RELIGION AND POLITICS AND THEIR IMPACT ON CIVILIZATION-BUILDING IN ISLAM AND THE WEST

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1 – Introduction

It might be appropriate to begin by asking this crucial question: Are religion and politics consecutive? That is to say, did one of them come before the other or are they overlapping and inextricably linked?

This question will determine the angle from which we approach our subject and the substance of what I have to say. When I look at Western history I find myself forced to conclude that it would be more accurate to regard them as consecutive, since Christianity entered the West's political arena as a "welcome guest" of the state (which at that time was the Roman Empire). When it arrived, Rome already had a long political tradition and well established and effective political institutions, so the fusion of religion and politics was something that occurred subsequently.

However, when I look at Islam I find that the two are inseparable because in the environment in which

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Islam was revealed no state existed, nor were there any effective political institutions. In fact, it was Islam itself that was destined to establish a state, so the relationship between religion and politics was founded on the premise that religion was the basis of an ideal existence in this world and the next, and accordingly, that it was the framework for all the institutions established by Muslim civilization, as well as the yardstick for all Muslim behaviour. Although *da'wah* (spreading the Faith) lies at the core of Islam, anthropological and historical evidence indicates that conversion to Islam has never been a purely religious matter. It is also a political one.[1]

The first Islamic community in Madinah had certain distinct features which may be described as political. The alliance between the *Muhajirun* (Emigrants) and *Ansar* (Helpers) represented a new departure which combined political with creedal elements. It did not come into being in a vacuum, nor was it solely the product of Divine Revelation. Rather, the conflicts out of which it was born were a necessary consequence of the geopolitical events in which the Muslims found themselves engaged from the moment of their *Hijrah* (Migration) to Madinah. A dynamic Islam had come into being and needed to protect the *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar* who had chosen that religion, and this coincided with the revelation of the Qur'anic texts which regulated the daily lives of the early Muslims and established the framework of their culture. Consequently, aided by Divine Revelation, they began to build a new civilization.

In this dynamic Islam it became impossible to separate the spiritual from the temporal, because Islam represents the religion of this world and the next. The Holy Qur'an says: "But seek, with the [wealth] which Allah has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world." *(Al Qasas, 77)* and "Say: 'Truly, my prayer and my service of sacrifice, my life and my death, are [all] for Allah, the Cherisher of the Worlds.'" *(Al An'am, 162)*. When Islam became firmly established, the Qur'an issued a wide range of laws on general matters in *Surah*s (Chapters) such as *al Baqarah*, *al Ma'idah* and *al Nisa'*, as well as numerous others. These laws covered several areas which were profoundly political. Indeed, the Qur'anic texts show clearly that Islam calls upon its followers to accept it as the authority

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1   For further material on this subject see Eric Wolf: *The Social Organisation of Mecca and the Origins of Islam*, in *Anthrobologia al Islam* by Dr. Abu Bakr Ahmed Ba Qader, Dar al Hadi, Baghdad, 2005, p. 223.

governing every aspect of their lives. Since it is so broad in its scope, it is impossible to separate religion from politics in an Islamic context, except on the grounds that politics is temporal, governed by historical and cultural circumstances, and based on the principle of providing an easier life for the people. Despite these grounds, however, an absolute and total separation between politics and religion is something that does not, and cannot, exist in Islam, since politics will always remain inexorably linked to the fundamental principles of the Shariah.

2 – Religion and politics in the West: Origins

Rome "held the entire Mediterranean region under its sway. In Western Europe its borders extended along the Rhine and the Danube; there were legions of Roman soldiers based in Britain. The Romans called their territories outside Britain provinces; the provinces were administered by Roman governors and protected by Roman garrisons and the inhabitants of those provinces paid taxes to the Roman state treasury."[1] Most of the Middle East at that time was subject to the rule of Rome.[2]

The point that concerns us here is that this august realm, founded by the Etruscans,[3] who built the city of Rome and made it their kingdom's capital, was an advanced civilization with a long and powerful reach. However, it collapsed after the revolution led by the Roman nobility, who overthrew the kingdom and declared a republic[4] in 509 BC.

Historical evidence confirms that religion and politics came together to build the great edifice that was Roman civilization. Anyone who has studied the relationship between the religious and political aspects of that civilization will have observed how the two elements became inescapably wedded to each other. The Roman Empire claimed Divine attributes for itself alongside its political symbolism; for example, the

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1   A. S. Svenskaya: *The Early Christians and the Roman Empire*, Tr. Ihsan Mikhail Ishaq, 1st impression, Dar Ala'uddin, Damascus, Syria, 2006, p. 7.

2   For example, Greater Syria was a Roman province.

3   Abdul Satir Labib: *Al Hadharat*, 2nd impression, Dar al Mashreq, Beirut, 1971, p. 184.

4   Ibid. p. 184.

fact that "Augustus" – the title of one of the Caesars – was an attribute only assigned to gods[1] is proof that politics did not exist independently of religion, but rather that it was a "legal instrument" for safeguarding the religion; it was the state's function to uphold the principle of respect for the gods – the gods of Rome. Moreover, in addition to its purely political role the Senate – the Roman state's leading institution – was also responsible for religious affairs.

It was this ideological melding and harmony between politics and religion that gave Roman civilization its momentum. The state was able to harness a pagan religion to reinforce its unity and bolster its status and culture.

The pagan religions began to lose their influence under the combined impact of Greek philosophy, religious ideas from the Middle and Far East, Jewish monotheism and Christianity, which was brought to Rome by Christian missionaries. As Roman politicians came to realise that the people of Rome and its provinces were beginning to turn away from the pagan religions and embrace Christianity, they sensed that their state's situation was fraught with danger. Consequently, the wiser ones among them concluded that a godless Empire would be no more than a soulless and powerless political corpse, and that Christianity would be "able to infuse new blood and a new spirit into the body of the state".[2]

It was for this reason that the Roman state adopted the Christian religion and introduced it to the West from the fourth century CE. This took Western Europe into a new phase of its history in which religion and politics came together to create a force which was so dynamic that "the prevailing view in Byzantium was of a single world-wide Christian community led jointly by the Church and the Empire."[3]

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1   Ibid. p. 200.

2   A. S. Svenskaya: *Secrets of the Gods and Religions*, Tr. Ihsan Mikhail Ishaq, 2nd impression, Dar Ala'uddin, Damascus, Syria, 2006, p. 464.

3   Rustam Saad: *Al Firaq wa'l Madhahib al Islamiyyah mundhu Dhuhur al Islam hatta'l Yawm*, 1st impression, Dar al Awa'il, Damascus, Syria, 2003, p. 34.

3 – The theoretical basis for this fusion

The fusion between State and Church was founded upon a solid theoretical basis. The teachings of the Messiah (PBUH) called upon humanity to channel its mental, psychological and physical energies into both love of God and love of mankind. They also appealed to people to strive to establish goodness, probity and peace upon earth,[1] and gave particular focus to personal salvation. According to the Christian scriptures, this goal had God's blessing and was therefore achievable, since the Kingdom of God begins here on earth. Moreover, in order to achieve that Kingdom no more is required than a "struggle inspired by the Messiah" – the Messiah being the symbolic striver who sacrificed himself in order to promote those precious values. His story and teachings gave unending support and succour to those striving for the good of humanity, so therefore a Christian could not be considered a sincere Believer unless he strove to achieve this goal on earth. It would seem that this Christian principle was seen as a major priority by those peoples who were seeking "peace and security in a turbulent and increasingly unfeeling world."[2]

The Christian message had a startling effect on the peoples of the Roman Empire, and as they began to embrace the new religion, the fervour of the masses was further aroused by the great sacrifices made by several leading figures in the Christian community. Meanwhile, Rome's politicians came to realise that this religion had considerable political and cultural value and favoured the idea of a fusion between Church and State. They saw that not only did Christianity reject pagan beliefs; it also refreshed the soul and promoted respect for humanity as well as the values of morality and peace, and therefore it was an ideal instrument for reinvigorating the state with new blood and a new spirit.[3]

Rome, which had extensive experience in the administrative, military, judicial, economic and social fields, showed itself able to enlist Christianity

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[1] For confirmation of this, see the Gospels.

[2] Kevin Reilly: *The West and the World: a History of Civilization*, Tr. Abdul Wahhab Mohammed al Masiri and Huda Abdul Sami' Hijazi, 'Alam al Ma'rifah Series No. 90, Kuwait, 1985, p. 164.

[3] A. S. Svenskaya: *Secrets of the Gods and Religions*, Tr. Ihsan Mikhail Ishaq, 2nd impression, Dar Ala'uddin, Damascus, Syria, 2006, p. 464. Also see ibid. p. 255 and p. 259.

for its own political ends, while at the same time spreading the Christian message in all sincerity. The consequent harmony between Christianity and the Roman state served the common interests of both parties.

4 – How have religion and politics benefited the West?

From the moment it was first adopted Christianity was able to save the Roman Empire from collapse and provide it with an ideology that enabled it to renew and improve itself.

When the Empire disintegrated in the Middle Ages and its provinces cut their ties with it, its power and influence waned. However, despite this, and despite the theological disputes which led to schisms within the Church, the Christian religion continued to play a major part in shaping the European identity and determining the character of its culture. I do not intend to go into detail here, because that is really a job for the cultural historians. However, I can say that throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the modern era politico-religious coexistence has been a remarkably constant feature of Western civilization. From the earliest times till around the beginning of the 19th century CE the West never considered the possibility of a total separation between religion and politics. Even Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was close to the spirit of Catholicism when he posited the existence of a Perfect Supreme Being; indeed, he claimed to be able to prove it and asserted that belief in such a Being was an obligation which served the interests of the individual and mankind as a whole.[1] Then the French School of Western culture tried to reconcile Christian rationalism with Cartesian theory by filling in the gaps in Descartes' philosophy with "creedal elements" that Descartes had seriously overlooked.[2]

This line was taken up by numerous leading thinkers in the 17th century including Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715). Pascal put forward an argument in the form of a "wager" that "religion,

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1 Andre Cresson: *Philosophical Trends from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, Tr. Nihad Ridha, 2nd impression, Manshurat 'Awaidat, Beirut – Paris, 1982, p. 103.

2 Ibid. p. 103.

together with the morality, wisdom and virtues inspired by it,"[1] was a more likely proposition than not. He regarded placing one's bets against religion as a form of rebellion leading to the direst of consequences; accordingly, in his view the West had no option but to remain true to the Christian Faith in its Catholic version, "because of its vital usefulness".[2] A clearer defence of Christianity was put forward by Malebranche, who proposed a combination of Christianity - particularly in the form in which it was understood by Saint Augustine (354-430) - and Cartesian theory and methodology. Malebranche saw the importance attached by Descartes to reason as a kind of "Revelation from within".

In Malebranche's view, it is the Christian scriptures (the Gospels and the Epistles) that provide us with the "Revelation from without". There is no difference in status between the two forms of Revelation, since they complement each other. In his book *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* Malebranche writes: "I do not believe that true philosophy is incompatible with religion or that the best philosophers differ in their feelings from true Christians...Truth speaks to us in numerous different ways, but it is certain that it always says the same thing. Therefore we should never set philosophy up in opposition to religion."[3]

These words indicate that a fourth member – Revelation – should be added to the Cartesian trinity of intuition, deduction and experience, since a philosopher must "not think unless he knows beliefs"[4]. "Beliefs" here refers to Malebranche's beliefs, which would mean that Revelation – i.e. the Christian Scriptures – also extends into the cultural sphere, including politics; this in turn would mean that it is not feasible to develop a political vision in isolation from religion, since the Christian religion was revealed to promote a "politics of mankind" at two levels – from "within" as a "gift to

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1   Ibid. p. 191.

2   Ibid. p. 100. See also pp. 92-93.

3   Ibid. p. 105. See also Didier Julia: *Dictionnaire de la Philosophie*, translated into Arabic by Francois Ayyub and others, 1st impression, Maktabat Antoine, Beirut, and Dar al Andalus, Paris, 1992, p. 476.

4   Andre Cresson: *Philosophical Trends from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, Tr. Nihad Ridha, 2nd impression, Manshurat 'Awaidat, Beirut – Paris, 1982, p. 106.

men's hearts,"[1] and from "without" in order to set up systems that would regulate behaviour, strengthen ties between members of the community, establish justice, promote peace and protect lives and property. From "without" the politics of mankind affirmed that "Christianity is the religion in which there is a growing orientation towards life and the world".[2]

As far as the "from without" aspect is concerned, throughout the 17th century Catholicism was very much a living faith in France and the rest of Europe and it was the element that imbued politics with its ethical content, while continuing to ensure that Western civilization remained charged with vitality.

5 – The trend towards critical thinking

From the 18th century the relationship between religion and politics began to cool. Indeed, it showed signs of breaking down altogether, particularly after the critical English philosophical theses published by Francis Bacon (1561-1626) in his *Scientific Works*, Isaac Newton (1643-1727) in *Philosophiæ Naturalis* and John Locke (1632-1704) in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Meanwhile, in France there were a series of attacks on Church dogma in which doubts were raised about the historical value of the Bible[3] and religion's ideological and social roles were belittled. This critical trend marked a volte-face in comparison with the views of Pascal, Malebranche and the Church Fathers. Voltaire (1694-1778), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Paul-Henri Holbach (1723-1789) were all ardent advocates of liberation from Christian dogma. However, despite this trend's weakness from a philosophical point of view, its literature was highly effective in promoting critical thinking and its influence extended to Germany. In 1794[4]

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1 Ibid. p. 130.

2 Didier Julia: *Dictionnaire de la Philosophie*, translated into Arabic by Francois Ayyub and others, 1st impression, Maktabat Antoine, Beirut, and Dar al Andalus, Paris, 1992, p. 225.

3 Andre Cresson: *Philosophical Trends from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, Tr. Nihad Ridha, 2nd impression, Manshurat 'Awaidat, Beirut – Paris, 1982, p. 144.

4 Didier Julia: *Dictionnaire de la Philosophie*, translated into Arabic by Francois Ayyub and others, 1st impression, Maktabat Antoine, Beirut, and Dar al Andalus, Paris, 1992, p. 425.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) published his *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. Georg Hegel (1770-1831), though somewhat influenced by religion, wrote extensively about the mind and reason and was one of the thinkers who paved the way for Karl Marx (1818-1883). Nor should we forget here that the critical approach also found its way to Scotland, where David Hume published *The Natural History of Religion* in 1757.[1]

These developments proved highly threatening to the ties between religion and politics, and the philosophies they represented shattered every accepted theory on religion, science, nature, morality and politics. That was why Andre Cresson – a writer on philosophical trends from the Middle Ages to modern times – wrote: "18th century philosophy was to a large extent a subversive philosophy".[2]

6 – A question on critical philosophy

From the 18th century a change could be clearly observed in the relationship between religion and politics in the West. However, it would not be appropriate to make categorical pronouncements on this matter. Instead, one should pose the following question: Did Christianity withdraw from its role as a partner in Western civilization? That is to say, did it separate itself totally from politics?

My reply would be as follows: Although the philosophies of the 18th century produced convulsions, the West had learned from the earlier generations whose civilization represented the outcome of combining religion with politics. France, and not only France but the whole of Europe, was aware that its forefathers had been simultaneously at ease with their Faith and builders of their civilization, and that Christianity had given work a sanctity that it had not enjoyed before. The monks of the Benedictine Order described the Christian attitude in this connection as: "Work is worship" and regarded "congregations of workers as being equal in importance to

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1   Didier Julia: *Dictionnaire de la Philosophie*, translated into Arabic by Francois Ayyub and others, 1st impression, Maktabat Antoine, Beirut, and Dar al Andalus, Paris, 1992, p. 586.

2   Andre Cresson: *Philosophical Trends from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, Tr. Nihad Ridha, 2nd impression, Manshurat 'Awaidat, Beirut – Paris, 1982, p. 215.

congregations of worshippers. In fact, the guilds were originally religious fraternities and they never lost their religious character. The merchants' and artisans' guilds served the interests of their members and the interests of consumers by guaranteeing the quality of their products, setting fair prices and working for the economic prosperity of their cities. At the same time, however, they attached equal importance to producing and performing religious plays for the people of their towns and cities and built schools, churches and assembly halls for the citizenry. They also arranged insurance for their members, as well as pageants and carnivals…"[1]

Another function of religion was as a school of art. It supported aesthetic education; this was reflected particularly in the architectural styles of Western cities, in their paintings and sculptures and in the elegance of their dress… Indeed, Christianity was able to underpin and sustain the city and supply human society with its members' needs.[2]

Those who applauded criticism of the "destructive tendency that never ceased to seduce 18th century thinking"[3] strongly believed that Christianity contained certain elements that could never be destroyed because they were eternal truths with the power to imbue us with faith, hope, power and morality - qualities which provide the impetus for civilization building and human progress. A leading proponent of this view was Francois-Rene de Chateaubriand (1768-1848), who attacked supporters of the notion that Christianity should be eradicated from the life of the community in his book *Genie du Chretianisme* (*The Genius of Christianity*). In this he was more vehement than the Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), who adopted a more diffident approach in his treatise on political theory - *L'Esprit des Lois* (*The Spirit of Laws*). While Montesquieu merely appealed for a positive attitude to some religious principles when devising laws, Chateaubriand demanded that Christianity should be the sole source, describing it as the "most poetic of faiths, the most humane and the most compatible

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1   Kevin Reilly: *The West and the World: a History of Civilization*, Tr. Abdul Wahhab Mohammed al Masiri and Huda Abdul Sami' Hijazi, 'Alam al Ma'rifah Series No. 90, Kuwait, 1985, p. 226.

2   Ibid. p. 230.

3   Andre Cresson, p. 278.

with freedom, the arts and literature. The modern world is indebted to it for everything, from agriculture to the pure sciences and from the refuges built to provide shelter for the destitute to the houses of worship built by Michelangelo and adorned by Raphael."[1] In his book *Essai sur l'Indifference en Matière de Religion* (*Essay on Indifference in Matters of Religion*) – published in 1823 – the French thinker Felicite Robert de Lamennais (1782-1854) insisted that the West's embrace of Christianity and its acceptance of the Church's authority had created "that wondrous spiritual communion" as well as "that perfect social system".[2]

The prevailing current of opinion in France was that a total separation between the Christian religion and politics would probably not be wise. This current, which then spread to Italy, Britain, Germany and the United States of America, felt that the best course would be a return to the West's earlier model based on an accord between its religious and social elements.

However, would the West be receptive to this idea?

7 – From Auguste Comte to the beginnings of secularism

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was critical of those who supported the idea of a return to an understanding with the Church. In his view Christian philosophy was generally not "appropriate for an age that was capable of giving full rein to the intellect"[3] and whose aspirations were towards progress and development. He rejected the idea of fusing religion with politics on the Catholic model, in which the king was the ultimate symbol of both temporal and spiritual power. Nor was he impressed by the proponents of the English system, who held that the king's authority should restricted through a system of control and partnership.[4] His view was that a "rational sociology" should be developed (with the blessing of "science")

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1   Ibid. p. 282.

2   Ibid. p. 283. See also Didier Julia: *Dictionnaire de la Philosophie*, translated into Arabic by Francois Ayyub and others, 1st impression, Maktabat Antoine, Beirut, and Dar al Andalus, Paris, 1992, p. 451.

3   Andre Cresson: *Philosophical Trends from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era*, Tr. Nihad Ridha, 2nd impression, Manshurat 'Awaidat, Beirut – Paris, 1982, p. 313.

4   Ibid. p. 315.

and that this sociology should lead to the creation of a temporal authority capable of establishing the framework for the different aspects of social life on a rational and scientific basis.

The Comtian position, then, demanded that the West should abandon the linkage between the Church and politics and embrace the positivist approach in which science took the place of the Church. Science would provide us with the political systems we needed.

Positivism has played a significant part in changing the Western political mentality and, although Comte's ideas have been subjected to much criticism, they caused convulsions in the historic alliance between the Church and politics which had existed ever since the 4th century CE. They became popular in England and Germany after evolutionism became a more acceptable notion in those countries; there was also a rise in scientific and historical criticism of the Jewish and Christian scriptures in France, Germany and Britain. A further factor in the separation of religion from politics in the West was the emergence of a trend known as *Naturalisme Scientiste* (*Scientific Naturalism*)[1] which called for a vision of the world that was totally at odds with the one depicted in the Christian scriptures. Here we should also bear in mind that the emergence and spread of Marxism gave a further boost to calls for the separation of religion from politics in the West.

8 – Freedom versus restraint

No student of the subject can state categorically that there has been an absolute separation between religion and politics in the West. It is true that the West came to resent the oppressive custodial role assumed by the Church in its attitude to the Christian faith as well as its assumption of the right to control the intellectual and political spheres.[2] However,

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1 Ibid. p. 389.

2 'Abdul Rahman Taha: *Ruh al Hadathah*, 1st impression, Arab Cultural Centre, Casablanca, Morocco, 2006, p. 194.

Tariq al Kahlawi: *Al Sardiyyat al Shumuliyyah li 'Ilaqat al Din bi'l Dawlah wa Tarikhaniyyatiha*, *Al Adab* magazine, Year 55, Nos. 6,7,8,9, Beirut.

history tells us (and this is still true today) that Western politics has never rejected Christianity, nor has it been able to eradicate the political role of the Church establishment. And despite Max Weber (1864-1920)'s work on secularism, which has been regarded as an authoritative source[1] since the end of the Second World War, the West has never given in to the notion of a separation between religion and the state. Our evidence for this is as follows:

Firstly: The British version of secularism does not endorse a total separation. In the mid-1990s, as a result of pressure on the government from British religious groups, a plan to amend the "Common Law" in favour of full secularism failed and the law was never promulgated. In fact, the Conservative government at the time accepted those groups' proposals for a politically backed multifaithism.[2]

Secondly: The French separation model appears to be more radical, but achieving it was a long, hard slog. In this connection, we should not ignore the influence of Christianity on the French Right; nor should we forget that the state found the Church useful when devising its French imperialist theory. The imperialist government used Christianity to help it impose its will on its colonised peoples; in fact, the poet Victor Hugo (1802-1885) – a leading figure of the *Humaniste* (Humanist) School – gave a speech at the Elysee Palace in which he applauded the alliance between the state and the Church and asserted that colonising the "savage" peoples of the southern Mediterranean was a "civilizing act".[3]

Thirdly: The Catholic and New Thomist trend has become a powerful force in Poland, particularly since the fall of the country's Marxist leadership in 1990.[4]

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[1] *Lubnan* August/September 2007, p. 13.

[2] Ibid. p. 16, taken from T. Modood (ed): *Church, State and Minorities*, Policy Studies Institute, London, 1996, p. 5.

[3] See Victor Hugo: *Oeuvres Completes*, Collection "Bouquins", Robert Laffont, Paris, 2002, pp. 1009-1012.

[4] See Didier Julia: *Dictionnaire de la Philosophie*, translated into Arabic by Francois Ayyub and others, 1st impression, Maktabat Antoine, Beirut, and Dar al Andalus, Paris, 1992, p. 382.

Fourthly: Other Western states, including Malta, the Principality of Monaco and some Swiss Cantons, still regard Catholicism as their "official faith". There are also European countries that enshrine other "official faiths" in their constitutions. In Greece and Greek Cyprus the Orthodox sect is the official state religion, while Lutheranism enjoys a similar status in countries such as Denmark and Norway.[1]

Fifthly: The West still has the Vatican – a religious state par excellence; moreover, it still holds the symbolic status of the Vatican in the greatest respect and continues to believe that the Vatican is a reflection of Catholic Christianity's political and religious role and the capital of world Catholicism.[2]

Sixthly: It is no longer possible for us to speak "ingenuously about America's experience of secularism, since there is a growing acceptance that it is time to take a new look at the 'mythology of secularism' in that country – a mythology based on an incorrect interpretation of Article One of the amended US Constitution of 1791 known as the Bill of Rights." This Article contains the proverbial sentence about "Congress not having the power to promulgate any law on the establishment of a religion or to suppress the freedom to practise one. Scholars and researchers are under no illusions regarding the total separation of religion from the state in that country, since it seems clear that progressive moves towards greater democracy take precedence over full secularism."[3]

Seventhly: Liberation theology – a movement that emerged particularly in Latin America – calls for a new understanding of Christianity involving its alignment with humanitarian causes, the poor and peoples suffering from marginalisation or colonialism.[4]

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[1] Tariq al Kahlawi: *Al Sardiyyat al Shumuliyyah li 'Ilaqat al Din bi'l Dawlah wa Tarikhaniyyatiha*, p. 17.

[2] *'Awaidat*, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st impression, 1996.

[3] Tariq al Kahlawi: *Al Sardiyyat al Shumuliyyah li 'Ilaqat al Din bi'l Dawlah wa Tarikhaniyyatiha*, p. 16. The Dutch sociologist Veit Bader has carried out an extensive review of secularist mythology and he has written some highly significant articles on the subject. One of these – *Religious Pluralism: Secularism or Priority for Democracy* – was published in the magazine *Political Theory* on 27th October 1999.

[4] For further information see Muhsin bin Isma'il: *Al Insan wa'l Hurriyyah fi Lahuti'l Taharrur*, a doctoral thesis, Marhalah Thalithah, Marqunah, al Zaytuna University, Tunis.

Eighthly: We should not forget that the modern West was partly created by clergy from the Renaissance era. In Italy **[Surely this should be Germany? Tr.]** the Protestants played a prominent role in the Reformation and they were the driving force behind the emergence of Western capitalism.[1]

We mentioned earlier that the precursors of Western modernity "such as Descartes, Newton, Kant, Hegel[2] and many others showed clear evidence of religious influences in their ideas and academic disciplines." For this reason we cannot say with certainty that religion in the West has become totally separated from politics or that it has ceased to play a part in its civilization.

9 – Religion and politics in Islam

a – Context

Islam and the West differ radically from each other where the relationship between religion and politics is concerned. In Islam, state did not precede religion, nor did religion precede state.

Islam appeared on the scene as a "timeless" faith based upon a belief in the One God, and its political character was imposed upon it by the reality of the situation. At the same time, politics in Islam has never been in any way theocratic in character. In Islam the Caliph does not say: "I am Allah's *Khalifah* (Caliph/Successor)," but rather "I am the Messenger of Allah's *Khalifah*."

The Arab environment in which the Qur'an was revealed was already prepared to accept the fusion of religion and politics. The Arabs were more than ready to embrace monotheism despite the fact that they worshipped idols,[3] and they suffered from a permanent state of political turbulence.

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1   Abdul Rahman Taha: *Ruh al Hadathah*, 1st impression, Arab Cultural Centre, Casablanca, Morocco, 2006, p.49.

2   Ibid.

3   The Arabs did not suffer from spiritual poverty. Their worship of idols did not preclude a belief in the existence of Allah as the Creator and Arranger of the universe. The Qur'an mentions this in numerous verses and points out that when an Arab is asked why he worships idols he replies: "We only worship them so that they can bring us closer to Allah" *(Al Zumar, 3)*.

This was because their tribal system did not enable them to create a state or establish a proper form of government; nor did it train them to live within an institutionalised structure or enjoy the kind of political power enjoyed by other nations such as the Persians, the Byzantines and the Abyssinians.

So when the Qur'an was revealed it was able to respond to the Arabs' state of turbulence and steer their culture in a different direction. This did not entail copying the Byzantine or Persian models, but the adoption of a new philosophy that sought to free mankind from the snares of ignorance, poverty, paganism, bondage, subjugation, tyranny, racism and arrogance. Islam placed the Arabs in a position that enabled them to convey its Message to mankind and convince them to embrace the new Faith whose Qur'an and Hadith scriptures championed and promoted humanity's eternal values. These were values of a kind that all rational individuals needed for their benefit and guidance, and in order to show them the way when they created the institutions needed for their civilization.

b – Religion and politics in Islam – origins and realisation

• Origins

Islam's focus was on man and his activities on earth, and the Qur'an was revealed to empower man to fulfil his destiny on the basis of a philosophy which called upon him – as a Believer – to perform his role as a builder of civilization and leave his mark on history. The Holy Qur'an says: "It is He who hath produced you from the earth and made you to become settlers therein" *(Hud 61)* and "Then We made you heirs in the land after them, to see how ye would behave." *(Yunus 14)* Most commentators interpret these verses as meaning that developing the land is not just an option but an obligation and, moreover, that the status of being an "heir" carries with it the need for a system of rules to be introduced to provide Muslims with a new general framework for social behaviour. This was something that had hitherto been completely unfamiliar to the Arabs. The Arabs – particularly the Arabs of the Hejaz – did not understand what such concepts as a state or a system of government meant before Muslim society came into being in Madinah. Later, however, when that society took shape and became a visibly

distinct community,[1] a legal system needed to be devised in order to provide Muslims with the regulations and structures on which their community would be based. An examination of the Qur'an and the Hadith will reveal that these structures and regulations are not only concerned with spiritual matters – "the province of religio-psychological sanctions"[2] – but also the political side, particularly the creation of a ruling authority (the *Wali al Amr*) who would be given responsibility for enforcement in such areas as:-

–   Judgements and rulings: The Qur'an says: "But no, by thy Lord, they can not be [real] Believers until they make thee judge in all disputes between them, and find in their souls no resistance against thy decisions, but accept them with the fullest conviction." *(Al Nisa' 65)* and "O ye who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority over you." *(Al Nisa 59)*.

–   Justice: "Allah commands justice." *(Al Nahl 90)* and "And when ye judge between people, that ye judge with justice." *(Al Nisa 58)*.

–   Mutual consultation: "…who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation." *(Al Shura 38)*.

–   Safeguarding freedom: By eradicating the causes of slavery and making manumission one of the most virtuous of acts of sacrifice for the sake of Allah: "And what will explain to thee the path that is steep? [It is] freeing the bondman…" *(Al Balad 12-13)*.

–   Protecting the community: "What is the matter with you that ye help not each other?" *(Al Saffat 25)* and "And those who, when oppressive wrong is inflicted on them, help and defend themselves." *(Al Shura 39)*.

–   Providing security and the conditions to allow virtue to thrive: "…and He forbids all shameful deeds, and injustice and rebellion…" *(Al Nahl 90)*, "When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle. But Allah loveth not mischief." *(Al Baqarah 205)*, "…and do no evil or mischief in the land."

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1   Ibn 'Ashur: *Usul al Nidham al Ijtima'iy fi'l Islam*, 2nd impression, Dar Sahnoun, Tunis, 2006, p. 109.
2   Ibid. p. 115.

(Al Baqarah 60), "Why were there not, among the generations before you, persons possessed of balanced good sense, prohibiting men from mischief in the earth…?" *(Hud 116)* and "…and seek not [occasions for] mischief in the land." *(Al Qasas 77)*.

–   Seeking to acquire wealth, and safeguarding the *Ummah*'s (Islamic community's) property and ensuring that it is distributed fairly: "Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world…" *(Al Kahf 46)*, "And those in whose wealth is a recognized right for [the needy] who asks and him who is deprived." *(Al Ma'arij 24-25)* and "Come not nigh to the orphan's property except to improve it…" *(Al Isra' 34)*.

–   Relations with other parties in peace and war: "Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for [your] faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them; for Allah loveth those who are just. Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for [your] faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support [others] in driving you out, from turning to them [for friendship and protection]. It is such as turn to them [in these circumstances] that do wrong." *(Al Mumtahanah 8-9)*.

This linkage between religion and politics showed the early Muslims that the creation of a ruling authority (i.e. a government) to administer the community's political affairs was a "matter in the vital necessity class";[1] it was something dictated not only by the demands of their situation and the logic of the geo-political climate at that time, but also because it was the only way they could safeguard themselves and their essential identity. As they recited the verses revealed to them from the Holy Qur'an, it became clear to the Companions of the Prophet (PBUH) that it would be impossible to set up the kind of *Ummah* sought by the Messenger Muhammad (PBUH) unless it had a government, which meant that embracing Islam was not merely a religious requirement but a political one as well.[2] Indeed, history demonstrates the truth of this assertion; that is to say, as the strength of

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1   Ibn 'Ashur: *Usul al Nidham al Ijtima'iy fi'l Islam*, 2nd impression, Dar Sahnoun, Tunis, 2006, p. 199.

2   Eric Wolf: *The Social Organisation of Mecca and the Origins of Islam*, in *Anthrobologia al Islam* by Dr. Abu Bakr Ahmed Ba Qader, Dar al Hadi, Baghdad, 2005, p. 223.

the Muslims in Madinah became recognized, the Arab tribes began to embrace Islam on a creedal basis; however, at the same time there were also political factors involved, since the tribes saw that the alliance between the *Muhajirun* and the *Ansar* had made them a powerful political force.

• Realisation

In the light of the preceding paragraph, it would be fair to say that Islam appeared to mankind as a Divine Way which reconciled the spiritual with the temporal and the religious with the political. From the early days of Islam the Muslims realized that their religion did not exclude politics, but rather that politics accounted for a significant part of man's duties as vicegerent and, moreover, that mankind would be "incomplete" without it. The Messenger Muhammad (PBUH) recognized this and the religious revolution associated with the name of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) endorsed the structural establishment of a new state.[1] As directed by Divine Revelation, Muhammad (PBUH) transformed tribal, ethnic and regional-based political allegiances into the state creed, assigned the state a political capital and defined the borders of the state as extending across the length and breadth of the Arabian Peninsula. In doing so, he preferred to exercise his political programme from a settled community – Madinah – which became the centre of most of the political activity, while his capital also controlled Arabia's other administrative centres. He established a regular army and a judicial authority, regulated money transactions and laid down the rules for managing and handling property (prohibiting usury and trade in forbidden goods, setting the Zakat rate etc.). He also appointed Amirs, sent ambassadors on missions and messages to kings, decreed respect for other religions and concluded treaties. In Madinah he issued a constitution known as the *Sahifah* and promoted a concept of citizenship which included allegiance to the nation and respect for religious and cultural pluralism.

Muhammad (PBUH) was able to achieve something for the Arabs that was completely new to them – "the realisation of the concept of a state".[2]

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1 Ibid. p. 226.

2 Ibid. p. 227.

This enabled men with political ambitions to find justification for their aspirations in the text of the Qur'an, but in a form that they had never dreamed of.

Muslims were inspired to embrace Islam because of its eternal human principles, but their enthusiasm increased further when they saw that this religion was able to place limits on the ruler's power in the interests of the community. This was summed up by 'Uthman bin 'Affan (may Allah be pleased with him) when he said: "Allah restrains the ruler in those things in which He does not restrain him with the Qur'an." Indeed, the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs faithfully observed the linkage between religion and politics, which they regarded as being of the very essence of Islam, and it was they who perfected the "state of Islamic custodianship in respect of homage, justice and equality".[1]

That was the time of the Islamic conquests which helped people free themselves from paganism, ignorance and despotism: "and Mu'awiyah bin Abi Sufyan was in no way inferior to the four [Rightly-Guided Caliphs] except insofar as he initially followed a different line from that of the fourth Caliph [i.e. 'Ali bin Abi Talib] because of the way he applied an *ijtihad* interpretation; our *'ulama* (scholars) reckoned that this *ijtihad* was incorrect until the point where matters were set straight when al Hasan waived [his claim to] the Caliphate; [after this,] he [i.e. Mu'awiyah] continued to better the condition of the Muslims throughout [the rest of] his life."[2] Mu'awiyah continued his civilization-building mission over the course of his reign, with the result that every corner of his state was able to enjoy progress and prosperity.

Although the style of government followed by the Rightly-Guided Caliphs was henceforth replaced by a hereditary monarchy with many shortcomings, the interdependence between religion and politics continued to form the basis of the law that determined the course of the state's civilization-building and guided the ruling dynasties from the Bani Ummayyah era to the fall of

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1   Ibid. p. 202.

2   Al Mu'addal Mansur: *Dirasat al Thaqafah al Islamiyyah wa's Siyasiyyah, Muraja'ah wa Taqyim*, in *Antrobolojiya al Islam*, Ch. 12, p. 343.

the Ottoman Caliphate. In fact, the Muslims' role as a civilizing force only waned with the decline of the Ottoman state in Turkey, the Safavids in Iran and the Mogul Empire in India during the 17th century CE. The decline of these states was due to domestic factors and European pressures.[1]

The situation deteriorated further and by the beginning of the 19th century the Muslims' civilizing role collapsed when "other major Muslim regions came under European colonial rule. The Dutch took possession of Indonesia and Egypt fell to the British,"[2] while the French, Italians and Spanish became the dominant powers in North Africa and the Levant.[3]

c – Going back to the roots: cautious optimism

Now that Islam has again become an issue of importance for Muslims everywhere, the Islamic world is trying to return to the Islamic principle of a system in which religion and politics are interdependent. Despite the deep impact Western imperialism has had on the Muslims' intellects, psyches and culture, as well as on their social, economic and political situation, and despite the iron fist of anti-religious military and secular fundamentalism which has ruled over most of the Islamic regions, a new Islamic vision has now appeared which recognizes the possibility of Islam playing "a major role in political modernisation".[4] This is not just due to the fact that Islam is the most fundamental symbol of the *Ummah*, but rather because of the dynamic, humane and flexible nature of its scriptures that deal with political questions. This suggests it is possible to develop a sound and cogent Islamic political process, provided that it applies *ijtihad* in a rational manner that takes current situations into consideration as well as eternal values, and makes a critical assessment of our political heritage, both Sunni and Shi'i.

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1   Ibid.

2   Ibid.

3   Ibid.

4   Ibid. p. 355. This process began when Iran's *'ulama* took part in the Constitutional Revolution and the reform movement, which called for *ijtihad* on political questions. Later contributors include the present-day Islamic movements in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey and Iran. Also the movement in Turkey is mature and sound, the other movements still need to develop a proper understanding of the nature of politics.