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# MEDIA

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## Reporting Islam

By Elie Kedourie



REPORTING ISLAM for the media came to be increasingly in demand with development both of newspapers and of contacts, political and commercial, between the West and the non-Western world of which Islamic regions form such an extensive and important part. An inspection of, say, the London *Times* in the decades between the Crimean War and World War I yields the impression that this newspaper—and there were a few others like it in Europe—enabled its readers to keep up with, on a regular basis, conditions in Muslim countries. A network of local correspondents sent detailed and frequent despatches and bulletins, not only from the capital city but also from provincial towns and even remote and out-of-the-way places.

Conditions have now quite obviously altered. Even though means of transport have become immeasurably speedier and means of communication instantaneous, information about events in most of the world is much more difficult to obtain. There are many reasons for what can only be called a decline or a regression in the ability of journalists to keep their readers adequately and regularly informed about happenings in the non-Western world, the world of Islam included.

In the first place, political conditions in a great many countries in Asia and Africa, where the great majority of Muslims are to be found, have with the advent of Independence put progressively greater obstacles in the path of newspapermen. Information about current events has become a matter of state, to be manipulated or suppressed in the interest of the rulers. UNESCO's attempt to bring about what is laughably called a "new world information order" indicates the attitude towards journalists and the flow of news from those who now constitute the majority in the United Nations.

In the second place, with the coming of mass literacy, newspaper readership has changed greatly. It is, of course, the case that newspapers depend on literacy. But when literacy was the affair of a minority, it generally went hand-in-hand with a high level of education, and the newspaper audience was one which followed with a great deal of interest—of informed interest—the affairs of foreign countries. Today, a mass readership naturally shows a much narrower and less informed interest in public affairs. Again, the new world-wide electronic media have narrowed horizons even further, since

these media do not even require the preliminary discipline of literacy on the part of their audiences.

In a recently published book by a television journalist who covered events in the Iranian Revolution during 1979 and 1980 for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (*The Man in the Mirror*, 1987), Carole Jerome describes the difficulties of reporting the events then taking place in Iran:

"Each day reporters attempted to simplify and communicate the complex developments to their faraway public. But no simplification could suffice. We felt we were madly flinging pieces of a jigsaw puzzle into the void with every news transmission. But since we didn't have all the pieces in the first place, we could never assemble the picture. . . ."

Why, then, was the picture so fragmentary and chaotic? Of course, no single direct observer of something as complicated as a political upheaval can hope to give more than a cursory idea of what is going on; but, as Miss Jerome shows, the problem was greatly aggravated by the relative unfamiliarity with the Iranian scene of a great many journalists.

"Only one correspondent [she writes] spoke Persian, and few in the press corps were experienced in the internal workings of the Iranian Shi'a mosque. . . . Among the press, even the old Iranian hands were freshmen. The press tends to follow world events in deciding priorities, and Shi'a fundamentalism had not even been on the list when the crisis took shape. Moreover, foreign correspondents can scarcely be expected to speak the language of all the countries they wake up in. There is a basic arrogant assumption that we of the West can quickly grasp the essentials of these exotic boondocks. . . ."

One conclusion which may be drawn from these observations is that the very speed of the modern means of transport has actually impaired the ability of journalists—who can be moved swiftly at the behest of their editors from one spot of the globe to another—to acquire the familiarity with distant and exotic scenes (a familiarity which can come only with time) which will enable them to report authoritatively.

Miss Jerome's account illustrates the well-known modern phenomenon of the medium itself being the message. The media, she remarks, had an insatiable appetite for action:

"If the day had been dull and insufficiently photogenic, television in particular was up a creek—but never without a paddle. 'Well', said one network producer over the phone to the New York desk one night, 'there was only the usual little dust-up at the embassy, but don't worry. We'll make it look like a war.' And with judicious editing, he did.

Television crews and satellite transmissions cost each network upwards of \$100,000 a month from locations like Teheran. And for that kind of money, New York and London want to see something every day. Pressed from all sides, journalists in the field go numb. Typically, this is the way it went as one field producer directed his videotape editor in a hotel suite: 'Okay. Give me ten seconds of Beheshti, a bit of the embassy wallpaper, some of the mobs there, then fifteen seconds of the slaughtering of the camel

in the street. . . . Let's get this thing done. Bird's up in half an hour'. . . ."

Another impediment for the newspaper reader lies in a journalist's sentimental attachment to an exotic political cause, or commitment to a particular policy, either in his own country or the one on which he is reporting. Commitment, for example, was evident in much newspaper reporting of the Viet Nam War, while an example of sentimental attachment impairing judgment is that of J. D. Bourchier, the Balkans correspondent of the London *Times* before World War I. Bourchier's partiality for Bulgarians and dislike of Turks made impossible the impersonality, detachment, and distance which the good reporter has to maintain, above all in distant and exotic places. His name, the official *History of the Times* approvingly declares, "will have a permanent place in the history of Slav liberation. . . ." Praise of this kind a journalist must strive to avoid.

The difficulty of reporting Islam does not arise only from the character of the contemporary media and their audience. Muslims and Muslim societies show a great variety of circumstances and behaviour, each of which requires to be distinguished from the others. The means to distinguish between them have to be acquired through historical study as well as by the practical political acumen which characterises journalism at its best.

There are today over 800 million Muslims in the world, living mainly in Asia and Africa. Their overwhelming majority in fact is to be found in Asia; but not in the Middle East, the birth-place of Islam and the area naturally and popularly associated with it. The largest Muslim state is Indonesia where there are about 140 million, constituting 90% of the population. Indonesia is followed by Pakistan where its 90 million Muslims form 97% of the population, and Bangladesh with about 80 million, constituting 85% of the inhabitants. A moment's reflection will lead us to conclude that these three countries are very different indeed in point of tradition, contemporary outlook, problems, interests, international connections and styles of international activity.

What is true of these three very large states is equally true of smaller, but still very substantial states: Turkey with its 48 million or Egypt with 40 million. And just as true of very small states: Saudi Arabia with its 5 million or the United Emirates with its 200,000. All these predominantly Muslim countries are sovereign states able to play their part on the international stage, and are far from taking for granted the assumptions underlying intercourse between states, the product of Western political traditions, which were for so long accepted. Such a state of affairs was unknown before 1945. Previous to that date almost all these countries, as indeed most other Muslim areas, were dependencies of European Powers and unable to make their voice heard, or bring their weight to bear in international affairs. If the USSR be counted as a European Power, then it is the only one which still rules over a sizeable population of Muslims—some 45 million. In addition, two non-European and non-Muslim Powers, India and China, rule over substantial numbers of Muslims: 75 and 20 million respectively.

All this is to say that the problem of reporting Islam is

much more complicated, and the pitfalls for journalists much more numerous than when these vast and populous areas were governed from European metropolitan centres whose outlook and political activities were much more accessible and familiar. Adequately reporting Islam today involves, then, great difficulties arising out of what might be called the highly polycentric character of both the society of states and of the Muslim component thereof.

ARE THERE, however, any characteristics or problems which all Muslim societies and states share in one way or another? I can think of at least two, which are related to one another. From its very beginnings Islam was both a religion and a polity. Muhammad was "the Messenger of God" transmitting a divine revelation to mankind; but he became, in Medina, the governor of the new, small community of Muslims and their leader in politics and war. The institution of the Caliphate, which became established after the death of the Prophet and was the highest public office in Islam, was in consonance with what had come to characterise the original polity in Medina. It was, and remained to the end, a religio-political office attending to the affairs of the Muslim community, safeguarding the Faith and protecting it from its enemies. The Caliph, i.e. the successor of the Prophet, also bore the title of *Imam*, leader in prayer, and *Amir al-mu'minin*, Commander of the Faithful, the title *Imam* denoting the religious character of the office, and *Amir almu'minin* indicating that he was the supreme military commander of the *umma*, the community of the faithful.

There was, then, from the very beginning a tight connection between Church and State, if we may use, simply by way of analogy, terms originating in, and applicable to the Christian world. In course of time, the Caliphate devolved, among Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, on the Ottoman House. In 1924, shortly after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the Grand National Assembly abolished the Ottoman Caliphate. Attempts to have another Muslim ruler declared Caliph in the 1920s and '30s failed. It became clear that the Muslim world, now divided among many sovereign states, could not agree on a successor to the Ottoman holder of the Caliphate; nor was this surprising, since the Caliphate was not a purely religious office like the modern Papacy. In the political theory of Islam, the Caliph was equivalent to what, in the Western vocabulary of politics, is termed a *sovereign*—the holder of political authority and military power. The political theory of Islam has found it difficult, up to the present, to devise a substitute for this central and fundamental notion.

The reason why the Turkish Grand National Assembly abolished the Caliphate was that it—together with the founder of the Turkish Republic—believed that, if Turkey was to become a modern, prosperous, and powerful state, there should be a separation between State and Religion: in other words that what is known as the *laic* principle should be one of the bases of the new Republic, just as the separation of Church and State had come to be a widely accepted principle in European constitutions. This separation has remained a fundamental feature of successive Turkish consti-

tutions. There is only one other Muslim state where the *laic* principle obtains, namely Indonesia. Elsewhere Islam, explicitly or implicitly, must be the religion of the state or of its head. This is so, even if, as in Baathist-ruled Syria and Iraq, the constitution of the ruling party lays it down (Article 15) that the “‘national tie’ is the only tie that may exist in the Arab state.”

But if secularism is, as in Turkey and Indonesia, a prominent feature of the constitution—or if, on the other hand, Islam is accepted, explicitly or implicitly, as the official religion of the state, or the religion which its head has necessarily to profess—it remains the case that here is an issue which Islamic political thought, in its engagement with the modern world, has yet to settle. In those countries where secularism has been officially adopted, the vast bulk of the population remains strongly attached to Islamic traditions and beliefs. Among these beliefs, not the least important is that religion and rule should be one, so that there is great tension, hitherto quite unresolved, between the beliefs of the mass and the official doctrine of the state. Islamic political thought, in other words, has not yet developed an analogue to the Western idea of a free church in a free state.

One has to remember, of course, that political thought and political practice are not identical. In practice, all kinds of compromises and accommodations tend to be made which would serve to diminish the frictions and antagonisms between an Islamic and a Western way of life, and between Islamic ideals and those which the numerous Westernised members of Muslim societies now want to live by. But such practical accommodations must remain precarious so long as they are not legitimised by an Islamic political theory which has behind it the consensus of both religious leaders and ordinary believers.

Take, as an example, Iran. After World War I, a modernising and Westernising ruler, Reza Khan, who became Shah in 1925, was able to continue disregarding the Islamic provisions of the Constitution of 1906 which remained theoretically in force, but which had been in practice from the very beginning disregarded. These provisions empowered a board of divines to rule on whether legislation conformed to the laws of Islam—and, if not, to veto their enactment. Reza Shah’s son, Muhammed Reza, who succeeded to the throne in 1941, continued and extended his father’s policies. But Muhammad Reza Shah was toppled from his throne at the beginning of 1979 by a hitherto obscure man of religion who, moreover, had been an exile for the previous fifteen years. The régime which followed the Shah’s rejected, abjured, and condemned as un-Islamic the policies of modernisation and Westernisation which had been relentlessly followed for more than half-a-century. Such policies did not succeed in attracting the loyalty of the people or the assent of the divines.

The régime which succeeded that of the Shah, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, is widely described as “fundamentalist”. This term, adopted from the vocabulary of Christian theology, is meant to denote that Khomeini’s movement constitutes a call for the restoration of pristine Islamic values—as these had been articulated at the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors. The justification for such a demand was that these values had ensured for Muslims power and

prosperity, which had directly flowed from obedience to the divine commands. What Khomeini and other fundamentalists before him have argued is that Muslims began to lose power to the benefit of unbelievers, to become poor and weak, purely as a result of having abandoned their God-given values, of having ceased to heed the divine commands.

FUNDAMENTALISM as a current of thought, a cluster of attitudes, and often an organised movement is, then, the second phenomenon which is spread across the whole Muslim world, and is obviously related to, is the obverse of, modernisation and Westernisation. From the very beginning of modernising policies, whether simply advocated by Muslim thinkers or actively pursued and enforced by rulers, there were voices raised to warn Muslims that Westernisation was entirely the wrong path to take. In the 20th century, decades after Egyptian thinkers and rulers had put Egypt on such a path, there appeared in the 1930s a movement which propounded essentially the same ideas as Khomeini was later on to embrace—namely, that the only salvation lay in return to the Koran, the teachings of the Prophet, his way of life and that of his immediate successors. This movement, that of the Muslim Brethren, has attracted a very large number of followers and has played a striking, though hitherto unsuccessful, role in Egyptian politics. Offshoots of the movement are to be found in Syria, in Jordan, in Israeli-occupied Gaza and West Bank, and in the Sudan. Their following in these areas has also been large, and their political impact equally noticeable. Similar movements, also predating Khomeini’s appearance, are to be found in Pakistan where their programme was officially adopted by the régime headed by the late President Zia ul-Haq. Again, in the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation and the Soviet-backed Communist régime, fundamentalist parties, inspired both by the Muslim Brethren and by the Pakistani fundamentalists, are prominent. Similarly, in both Malaysia and Indonesia fundamentalist movements have obtained a hold, albeit not as powerful as in Egypt or Pakistan.

These two phenomena, of Westernisation and accommodation with it, on the one hand, and rejectionist fundamentalism on the other, are to be seen all over the world of Islam. Their respective strengths vary from area to area, and have their ups-and-downs over time.

If one is reporting Islam, it is on these two related movements that one ought to keep an eye. Not of course exclusively, since, as has been argued, each Muslim country has its own particular traditions and its own specific history to be studied and borne in mind. But the ebb and flow of fundamentalism and its opposing ideas—antagonists in symbiotic relation to one another—is one which repays constant attention. Not the least interesting issue is how fundamentalists can pursue their aims without contamination from the Western ideas and techniques which they undoubtedly need in order to protect and maintain themselves. Conversely, how can the Westerners accommodate Islam—since without such accommodation, Westernisation may find itself in difficulties and, as happened in Iran, perhaps even fail.

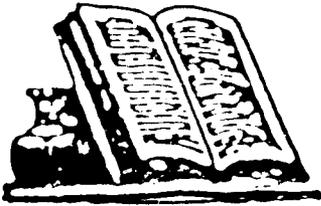
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# IN THE MARGIN

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## Between East & West

By Anthony Hartley



FIRST "SAMIZDAT" and then "Charter 88"—is there never to be an end to the British Left's attempt to attract prestige to themselves by an identification with the more risky activities of Russian or Czech

dissidents? The aim of such enterprises, in so far as they have political meaning, is to assist the formation of a Lib-Lab coalition which, by unifying the forces opposed to Mrs Thatcher's government, can break its seemingly durable hold on the voters, but the patrons of this idea have chosen a singularly indirect route to their objective. Anyone who wants a written British constitution will presumably have to wait till the cows come home, and, since no opposition party leader seems to be in favour of anything of the kind, the operation is unlikely to have much success. However, it may continue to provide fodder for political journalists and occasion for deliciously conspiratorial meetings for some time to come.

As for the implication, present in the references to East European conditions, that we all live in a Britain increasingly subject to the fear and oppression usually found in a totalitarian state, Dr Julius Toman, a signatory of the Czech intellectuals' "Charter 77", said what was necessary when he remarked that the adoption of the name was "cheap". He went on: "People here are not oppressed. They are not yet speaking from within some really threatened right."<sup>1</sup>

All this seems to be more a product of political frustration than a true perception of Britain today. In media nightmares, no doubt, gallant BBC producers struggle against a merciless bureaucracy, and investigative journalists are dragged screaming from the typewriter by the minions of MI5. But the martyrs of the media will soon wake up and find themselves at home in bed, free to pursue their unhampered careers. They need no *samizdats* or charters to provide what they already have: a good deal of licence to call the quick and the dead over the coals.

The iron rule of Mrs Thatcher apart, it is curious that Brit-

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 December 88. It is fair to add that the drafters of "Charter 88" recognise this point: "Conditions here are so much better than in Eastern Europe as to bear no comparison." But in that case why adopt a name which invites one?

ish intellectuals in a spectrum ranging from what was once the Alliance to *Marxism Today* should have chosen to identify themselves with the East European intelligentsia's resistance to tyranny. It is a powerful, if backhanded, tribute to the Russian and Czech dissidents that the very mention of them should be taken to conjure up ideas of freedom and the rule of law.

Such admiration is natural enough. These are men who have suffered for what they believe; it is their close encounters with totalitarianism that give their liberal opinions a strength such views can hardly possess in countries where they have become a cliché. In the West what is called "liberalism" has too often been associated with the soul-searchings and indecision of a cultured élite. A lack of self-confidence, the inability to say boo to a goose—these are the patterns of behaviour that the word "liberal" brings to mind—probably unfairly. In Eastern Europe things are different. Those who have fought for the more robust liberalism of Mill and Tocqueville have said boo to kites and vultures. Their image is that of men ready to fight and, if necessary, die. Of course, we take them seriously. Of course, the word "democracy" on their lips has a different ring from when it is used in, say, a speech from the rostrum at a meeting of the National Union of Students.

Will this living example of fighting liberalism have its effect on us? Can we expect from Eastern Europe a renewal of political sincerity that will find its echo in the West? Political protest—manifestos, leaflets, demonstrations—takes on reality in as much as it is addressed to real evils. It loses significance when trotted out for one trivial complaint after another. The word "hungry" can be used to describe a well-fed individual who has missed his lunch or a starving peasant in the Sahel. But there is little doubt which of these two cases infuses more genuine meaning into it.

IN THE YEARS to come Eastern Europe's intellectual output will affect the West in many ways. This cultural invasion began with clandestine writings. A Kundera or a Solzhenitsyn had all the more impact in that their works came to us painfully and at long intervals. Now the volume of writing from the East is growing, and, as well as novelists and poets, we shall be able to read historians and philosophers writing as they must have written for themselves and a trusted student or two, without the protective camouflage of an assumed Marxism. Soon we shall have a better knowledge of the intellectual vitality seething beneath the surface of Communist orthodoxy.

As these new ideas and alien experiences reach us, what shall we make of them? "Human kind", wrote Eliot, "cannot bear too much reality", and it may be that the flood of testimony from Eastern Europe will confuse and baffle us as much as it stimulates. The years that were necessary to absorb, say, Dostoevsky into the mental world of Western Europe should warn us against possible misunderstandings. How many of those who read Solzhenitsyn have the faintest idea of what his beliefs imply? The millennium of the Russian Orthodox Church was reported as though the Patriarch Pimen