of our age in which signs of the latter days predicted by the Prophet and the saints of Islam are manifest everywhere, an age which seems so pregnant with momentous events beyond our ken. But even such projections cannot be made categorically, if one remembers the saying of the Prophet that all those who predict the Hour are liars.

Even if we know that it is the eleventh hour, according to Islam, only God knows when the clock will strike twelve.

All that one can say is that Islam is likely to remain a powerful religious force in the coming future, a challenge to secularism in all its forms (as secularism will remain a challenge to it). Islam will struggle with forces which negate its reality within and without and is most likely to draw ever closer to all other religions, especially its monotheistic sisters, Judaism and Christianity, which share with it acceptance of the Transcendent, the sense of the sacred, and the understanding of the ultimately spiritual nature of man as well as the spiritual significance of all of creation. As to how exactly the forces of religion and secularism will contend with each other on the stage of cosmic history and how Islam will create mutual understanding with other religions while preserving its integrity, one can only repeat the formula with which traditional Islamic treatises usually conclude; that is, "And God knows best (*wa' Llāhu a'lam*)."

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