

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCIPLE OF HISTORY

Al tawhīd commits man to an ethic of action; that is, to an ethic where worth and unworth are measured by the degree of success the moral subject achieves in disturbing the flow of space-time, in his body as well as around him. It does not deny the ethic of intent where the same measurement is made by the level of personal values affecting the moral subject's state of consciousness alone, for the two are not incompatible. Indeed, Islam demands the fulfillment of the requirements of the ethic of intent as a preliminary prerequisite for entering into fulfillment of those of the ethic of action.¹ By so doing, Islam prevents its ethic from becoming one of consequences, or utilitarianism, however noble the ring.

Disturbing the flow of space-time, or transformation of creation, therefore, is expected of the *engagé* Muslim. Having acquiesced to God alone as his Master, having committed himself, his life and all energies to His service, and having recognized His Master's will as that which ought to be actualized in space-time, he must enter the rough and tumble of the market place and history and therein bring about the desired transformation. He cannot lead a monastic, isolationist existence unless it be as an exercise in self-discipline and self-mastery. Even then, if the exercise is not conducive to the end of achieving greater success in the transformation of space-time, it is doomed as unethical egocentrism; for the purpose would in that case be self-transformation as an end in

أَلَا لِلَّهِ الدِّينُ الْخَالِصُ... إِنْ اللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ كَذِبٌ كَفَّارٌ (الزمر: ٣) بَلَى مَنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ
مُحْسِنٌ فَلَهُ أَجْرُهُ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِ وَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ (البقرة: ١١٢) إِيَّا مَنْ أَى اللَّهُ يَقَلْبِ سَلِيمٍ
(الشعراء: ٨٩) إِنْ فِي ذَلِكَ لَذِكْرٌ لِمَنْ كَانَ لَهُ قَلْبٌ أَوْ أَلْقَى السَّمْعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٌ (ق: ٣٧)

¹ Religion in all its purity belongs only to Allah... Allah will not guide anyone guilty of lying, of ungodliness or unfaith (39:3)... Whoever turns his face to Allah in loyalty and does the good works will have his reward with Allah. Such persons will not grieve; and no fear shall befall them (2:112)... Allah will forgive none but those who turn to Him with candid hearts (26:89)... In this is a lesson, a reminder, to those who have a sincere heart, or to those who stop arguing when evidence confronts them squarely and acquiesce to it readily (50:37).

itself, not as a preparation for transforming the world into the likeness of the divine pattern.

The Quran has amply justified creation and described it as that in which man is to undertake his cosmic vocation. Emphatically the Quran asserted that the world is the realm where the absolute is to be realized, and so by man. "Excellence in the deed," (*falāḥ*) in terms of which the Quran describes the purpose of creation as a whole, can have no other meaning than the transformation of the materials of creation, i.e., men and women, earth, town and country.² To the question, who is the denier of the religion ("religion" being a more comprehensive term than "God") the Quran answers: "it is he who repulses the orphan; who does not urge the feeding of the poor."³ Evidently, filling this world, this space, and this time with value, even the material value of food, is not only important for religion, but the very whole business of religion. For this reason, Islam's eschatology is radically different from that of Judaism and Christianity. In the former, the "Kingdom of God," is an alternative to the Hebrew situation in exile. It was the Kingdom of David projected nostalgically by those who had lost it and who presently stand at the nethermost level of captivity and degradation. As for Christianity, its main thrust was to combat the materialist, externalist, enlandising ethnocentrism of the Jews. Hence it was necessary for Christianity to spiritualize the Kingdom of David and remove it altogether from space-time. This trend already existed in later Judaism, and Christianity developed it further by universalizing it as the salvation of mankind and purging it clean of earthly attachment. In both cases the "Kingdom of God" became an "other world" and thus this world became the temporary theater of Caesar, the devil, the flesh, "where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal."⁴

... يَنْقُورِ أَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مَا لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرُهُ هُوَ أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنَ الْأَرْضِ وَاسْتَعْمَرَكُمْ فِيهَا فَاسْتَغْفِرُوا لَهُمْ تَتَوَبُّوا إِلَيْهِ إِنْ رُبِّي

قَرِيبٌ مُجِيبٌ* (هود: ٦١)

² O People! Serve Allah alone. You have no god other than Him. It is He Who established you on earth that you may settle in it [according to His pattern]. So do seek His forgiveness and repent to Him. He is our Lord, near and responsive [to those who call on His mercy] (11:61).

أَرَأَيْتَ الَّذِي يُكَذِّبُ بِالذِّبِّ فَذَلِكَ الَّذِي يَدْعُ الْيَتِيمَ وَلَا يَحِضُّ عَلَى طَعَامِ الْيَتِيمِ

(الماعون: ١-٣)

³ Have you considered the denier of reckoning? It is he who pushes away the orphan, who does not enjoin the feeding of the destitute (107:1-3).

⁴ Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal (Matthew 6:19).

Islamic eschatology did not have a formative history. It was born complete in the Quran, and bears no relation to the situation of its contemporary adherents as in Judaism and Christianity. It was conceived as a moral climax to life on earth, a climax consisting of rewards and punishments.⁵ This world was not to be repeated, as it were, under different auspices and with different lots for men than their present miseries. It was the one and only kingdom, the one and only spacetime. All that ought-to-be, ought to and can happen in it through man's agency. Once it comes to an end, only award and execution of judgement, consummation of reward and punishment can take place. This happens in a way totally other than the ways of this space-time, a transcendent way utterly removed from human knowledge, except the allegorical description of it given us by revelation.

In consequence, the affairs of this world acquire in Islam a significance of utmost gravity and seriousness. History is as crucial for the Muslim as it is for the communist except that the Muslim knows himself, not the Absolute, as responsible for history. The Muslim is confident that what God disposes history to be in the end is the direct consequence of his own conduct in history, on the personal, individual level, as well as on the communal or societal. Whereas for the communist, history is itself the absolute and hence necessary, and for the Christian, history is irrelevant, superfluous and evil, it is for the Muslim the theater, the material, the test, the substance, and the very purpose of creation. It follows that Islam defines its adherent as he who is existentially "serious," who ponders creation and exclaims, "Praise be to You O Lord! for you have not created all this in sport!"⁶ who leads the dangerous life of interfering with the processes of nature and history to the maximum degree possible; and who is willing to be judged by his achievements and failures in history. *Al tawhīd* thus enables the Muslim to see himself as the vortex

⁵ Every page of the Qur'an contains either an element of *targhib* (promise of reward in this life or the hereafter) for good conduct, the good deeds or works of man, or an element of *tarhib* (a threat of punishment, of suffering and of, ill) for misconduct, the works of evil. This continues a tradition of morality as old as man. Islam only paints its scenarios more vividly and strikingly than they were ever described before.

الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ وِجْهًا وَقُعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَطْلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ (آل عمران: ١٩١)

⁶ Righteous are those who are always mindful of Allah in their work, in their rest or in their sleep, who ponder the creation of heaven and earth, and who conclude: O Lord, You have not created all this in vain. To You is the praise. Protect us from the punishment of eternal fire! (3:191).

of history because he is the only vicegerent who can bring the will of God to fulfillment in history.

This is the only perspective capable of explaining the conduct of the Prophet (SAAS) as well as of his companions (RAA) and early generations of Muslims. Muhammad's vision in the cave of Ḥirā' and his communion with divinity through Jibrīl, sent him into Makkah to act and transform men and history. It did not hold him in the state of the experience, nor taught him to desire and seek its own recurrence, nor teach his companions to desire it for themselves. Rather, it commanded him with oppressive clarity to reknead and recut the real world of space and time according to the likeness of the divine pattern. This is probably the ultimate distinction of Muhammad's experience over that of Christianity's Jesus; namely, what while it reaffirmed the personalist values Jesus, it built over them as precondition the vision that to behold God, to love God and be absorbed in Him, to live in Him is nothing unless it actually lifts this world, this history, this matter to the plenum of value which is God's will. It was this plus of religious experience which caused the Prophet (SAAS) to answer his uncle's plea to give up upsetting the *status quo* which Islam had caused in these worlds: "If I were given the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left that I relinquish this task before God gives it victory or I perish in the process, I shall not accept."⁷

Rather than surrender passively to his enemies and make of himself another sacrificial lamb, Muhammad (SAAS) outwitted them, emigrated to Madīnah and in the first week established the first Islamic state and gave it its constitution. His apostleship consists of no more than receipt and conveyance of the message. But the message had a content and Muhammad (SAAS) was the first to fulfill what it demanded. This content dictated to him to interfere in the processes of nature, in the lives of his people and all men, there to bring about the desired transformation. After an illustrious career of leadership on all fronts of life—from the most personal to the military, political and judicial—during which he unified Arabia and mobilized it for the dramatic interference in world-history, he died while a mobilized army stood on the ready to bring Islam to the world outside Arabia.

Caught by the Prophet's vision and his personal fire, the early Muslims plunged headlong into the arenas of history, changing the internal constitution of individuals of all races and cultures, and the patterns of their

⁷ *Supra*, chap. I, n. 37.

daily lives, the cultures of whole societies as well as the maps, contours and skylines of villages, cities and whole empires. ‘Uqbah ibn Nāfi’ ’s famous speech on the shore of the Atlantic in the Maghrib, “O Ocean, if I knew that there is earth beyond you, I would cross you on horseback!” is typical of the spirit of that new generation brought up by Islam. The task the Muslim conceived was global; and he wanted to be sure he had fulfilled it all. The nature of the task was moral and religious, for the Muslim was concerned neither with political office nor with economic advantage. It was an earth governed by a new world order that he sought to establish; an earth where no injustice can escape without meeting its just redress; where ideas are free to travel and men are free to convince and be convinced; and where Islam can call men to the unity of God, of truth and of value. Had history itself not existed before and cried, as it did in the Muslim’s ears, for re-formation, the Muslim would have created it. For, like Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān, having discovered God and the divine will, he had to carve out of the trees a raft with which to cross the seas, to end his individualist isolation, to seek society and the world and to make history.