Understanding Islam
Series Four: Bearers of the Final Message

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Part Ten: Muslims in the contemporary world

The difficulty with talking about the contemporary world is that by definition it is always changing and so anything is likely to be out of date as soon as it is written. It is important to begin by looking at how Islam came into the modern period around the world.

The European Colonization and its aftermath

From the end of the 15th century, the European sea-going powers began to dominate shipping and thus expand their empires through conquest and trade. In time, much of the Muslim world was ruled by the European imperial powers, especially Britain, France, Holland and Russia by the 18th and into the 20th centuries. Great natural riches were taken from the colonised lands and the colonial powers benefited from trade; this contributed to the end of the great Muslim empires. This colonial expansion led to the rise of Europe and fuelled the industrial revolution. The result in many Muslim countries was to leave a sense of emptiness, a decrease in self-respect, a lack of awareness of their histories and a sense of resentment against the colonial masters. Part of this decline also affected their intellectual life and the lack of development of Islamic thought. Only the leisured classes have time to spare for intellectual activity and they were more likely to embrace European education so as to curry favour with their imperial rulers and thus advance themselves in society. Most of those who eventually came to power in the newly independent Muslim lands were the product of this European education.

Muslim communities kept the memory of former times alive and sought to preserve classical Islamic thought for future generations. Four trends can be detected in this situation. The first group, the majority, held fast to the traditional interpretations handed down to them and concentrated on living a pious life, often in rural villages. The second embraced the best of what European thought had to offer and sought to re-interpret the legacy of Islam in modernist ways. The third saw that the decline of Muslim power was caused in part by a departure from the pure foundations of Islamic thought and practice. They sought to purify Islam by returning to the sources and having nothing to do with their European rulers. The fourth held that there could be no true Islam without political power and so set about building revivalist movements that would integrate private piety with guidance for the whole of society, and thus the rise of "political Islam."

Amongst the great reformists of that period were men like Ahmad Sirhindi (d.1624) and Shah Waliullah (d.1762) in India, Mehmet Birgivi (d.1573) and Qadizade Mehmet (d.1635) in Turkey, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897), who taught Islamic

unity in Iran, Egypt, India and Turkey, Abd al-Kader (d.1883) in Algeria, ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d.1792) in Arabia, and Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) in Egypt. They sought to awaken Muslims to their heritage and revive Islam in their societies.

Nineteenth century "liberalism"

The invasion of Egypt by Napoleon's armies in 1798 was a body blow to the Arab world. It opened up for the élite urban classes the opportunity to drink deeply from European thought, culture and political structures. Muslim intellectuals travelled to France and brought back ideas of a free press, constitutional rule and an emphasis on liberal education. This trend stretched into Syria to the east and across the Maghreb to the west. Progress in society was to be gained by embracing European ways of thinking and organising life. This resulted in the translation of European works into Arabic but for the élite, French language and culture was the goal. The drive for modernisation led to economic problems and debt, which resulted in French and British assistance, culminating in Egypt becoming a British colony in 1882.

A similar movement can be seen in British India. After the British used military force to put down the Indian Mutiny (First War for Indian Independence) in 1857, there was no more hope for a return to Mughal power, with the last Mughal Emperor being sent into exile in Burma in 1858. The key "liberal" reaction was led by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), who worked for a rehabilitation of the Muslim community in the sight of the British rulers. He travelled to England for a visit in 1869-70 and came back with a sense that there was much to be commended in the English way of thought and life. He established the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh (later Aligarh University) modelled on an Oxbridge collegiate style and sought thereby to reform educational methods in India. He wanted to take all that was good in European modernity and claim it as conforming to the principles of Islam. Similarly, he wanted to interpret the Qur'an in naturalistic ways.

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and Arab Nationalism

The Ottomans rose to power in 1281 and came to rule much of Anatolia, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East during their height in the 16th century. From 1453, they had their capital at Istanbul (formerly Byzantium and Constantinople). At the time of the 1914-18 War, they sided with the Germans and subsequently lost their Arab lands. This brought about the rise of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (d.1938) who responded to the shame at the loss of the Empire by disbanding the Caliphate in 1924 and forcibly secularising Turkey from then onwards.

The British had made multiple and contradictory promises to various parties during the 1914-18 War. They had promised Arab leaders self-determination if they would rise up and help to defeat the Ottomans. Both the Hashemites and the house of ibn Saud had been promised control of the Muslim Arab heartlands. Meanwhile Lord Balfour, speaking on behalf of the British government, was giving support to the Zionist movement to favour the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine *it being*

clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. In the aftermath of the war, the Egyptians won a degree of autonomy under British rule as a result of their uprising in 1919, whilst the French crushed a similar uprising in Syria in 1925-7.

After the fall of the Ottomans, their former Arab territories were carved up into areas of French and British "influence" by the Sykes-Picot agreement, which in effect drew the map of the contemporary Middle East and installed rulers in various countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. This gave rise to a spirit of Arab nationalism, which came to fruition with the comprehensive defeat of the combined Arab armies in the 1948 war with the newly created State of Israel. In Egypt, the Free Officers took power under Gamal Abdul Nasser in 1952 and established their independent authority by the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956. An attempt was made at Arab unity through the creation of the United Arab Republic in 1958, comprising Egypt and Syria but with the latter being distinctly in a secondary position. The UAR lasted only three years, until 1961, when a group of Syrian generals (including Hafez al-Asad) took power in a military coup. Such military-led governments/dictatorships became endemic, including the rise of Qaddafi in Libya and Saddam Hussain in Iraq. All of them were marked by severe repression of the common people and imprisonment, torture and death for many who wanted to establish another way forward. The line of military rulers in Egypt continued through Sadat and Mubarak, with the likelihood of a return through al-Sissi. The on-going strife in Syria is obvious, with Bashir al-Asad taking over from his father.

The rise of "political Islam"

In the 20th century the struggle for independence from colonialism and the re-invigoration of Islamic learning led to reform movements in Egypt, such as the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, or the Muslim Brotherhood, with which the names of Hasan al-Banna (d.1949) and Sayyid Qutb (d.1966) are associated. They sought to reinterpret Islam and gain political power for a reformed Islamic State. Their efforts were paralleled in India and later Pakistan by Abul A'la Maududi (d.1978) who sought to transform the young Pakistan into what he called a 'theo-democracy.' In Turkey, Saïd Nursi (d.1960) founded the Nurculuk Movement as a spiritual force against secularism.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928 and continued as a grass-roots organisation. After the death of al-Banna, it became a more revolutionary movement under its main theoretician Sayyid Qutb, who was executed under the Nasser government in 1966. During Nasser's time, the Brotherhood was banned and many of its leaders and supporters were imprisoned. During the second half of the 20th century, it "went underground" and sought to serve those most in need in society with the expectation that the day would come when there would be free elections and then the masses would remember who had served them. Things were given a new impetus by the decisive defeat of the Arab forces in the 1967 war with Israel. Now

the spirit was that Arab nationalism had failed to deliver and "Islam is the answer" to development in the future.

Nasser died in 1970 and was replaced by Anwar Sadat. He brought in new policies of opening up to American capitalism and released many of the Brotherhood supporters from prison, although the Brotherhood as an organisation was still banned. The move to foreign investment meant that many of the poor were further impoverished and foreign debt and dependency rose. After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the oil-producing Arab states substantially increased the price of crude oil and thus began the flow of vast riches to those countries. This created the need and money for foreign labour and so many workers from Egypt and other countries went to these more conservative Wahhabi-influenced societies where they imbibed those understandings of Islam and then brought them home on their return. During the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood experienced further oppression and military suppression in Syria.

A crucial date in the formation of the modern Middle East is 1979. It was in this year that Sadat signed the Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty, which was seen by many Arabs as abandoning the rights of the Palestinian people to return to their homeland. It led to Sadat's assassination in 1981. Also in this year, the Ayatollah Khomeini launched the Iranian Revolution. Although this was in a Shi'a context, it demonstrated for the first time in modern history that Islamic religious and political power could be combined to bring in a new form of Islamic government. This transformed the mind-set of those who favoured political Islam from an idealised hope to a real practical reality for which they could strive. In the same year, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and there was a concerted effort by the Western powers to support the internationally recruited Muslim fighters who went there to assist in driving them out of the country. This demonstrated the military might that could be raised in the name of defending Muslims facing oppression. It took ten years for the Soviets to be defeated in Afghanistan but it had shown that Muslim fighters, inspired by Islamic principles, were capable of defeating a super-power. This created a methodology that would be implemented in Bosnia and can be seen at work in Syria today.

President Sadat, styled "the American-leaning Pharaoh" by his enemies, was assassinated in 1981 and replaced by another Egyptian general, Mubarak. This brought in another long period of iron-fisted rule and oppression in a "police state." The urban élite continued to prosper whilst the rural poor were further impoverished. The Arab dictators sought to preserve the *status quo* by passing on their rule to their sons: Qaddafi in Libya, Mubarak in Egypt and al-Asad in Syria can be cited as obvious examples but the trend stretch on into the Maghreb. This provoked two reactions: those who sought political Islam continued to serve those in need and await free elections and young urban people wanted to break free from this undemocratic oppression. The latter movement was fired by the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit-seller in December 2010, thus leading to the "Arab Spring." The former movement profited by the overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood was swept to a landslide victory in the elections that followed. The cycle has again been

set in motion with the return of military rule and the re-outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Two factors are new in the 21st century situation: mass communication and demographics. Through the rise of satellite television and the internet it is now possible for news to be conveyed instantaneously around the world, not just by the ruling powers but also by individuals. We must take seriously the phenomenon of young people in Tahrir Square in Cairo being able to hold up a smart-phone and transmit video footage to the world instantaneously so that armed suppression of the masses can no longer be done out of sight. This not only has an impact on "world opinion" but also profoundly on young Muslims in other countries who can see the suffering of their Muslim brothers and sisters. As a general rule, we can say that two-thirds of Muslims in the world today are aged under thirty-years-old. Many are living in relative poverty and they feel that they have no future in their native countries. At the same time, through electronic media, they are able to see the relative opulence of those who live in the West and so there is a pull to formal and illegal migration that is stronger than in earlier generations. This can be exemplified by those who risk everything to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe; in their estimation, they have nothing to lose.

A wider perspective

The resolution of the communal situation in British India by the creation of the state of Pakistan in 1947 (East Pakistan until the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971 and the modern Pakistan created from the former West Pakistan) has not yet proved itself as the ideal Muslim state. There has been an unresolved tension throughout its history between Pakistan as a "homeland for Indian Muslims" and as an "Islamic State." There have been decades of military rule and a general perception of corruption amongst the political classes and wealthy élite. The demographics are again noteworthy with an expansion from less than 40m at its creation to something around 170m today with the concomitant preponderance of young people with little hope of a better future.

With the rise in more militant expressions of Islam, we have seen marked inter-religious tensions in some Arab countries that have for centuries been multi-religious. The expulsion of Arab Jews after the creation of the State of Israel and the flight of Christians from Palestine, Iraq and Syria can be noted. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim population on earth, which deliberately set itself up at independence as a multi-religious society, there are groups who want to see a more dominant role for their form of Islam. The division of Sudan along largely religious lines must be noted, as must the plight of millions of non-Muslim workers in oil-rich Arab countries. Inter-ethnic conflicts can also take on a religious colouring, as in the Central African Republic. The legacy of communities advantaged through Christian missionaries and western funding to the disadvantage of Muslim communities in the same countries underlies present tensions, especially in parts of Africa.

The transition from European colonial rule to independence was by no means always smooth and peaceful. There were bitter wars of independence, e.g., in Algeria, that still leave their legacy. Often the colonial masters left a situation in which the new ruling classes were predisposed to economic and political close relationships to the advantage of the Europeans and the emerging élite. The colonial rulers generally felt it necessary to leave a legal code behind them for the independent country, which owed more to European law than to the local and religious nature of the independent population. There have been struggles to seek to bring these more into line with the principles of *shari'a*. The nature of international funding and international trade often means that western powers have an on-going major share in the economic lives of countries and the profits from natural resources.

Muslims have become more critical of Western support for corrupt regimes and the activities of various Western powers in Muslim lands have given rise to a suspicion of the West's intentions and a concern over the spread of Western culture and values. Global trading and the advertisement of a consumer-dominated lifestyle have caused many to realise that multi-national companies are often more powerful than developing governments and that they repatriate their profits with limited gain for local people. This runs alongside a desire by many younger Muslims to embrace selectively elements of those lifestyles that they find attractive.

International relations are seen by many to portray double-standards in the implementation of International Law. Dozens of UN Resolutions are seen to go unheeded when they concern the plight of the Palestinians or the population of Kashmir whilst the shaky foundation of a Resolution is seen to be a mandate for war as in the case of Iraq. The internationalisation of domestic conflicts has led to great destabilisation in the case of Iraq and Syria where non-native fighters are supported by rich countries wishing to export their political or religious interests.

Minority Muslim communities

One of the phenomena of the last seventy years is that millions of Muslims have migrated to other countries or, in the case of India, were left behind by Partition. There are now hundreds of millions of Muslims who live as minorities around the world.

Europe

From the 16th century onwards, with the rise of the European age of discovery, which led to trade and thus more contact with Islam, Muslims were to be found in the sea-going nations of Western Europe. They were diplomats, travellers or returned prisoners who had converted, traders or servants brought back by imperial families. In time members of the ruling élites from colonised countries would send their sons to Europe for an education and some of them stayed and settled. The early Muslim communities in Europe were often around sea-ports or in the big cities, such as Cardiff, Marseilles and Venice.

After the 1939-45 war many European countries were in ruins and manpower was short owing to the number of men killed or injured in battle. This was also the beginning of the end of the European colonies and with withdrawal often came sizeable numbers of Muslim citizens, who settled in the European imperial country; the case of Algerians coming to France might be cited as an example. Many in the former colonised countries were desperate for work and with the shortage of labour in Europe, a steady flow of migrant workers arrived to assist in post-war rebuilding. The normal pattern was to draw from former colonies: so Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia for France, the Indian Subcontinent for Britain, and Indonesia and Suriname for the Netherlands. In Germany, migrant workers were recruited from Turkey, with which Germany had long-established ties. Turks and Moroccans especially came to work in other Northern European countries, such as Belgium, Denmark and Sweden. From the 1960s onwards, there was a legal transition from migrant workers to settled immigrant communities, which means that the vast majority of European Muslims are now citizens of a European country and therefore are free to relocate anywhere in the European Union.

Another contributory cause for Muslims coming to Europe has been as refugees fleeing war, poverty or political unrest. The list of countries from which they came is long, including Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Mali, Nigeria, Palestine, Senegal, Somalia, and Sudan, amongst others. Such refugees are to be found in all countries of Western Europe and most, over the years, have received permanent right of residence or citizenship. These Muslim communities are generally statistically younger than the general population and so with family expansion we can expect the number of European Muslims to rise in coming decades. There is likely to be a shortage of people of working age in Europe as this century progresses and so we may expect more Muslims to come and settle as active members of the workforce. In addition there have been significant numbers of Muslim converts in Europe, most through marriage but many after intellectual enquiry and opting for the values of Islam.

North America

There were almost certainly some Muslims who had outwardly converted to Christianity amongst the early Spanish settlers in the Americas but they were absorbed into wider society. A significant number of the African slaves that were brought to the Americas were Muslims but they were forcibly converted to Christianity, although traces of them are found in small pockets and there is a record of at least one group amongst them who were able to write a copy of the Qur'an from memory after their arrival. The descendants of former slaves provide the recruitment ground for the African American Muslim communities, who today number around one-third of American Muslims.

The first migrant group appears to have come from Greater Syria (modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) in the last quarter of the 19th century. They were

significantly added to by more educated political refugees after the 1939-45 war coming mainly from Egypt, Iraq and Palestine as well as those escaping from the Soviet system in Eastern Europe. From the later 1960s onwards there was a steady stream of professional Muslims coming to make a new life in North America. In Canada, these were often coming from former British colonies, including a large Isma'ili community of East African Asians. A significant group of Iranians settled in North America during the second half of the 20th century. In addition there are those who came as war refugees: Afghans, Kurds, Iraqis, Lebanese and Somalis. In the latter part of the 20th century, there was an increase in Islamic practice and commitment, which saw the establishment of a significant number of mosques and other community centres.

Trends in the modern world

A key issue amongst Muslims throughout the modern world is education. The richness and diversity of Islamic learning from earlier generations is not widely known. This can lead to people holding tight to narrow understandings and not allowing the range of opinions on matters on which no consensus has emerged that was typical in earlier societies. This intellectual heritage is being claimed but it takes time to train a sufficient body of scholars for the task across the whole range of academic disciplines. This on-going tradition of Islamic thought is slowly being revived and brought to bear on questions that were unknown until the modern period. By reintegrating Islamic disciplines alongside other areas of study, the breach that all too readily opens between “religious” and “secular” scholarship is being healed progressively, to the benefit of all.

Many developments have taken place around the world in the theory and practice of the education of children and adults in recent decades. This necessarily prompts the question of how to lead new generations of Muslims into exploring and understanding the richness and balance of their faith and heritage. Children growing up and being educated in contemporary societies are accustomed to learn in new ways and through a whole range of educational media. Muslims are faced with developing the appropriate use of these new methodologies and technologies in the education of their own rising generations. The internet and the whole information technology revolution is playing an enormous role in rediscovering the classical traditions, which can lead to some difficulties in making balanced judgements due to the lack of guidance from a learned teacher.

One of the critical developments in the modern world is the education of women. In western countries, girls and boys have equal access to universal education and the number of Muslim women going to university is on a par with and often exceeds the number of men. Throughout the Muslim world, a similar substantial trend in the expansion of female education can be observed. This holds true also for education in the Islamic sciences. Women are accessing the scholarly tools necessary to engage with the sources and intellectual development of Islamic thought with the outcome that they are reading the tradition from their perspective, thus liberating them from the

partial knowledge available to their foremothers mediated through men and allowing them to question received interpretations. They are not only the first teachers of their children but also are contributing insights that will impact on a future generation of scholars. This must be seen as a significant engine of change in future Muslim communities worldwide.

The development of the nation state is a relatively new thing in Muslim history. The decline and break-up of the Muslim empires brings the challenge of finding appropriate ways of governance for the emerging Muslim nations. What political structures are best suited? How are the Islamic principles of equality and individual responsibility before God to be incorporated? What is the responsibility of one nation towards others? What role is there in civil society for traditional institutions, such as sufi orders, endowed charitable foundations and *madrasas*? The huge and growing gulf between rich and poor nations brings challenges for seeking an Islamic solution to issues of globalisation, the displacement of peoples, fair trade and the growing ecological problems (especially global warming) facing the world.

The development of Muslim communities in industrialised societies, whose roots lie outside Islamic culture, brings with it the issue of developing the overarching ethical and cultural norms of Islam in these new contexts. Some of what Muslims have found in the modern world promotes and advances the higher principles of justice, equality and care for all, but other aspects are less compatible with Islamic principles. How are societies to create a space in which Muslims can be faithful to God and a godly way of life in a liberal democracy which is shared with fellow citizens who operate on sometimes significantly different ethical and humanitarian principles? How are the particularities of Islamic codes of conduct to exist in a context of one secular territorial legal system? In a world of sound-bites and fleeting media attention, there is a real problem to create a climate that encourages impassioned reasoned discussion, which promotes an informed context against which questions can be debated and in which the view of the consensual middle ground is not swamped by the clamour of the extremists.

The rise of extremism under the banner of Islam

As we look back through this snapshot of the contemporary situation of Muslims in the world, it is clear that there are historic injustices, vast disparities of wealth and economic, political, military and cultural exploitation – *some* – of those on the losing end of each equation are Muslims but *by no means all* and Muslims *have no monopoly on suffering in the world*. However, we can only understand the rise of extremism against such a background and then see it as one response – a response that, in the judgement of the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars and leaders, is a misguided distortion of Islamic values and teachings. We have seen earlier in this course that indiscriminate killing and the use of terror as a tactic can have no part to play in genuine Islam (see Series III, parts 10 and 11). It is no exaggeration to say that we are living through a time in which there is a struggle going on for the spirit of

Islam. It is a struggle that affects everyone and not just Muslims – the first step in this struggle is to Understand Islam.