Introduction

Journey to the Ends of Islam

> In order to preserve in political science the freedom of spirit to which we have become accustomed in mathematics, I have been careful not to ridicule human behaviour, neither to deplore nor condemn, but to understand.
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Westerners have traditionally regarded Islam with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. This mix of sentiments was fully apparent when the Islamic revolution broke out in Iran. After first being attracted by the experience, exhilarated by its novelty, many leading intellectuals subsequently trumpeted their disgust at the Khomeinist state's thirst for blood and washed their hands of the matter: the phenomenon had proved too resistant to their categories of thought.

Disoriented by this experience, Western intellectuals have tended to take refuge behind a kind of Maginot Line of enlightened rationalism. From these entrenched positions they excoriate 'fanaticism', 'backwardness', and 'Muslim fundamentalism'. The West, they seem to be saying, has gone beyond all that: let it now go its own way and let Islam — irretrievably alien, intellectually inaccessible, and repugnant — wallow in its barbarism.

This attitude is pernicious. However healthy the reflex that engenders it, the result is facile misdirection. The sentiment of pity and its offspring, sympathy, are unworthy counsellors for the analyst. Unless they are resisted, one runs the risk of seeing reality only through the prism of one's own desires. When the consequent illusions suddenly fade, they are replaced by disappointment, and affability is supplanted by a bleak lack of

curiosity that stills the mind; understanding is renounced in favour of the stodgy comfort of time-honoured convictions.

This book seeks to take up the challenge to Western categories of thought posed by contemporary Islam in its most spectacular, most *monstrous* manifestation (in the strict sense of the word): the 'Islamicist movement'.[1] The term is meant to designate that collection of 'inflammations' of Islam (more easily listed than analysed) that have led — though exactly how is not yet clear — to such disparate events as the Iranian revolution, the attack on the Great Mosque in Mecca, the attempted assassination of the pope, the assassination of Sadat, and even Colonel Qadhafi's African intrigues.

The effects of these events have been real enough, while their causes, presumably complex and entangled, resist analysis. To unwind the skein of all these phenomena in an exhaustive study of the manifestations of Islamicism from Morocco to Indonesia, from the North African districts of Marseilles to Samarkand, would require a work of encyclopaedic scope. It is far better to examine one particular case more restricted in space and time. I have chosen the Islamicist movement in Sadat's Egypt, whose most clamorous act was the murder of the president on 6 October 1981, before a world-wide television audience.

The choice of Egypt was determined by a number of considerations. To begin with, it was in Egypt, in 1928, that Hasan al-Banna founded the Society of Muslim Brethren (or Muslim Brotherhood), prototype of the contemporary Islamicist movement. This historical primacy affords us much invaluable sociological information. Moreover, it was in Nasser's Egypt, beacon of the progressive independent states of the Third World, that the regime violently smashed the largest branch of the Brotherhood. It was also in Egypt that an Islamicist movement was reconstituted, against that independent state, and sought, not without considerable success, to articulate social dissatisfaction.

Furthermore, if Egypt offers a choice terrain for the researcher, it is partly because the poor and oppressed masses of the Muslim world are now watching the fate of its fifty million inhabitants just as they once fixed their gaze on Nasser. Tape cassettes of the Friday sermons of Sheikh Kishk, an Islamicist

1. The term 'Islamicist' is used throughout to render the French 'islamiste'. The loan-word 'Islamist' did not gain currency until after this translation had been completed.

preacher in Cairo, are avidly passed from hand to hand in towns and cities from Casablanca to Kuwait, and in the neighbourhoods of Muslim immigrant workers in Europe as well, providing their listeners with an Islamicist view of the world.

Finally, and perhaps most important, it was in Nasser's concentration camps, symbols of pharaoh's despotic regime, that a man called Sayyid Qutb charted the renewal of Islamicist thought of which the contemporary organizations are to a large extent the legatees. These organizations presented a varied and richly shaded array of tendencies throughout Sadat's decade in power, including legalistic currents, sects that established isolated communities for resocializing their members, mass student organizations, and groupings preaching armed struggle.

The Egyptian example — which I was able to analyse on the scene and at considerable length — therefore stands as a kind of paradigm against which other manifestations of Islamicism can be measured. Perhaps that will enable us to penetrate appearances, as fleeting as they are spectacular, and grasp the underlying meaning.

Our journey to the ends of Islam will inevitably subject the reader to some intellectual dislocation. This is unavoidable. Nothing would be more specious than to assume *a priori* that the manifestations of contemporary Islam are no more than the usual sort of phenomena analysed by the social sciences, but veiled, in this case, by the mask of religious ideology.

In discussing the anti-Jewish polemics of the Islamicist journal *al-Da'wa* ('The Mission'), for example, we will encounter many of the stereotypes of European anti-Semitism, foremost among which is the imperishable *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Admittedly, in this case we are dealing with a Western tradition that has forded the Mediterranean. But our investigation must not end with that observation alone. Our aim is to understand how and why these stereotypes came to be used again in the contemporary Middle East: how is it that they 'make sense' to the Islamicist mind, to the semantic system of the bearded militants in their white gallabiehs? To discover this is to reconstruct that system's grammar and lexicon, and thus also the Muslim cultural

tradition from which it issued and the contemporary Third World in which it functions. Here the tasks of the orientalist and the political scientist are inevitably interwined.[2]

2. The author enjoyed a three-year stay in Cairo under the auspices of the Centre d'études économiques, juridiques et sociales, and participated in its research programmes and seminars. I am most deeply grateful to the French–Egyptian team at the Centre. Nevertheless, the opinions expressed in this book are the outcome of personal research alone and are my responsibility alone.

I would also like to thank the many friends, Egyptians and foreigners resident in Egypt, who taught me to open my eyes in that country. Of all of them, I will mention only Maurice P. Martin, whose intimate knowledge of daily life in the Nile Valley is equalled only by his relentless curiosity.

Olivier Carré, Bruno Etienne, and Maxime Rodinson gave me precious advice and spotted many errors during the drafting of the thesis on which the present book is based.

My 'professor of grammar', Michel d'Hermies, was a demanding reader of a manuscript whose content owes much to him.

Finally, Rémy Leveau was unstinting in his kindness and support, in both Paris and Cairo. The research that led to this book could not have been undertaken without the confidence with which he honoured me from the very outset.

A Note on Sources and Spelling

I have chosen to transcribe the Arabic names and terms in this book according to a system that is both intelligible to those who know no Arabic and familiar to speakers of the language. The latter will find little difficulty recognizing the emphatic letters and long vowels, neither of which have been marked, and will not be confused by the rendering of both *'ayn* and *hamza* by an apostrophe.

The combination *th* is pronounced as in English; the *kh* corresponds roughly to the German *ch* or the same letters in the Scottish *loch*; *dh* represents the sound *th* in the English word *then*; the *gh* is the rolled Parisian *r*. Other letters and combinations of letters are pronounced more or less as in English.

The thesis on which the present book is based contained some six hundred footnotes, most of which referred to Arabic sources, and a bibliography of about five hundred works, more than two-thirds of which were also in Arabic. These have all been eliminated to make the book more accessible. A brief list of works referred to directly in the text has been preserved, on pp. 241–43; it is followed by an equally brief list of periodicals. Numbers that appear in brackets in the text refer to sources in this list. The footnotes that remain are explanatory in nature.

Specialist readers who would like more detailed references may consult the above-mentioned thesis, *Le Mouvement islamiste dans l'Egypte de Sadate*, at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris.

All quotations from the Koran in this book are taken from the translation by N.J. Dawood, second revised edition (1966), published by Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.

The author has made several revisions for the English edition.