13 Islam, Politics, and Revolt: Some Unorthodox Considerations

It is widely stated and believed by both Muslims and non-Muslims that Islam and politics are inevitably closely intertwined if not inseparable in virtually all spheres; and that this has been true from the rise of Islam until the present, with recent more secular rulers like Ataturk, the Shah of Iran, Bourguiba, and Nasser a brief contemporary exception. A 1988 statement of this widespread view, and its supposed radical contrast with Christendom, is found in Bernard Lewis’s book, *The Political Language of Islam*, where he says:

In classical Islam there was no distinction between Church and state. In Christendom the existence of two authorities goes back to the founder, who enjoined his followers to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s and to God the things which are God’s. ... each with its own laws and jurisdictions, its own structure and hierarchy. In pre-westernized Islam, there were not two powers but one ... in classical Arabic, as well as in other languages which derive their intellectual and political vocabulary from classical Arabic, there was no pairs of words corresponding to spiritual and temporal, lay and ecclesiastical, religious and secular.¹

One problem with this view is the assumption that words like “lay” and “secular” always had approximately the meaning they do today, clearly opposing them to religious or ecclesiastical, which is not the case.² Another problem is the implied understatement of the close church–state relations characteristic of the Eastern Orthodox churches through much of their history, often called Caesaropapism. And finally, the view overstates the identification of religion and state during much of the history of Islamic peoples. While Christianity had more early ideological bases for separation between religious and state institutions than did Islam, and coexisted with

secular, often Roman, legal systems, nonetheless in practice for most of their pre-modern periods, the two religions saw rather similar levels of relationships between religion and politics.

A study of the history of Islam indicates that, whatever the views of some theorists and contemporary writers, the near-identity of religion and politics in Islam is more a pious myth than a reality for most of Islamic history. After the first four caliphs, whose close relationship to the Prophet made them a special case, there arose what were essentially political caliphal dynasties – the Umayyads and the Abbasids – who acted largely through their appointed bureaucracies and broke religious rules when it suited them to do so. The body of religiously learned men, or ulama, grew up and helped create the schools of Muslim law partly in order to carve out a sphere independent of what were essentially temporal rulers, but their independent judgements and legal rulings rarely had as much effective force as did those rulers. The independence of rulers from religious or popular control grew as military and tribal converts coming from beyond the borders of Islam increasingly took over – beginning with Turkish soldiers under the Abbasids and going on to the Seljuqs, Mongols, Mamluks and lesser-known military dynasties. Beginning in the tenth century rulers were increasingly called sultans and were increasingly free of the Abbasid caliphs to whom they owed theoretical allegiance. Works like the famous advice to rulers attributed to the great Seljuk vizir Nizam al-Mulk often stressed the importance of backing orthodox religion and suppressing heretical movements, but this was in order to have an ideological base for pragmatic policies, and this book does not speak of genuinely following religious precepts or the rulings of the ulama.\(^3\) Even the famous and often-quoted saying "religion and government (\textit{din o daula}) are twins" hardly indicates that they were either the same thing or inextricably intertwined like Siamese twins: it may be taken as an admonition to keep them in harmony for stable rule. Some Islamic theorists, mainly in the later periods when government was quite separate from religion, did stress the intertwining of religion and state, but this reflected their ideal more than reality.

A number of recent scholars besides myself have made these points – Ira Lapidus, Sami Zubaida, Nazih Ayubi, and Muhammad Arkoun, among others – though the majority view seems little affected. As early as 1975 Lapidus published an article convincing opposing the traditional view, with examples from the early Islamic centuries. In summary, he says: