A Beginner's Guide to Militant Islam

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Recent events in Egypt and Algeria, as well as the continuing difficulties of Christians in Iran and the Sudan, have returned the topic of Islamic militancy to Western newspapers. Concern for the situation of world Christianity requires of Catholics some grasp, however non-specialist, of where such militancy comes from and whither it is going. The 1994 Roman Synod of the Catholic churches of Africa was much exercised by the problem, though to judge from the reported speeches of the bishops, few had more to recommend than 'dialogue'—that contemporary Vaticanesque panacea. To understand why the revolutionary Islam characteristic of a major segment of the Muslim world in the late twentieth century aims at nothing less than the comprehensive take-over of the civil societies where Islam is present, one sine qua non is an acquaintance, at least in broad outline, with the origins and development of the Islamic faith as a whole.

The Origins of Islam

Islam was born in the Arabian peninsula among Bedouin Arabs tribal in social structure, polytheistic in religion. Unwritten laws of tribal authority and custom governed Bedouin society. In what has been called 'tribal humanism', the virtues and rules it inculcated for guiding human behaviour were ascribed to no divine source but functioned, rather, as the distillation of tribal experience and tradition. In pre-Islamic Arabia, the threat of group vengeance underpinned a rudimentary practice of justice, unenlightened by much sense of moral responsibility, whether personal or communal. No eschatology of post-mortem reward or punishment appears to have been known. The religion of Arabia, indeed, reflected its society. The many gods and goddesses served as protectors of individual tribes, their spirits associated with such sacred objects as trees, stones, springs and wells. At Mecca, the most important oasis town, a cube-shaped building, the Kaba, was regarded as the central shrine of these tribal patron deities, three hundred and sixty of whom were venerated collectively at a great annual pilgrimage-cum-fair.

The pre-Muslim inhabitants of Arabia also knew of a supreme high God, Allah, whose name means 'the God'. The creator and sustainer of life, he was, however, remote from everyday customs and the object of

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neither cult nor ritual. Three goddesses, believed to be his daughters, were associated with him. Arabian religion was quite definitely, then, a polytheism, though in both the far north and the extreme south of the peninsula could be found Arabs who were, by contrast, monotheists, whether in unitarian guise, as Jews, or in trinitarian form, as Christians.

It is important to note that, at the time Mohammed was born—c. 570 A.D.—this tribal society, with its religion, was experiencing a painful straining of its internal cohesion. This was the consequence of the fast accelerating transformation of the Bedouin Arabs from a nomadic into a sedentary people, and the resultant emergence of such cities as (precisely) Mecca. New wealth, the rise of a commercial oligarchy and more marked differentiation into social classes: all this began to undermine the traditional system of Arab tribal values, and the way of life, and social security, they afforded. From the beginning—and in sharp contra-distinction to Christianity in this regard—Islam regarded itself as a divinely inspired provision not only of new religious and ethical truth but also of *a new social and political order.*

Who, then, was Mohammed? He was the son of a trader, orphaned at the age of six, but rising to become the steward or business manager for the caravans of a wealthy widow, whom he later married. He appears to have enjoyed a reputation for good judgment and trustworthiness, qualities complemented by a reflective nature that lead him to retreat at intervals to a cave, some miles north of Mecca, where, in long periods of solitude, he contemplated his life and the ills of society, seeking greater insight. Here in the month of Ramadan, 610, on an evening Muslims call 'The Night of Power and Excellence', Mohammed received the first of numerous allegedly divine revelations. A heavenly intermediary, later identified as the angel Gabriel, commanded him to 'recite'. Mohammed replied that he had nothing to recite. But finally, after repeated bewildered pleadings, the words came to him:

> Recite in the name of your Lord who has created,
> Created man out of a germ cell—
> Recite for your Lord is the Most Generous One who has taught by the pen,
> Taught man what he did not know![1]

The messages continued over twenty-two years until 632, and were subsequently collected and written down (Mohammed himself being illiterate) in the *Koran*, whose name means 'The Recitation'. At first Mohammed was reluctant to make known these 'revelations'. He feared that the messenger might be demonic, and he himself rejected as one possessed—the starting point of Salman Rushdie's novels about Islamic origins, *The Satanic Verses*.

Such fears were not unfounded for, to begin with, Mohammed's

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mission met with fierce resistance. Why? First of all, his denunciation of polytheism and his insistence that Allah was the only God, with whom no other could be associated, both upset the traditional beliefs of his hearers, and threatened the lucrative pilgrimage centre at Mecca where he was living. Secondly, his message included a rhetoric favouring 'social justice'. His anathematisations of usury, of the exploitation of orphans and widows, and of the neglect, on the part of the rich, of obligations to the poor, did not endear Mohammed to the ruling élites. But thirdly, and most importantly, Mohammed claimed not only prophetic authority but also, based on this authority, *a right to political leadership*. Indeed, he insisted that all true believers belonged by rights to a single universal community, transcending tribal or other bonds, and submitted to his ultimate direction.

The early development of Islam

In 622 Mohammed, still under a cloud at Mecca, was invited to arbitrate in a dispute between tribes at Medina, a city some two hundred miles to the north. His journey there, or 'migration', the *hijra*, which the Islamic calendar takes as its year 1, marks the turning-point in Mohammed's fortunes. At Medina, Mohammed succeeded in establishing his own leadership, thereby creating the first Islamic community-cum-State: for this was a new religion and a new political order rolled into one. There Mohammed issued a charter setting up a community whose primary identity and bonds of unity were those of a common religious faith.

From Medina, Mohammed launched an attack on Mecca, and in 624, at a place called Badr, he defeated the Meccan army. Muslims regard the Battle of Badr as endowed with a unique significance. In the first and most decisive encounter of the forces of Islamic monotheism with the followers of ignorance and unbelief, God assisted his own soldiers to victory. Throughout subsequent history, Muslims have appealed to this battleground as the symbol of *jihad*, the sacred struggle: most recently, in the Egyptian-Israeli war of 1973, whose Egyptian code-name was 'Operation Badr'.

Once in possession of Mecca, Mohammed found it comparatively easy to consolidate his hold on the rest of Arabia, by a combination of military and diplomatic means. By 632, the year of his death, this conquest—the incorporation of the peoples of the Arabian peninsula into the Islamic *umma*, or community, was complete.

The faith of the community

Before looking at the subsequent development of Islam, something more needs to be said about the teaching and the religious-political community thus established. Since Mohammed was simultaneously prophet, ruler, military commander, chief judge and lawgiver, not only was the *Koran*

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authoritative for Islam. The practice of Mohammed, his example (*sunna*), had to be taken as the norm for communal life, which it was by way of reports or traditions (*Hadith*) about what the founder had done and directed. (Many of the latter, it should be said, are treated as legendary by Western scholars.) The *Koran* and the *Sunna*, the Recitation and the prophet's Example, became the two principal sources of the *Sharia*, the Law of Islam, though they were supplemented both by appeal to the consensus of the community, following a saying of Mohammed, 'My community will never agree on an error', and by analogical reasoning, furnishing as this could rules for one situation by reference to the principles underlying the rules found in the authoritative sources for some other situation.

The faith of this religio-political community was a monotheism which saw itself as essentially a purification of the two monotheistic religions known to Mohammed himself: Judaism and Christianity. According to Mohammed, as polytheists the Arabs were living in ignorance of Allah, *the* God, and his will, as revealed by his prophets Adam, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. This was culpable of them, for Arabs were descended from Abraham through Ismail, Abraham's son by Hagar—rather than through Jacob, his son by Sarah, the Jacob whose other name was Israel, the ancestor of the Jews. Mohammed understood Islam, therefore, not as a completely new beginning, but rather as a restoration of the true faith by an act of total surrender or submission (*islam*) to Allah, and the implementation of his will as revealed in the last prophet—Mohammed himself. The God who showed his hand in nature and history also disclosed his face in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, but, unfortunately, Jews and Christians distorted his revelation. This the Jews did by claiming for themselves the status of a uniquely chosen people, and the Christians by making Jesus into the Son of God, and thus committing the one unforgivable sin of idolatry, associating a pseudo-God with the only true God, Allah.

Mohammed was disappointed when Jews and Christians failed to rally to his reformation, with its supreme Scripture, the *Koran*—regarded as qualitatively superior to the Bible in that it is the eternal, uncreated, literal Word of God, sent down from heaven, a book pre-existent to the creation of the world and co-existent with God, even in its Arabic language. This supreme Scripture reveals a God both just and merciful, and the mission he gives to true believers to be his servants and spread his rule.

Muslims constitute the new community of believers who are to be an example to other nations. As the *Koran* says:

> We made you an *umma* justly balanced, that you might be witness over against the nations...[2]

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and again:

> You are the best community evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong.[3]

The Koran envisages a society whose belief and action are inseparably joined, with worship and devotion affecting private and public life equally, and where authoritative prescriptions lay down the fundamentals of a new social order, including such aspects as marriage, divorce, inheritance, theft, fornication, murder, false contract, usury, and the hoarding of wealth.

The subsequent development of Islam

None of this was lost on Muslims after the death of their founder. The wars of conquest on which Muslims embarked were regarded as an opening of the way, *fath*, for Islam. The speed with which they established their supremacy throughout the Middle East seemed a miraculous validation of the truth of Islam's claims, as Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Persia and Egypt submitted to the Muslim advance, to be joined soon after by other lands, extending the boundaries of the Muslim empire to Morocco and Spain in the West, and across central Asia to India and Indonesia in the East. But, owing to the prophet's rôle as not only messenger of God but also political leader, his death, unaccompanied as this was by any provision for succession, faced the Islamic community with a political crisis never fully resolved.

The longest lasting form which the succession to Mohammed took was the Caliphate. The Caliph, appointed at first by a process of consultation among Mohammed's closest disciples, and later by hereditary right, was the head of the community of believers. However, the appointment of the fourth Caliph, Ali, whose supporters were called Shiites, *Shiat-u-Ali*, the party of Ali, led to a permanent cleavage within Islam. The Shiites held that Mohammed had designated Ali (his son-in-law) as his successor, and intended the 'commander of the faithful' to be always of Ali's family and line. With Ali's murder in 661, the Shiites established their own succession, supporting, over against the Caliph of the main body of Muslims, now termed Sunni, a supreme Imam or Teacher, of whom they recognise eleven, all told. The twelfth Imam they regard as not having died but as having been divinely 'hidden'. This occluded Imam will, they believe, return so as to organise the final victory of Islam at the end of time. Meanwhile, authority devolves, for Shiites, on clerical theologians (also called imams) who represent the teaching of the temporarily occluded Grand Imamate in the interim: hence the present governmental system of Iran. Both groups, the Sunni and the Shia, agree nonetheless in regarding the period of Mohammed and his early

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companions as normative for all subsequent Muslim society, and the necessary reference point for all Islamic revival and reform.

Under the Caliphate, based successively at Damascus, Baghdad and finally Istanbul, Islamic jurisprudence developed the early legal elements in the sources into an elaborate structure of administrative and criminal law, governing in principle all areas of life. The *Sharia* is believed to be God's law for all mankind, since, in the final analysis, God is the sole legislator for the world. To break the law is simultaneously a crime and a sin, a transgression against society and against God, and the guilty are subject to punishment both in this life and the next.

By the mid-seventeenth century, however, not only had Islamic military and missionary expansion come to a halt. The fabric of the Islamic polity itself seemed to be crumbling. The Caliphate, now held by the Ottoman sultans, was incapable of extending its authority over the two competing Sunni empires, that of the Moghuls in India, and of the Safavids in Iran. Furthermore, all three polities were undergoing a slow but steady disintegration. In the nineteenth century, this process speeded up as European powers, themselves committed in various degrees to Christianity, and given economic and technological muscle by the Industrial Revolution, began what seemed their inexorable encroachments on the vast global space denominated by the later twentieth century Western intelligentsia the 'Third World'.

The resultant shock to Islam, which found itself, for the first time in history, reduced to a position of subordination and dependency, produced by way of reaction a many-faceted movement of revival. The 'Militant Islam' of my title is its most striking form. Whereas some more moderate forms of the revival—Islamic modernism—accepted elements of Western constitutional law and economic arrangements, the more radical kind insisted on the uncompromising rejection of everything that originated outside Mohammed and the seventh century community. All non-Islamic accretions or innovations must be treated as corrupting infiltrations, and those Muslim religious establishments which have given them house and home be either purified or overthrown. In the later twentieth century it is this militant Islamic revivalism which is in the ascendant in much of the Muslim world, while its more accommodationist, modernist competitor is widely discredited.

Why? The main reasons appear to be twofold. First, the moderates lacked credibility in that they could so easily be represented as speaking for Western-educated or Western-oriented rulers and political élites. For example, feminist movements looked like organisations of upper-class women who wished to discard the veil so as to adopt Western dress and life-style. According to the radicals, Muslims could only remain faithful

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by rejecting Western secularism and materialism outright, and returning solely to Islam, whose perfection makes for assured guidance. For the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, or the Jamaat-i-Islami, 'Islamic Society', in India, the separation of religion from the State in Western nations represents the inherent fallacy of secularism, preparing the way for the disintegration of the moral order of society.

Secondly, in the 1970s, a variety of political factors gave the radicals fresh influence. These would include both particular events, like the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967-1968 and 1973, the oil embargo of 1973, the Iranian revolution of 1978-1979, and also more general states of affairs, like the apparent failure of pro-Western Muslim governments to meet the socio-economic needs of their populations, and a renewed quest by the intelligentsia for a deeper rooting in the Islamic past. Perhaps the most potent events were the loss of East Jerusalem, the third holiest city in Islam, to the Israelis, and the Iranian revolution on which the Islamic Student Association of Cairo University commented:

> The Iranian revolution represents the first breach in the wall of the secularism...The Islamic peoples rejected it and began to set up the rule of God. Secularism is a call to separate religion from the State and to prohibit Islam from interfering in politics or in the affairs of government. It is the perpetual resort of those idolatrous rulers who transgress limits set by God and paralyze his *Sharia*.[4]

The distinctive outlook of Militant Islam

Can we sum up the ideological *Weltanschauung* of militant Islam? First, Islam is a total and comprehensive way of life, covering society, politics and law. Secondly, the renewal of society requires an Islamic religio-political and social revolution. Thirdly, to restore God's rule, Western-inspired civil codes should be replaced by Islamic law. Fourthly, science and technology must be subordinated to Islamic beliefs and values so as to guard against Westernisation and secularisation. Fifthly, those nominally Muslim governments which do not accept these principles are illegitimate, and their members and supporters, in effect, unbelievers. Sixthly, struggle, *jihad*, against unbelief and unbelievers is a religious duty. The army of God is locked in holy warfare with the army of Satan, whose vanguard is Western (mainly American) and Eastern (mainly Russian) imperialism, together with Zionism. Lastly, owing to the connexions of Christians and Jews with such imperialism and Zionism, militants may maintain that the latter groups can no longer, as once traditional, be treated with reverence as 'peoples of the Book', but must be suspect as potential participants in a world-wide conspiracy against Islam. These seven points underlie the policies of, for instance, the radical Shiite organisations, Hezbollah and

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Islamic Jihad, in the Lebanese civil war.

In most Muslim States, citizens may hold any office, regardless of their faith. However, this Western (and, basically, secular and liberal) approach is increasingly contested. Non-Muslims, it is said, cannot appropriately occupy governmental, military, judicial or legislative positions, since these involve responsibility for formulating an Islamic philosophy of civil society to which, by definition, they cannot be committed. Non-Muslims should exercise only a restricted rôle in properly constituted Islamic society.

A Catholic Christian response

A Catholic Christian response to all this would naturally involve, firstly, charity towards all individual followers of Islam, and, secondly, stimulated by the challenge of Islamic militancy, a clearer perception both of how the Christian faith agrees with Islam in some respects (see the Declaration *Nostra aetate* of the Second Vatican Council) and of how it differs, and remains unique and transcendent (see the Decree *Ad Gentes* of the Second Vatican Council). In the later patristic and early mediaeval periods, *The Parable of the Pearl*, by the Nestorian patriarch Timothy, and pope Gregory VII's letter to the Hammadid ruler al-Nasir, exemplify eirenic yet doctrinally confident attitudes to Islam.[5] But the peculiar quality of militant Islam is that it demands of us a response in a particular sense: namely, in terms of a theologically based political ethics.

It is widely believed nowadays that Catholics were committed by the Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, on religious liberty, to what is basically that Western, liberal and even secular view of the relation between religion and civil society rejected by all Muslims save a few Westernising Islamic modernists: namely, that the State as such has no religious duties or competence, and that a religious body can ask of it only the freedom to pursue a spiritual mission as one grouping among many in the ideological market-place. This is, in all essentials, the nineteenth century Liberal ideal of 'a free Church in a free State'. That the present-day Catholic Church has been belatedly (at the Council) converted to this standpoint is generally credited by the Council's friends and foes alike. The belief that the historic Churches have abandoned all aspiration to construct or conserve 'Christendom societies', and even to claim a public relevance for their religious doctrines, encourages Muslims with a 'forward' policy in Western societies to press the counter-claims of the Islamic *umma*: on the ground that, being now essentially secular, and hence Godless, such societies are effectively spiritual and ethical *vacua* which Islam may one day hope to fill.

However, even a cursory reading of the Conciliar Declaration on

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Religious Liberty shows that the Council intended to adopt no such classical liberalism. The preamble of the text states clearly that:

> God himself has made known to mankind the way in which men are to serve him...This one true religion subsists in the Catholic and apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men.[6]

What religious freedom, rightly understood, concerns, is, therefore, simply (but importantly) 'immunity from coercion in civil society'. Accordingly, the Declaration promised to

> leave untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men *and societies* [italics added] toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ.[7]

The Council document goes on to elaborate the philosophical, biblical and doctrinal reasons why religious freedom, seen as following from the God-given dignity of the human person, should be recognised in the constitutional structure of society, and thus become a civil right within what the Declaration cautiously terms 'due limits'.

Thus the Council simultaneously maintained continuity with the traditional understanding that there can—and should—be such a thing as a Christian State, a civil society where orthodox Christianity is the only recognised public doctrine, yet broke fresh ground in adding to this the very important rider that even—or especially—within the legal structure of such a Christendom society space must be created for dissenting groups who do not accept the validity of the Judaeo-Christian revelation in its Catholic (or perhaps any) form. It is because a liberalising interpretation of *Dignitatis humanae* has gained a false status of self-evidence that more recently (in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* promulgated in 1992) the magisterium has intervened to set the record straight. There we read that decisions in and for civil society cannot be made without at least implicit reference to a metaphysical vision of man and his destiny. Furthermore:

> Only the divinely revealed Religion has clearly recognised in God, the Creator and Redeemer, the origin and destiny of man. The Church invites political powers to refer their judgments and decisions to this inspiring Truth about God and what Man.[8]

The Catholic view is not so much at the antipodes from the Islamic, then, as might at first appear.

Simultaneously, however, Catholic Christendom is now possessed—

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as unfortunately in the Western Middle Ages it was not—of a theology of political ethics that enables it to incorporate civilly non-Catholic citizens, with the provision of legal defence for the corporate patrimonies of life-ways that reflect the diverse consciences of persons.

It is natural that those whose minds and sensibilities have been formed by modern Western liberal institutions will feel that a concerned, equitable, fraternal and therefore *hopeful* response to Islamic militancy lies in downplaying the theory, and few remaining institutional vestiges, of Christendom, and substituting for these the concept and practice of a secular, pluralist society. Such an attitude is at least as common among believing and practising members of the historic Churches in Britain as in other sections of British society. Whatever psychological plausibility it may gain from collective guilt over colonialism and intolerance in the past (though the historical record in these respects is more varied than some would believe), there is no reason to think that it cuts any ice with such thoroughgoing Islam. Indeed, the Salman Rushdie affair taught the contrary lesson. Muslim militants are more amenable, and sympathetic, when they encounter a theologically-based political ethics (albeit one not their own), than when presented with liberalism *tout court*. For the former they can have some respect; for the latter none. There is little that Christian minorities can do to impede the movement of Muslim societies towards the full implementation of a radically-conceived Islam. But there is something Christian majorities can do to assure such thorough-going Muslims that acceptance of the language, and attendant practice, of 'human rights' does not necessarily go hand in hand with Godlessness and *insouciance* towards the claims of the Abrahamic revelation.[9] In that way, the slow reconstruction of the foundations for Christendom societies in the West may help defuse hostility towards an enlightened 'modernism' of Western provenance in the Islamic world itself.

1 XCVI, 1–2.
2 II, 143.
3 III, 110.
4 Cited in J. Esposito, *Islam. The Straight Path* (New York and Oxford), p. 162.
5 J. Johns, 'Christianity and Islam', in J. McManners (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 179-180.
6 *Dignitatis humanae*, 1.
7 Ibid.
8 *Catéchisme de l'Eglise Catholique* (Paris 1992), 2244.
9 For the possibility (but also the difficulties) of an Islamic appropriation of the concept, see A.E. Mayer, *Islam and Human Rights. Tradition and Politics* (San Francisco 1991).

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