4

Islam and the West: 'Threat of Islam' or 'Threat to Islam'?

Few, if any, issues in international relations have generated as much myth as that of an alleged 'Islamic threat'. Since the late 1970s, and more particularly since the Iranian revolution of 1978–79, the issue of 'Islam' and of its supposed challenge to the 'West' has become a matter of enduring international preoccupation, and one which politicians within Western European states, as well as a number of Islamic leaders, have chosen to highlight. Chapter 6 contains a discussion of how within this context a strain of 'anti-Muslimism', of hostility and aggression towards Muslim people, has arisen. Yet, as must be evident from the start, the image of an 'Islamic threat' is misleading in other ways. At the very core of this supposed challenge or conflict lie confusions: the mere fact of peoples being 'Islamic' in some general religious and cultural sense has been conflated with that of their adhering to beliefs and policies that are strictly described as 'Islamist' or 'fundamentalist'. It has been assumed, in other words, that most Muslims seek to impose a political programme, supposedly derived from their religion, on their societies.+ The fact that most Muslims are not supporters of Islamist movements is obscured, as are the conditions under which people who are Muslims do turn to this particular option. All is far too easily ascribed to the general influence of 'Islam'. As with other political myths, the very fact that these ideas are propagated gives them a certain reality – for those whom they are designed to mobilize, but also for those against whom they are directed.

The argument that follows is one attempt to disentangle some of these issues, to show in what senses there is not and also in

what senses there is a conflict between the secular, post-Christian world of Western Europe and that of the Islamic peoples to the south and south-east. If the major challenge has appeared to come from the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country with a population of over 60 million in a strategic position in West Asia, with a declared aim of 'exporting' the revolution (*sudur-i inqilab*) and a record of long-range liaison with hostage-takers in Lebanon and some terrorists in other states, the 'Islamic' menace has been perceived as taking other forms as well. Close to Europe, and in an area historically a part of the Mediterranean civilization and economy, an Islamist current has arisen in North Africa. Even closer, and under the influence of Islamist movements in their home countries, there has been some evidence of Islamist sentiment amongst the 6 million mainly North African and South Asian immigrants in Western Europe. This image of an Islamist challenge is compounded by the high level of political, domestic and interstate conflict involving the Muslim world. The Persian Gulf region has in the last twenty years seen the Iranian revolution, the Iran–Iraq war, and then the Gulf war of 1990–91. In between lie an array of further crisis points – Israel, Lebanon, Libya and, most recently and in closest geographical proximity, Bosnia.

This contemporary image of an Islamic threat receives, or is alleged to receive, additional support from three other sources. The first is a history of conflict between the world of the 'West', Christianity, and the world of Islam stretching back over a millennium. From the invasions of Iberia in the seventh century, through the crusades which began in the eleventh century, then through the conflicts with the Ottoman empire that lasted from the fifteenth century to the final collapse of that last Islamic challenge in 1918, conflict has been entrenched. Though with the 'reconquest' of Spain the Islamic forces were driven out in 1492, the Ottoman rival lasted into this century, leaving deep scars in the southern Slav countries. In the northern Slav areas, the 'Tatar Yoke' may have been thrown off in the sixteenth century, but the conflict with independent Islamic states in Central Asia and the Caucasus and with the Ottoman empire itself remained a leitmotif of Russian policy. In the collapse of established regimes and state structures in the Balkans in the

years from 1989, anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic themes were frequently articulated by those wanting to mobilize some popular support and lend legitimacy to their actions. The Croats blamed the Ottomans for implanting Serbs in eastern Croatia, the Serbs presented themselves as the champions of a campaign against Turkish–Islamic influences in Albania and Bosnia; Bulgarian communist nationalists persecuted Turks in their countries; there were demented rumours about Libyan, Iranian and Palestinian paratroopers dropping over Timisoara during the Romanian uprisings of December 1989. The origins and content of these 'anti-Muslimist' discourses will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7.

This historic anxiety about Islam receives support from quite another source, namely the end of the Cold War. Both in the 'West' and in the Islamic world it is claimed that in some way the end of the Cold War, a conflict between a capitalist democratic West and a dictatorial Soviet-dominated East, has occasioned the creation or revival of the supposedly ancient conflict between the Christian West and the Islamic world. Some of the analysis of the Gulf war has rested on this thesis, arguing that the West went to war with Saddam Hussein and built him up as an enemy, as a substitute for the Cold War conflict with Russia. By extension, Western European concern about the 'Islamic threat' in general, including the issue of migration into Western Europe, is seen as some ideological substitute for the Cold War and the confrontational disciplines it occasioned. In this perspective, the conflict with the Islamic world allegedly reflects some inner need of Western society for a menacing, but subordinated, 'other': a linkage is made between the traditional religious-based hostility to Islamic society that goes back to the crusades and the need to assert a post-communist hegemony.

Nor is this all. So far we have considered ideas about the Islam–West conflict as they are generated in the West, and relate to or apparently serve the interests of those who hold power in the West – 'Christian', 'capitalist', 'rich', 'imperialist', or whatever they may be. In so far as these ideas represent a form of prejudice, negative stereotyping or false alarm – what in German is termed *Feindbild* (an 'enemy image') – the assumption might be that they are specific to those outside the Islamic world who espouse them.

Oppressed ethnic or social categories – Irish, blacks or Jews, workers, women or nomads – do not on the whole reproduce and mirror the prejudices about them held by their detractors. In the Cold War, when Western politicians denounced the aggressive intent of the communist East and alleged that the USSR was militarily superior, those who rejected this analysis sought to show that a different, if not opposite, interpretation was valid. For example, the USSR was not as aggressive as implied, and the West was more so; the military capabilities and expenditures of the West were in most if not all respects higher than those of the Soviet bloc.

In the case of the Islamic world, no such simple refutation of stereotypes is possible. First, in many respects, Islamist rhetoric matches that of the West not, as was the case with communism, by presenting an opposite picture, but by appearing to confirm it. A casual reading of the speeches of Khomeini, or of Islamic leaders such as the exiled Ghannouchi of Tunisia, al-Turabi in Sudan or al-Madani in Algeria, will reveal in them many of the same themes that are found in anti-Islamic propaganda in the West: the Islamist movement rejects Western values of secularism, democracy, the rule of civil law, equality between men and women, and between Muslims and non-Muslims; Islamists espouse gross racist generalizations about Jews, the 'West' and, in other contexts, Hindus; they are committed to a long-term struggle with the West, seen as decadent and aggressive, and to a militant, intransigent, conflict with the historic enemy. The leaders of the militant *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, literally 'the Party of Liberation', which was influential among Asian youth in Britain in the early 1990s, was quite clear that its goal was, through *jihad*, to convert the whole world to Islam.

This convergence or stereotypes applies above all to the two key areas of identification and definition. Whereas for decades critics of colonialism in North Africa and elsewhere had criticized the idea that the inhabitants of these areas could be defined primarily as 'Muslims', as if this was an ethnic term or a sufficient cultural definition, the Islamist movements appeared to concur with colonial myth in *rejecting* terms of national identification and differentiation in favour of 'Muslim' as a cultural/ethnic category. Khomeini denounced ethnic and national distinctions as alien: 'In Islam there are no frontiers,' he said.[2] In Britain, a variety of

immigrant Muslim groups have sought to argue that there is a single 'Muslim' community, comparable to the Irish or black community. Secondly, beyond words and programmes, the record of what has occurred in a range of countries where the state invokes Islam as its legitimation appears to offer confirmation of the view that these societies are being organized on the basis of radically different principles to those espoused, and to some extent practised, in Western Europe. If this is true in conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia, it is even more so in the Islamist states of Iran and Sudan. Most important of all, the idea of a perennial conflict with the 'West', and one that could revive with the end of the Cold War, is evidently not just an invention of European or American demagogues. As communism collapsed, and with it the range of parties and movements in the Third World that associated with it, some in the Islamic world appeared to confirm Western prejudices by affirming that they would indeed replace Bolshevism as the major challenge to the West, and would do so more effectively because their challenge was inspired by God. In January 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini wrote an open letter to Soviet leader Gorbachev, urging him to abandon materialism and engage in 'serious study' of Islam.[3] The intermittent invocation of *jihad*, the very real support for some terrorist groups, the bloody rhetoric about cutting off the hands of America – all seem to lend credence to the image of an 'Islamic' threat.

The opponents and proponents of the Islamic movement were in agreement that 'Islam' itself was a total, unchanging, system, that its precepts operated over centuries, in all kinds of societies, and determined the attitudes of diverse peoples towards politics, sexuality and society. Both sides shared the view of a historically determined, essential 'Islam', which is supposedly able to account for all that Muslims say, do, and should say and should do. Khomeini, Turabi, the Muslim Brothers and the rest are as insistent on this score as any anti-Islamic bigot in the West. Whatever else, the image of a timeless 'Islam' is not just the fabrication of fevered Western minds.

Put another way, if there are myths about 'Islam', they are ones invented and propagated not just in the supposed hegemonic world of Europe and the USA, but also within the supposedly dominated and oppressed arena of 'Islam' itself. Any attempt to put

this issue in perspective and to suggest ways of dealing with the complex set of questions involved will, therefore, involve the dual process of challenging ideas dominant not only in Western Europe but also in the Islamic world itself.

Disentangling the myths: initial clarifications

Regrettably, for politicians, popularizers and demagogues on both sides, the reality is far more complex than they normally imply. There are very real issues underlying the rise of Islamic movements, their relations with Western Europe and the formulation of a European policy in regard to them. These genuine concerns can only be reached by cutting away some of the jungle of misconception that normally surrounds them. No one familiar with the misconceptions can imagine that they will easily disappear or that mere identification and criticism will dispel them, not least because myths, once propounded, gain a force of their own; all the same, it is worth while to establish some basic parameters of accuracy and proportion in order to help clarify the issues.

First, a few explanatory points about the historical dimension. Probably the most common charge against Islam is that it sanctions terrorism. In answer to this, it has to be recalled that there is no necessary or historic relationship between terrorist politics and Islamic identities. As noted in chapter 1, in the nineteenth century, when terrorism in the contemporary sense emerged, it was not the Muslims who led the field.[4] More recently there has been terrorism aplenty, but no Islam, in Northern Ireland, Euzkadi, or Sri Lanka. Moreover, if intolerance and repression of differing ethnic/religious groups is the concern, then the Islamic world, while responsible for many crimes in the past and today, is by no means alone. The claim made by many Muslims that ethnic and religious minorities were treated as equals in the earlier Islamic empires is quite false, though the comparative record of these societies is in many respects still better than that of their competitors. After all, it was not the Muslim world that organized the Judaeocide of World War Two or that expelled the Sephardim from Spain. In a range of countries today it is Islamic peoples who are the victims of repression and terror – in Burma, Kashmir,

Palestine and, most recently, in Bosnia. No one can claim that it is militant Islamic peoples who are solely responsible for these crises, if they are responsible at all.

The very concept of an 'Islamic' threat is itself a chimera, and to talk of some enduring, transhistorical conflict between the 'Islamic' and 'Western' worlds is nonsense. On the 'Islamic' side, it is absurd to see Muslim countries as in some general sense menacing the West. The military threat posed by unified Islamic forces (under the Ottoman empire) has long since disappeared. Driven from the gates of Vienna and Budapest in the seventeenth century, the imperial troops evaporated with the Ottoman empire in 1918. Today the combined strength of the Islamic world is far less than that of the West, even assuming the (almost impossible) case of the different countries forming an alliance to act in unison. In reality Islamic countries have pursued individual, nation-state interests, and as often as not fought each other: Iran and Iraq, Egypt and Libya, before that Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Morocco. Of course, an Islamic country with a nuclear device could cause great destruction, as could China or Israel, but any such usage would be small in comparison with that which its opponents could potentially inflict on it.

A further constituent of the 'threat' argument is the myth of the 'necessary' enemy. On the Western side, it is a profound if widespread mistake to think that in any general sense the West 'needs' an enemy. Of course, certain benefits arise from international and ideological/religious confrontation: arms manufacturers benefit, as do proponents of social discipline. That external challenges have a function to play within a society was indeed true in the case of the Cold War. But this does not mean that the Cold War arose as a result of pressure for such internal benefits.[5] Western society as a whole, and Western capitalism in particular, have never 'needed' an enemy in some systemic sense. On the contrary, as the liberal internationalists of the nineteenth century and Karl Marx himself saw clearly, capitalism is an expansionary force that seeks to subject the whole world to its domination and force it to imitate the West in key areas of social, economic and political activity. Its main conflictual drive is competition within itself – for profit, markets, power. Cultural and religious diversity between the US and Britain or Japan and

Germany will remain, but the system as a whole has an inbuilt drive towards homogeneity. That, if anything, is its secret. There is nothing in Western society – be it profit, market, or ideological and cultural stability – that requires an 'enemy' in the form of communism, Islam, Japan or anything else. As discussed in chapter 3, the explanation of the Gulf war in terms of the necessary 'enemy' is, on closer examination, vacuous.

Islamists and their opponents appear to agree that 'Islam' can be taken as the explanation for political and social behaviour. The idea that 'Islam' as such provides an identity, explanation and moral code for all actions undertaken by Muslims is a clear simplification. Islam, like any great religion, has a set of texts – a holy book, traditions, legal documents, learned writings – that are invoked to justify the actions of Muslims. But these texts cannot and do not explain what is done or how the interpretation is rendered for the simple reason that they contain within them a range of possibilities and possible uses. No religion, Islam included, is a set menu of moral, political and social behaviour; it offers, within some varying limits, an à la carte selection, varying with sect, time and context, if not from individual to individual. Nowhere is this more true than in regard to *shari'a* law, supposedly a guide to behaviour for all Muslims. As we shall see in chapter 6, it is no such thing.

To ask of Islam the answer to basic questions about politics and society is spurious. As on many other issues, the main texts of Islam are silent on whether it is desirable for societies to be organized around nationalism or pan-Islamism; capitalism or socialism or, for that matter, slavery; state control of the economy or private ownership. Nor does Islam tell us about the circumstances in which the state should be opposed or supported, whether there should be one state or many; whether believers should embrace modernity or tradition. Indeed, anterior answers to these questions determine the interpretation derived from the texts. Those outside the Islamic world who explain what some Muslims do by reference to the religion miss the point, as do those from within who seek to justify their particular practices by reference to it. Beyond its core doctrines[6] and a broad sense of intra-Islamic solidarity *vis-à-vis* the non-Muslim world, Islam is as variant, flexible, and open to new interpretations as any other body of

religion and thought. If those within it seek to justify their actions by reference to a particular traditional authority, this is a choice, not a necessity, and often conceals what is in fact an innovation or completely new departure under the guise of a return to some imagined past (Khomeini's theory of Islamic government was a good example of this, as is talk of Islamic development economics and Islamic computing). If we want to know why most Muslims hold the views they do about economics, democracy, or the position of women, it is not Islam as such that can explain it.

The contingency of Islam – the fact that no one set of political or social principles follows from it – is of particular relevance in relation to two issues central to the contemporary debate. The first is that of identity and ethnicity. It is never valid to present 'Muslim' as a term of ethnic identity. This is either a stereotypical projection employed by those who have sought and still seek to dominate or exclude people of Islamic origin, or it is an equally spurious claim made by people within an Islamic community who seek to exercise authority over a social group by advancing their particular interpretation as the sole legitimate and authoritative 'Islam'. Other identities – social, ethnic, linguistic and national – all play their part. There is no one Islamic people, just as there are no peoples whose ethnic identity is defined by religion alone.

The one state that was formed on the basis of Muslim identity, Pakistan, was itself a multi-national entity, comprising Punjabis, Sindis, Baluchis and Pathans in the west and Bengalis in the east (all indigenous peoples), and a sixth grouping, the *muhajirs*, who were immigrants from India. In 1971 the Bengalis seceded on a national basis – the only successful case of such a breakaway to have occurred in the period between 1945 and the collapse of communism. The remaining state, the former West Pakistan, has increasingly come to be the site of conflict between the different groups established there. In the creation and diffusion of contemporary identities within multi-national states, Islam, when linked to nationalism or communal identity, can indeed play a part. This applies as much among immigrants in Western Europe as in established communities in West Asia and North Africa. Islam, like culture and history, becomes a reserve on which the promoters of new identities draw. But as in theological interpretation, so in the fostering of ethnic identities, the choice and character of

identity is determined by contemporary and secular forces, and not by the religion itself.

The second issue is that of democracy. Many people in the world opposed to Islamic states – Christians, Jews, Hindus, South-East Asian Chinese – hold the view that Islam and Western democracy are incompatible. Once again we find people in the Islamic world, from the Saudi ruling family to Khomeini, advancing the same belief. One of the most common themes of Islamist discourse in the 1980s and early 1990s was the alleged failure of Western democracy. Yet to be drawn into an argument about any *necessary* incompatibility, or for that matter compatibility, between Islam and democracy is to accept precisely the false premise that there is one true, traditionally established, 'Islamic' answer to the question, and that this timeless 'Islam' rules social and political practice. There is no such answer and no such 'Islam'.

If there are in a range of Islamic countries evident barriers to democracy, this has to do with certain other social and political features that their societies share. These would include low levels of development, entrenched traditions of state control, political cultures that inhibit diversity and tolerance, the absence of a tradition of private property, and the lack of separation of state and law. These will be examined in greater detail in chapter 5. Though some of these features tend to be legitimized in terms of Islamic doctrine, there is in fact nothing specifically 'Islamic' about them.

Islamists today deny the separation of politics and religion. Anyone familiar with the teachings and practices of Islamist thinkers will be aware of a strong tendency to link religion to politics. The oft-repeated phrase, which appears to have become common in the nineteenth century, that 'Islam is religion and state' (*al-Islam dinun wa daulatun*), has traditionally served as the basis for authority, legislation and repression in many Islamic states. In contemporary debates, Islamist thinkers attack in particular the concept of 'secularism', the European-generated idea that law and politics should be separated from the church and from invocations of divine authority. This they regard as un-Islamic, and indeed as one of the sources of Western decadence. Critics within Islamic countries, as well as those outside, have contended, and justifiably so, that this rejection of the notion of

secularism does preclude the consolidation of democratic institutions. As will be argued in chapter 5, democracy, apart from other preconditions, presupposes secularism, since only on that basis can a state operate according to the rule of law, respect for the rights of individuals, tolerance, and pluralism of ideas and political organization. Here we once more encounter the mutual reinforcing of stereotypes: those opposed to the Islamic world unite with Islamist thinkers themselves to deny that Muslims can separate religion from politics.

It would seem, then, that we arrive at a fundamental problem: no secularism, no democracy. There are, however, two important qualifications that need to be made, one contesting the external image of Islamic societies, the other criticizing the Islamist account. In comparative perspective, it should be noted that the problem of religion and politics is by no means specific to Islamic countries. A range of North European nationalisms, such as the Irish and Polish versions, are suffused with religion, as are virtually all those of Orthodox Christianity: Greek, Serbian, Greek Cypriot and Russian. There are certain dimensions of this problem which are specific to Islam, as the Islamists themselves proudly assert, but the division between a secularized Western politics and a religious Eastern variant is far from absolute. The emergence of what came, somewhat inaccurately, to be termed fundamentalism in the 1970s was certainly not specific to the Islamic world. In India, movements of Hindu chauvinism mobilized millions, and in the USA Christian fundamentalism has played a significant role in politics.[7] To turn to the question of international tensions, it is striking how Europe presents a picture not of a two-sided division between Christian and Muslim, but of a three-sided one between Western Christian, Eastern Christian and Muslim. The EU in its wider conception will be a community not of Christian states keeping out Turks and Tunisians, but of Western Christian states plus one anomalous Orthodox inclusion, Greece (a state which, if Brussels gossip is to be believed, most other EU members now wish they had never allowed to join in the first place). The Treaty of Rome was not so termed for nothing.

The second corrective to the idea that Islam has a unique, enduring problem with secularism comes from within Islamic tradition and history itself. For all that critics and proponents of

Islamist thinking allege, it is simply not true that Islamic societies cannot separate politics from religion. One can in fact argue an extreme case, namely that the whole history of Islam as a political and civilizational project has been dominated by realistic, political calculations. This, incidentally, was one of the arguments of *The Satanic Verses*. The lack of a unified Islamic polity for the last thirteen hundred years, and the different political uses to which Islamic authority is put, suggest that there is no one unifying politics to be derived from the holy texts. In the contemporary world, the example of a country like Turkey, once the leader of a supposedly Islamic empire, shows that there is no necessary relationship between a particular political and economic system, or indeed between religious sanction and the state, within the Islamic world. Here is not the place to give full consideration to theological possibility; suffice to say that a separation of religion and state, indeed a rejection of all worldly, political activity, is just as possible an interpretation of Islamic thinking as anything the Islamists now offer.[8]

The rise of Islamist movements and the invocation of Islam as a justification for political action do not represent some general, transhistorical phenomena; they reflect particular forces within specific societies in the contemporary world. In other words, they are a response to current problems, often of a social and political nature. Where Islamist movements arise, or where particular groups identify themselves primarily as 'Muslim', they are responding not to a timeless influence, but to the issues their societies and communities face today. Such issues include the intrusion of the state into everyday life, the evolution of legal codes, the fact of external domination (or the belief that this is a major factor), rapid urbanization, competition for educational and employment positions, cultural and social changes, not least in relation to the position of women. None of these problems is specific to the Islamic world; each, to a considerable degree, has come as a result of recent changes in these societies. If one tries to explain the rise of Islamist movements in Iran, Algeria, Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere, one can start by examining the problems facing the populations of these countries.[9] If, in Western Europe, communities from Islamic countries increasingly define themselves in Islamic terms, this may be not so much a reassertion of some already existing Muslim identity, as a response to the problems of immigration and status, racist prejudice, employment discrimination and alienation that they face where they now are. It is, of course, part of the self-image involved in expressing such allegations, that they claim their Muslim identity as an eternal given and a universal, pan-Islamic, adhesion. However, such claims are part of the ideology, not of the explanation.

It follows from this that the image of Islam as in some sense an international or stateless phenomenon is also misleading. There certainly have been such transnational forces, in the past with networks of Islamic scholars and sects, and today with the transmission of images, messages and texts between Muslim countries. The interaction of the Pakistani writer al-Mawdudi with the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb is one example of this. Muslims may also on some issues feel themselves to be part of a wider community, to feel solidarity with struggling Islamic groups elsewhere. But in its political form, the Islamic movement is defined and determined by national states and rival political factions. This is so in the sense, first, that it remains the goal of these movements to capture state power and, second, that if and when they do so they use Islamic doctrine to bolster the interests of those states (Iran and Sudan are no exception). Finally, these trends are national in that the particular form which the Islamist movement takes is determined by the problems that the society confronts. For example, although neighbours, Iran and Afghanistan produced very different Islamist movements. Iran's Islamism was urban-based and led by traditionalist clergy, acting through mass political mobilizations; Afganistan's was rural-based, but led by modernized intellectuals acting through guerrilla war. The implication of this for relations between Islamic states and Western Europe is evident: these movements will remain diverse, defined as they are by particular states and influenced by state interests, and will be more likely to conflict with each other, as was the case with Iran and Iraq, than to unite against the West. There cannot be a great 'Islamic challenge', not only because the Islamic states are, and will remain, much weaker than those of the West, but also because they do not represent a coherent, internationally constituted alliance. Indeed, one could take the argument further and show how, on the basis of proclamation and practice, most Islamist movements are concerned with

what is going on within the Islamic world and with competition between Islamic states and parties, rather than with the outside world. It is worth recalling that Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetoric was not one calling for a *jihad* to conquer or convert the non-Muslim world, but was a cry of concern: 'Islam is in danger' (*Islam dar khatar ast*). If there is any common thread running through these movements, it lies here.

The struggle for the migrant soul

Nowhere is this sense that Islam is under threat and at risk of being corrupted more evident than in the context of the growth within the developed world itself of Islamic communities. Indeed such communities now represent a significant force in many Western countries. Conversion to Islam has not been a significant trend, except amongst blacks in the United States. In Europe a Roger Garaudy – the former French communist now a Muslim convert – and the occasional Sufi do not constitute a mass shift. The main reason for the surge in Islamic communities has been migration. In Britain, France, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Sweden and other countries, there are now established Islamic communities born of this recent migration. Precise figures are impossible to come by, but rough indicators give the broad picture: in Britain there are between three-quarters and one million Muslims; in France, there are over three million; in Germany, the figure is believed to be around one and three-quarter million. The total for Western Europe is over 6 million.[10]

For all the differences of origin and country of residence, these communities evince some common characteristics. The first is that, while the migration itself took place overwhelmingly in the 1950s and 60s, before recession and immigration controls sealed it off, not until the 1970s and 80s did there occur the remarkable surge in religiosity, in the public demonstration of Islamic faith. This trend is evident in the number of mosques: there are over 1,000 of these in France, and the number in Britain rose from 51 in 1970 to 329 by 1985, the great majority in converted houses or flats. It is equally evident in the activities of Islamic associations and community groupings, hundreds of which exist in each major state.

The same increase in religious visibility among immigrants has also led to campaigns on issues of special importance for Muslims: the availability of halal meat, the provision of places of worship, respect for Islamic practices in education, the clothing and segregation of Muslim women.

Many of these campaigns reflect alarm about how to maintain control within the community, rather than about the threat from a non-Islamic world without. In every country Islamic leaders express concern about the degree to which the second-generation immigrants, by now up to half of the total, will continue to respect the faith. In Paris and Lyon, as in Birmingham and Bradford, the young, as distinct from the very young, are not proportionately present in the mosque. The increased religiosity of the 1970s and 80s may go some way towards reversing this, but it is too early to say. Yet some factors common to different Western European countries have certainly encouraged increased religious identification. The closing of frontiers to further immigration has reduced the degree of circulation of migrants and has therefore made it clear that those now resident are going to stay. The rise of racist attacks on Muslims – evident not only in 'Paki-bashing' in Britain but in the rise of Le Pen in France and far-right activities in Germany – has forced many in the second generation to qualify their hope for full integration. Donations and expressions of solidarity from Islamic states have also played their role, as have certain international events, such as the Iranian revolution, the attacks on Libya, the Palestinian *intifada*, and the war in Bosnia.

If these substantial Islamic communities in the West share common concerns, they are also marked by enormous differences. For this reason it is impossible to form any general picture or 'sociology' of Western European Muslims. First of all, Islam is a centrifugal religion; it has no even putative centre. The caliphate abolished by Atatürk in 1924 had long since ceased to act as an authority even for Sunni Muslims. The variety of sects and orientations that are present within the communities is a reflection of this centrifugal pattern, and fragmentation within Islam as such is compounded by the religious changes that occur in the process of emigration. While it is safe to assume that many migrants retain the beliefs of their place of origin, there is much adoption of Islamic ideas from other sources, encountered only in

exile. Thus Yemeni migrants in Britain in the 1930s and 40s were organized by a religious sect, the Alawiyya, originally based in Algeria.[11] Among French Muslims of North African origin there has in recent years been considerable support for the *Jama'at al-Tabligh*, the Society of Propagation, a proselytizing grouping founded in India in 1927 and with its European headquarters in Britain. The experience of migration both confirms a desire to assert or reassert certain traditional values and exposes the migrant to new ones. The parallel with communist recruitment of migrants is striking: indeed in France many Arabs and Turks now live in former strongholds of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). It is not for nothing that the most prominent centre of the autonomous 'French' Muslims is la mosquée de Stalingrad and that its worshippers live in the rue Youri Gagarin and the avenue Maurice Thorez.

To these religious differences are added those of a national, linguistic and political character. The 'Muslims' of Western Europe, who appear homogeneous to the non-Islamic world and to the, usually self-appointed, official representatives of Islam, also come from a variety of national backgrounds: in Britain, Pakistanis, Bengalis and Indians, but also Turkish Cypriots and a variety of Arabs; in Germany, Turks and Bosnians; in France, Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Senegalese, Mauritanians and Turks. Even these 'national' labels conceal local and linguistic divisions – between Pathans, Punjabis and Gujeratis, between Kurds and Turks, between Algerian Arabs and Kabyles, and of course between the different Arab peoples. If the countries of origin differ, so too do the countries of reception. In Britain, Commonwealth immigrants were automatically granted the vote, something denied in France and Germany; on the other hand, the French government has, from the mid-1970s onwards, provided special housing for immigrants, and encouraged the building of places of worship in immigrant estates. Some French firms have provided these at the place of work. In Britain such provision for immigrant religious needs was almost inconceivable; much energy was, however, expended in conflict over an especially British issue: the school uniform.

The variety of currents and organizations within the Islamic communities of Western Europe is, moreover, compounded by the

fissiparous impact of Islamic states, many of which have tried to influence the communities with financial and other inducements. At one level this takes the form of funding mosques and publications, where religious duty and state interest may coincide. Saudi Arabia has specialized in this, and through the Islamic World League in Mecca operates its own transnational organization. Since 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran has also sought to build up a following in this way, albeit with fewer resources. Ayatollah Khomeini's Rushdie campaign was, in part, designed to strengthen his claim to be the leader of *all* Muslims. Other states use religious links as a way of maintaining administrative, and coercive, control over those from their own countries. Visas, funds, channelling of remittances, access to buildings all help to keep the migrants in line. Still others try to use the Islamic migrant communities as a way of extending what are basically secular political interests; Libya and Iraq, for example, have given money for this purpose, their 'Muslim solidarity' an extension of inter-Arab conflict. Beyond the influence of states, Islamic parties in the home countries have built up networks abroad. An obvious case is that of the *Jama'at-i Islam* of Pakistan, a right-wing group with Saudi connections that has strong support among Pakistani Muslims in Britain and organizes campaigns in both Britain and Pakistan.[12]

One final twist to this tale of fragmentation is that of the competition between Arabs and non-Arabs for primacy within Islam. The Turkish imams in France consider that their people understand more of the Quran than the Arabs,[13] and Gaddafi has denounced non-Arab influences, including the *Tabligh*, within Islam. It can be noted that there is more than a trace of this ancient cultural and religious rivalry to be found in the pages of *The Satanic Verses*, as well as in the response to Rushdie's novel.

Despite these evident diversities, the myth, perpetrated by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, is that 'Islam' and the Islamic communities represent one community, one *umma*. This has never been true of the Islamic world since the years of the first caliphs, and is certainly not true of the Muslims of Western Europe. The variety and fluidity lying behind the supposedly universal Islam promote a recurrent theme of all studies of 'Islamic' society, whether in Western Europe or in the relevant Third World countries. How far can the very designation 'Islam' provide a key

to understanding the behaviour of such groups in the social and political arenas? This issue has already been addressed: for all its claims to prescribe for social and individual as well as political behaviour, the variety of practices in Islamic countries indicates that 'Islam' as such cannot explain how Muslims behave, or how they might or ought to behave. As has already been suggested, other factors outside 'Islam' must be invoked. The resort to an all-explanatory 'Islam' is therefore circular. Moreover, 'Muslims', like non-Muslims, have multiple identities, the relative balance and character of which change over time. It is one of the intriguing but elusive challenges of any analysis of different 'Muslim' communities to disentangle and chart the relation between the different identities of their members. The study of Islamic communities cannot be based on a 'sociology of religion' alone; it must, rather, involve a sociology of how religion interacts with other, ethnic, cultural and political forces.

To take the example of one long-standing Arab community in Britain, in the eight decades since they have been resident in Britain, the Yemenis, a community of at most 15,000, have been identified by a variety of terms. They have been described as lascars, negroes, blacks, Asians, Arabs, Yemenis, Muslims and Pakistanis. To these 'identities' must be added their own list of variants – whether North or South Yemeni, Shafi'i or Zeidi Muslim, supporters of one or other faction of their respective regimes, and the tribal and regional variations, Dhali'i, Yafi'i, Maqbani, Shamiri and so on.[14] In much discussion of Western Europe, this problem recurs. For example, Kepel appears to work with a dichotomy 'French/Muslim', as if the two were alternatives.[15] Such usage does not sufficiently address the question of how far the separateness and distinctness of Muslims in France is a matter of their being Muslims, or of their being Arabs, or Algerians, or identifying with some subdivision. There is very little room in such a polarity for discussion of the place of an Arab or Algerian, of identity in the lives of these people, and of how religious activities, publications and meeting places interact with the political. Equally, comparative studies of Western European Muslims tend to treat their subject-matter in too restrictedly religious a manner. Yet as is evident from the mosques of Birmingham, attendance at these breaks down almost completely along national and regional lines: in proclaiming belief in one God, Pathans, Punjabis, 'Campbellpuris', Azad Kashmiris, Bengalis, Yemenis, Gujeratis go their separate ways to prayer.[16]

Much of the discussion of Western European Muslims focuses on issues of identity in a non-Islamic world, on questions of assimilation versus separateness, and on the distinction between 'insertion', that is, finding a recognized but distinct place, and 'integration'.[17] There is no doubt that both kinds of process are at work. Many second-generation citizens from Muslim backgrounds mix with and share the values of their generation in Western European society, and come to be critical of the national and religious backgrounds they come from. This phenomenon is exemplfied by the second-generation North African writers in France, the *beurs* (slang for French-born Arab), and in Britain films like Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Launderette*. Now that the doors of immigration have closed, it is harder to go back. At the same time the forces in favour of a negotiated 'insertion' have also gained ground: some through the widespread rise in religiosity in the 1970s, some through the exertions of Islamic states and organizations like the *Tabligh*. Islamic community and national organizations are now stronger and more vocal than ever before. In France they are already a political force, and they are increasingly becoming so in Britain. The 1987 manifesto, *The Muslim Vote*, signed by 24 Islamic associations, sought to lay out a set of demands for Muslims in Britain, pertaining above all to education – clothing, food, single-sex teaching, and the avoidance of dancing, mixed bathing and sex education. In France and Britain policies designed to alter the educational system on general grounds have provided occasion for Muslim parents to voice special concerns.

The dispute over *The Satanic Verses*

What this suggests above all is that for all their assertiveness the Muslim communities in Western Europe feel themselves to be under threat: it is the fear of loss of social control that animates the activities of their leaders, traditional and new. Here, of course, their concern has been shared by many of the most vocal leaders of the Islamic world, including Khomeini. Aggressive and

aggrieved as they may sound, theirs is a defensive cry. This sentiment of erosion, real or imagined, underlay the reaction to *The Satanic Verses* after its publication in 1988. The novel's fictionalized account of early Islam is, in itself, regarded by many Muslims as unacceptable, but Salman Rushdie's book is as much about the Islamic experience in one Western European country, Britain.[18] It was, indeed, said of Rushdie some years ago that after writing one book about India (*Midnight's Children*) and one about Pakistan (*Shame*), he would now write one about Britain. That book then appeared and, after the initial outrage on the part of Islamic officials, it was, appropriately, the turn of British ministers to denounce its anti-racist and satirical view of the United Kingdom, not least because of its reflections on the police.[19]

Rushdie's novel speaks for one aspect of the migrant experience in turning a critical face both towards the country of origin and its traditions and towards the country of reception. The novel's challenge, its expression of the alienation of the migrants and its 'offence' to Islam, is two-sided. It is no accident that at one point Rushdie links the migrant to the blasphemer: both act a part, both run the risk of causing offence. But Rushdie's main challenge to the Islamic world, beyond his Rabelaisian account of early Islam, is to have broken away from it. Khomeini accused him of *kufr-i jahani*, 'world blasphemy', but the term *kufr* and its adjective *kafir* contain several meanings: not only atheism and blasphemy, but also apostasy.[20] It is this latter charge that is the most serious since, in writing as he did of Mohammad, of doubt, of the profane masquerading as the religious, Rushdie represented a challenge from within that embattled religious leaders, in Bradford as in Tehran, could not accept.[21]

There is certainly a strictly religious foundation for such anathemas against those charged with 'blasphemy', in Islam as there is in Christianity and Judaism. Mohammad ordered the murder of Asma bint Marwan, a woman poet who criticized him, just as in the Bible Leviticus:24 enjoins us to stone all such offenders.[22] But the question of why such injunctions from another age have been invoked here and now can only be answered by reference to current social and political concerns. All the great victims of blasphemy charges (Socrates, Christ, Galileo, Spinoza) were also charged with sedition. It is by looking to political

concerns that the roots of the campaign around *The Satanic Verses* can be comprehended. Islam is 'in danger', and it is seen to be under threat not so much from without, something that has always been the case, as from the loss of belief and of submission emerging within.

What appears, therefore, to be a conflict between Islam and the external non-Islamic world is above all a reflection of a conflict within the Islamic world. The greatest consequence of the Iranian revolution has been to divide the Muslim world more grievously than ever before, and the same may well turn out to be the case with the response to *The Satanic Verses*. The reaction of some Tunisian Islamists to the Iranian condemnation of Rushdie may be indicative in this regard. They have declared that people should stop worrying about 'the British Rushdie' and instead concentrate their energy on the 'Rushdies' among their own people, by which they mean the secularizers and those proclaiming the equality of men and women.

Managing the conflict: the relevant issues

The ramifications of the Rushdie affair, and in particular the issues and interests which can be seen as underlying reactions to *The Satanic Verses* within the Islamic world, may serve to illustrate the more general point that explanations of contemporary attitudes in terms of religion, or a supposed return to the one 'true' religion, are insufficient. Three preliminary conclusions may be drawn. The issue of 'Islam' and the 'West' is more complex and more contingent upon contemporary concerns than either the opponents or proponents of Islamist politics would imply. If many of the problems – terrorism, fanaticism, an international threat – are imagined or confused, there are nonetheless very real issues at stake here, which will take many decades to resolve. Finally, these issues are, in the main, secular ones relating to the power of states, the status and treatment of migrant groups, and the balance of forces within a range of developing societies. It is all too easy to see this interaction in transhistorical terms. The conflict between communism and the 'West' lasted seventy years, or at most two hundred, from Babeuf to Gorbachev. That between Islamic

movements and the West has been going on for nearly fourteen hundred years, and continues. The wall of Berlin fell after 28 years, that of Avila, built in the fourteenth century to defend the city against Arab forces, still stands. The issue endures, however, not because of some timeless religious or ideological determination, but because social problems faced by both groups continue to be expressed in the language and symbols of religious identification, amongst other points of reference. To evolve a policy to solve or reduce what is presented as the conflict between the 'West' and the Islamic world requires a dual programme: first, separate the real, material, specific and secular difficulties faced by both Islamic and Western society from their confused religious expression; then address these difficulties themselves. To sum it up, such a policy would have to be underpinned by a concept of universalism, which would include secularism, plus development.

The issue of development, understood as both growth in the economic field and democratization in the political, is a useful starting-point. Within Islamic societies themselves, Islamist sentiment and Islamist movements have developed as a cultural and nationalist response to very real contemporary problems facing these societies, and more particularly to problems that have become clearer as the first generation of post-independence regimes has come to an end. Whether in Iran, or Tunisia, Algeria, Pakistan or Egypt, the rise of Islamist movements has been directed less against direct foreign domination than against the indigenous, albeit post-colonial, state that has failed to resolve the problems of the society it rules and has exhausted its political credit. The Islamist movements, although themselves determinedly committed to taking and using state power, are above all revolts against the policies – authoritarian, secular and intrusive – of the modernizing state. This is as true of supposedly conservative, pre-revolutionary Iran, as it was of Algeria in the later days of the FLN. The inability of these states to meet either the economic expectations or the cultural aspirations of their people has provided the context in which Islamist movements have developed. The logic of this analysis is evident: that until and unless the internal problems of these countries are reduced different varieties of Islamism will retain their appeal, against the backdrop of the diverse social and political crises between the different countries. As one Algerian official

commented during the 1991 crisis, the way in which Europe could best help overcome the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) would be to provide guidelines on how to employ millions of young people. Moreover, the Islamist movements themselves are unable to provide answers. Deluded with empty ideas about 'Islamic economics', the 'third way' and other supposed alternatives to either capitalist or communist development, they offer in effect a run-down form of Third World populism that is even less able than its more secular antecedents – Nasserism, Peronism, the Indian Congress and so on – to resolve the problems these societies face. Their failure is explained by the fact that the situation in these countries has in many respects substantially deterioriated since the immediate post-independence period. The demographic explosion is perhaps the most obvious instance of this.

What this crisis situation must entail in policy terms is a necessarily protracted but clear-sighted attempt to help these countries resolve their problems of economic and social development, in order to provide their populations with some prospect of future economic development. There are, of course, severe difficulties here: external capital is not limitless, and there are many other claims on it, particularly from the post-communist world. Yet the Islamic world itself is, thanks to the flow of oil revenues, not short of capital. What matters is how that capital is used. The states of many Islamic countries have a record of diverting economic resources, however generated, into consumption or the purchase of arms for various forms of 'security'. Moreover, many of the countries have social and economic structures that militate against economic development. This has been particularly evident in the past decade or so with the advent of export-oriented industrialization which has led no Middle Eastern country (with the exceptions of Turkey and Tunisia) to greater economic development. If oil revenues are factored out, the economic record of these states over the past two decades is amongst the poorest in the world, matched only by parts of Africa. No one will choose to invest in these countries for manufacturing purposes while alternatives such as South-East Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe are available. Yet until these basic problems of economic development are addressed, and until the bogus solutions of the Islamist movements are exposed, the context in which such forces

can grow and attract support will persist. In the end, the only solution for the Islamic world's relations with the outside world is for it to compete, but in that domain – the economic rather than the military – that more and more constitutes the ground of international conflict in the late twentieth century.

This is the lesson which the Islamic world needs to learn – not from Europe, but from the rising economies of the Far East. If there is to be a successful integration of the Islamic countries into the wider non-Islamic four-fifths of the world, it will have to take the form of economic competition, both industrial and other, as opposed to a recourse to outdated and rather ineffectual demagogies, and arms. The implications of this part of the argument for Western Europe are clear: employment and equality are the prerequisites for a successful integration of the new Muslim communities. Economic exclusion and political rejection will fuel fundamentalist antagonism.

More difficult is the issue of the appropriate political response to Islamism from within Muslim societies as well as from without. On the one hand, Islamist movements could be accepted as a valid expression of the popular will of the countries where they arise and of the communities within Western Europe that are influenced by them. Pragmatically and morally, there are reasons for taking this stand. Many in Western Europe, notably in Germany, feel that a century of colonial domination should now give way to a more tolerant and neutral attitude to what occurs in Third World countries. However, such a position can also be argued to be fundamentally mistaken, the product of both misplaced guilt and post-modernist confusion which ignores the very real dangers that Islamist movements involve for everyone, not least the dangers for Islamic countries themselves. Policies that deny the equality of men and women, of Muslims and non-Muslims, which legally suppress the rights of the individual, are not matters to which Western Europe, whatever its own failings, can remain indifferent. As will be discussed at greater length in chapter 5, human rights at present give cause for concern in countries dominated by Islamist policies and will do so more and more in the future. Indeed it is a relativist appeasement to say that such issues should be ignored on the grounds of pragmatism or anti-imperialism. Moral considerations apart, there will continue to be political pressure from

groups and individuals inside Middle East countries for greater international condemnation of human rights violations. And the influx of refugees from Islamist dictatorships – actual in the case of Iran, potential in those of Algeria or Egypt – will prevent any facile obscuring of this question.

The question of the principle of sovereignty outside Western Europe raises a similar set of alternatives: those who say that 'we' should not interfere and should 'mind own own business' are allowing the sovereignty of states (Kuwait, Bosnia) and of peoples (the Palestinians, the Kurds, the Eritreans) to be denied. Imperialist domination is not a legitimate policy for the end of the twentieth century; a firm, multilateral, always self-critical insistence on universal codes of political practice, as embodied in the conventions and documents of the UN to which all member states supposedly subscribe, definitely is. It can be anticipated that those in power in states that violate the sovereignty of their neighbours will resort to the platitudes of anti-imperialist and cultural relativist outrage to rebut external criticisms, but this must take second place to insistence by the wider international community on the universality of legal and moral considerations, and insight into the calculations and corruptions that often underlie appeals to distinctive moral principles. Abstention, agnosticism, caution, compensation for the past can be taken too far: indulging the tyrannical policies of Islamist states and movements against their own peoples and, through chauvinistic utterances and policies, against others, becomes a form of appeasement.

In practice, then, Western Europe has to evolve a two-sided, balanced policy towards the issues encapsulated in the term 'Islam'. On the one hand, there needs to be greater awareness of and hostility to the racism and general ethnic-religious prejudice that is directed against Muslim immigrants in Western European societies, and Islamic countries outside. Not least must come the recognition of how often Western Europe has permitted and indulged the oppression of Islamic peoples, whether in Palestine or in Bosnia. Beyond this it is essential that the West frames a long-term policy of economic interaction with these countries designed to assist them on the path of development. However, such a policy must not entail the indulgence of Islamist movements themselves, or of the false inclusive claims made by Islamists

in the Islamic world or in the West. That the myths of the Islamists and of their opponents often coincide in postulating one single, timeless, all-pervasive 'Islam', only makes it more important to devise an approach, based on solidarity and critique, by which to assess and respond to this very contemporary phenomenon.

5

Human Rights and the Islamic Middle East: Universalism and Relativism

'Islam approaches life and its problems in their totality. Being a complete and perfect code of life, it holds no brief for partial reforms or compromise solutions. It starts by making man conscious of his unique position in the universe, not as a self-sufficient being but as a part, a very important part, of Allah's creation. It is only by becoming conscious of their true relationship with Allah and His creation that men and women can function successfully in this world.'

Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, 1981, p. 9

'For a Muslim country, as for all complex state societies, the most pressing human rights issue is not local cultural preferences or religious-cultural authenticity; it is the protection of individuals from a state that violates human rights, regardless of its cultural-ideological facade.'

Reza Afshari, *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1994, p. 249

In the international debate on human rights that has evolved over the past two decades, the Islamic countries of the Middle East have occupied a position both common and specific. On the one hand, they have articulated views that are shared by other Third World and non-Western countries and, on the other, they have defined a specific position on human rights derived from the particular religious character of their societies and beliefs. Thus, at the June 1993 Vienna UN Conference on Human Rights, and at the regional conferences which preceded it, Islamic states, including those of the Middle East, joined with Asian states in criticizing UN and Western policy for its double standards, its violation of sovereignty, its neglect of economic rights and its imposition of 'Western' values. But at Vienna, the Islamic countries