

ISLAM AND COMMUNISM

*If the Middle East goes Red it
will be in spite of, not
because of Islam*

by

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IS ISLAM A PREPARATION FOR COMMUNISM?

By MUHAMMAD YAKUB KHAN

“Colonel Nasser, despite the greatest provocation which forced him to seek Russian help, refused to sit in the Kremlin’s lap. Devotion to his faith is a Muslim’s life-breath, and to accept a creed rooted in the denial of God goes against the very grain with him. . . .

“Jesus and Muhammad, so far as the Qur’anic teachings are concerned, are co-workers in the same cause — the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. It should be for the Church to come out of its shell of dogma, to see the identity, both in respect of path and purpose, between the two great faiths”

The all-comprehensiveness of Islam is the only effective challenge to Communism

Islam claims to be an all-comprehensive system. It caters for the needs of the whole of man — body, mind and soul. To look to his daily bread, to make him a good citizen, a good neighbour, a good father, a good husband, is as much its concern as to put him in communion with God. Good government, social justice, sound economy, home life, pursuit of scientific knowledge, even a necessary evil like war — there is no sphere of human activity about which Islam does not give light and guidance.

This all-comprehensiveness, one should have thought, should make it not only a proof against, but the only effective answer to, the challenge of Communism, which aspires to build a social order on the concept of man as a mere producing machine and a consuming animal, denying the very reality of the moral and spiritual aspects of his personality, which make life worth living. This very characteristic, however, a distinguished scholar, Dr. Nabih Faris, of Beirut University, tells us, makes Islam liable to be “swallowed up by Communism”.¹

The process of reasoning by which this conclusion is reached is equally fallacious. Since Islam draws no clear line between the spiritual and temporal, so runs the argument, an over-emphasis on the temporal over the spiritual may “make the transition from Islam to Communism easy and natural”. A bifurcation between the spiritual and the temporal, on the lines of the Christian dictum of “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and unto God the things which are God’s”, it is suggested, would have obviated this danger. The truth of the matter, I venture to think, lies the other way about. One system replaces another only when there is a vacuum in a social order. There lies the only secret of Communist infiltration and penetration. The social iniquities born out of feudalist and capitalist systems which held Europe in their grip during the last century called for a new force to restore the balance. And Communism just walked in. Had the Church not confined its activities to the saving of souls, and stood up to the erring Caesars and financial magnates of the day for violating the Master’s commandments about obligations towards one’s neighbour, ensuring a just and equitable social order, Communism would never have got a foothold in Russia or elsewhere. Islam, by undertaking to give man an equitable, rational, progressive, well-balanced social order, rather than pave the way for Communism, cuts the very ground from under its feet.

As a matter of fact, much of the loss of faith in Islam as a workable system in the modern social set-up towards the close of the last and the beginning of the present century among the Western-educated sections in all Muslim lands was a reaction against the purely other-worldly emphasis of the old school of theologians, who opposed Western sciences and technology, with disastrous consequences. Atatürk in Turkey,

Reza Shah in Iran, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in India, Jamaluddin Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduhu of Egypt, were some of the leaders of Muslim thought who led the revolt against this attitude, emphasizing that Islam was as much a matter of this life as of the next.

At one time a whole wave of revolt against religion swept the intelligentsia of Muslims as a result of the other-worldly attitude which Dr. Faris would thrust on Muslims, as the *raison d’être* of their religion. Iqbal had to devote much of his poetic genius to the eradication of this false attitude which he called monasticism. Much water has since flowed under the bridges, and instead of the wave of frustration and scepticism, Muslims throughout the world of Islam are pulsating with a new faith in Islam as an ideology which answers all the needs of man — social as well as spiritual. The creation of Pakistan on the basis of this ideology is a phenomenon unique in history, testifying to the fact that Islam as a faith and ideology is quite competent to cope with the demands of modern life, without the least risk of compromising its spiritual heritage.

This new faith-wave in Islam as a destiny is so deep and intense that Muslims throughout the world, the classes as well as the masses, loudly talk of Islam as the Third Ideology which alone strikes the golden mean between anti-God Communism and Godless Western secularism. On this issue there is no cleavage whatsoever — much less “sharp cleavage”, as Dr. Faris imagines — among Muslim thinkers like al-Ash’ari, al-Maudoodi, al-Banna, al-Hudaybi, on the one hand, and those he calls “liberals” on the other. They are all agreed that Muslim life in its totality must be reshaped in the light of Islam, which, they believe, has an answer to all the problems of modern life with all its complexities. Their only difference lies on the right of interpretation of that light, as enshrined in the Qur’an and the Sunnah. Since Islam recognizes no priestcraft, the consensus of opinion is that that right must vest in the people, and that explains why the Muslim Brotherhood, the Jama’at-i-Islami of Pakistan and the Fidayeen could not have their way, and had to beat a retreat before the force of public opinion in the politics of their respective countries.

The failures of their endeavours to impose an interpretation of their own on the Muslim mind, even though backed by great skill and scholarship, and up-to-date propaganda technique, debunks the writer’s other conclusion that the freedom of the individual is being sacrificed to the solidarity and welfare of the *Jama’ah*. Solidarity of the *Jama’ah*, no doubt, ranks very high in Islamic values, and must be ensured even at the cost of some restrictions on individual freedom. This kind of limited restriction is of the essence of all corporate, orderly life. But this in no way implies the negation of the freedom of the individual, as suggested by the writer.

It is a complete misreading of contemporary Muslim thought and life to seriously suggest that the present over-emphasis on the temporal connotes any drifting away from

¹ *The Islamic Review* for June 1956, pp. 28-31.

Islam. On the contrary, the restoration of this emphasis is born of a recaptured faith in Islam as a complete and fool-proof code of life, rooted, unlike the half-baked human philosophies or systems, in profound Divine wisdom. It will be no service either to the Democracies or the Muslim world to destroy this new-born conviction of the Muslim mind, which is, indeed, its greatest equipment in the contemporary world of ideological conflicts.

Communism meets the most stubborn resistance from the people in all Muslim countries. The Tudeh Party in Iran is an unlawful body and the Weekh Zalmai Afghanistan is yet a cry in the wilderness. The Azad Pakistan Party of Pakistan could not secure a single seat in the elections. In Egypt, Syria and other Arab countries, the recent pro-Communist swing has been more of a reaction against the pro-Israel policy of the West rather than any love for the Communist creed. The only Muslim country where Communism may be said to have won some political status is Indonesia. The reason there has been that the freedom fight against Dutch imperialism was fought under the colours of Communism. Even there popular sentiment against it is so deep-seated that Muslim parties have refused to co-operate with Sukarno's National Government scheme because of its inclusion of Communist Party representatives. Where is the justification for the alarmist note struck by Dr. Faris that Islam is a preparation for Communism and Muslim countries are on the verge of being swallowed up by the Iron Curtain?

Apart from this identity in point of all-comprehensiveness, Dr. Faris relies upon some other "similarities" between the two systems which, according to him, are likely to make Islam an easy prey to Communism. These to my mind are equally arbitrary, and the conclusions based thereon far-fetched. I would briefly examine them one by one.

Authoritarianism

The first "similarity" pointed out between the two systems is that Islam is as authoritarian in character as Communism. To quote the writer's words:

"The Caliph from earliest times has been the fountainhead of all authority. Obedience to him was obedience to God, disobedience to him carried, besides the most extreme penalty the State could mete out to offenders, the penalty of hell-fire in the hereafter."

This sweeping verdict on the Islamic conception of State-craft is based on the flimsiest possible data — the declaration of an Abbasid Caliph al-Nasir on the appointment of his vizier which is quoted as follows:

"Muhammad Ibn Barr al-Qummi is our representative. . . . Therefore he who obeys him obeys us ; and he who obeys us obeys God, and him God will cause to enter Paradise. On the other hand, he who disobeys our representative disobeys us, and he who disobeys us disobeys God, and God shall cause him to enter hell-fire."

It is rather surprising that of all the Caliphs, the writer's choice should have fallen on this particular one. As a scholar of Islam he could not be unaware of the fact that Muslims throughout the centuries have looked upon the first four Caliphs as the only standard patterns of the Islamic way ; that Caliphate, in the course of time, degenerated, in most cases, to the lowest depths, and, as such, cannot, in all fairness, be quoted as a correct model of the Islamic State. What made him lose sight of so many highlights of the history of Islam, which should serve as models and beacons to the most democratic of modern democracies. Take, for instance,

the example of the very first Caliph, Abu Bakr, and his very inaugural address to the people:

"I have been made a ruler over you, although I am in no way superior to you. If I do right, help me ; if I go wrong, put me right."

Can history point to a higher principle and example of a democratic conception of State?

Let us come to the second Caliph, 'Umar. A common man from the congregation in the course of his Friday sermon stands up and says he would not let him proceed until he has cleared his position on a particular point of his public conduct. The Caliph, rather than take offence, has the critic's doubts removed there and then.

The third Caliph, 'Uthman, became the target of a regular agitation against what some people considered objectionable in the administration of the State, which, ultimately, led to his assassination.

The fourth Caliph, 'Ali, once found himself in the dock in the Qadhi's court on a plaint by a common man, and when in the course of the proceedings the Qadhi addressed him as Amir al-Muminun, he felt very uneasy about it. The use of that honorific appellation, he later told the Caliph, was not in keeping with the canons of justice, which must treat both the parties to a dispute on a par.

Can history produce any examples of such a high standard of the relationship between the rulers and the ruled? It was not for nothing that the great Indian leader and reformer, Mahatma Gandhi, issued a directive to the Congress Ministries when they, for the first time, took office, always to keep Abu Bakr and 'Umar as models of what rulership, dedicated to the people's good, should be like.

These are just a few instances picked at random. Islamic history is full of how the mightiest kings were called sternly to account for their conduct. Iqbal, the great poet of the East, has immortalized this democratic aspect of Islam by depicting the episode when a Turkish Caliph, who had amputated the hands of a mason so that he might not reproduce the work of art he (the mason) had done for him for someone else, was condemned by the Qadi to undergo similar amputation, saying that in Islam (to use the poet's words):

Khun-e Shah rangin-tar az Mi'maar nest

("A king's blood is no redder than that of a mason.")

Nothing could be further from the whole spirit of Islam which teaches that "a word of truth on the face of a mighty ruler is the highest of Jihad" to vest an individual, however high or sanctified, with the absolute powers implied in the hand-picked quotation of the writer of the article. The Qur'an itself emphatically lays down that it is open to a Muslim to differ with a ruler, and refer all such disputes to the adjudication of the Qur'an and the Sunnah (4:59). It is perhaps worth while remarking here that one does come across this kind of attitude in Christianity. Whereas Jesus very rightly taught obedience to the Caesar only to the limited extent of what was due to the Caesar, viz., the taxes, etc., St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans (XIII, 1-7) taught the kind of unquestioning, unlimited obedience attributed to the Caliph al-Nasir, saying:

"There is no power but of God ; the powers that be are ordained of God ; whoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God."

Is dignity of man unknown to Islam ?

The article, however, not only convicts the Islamic system of being authoritarian, it goes much further, and tells

us in all seriousness that such Western values as "the dignity and freedom of man" are altogether unknown to Islam. To quote its words:

"It should be remembered that the stubborn resistance to Communism in the West is rooted in a specific philosophy, based on an absolute belief from which all other beliefs and values emanate, namely, the belief in the dignity and freedom of man. No such philosophy is discernible in the writings of modern Muslim writers as yet."

One wonders where and how the writer formed this impression. The whole essence of the message of Islam consists in the sanctity of human personality and the birthright of man to complete freedom of thought, conscience and expression. The Qur'an speaks of man as the vicegerent of God on earth, and makes freedom of his mind from all forms of shackles and inhibitions the cornerstone of any social system worth living under. As to modern writers the article speaks of, one wonders which writers the distinguished writer has read. Iqbal is by common consent one such leading thinker whom every Orientalist with any pretensions to knowing the Oriental mind must know. It may be said without exaggeration that the whole of his poetry and philosophy revolves round just one keynote, viz., the infinite potentialities of the human ego. It will be impossible to surpass Iqbal's imagery of the high destiny of man, even in the following one stray line, picked out at random:

"Urooj-e Adam-e Khaki se Anjum sehme jata hain
"Kih ye tuta huwa Tara Mah-e kamil na ban
jaye"

("The stars are feeling a shiver at the rise of this man of clay,

"Lest this fallen star should become a full moon.")

One whole book of Iqbal's Persian poetry, *Asrar-i-Khudi* (The Secrets of the Human Ego), translated into English by Professor R. A. Nicholson, is devoted to the theme of unlimited possibilities of the human mind.

Predestination

In support of his contention that Islam is an authoritarian creed, tending to reduce man, like Communism, to an automaton, the writer falls back on the doctrine of predestination vs. free will, which, under Hellenic and Magian influences, led to bitter controversies among medieval Muslim thinkers and theologians, dividing them into two camps known as the *Jabriyyah* and *Qadriyyah* — one holding that man was a mere tool in God's hand, and whatever he did had been pre-ordained by God's decree, the latter controverting that view on the ground of the obvious absurdity of the position that God should first compel man to do evil, and turn round on him and call him to account for it. They, therefore, considered man to be a free agent. This is a much beaten subject, and it is hardly fair to rake up these medieval controversies, in order to use them as a stick to beat Islam with. It would be hardly fair to judge Christian standards by what was said or done by Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages.

As a matter of fact these controversies in the house of Islam were themselves the importations of alien influences — *Isra'iliyyat* and *Majusiyyat* — which the masses of new converts brought with them. Fair criticism would try to grasp the general trend of Islamic teachings, as reflected in the basic, fundamental principles laid down in the Qur'an, and

the practical example in the daily life of the Prophet and the society he built up. Faith and good deeds — this is the main burden of the Qur'anic teachings. Time and again it has been proclaimed that Paradise is only for those who believe in God and do good deeds. "Man shall have naught except what he strives after" runs one categorical declaration. "God does not alter the state of a people, unless they themselves alter what is wrong with them," is another very clear warning. "Whoever does an iota of good shall get his reward; whoever does an iota of evil shall reap the bitter fruit thereof," is another declaration.

To ignore these emphatic unequivocal declarations, and seize upon texts here and there containing words liable to be misconstrued when torn out of the general Qur'anic context, is hardly the correct rule of interpretation. The Qur'an has repeatedly said that God has shown the way through the light of revelation, and it is for man to accept that way or reject it. God does not force His Will on him one way or the other. The issue has indeed been clinched when it is said that if God were at all to thrust His will on men, He would have done so on the side of guiding them all along the right path (The Qur'an, 6:149, 150). He abstains from coercion even in the direction of right, to say nothing of forcing man to evil.

This is, however, not the place to discuss all aspects of this big problem. Suffice it to say that the Prophet's own daily life gives the lie to all fatalistic interpretations read by hair-splitting theologians or carping critics into Qur'anic texts. A man whose life was an incessant struggle against the forces of opposition, who did all the planning, put in the maximum effort to achieve his objectives, could not be the founder of a fatalistic creed. A fatalist who believes that what is written is written, and must come to pass, would sit back with folded hands, rather than play the role of a most consummate nation builder, statesman, soldier, general and ruler that the Prophet Muhammad was. Islam is the direct negation of the theory of fatalism, making man the architect of his own destiny, as is beautifully summed up by Iqbal in the line:

"'Amal se Zindaqi banti hai Jannat bhi Jahannam
bhi,

"Ye khaki apni Fitrat men na nuri hai na Nari
hai."

("It is one's actions that make life a paradise or hell,
"By nature this product of clay is neither good nor
evil.")

Sovereignty of God

Another argument advanced to depict Islam as something rigid, something which stifles the flowering of the human personality, is that since sovereignty, in an Islamic State, is vested in God, it is not open to the citizen either to legislate or issue commands in his own right. This is hardly a presentation of the whole truth. A Muslim no doubt is not free to do anything against God's will — I doubt that any good Christian would care to claim a different attitude for his religion. Complete self-surrender to God's will is indeed the essence of Islam — and, I dare say, of Christianity. How does it follow that this attitude cuts across individual freedom to legislation, when it is open to every man to interpret God's will to the best of his own light? The Qur'an clearly lays down that "the State must be administered (by Muslims) by consultation among themselves". What else is democracy? A glance at the Pakistan Constitution should have enabled the writer to see that there is no inherent incompatibility

between God's sovereignty and freedom of legislation to the individual. Whereas it vests sovereignty in God, the implementation of God's will is left to the people. The only limitation God's sovereignty implies on individual legislation lies in closing the door on any legislation connoting the denial of God or the spiritual values of life. That, by itself, should give an Islamic State immunity against Communist infiltration — rather than make it an easy prey to it, as the argument makes out. Unlike a secular State where the State can overnight turn Red, if Communists capture the legislature (as in the Indian State of Kerala during the recent elections), a State rooted in God's sovereignty rules out any such eventuality. The very reformist movements of Hasan Banna, Abul A'la Maudoodi and others whom the writer quotes in his support will be to the forefront in any fight against Communism. Indeed, their writings have openly refuted all allegations of Communist leanings against them, and declared that in the implementation even of their political programmes they would have no truck with Communist organizations. Even Colonel Nasser, despite the greatest provocation which forced him to seek Russian help, refused to sit in the Kremlin's lap. Devotion to his faith is a Muslim's life-breath, and to accept a creed rooted in the denial of God goes against the very grain with him.

From fatalism to revolutionaryism

In the very next breath, however, the article strikes a self-contradictory note, when it describes Islam as a revolutionary force, as much as Communism. Both systems, we are told, deny the doctrine of original sin, and aim at creating Utopias of their own, as a panacea for all human ills. From fatalism to revolutionaryism is a big jump, and it is difficult to understand how the writer can paint two such glaringly inconsistent pictures of Islam — a rigid, stagnant, authoritarian creed which chokes up free thinking, initiative and endeavour, on the one hand, and a revolutionary force capable of smashing the present social order and building up a new and better one of its own. It is the strangest argument indeed to see in the absence of the doctrine of original sin in both Islam and Communism a common link between the two systems. The *Hadith* he quotes in support of the absence of original sin — viz., that everyone is born with a sound nature, it is his parents who make him a Jew, a Christian or a Magian — strikes at the root of predestination.

Suppression of reason

The article also rakes up another medieval controversy in Islam as to the relative positions of *'aql* (reason) and *naql* (authority), to draw the conclusion that the free play of reason in relation to authority "is equally negated by Islam and Communism". Even a casual reader of the Qur'an would find a repeated appeal to reason to see and verify the truths of religion. *Taqleed* (the blind following of authority) has been denounced as a characteristic of dumb, driven cattle. Are those who walk with their heads bent low (as cattle) alike to those who walk upright, asks the Qur'an? The very fact of the rise of a controversy between *'aql* and *naql* shows that in Islam reason was considered competent to sift, accept or reject what was handed down on authority.

Islam is perhaps the only religion which makes reason the touch-stone of all truth. Even non-material verities of religion such as soul, revelation, death, resurrection, life-after-death, Heaven and Hell, are made intelligible to human

understanding as far as possible within the straightjacket of sense-perceptions, by drawing upon similes, metaphors and allegories. There might arise situations where reason might find itself at sixes and sevens to see right from wrong. In all such cases, a Muslim would no doubt accept the light and guidance of revelation — which choice in itself would be an act of reason. In all such cases of transcending complexities, revelation, in a Muslim's life, plays the role of a healthy brake on the possible vagaries of reason. This by no means implies the mutilation of reason, or the fostering of an irrational, slavish frame of mind. In relation to Communism as well, this supremacy of revelation in moments of doubt and difficult decisions should be a Muslim's strongest shield, rather than his vulnerable point.

Where the danger really lies

The only point advanced by the writer in support of his contention which has force is the attitude of the West towards Muslim countries throughout the centuries, including modern colonialism. He is perfectly right in thinking that to get rid of Western domination, Muslims would "make league even with the devil". That is, however, quite a different thing from saying that as an ideology Islam is more akin to the Communist rather than the Democratic way. If pro-Russian trends are noticeable in some Muslim countries, it is in spite of Islam, not on account of it, as the writer would have us believe. It is entirely in the nature of a reaction against Western colonialism, which is still digging its toes in some parts of Dar-al-Islam. The Arab countries are after all not far wrong when they say that their immediate danger lies in Western colonialism, not Communism. How can they forget that the live bomb of Israel planted in their very heart has its wires in the hands of the West? For them the choice between the Democracies and Russia is a case of the devil they know and the devil they do not know. The fate visited upon Muslims behind the Iron Curtain could have served as a warning to them against any flirtation with Communism, but they are in blissful ignorance of it. The little news that trickles through even brings stories of big development projects in the Central Asian Soviet Republics which, previously, presented vast barren tracts. These stories, when they reach the medieval bazaars of Kabul, cannot but bring water to the mouths of the Afghans who, in this age of freedom and human rights, are still groaning under a medieval dynastic rule. The same is the case in most of the Middle East countries where, thanks to the outmoded political institutions, poverty, ignorance and disease stalk the length and breadth of the countries. The stories of development and economic prosperity across their borders cannot but make the common man look up to Communism for deliverance. Poverty and depression are the ideal breeding ground for the germs of Communism, and Muslims, despite their aversion to that Godless creed, may have to resort to it — even though as a lever to get rid of their miserable life-conditions. These outmoded political and economic institutions are believed, rightly or wrongly, to owe their survival to the patronage of the erstwhile Colonial Powers. Western colonialism is gone from most of these countries, but Western influence is still considered to be the determining force in the shape of things obtaining there. Instead of backing the dark horse of feudal elements, the democracies' influence must be directed towards fostering truly democratic processes. The first item on the Eisenhower Doctrine implementation plan must be to see to it that the people, rather than princes, loom large in the political pictures of their countries.

Possible trump card

The worst danger, however, lies in what the writer has squeezed in the last few lines, viz., Communism donning a turban and a robe, quoting the Qur'án, and making the hammer and sickle look more like a crescent. It would be nothing surprising if, when the inter-*bloc* conflict reaches a crucial head, the Kremlin, to win over the world of Islam, should play this last trump card and extol Islam as the highest and truest exposition of what Karl Marx really had in mind.

Islam, as a faith, can never go to Communism. But there

is nothing to prevent Communism going to Islam. This calls more than ever before for closer understanding between Islam and Christianity on the religious level. The Medieval Church attitude which made the two drift apart must give place to a dispassionate, rational assessment of their common origin, common values and common destiny. Jesus and Muhammad, so far as the Qur'anic teachings are concerned, are co-workers in the same cause — the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. It should be for the Church to come out of its shell of dogma, to see the identity, both in respect of path and purpose, between the two great faiths.

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