

Contemporary Islamic Militantism

By

EMILIO PLATTI, O.P.

Last year, while working in a little used section of the library at the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies in Cairo, I found an old booklet on Europe and Islam. It had been displaced and was not listed in the library's catalogue. But the 86 year-old Father Georges Chehata Anawati, who has never ceased to promote the need for dialogue between Christianity and Islam, knew the work very well: "Yes, it is the famous discussion concerning the relations between Europe and Islam, edited in 1905, between a French minister of Foreign Affairs, M.G. Hanotaux and the leading Muslim reformist theologian Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdou, Mufti of Egypt, who died in the same year, July 11, 1905."¹

Even after nearly 90 years, it is of some importance today to recall one of Hanotaux's statements in the light of the triumphant colonialism and cultural and economic expansion characteristic of the West. I do believe that the fundamental positions have not basically changed, even though some specific terms, "civilization" for example, are no longer employed in the same context, having been replaced instead by notions of "human rights" and "democracy." To quote Hanotaux: "To these Islamic and Semitic peoples, the French people, Aryan [sic!], Christian and republican, have now to bring the bread and the salt of life and civilization."

In considering the answer to the introduction by Muhammad Talaat Harb Bey and the text of Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdou, it is not completely

¹M.G. Hanotaux et le Cheik Mohammad Abdou, *L'Europe et l'Islam*. Avec préface de Mohammad Talaat Harb Bey, Le Caire, Jean Politis, 1905.

impossible to understand the reasons for both Islamic resentment towards the West and the call to reform within the Islamic world itself:

"For sir Hanotaux, as for many Europeans, there is no other civilization than the civilization coming from Europe. For them, welfare and prosperity can appear only under the rule of European Law, European customs, in one word: by European civilization. But nevertheless, this famous civilization brought to Europe itself an accumulation of disasters and ruins."² "According to the Gospel, as we read and understand it, the Christian Believer is supposed to detach himself from the world and should live in a simple way, following the straight path. The Gospel commands him not to repay evil by evil, and condemns the rich who are always ambitious and ready to harm others, since it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle than for the rich to enter the Garden of Paradise."³ This admirable doctrine has indeed the dignity of the Messenger who announced it . . ."; but nothing of this beautiful doctrine of the Gospel can be seen in that civilization where Hanataux is speaking about . . . actually it is founded on might, gold, vanity, arrogance, and hypocrisy, represented on the one side by the pound sterling and on the other by the golden Napoleon [Franc]. Jesus Christ taught his followers to be inspired by the spirit of tolerance; but this lesson has been so badly assimilated that Christians not only do not tolerate other people's law, but also the beliefs of others . . ."⁴ "On the other hand, I have to concede that contemporary Muslims are no longer real Muslims; they are superstitious and even idolatrous . . . They were transformed, and by weakness, they just imitated the others and were not able to preserve their heritage."⁵

It is well known both that Muhammad 'Abdou is the symbol of Islamic reformism and that the Islamic revival in the twentieth century is a direct consequence of his action; it is therefore clear that two of the central ideas of contemporary Islamic militantism can be summed up accordingly: (1) Social and economic international disorder, that is, fundamental injustice in opposition to the divine prescriptions, which can be explained as the consequence of a misunderstanding, or even abandonment of the Gospel or of the divine Law, by the West; (2) the radical reform needed within Islam itself.

The analysis of the international situation of injustice inflicted by the West on the world as a whole is common to all Muslim militants, and is

²*L'Europe et l'Islam*, p. 7.

³Mt. 19, 24 and par. and also in the Qur'ân, VII, 40: "To those who reject our signs and treat them with arrogance, no opening will there be of the gates of heaven, nor will they enter the Garden, until the camel can pass through the eye of the needle: such is our reward for those in sin".

⁴*L'Europe et l'Islam*, p. 42-43.

⁵*Ibid.* p. 59.

embodied in particular by the two greatest Muslim thinkers of contemporary Islamic Revolutionary ideology, the Pakistani Mawlana Sayyid Abu'l A'la Maududi (1903-1979) and the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), both of whom wrote militant commentaries on the Qur'ân: *The Meaning of the Qur'ân*⁶ and *In the Shadow of the Qur'ân*.

Maududi, in the introduction of his Address on *Jihâd in Islam*,⁷ delivered in 1939, described in terms still valid more than fifty years after they were penned the mutual incomprehension existing between Islam and the West:

"The word '*Jihâd*' conjures up the vision of a marching band of religious fanatics with savage beards and fiery eyes brandishing drawn swords and attacking the infidels wherever they meet them, pressing them under the edge of the sword for the recital of *Kalima*⁸ (. . .). The irony is that the painters are no other than those benefactors of ours who themselves have been engaged in an extremely unholy war for centuries on end. They themselves present the picture of robbers who, armed to their teeth with all kinds of deadly weapons, have set upon the world, pillaging it for the capture of new markets of trade, resources of raw material, open lands for colonization and mines yielding valuable metals, so that they may procure fuel for their ever burning fire of avarice. They fight not for the cause of God but for the satisfaction of their lust and hunger."

In these passages, the contemporary world is depicted in terms of the disorder brought about by the practice of injustice, comparable to what is described in the Qur'ân as the disorder involved in usury. This idea has also been expressed in a particularly striking way by Sayyid Qutb, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who was executed during the rule of 'Abd an-Nâsir's (Nasser). In his comment on *sûra* 104 (The Slanderer) we read:⁹

⁶Sayyid Abu A'la Maududi: *Tafhîm al-Qur'ân*, Lahore, 1949-1972; English translation: *The meaning of the Qur'ân*, Lahore, 1967-1988. Sayyid Qutb: *Fi Zilâl al-Qur'ân*, Cairo, 1953-1960/65; only the last part 30 is translated into English: *In the Shadow of the Qur'ân*, London, 1980.

⁷Sayyid Abul A'la Maudidi, *Jihâd in Islam*, Beirut, International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, No. 2, 1983, p. 1.

⁸*Kalima*, understood in the Indian Subcontinent as the *Shahâda*, the profession of Faith: "There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Prophet of God"; cf. Maududi, *Fundamentals of Islam*, Chap. 4: The Meaning of *Kalima* Tayyiba, Lahore, 1975, p. 24; in the new translation of the Islamic Foundation, *Let us be Muslims*, Leicester, 1982: There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

⁹In the translation of Yusuf Ali (Ed. Al-Madinah, 1401 A.H.): "Woe to every (kind of) scandal-monger and backbiter who pileth up wealth and layeth it by, thinking that his wealth would make him last for ever! By no means! He will be thrown into that which breaks to pieces. And what will explain to thee that which breaks to pieces? (It is) the fire of Allah kindled (to a blaze) the which doth mount (right) to the hearts: it shall be made into a vault over them in columns outreached".

"This sûra portrays one of the actual scenes in the early days of the Islamic call. Yet this scene is a pattern which is repeated in every environment and society. It is the scene of the villain, meaning one who is given wealth and uses it to tyrannise others. . . until even he cannot bear himself. He thinks that wealth is the supreme value in life, the value before which all values and all standards come toppling down. He feels that since he possesses wealth, he controls other peoples' destinies without being accountable for anything he does. He imagines that his money and his wealth is a god, capable of absolutely everything – even of escaping death, thus making him immortal and avoiding the judgment of Allah and his retribution."

It has become a commonplace in the Islamic world to consider that the descriptions of injustice and usury applied by the Qur'an to the citizens of Mekka are also to be attributed to the contemporary economical, cultural and social situation characteristic of the West today. The Islamic challenge to the West can be expressed in the form of a number of interrelated questions: Is Western prosperity, and its apparently progressive (and seemingly inevitable) economic expansion not in fact achieved at the expense of human being? Is it not brought about at any price, and especially at the expense of the majority of the peoples of the world? Is it not destructive of such fundamental values as solidarity, human harmony and, in particular, the sense of transcendence? Is the West even capable today for the awareness that not everything and not everyone can become objects of manipulation? Is there anything at all higher than human rights? What of the rights of Creation, or the rights of the Creator, of God?¹⁰

To those Muslims who post these questions, not only is the West entering a process of decadence – which inevitably involves a loss of any sense of the above-mentioned values – but that given this, the Western decline into decadence can actually be accounted for by the Muslims who understand themselves to be in a privileged position to interpret this phenomenon. After all, does the situation of the West not resemble exactly the same phenomenon as the ignorance of Islam, of the refusal to submit to the transcendent Law of Creation? And is this Law not explicitly given by God Himself in the Holy Qur'an, God's Word? Just as the citizens of Mekka thought themselves self-sufficient, so too with the modern, secular western world. And even if Socialism and Marxism portray themselves as devoting more attention to the necessity for solidarity between peoples, nevertheless, from the Muslim perspective, these ideologies are lacking in any fundamental values in support of this endeavour. It can only be by

¹⁰Maududi in *Towards Understanding Islam*, Delhi, 1989 (14th Edition), p. 103, but also the liberal Muslim scholar Mohammed Arkoun (interview in the French newspaper *Le Monde* about Salman Rushdie).

way of loyalty to the noble and transcendent ideal that human beings can be persuaded against the temptation of commitment to a purely personal, individual benefit;¹¹ without such ideals, the entire fabric of society is condemned to disintegration. Only by means of a loyal submission to the divine Decree is man to be saved from this otherwise inevitable path to self-destruction. It would seem, however, that the West is about to enter upon a period characterized by Ignorance of this divine Decree, or more precisely, of Ignorance of the three fundamental principles of Islam: the existence and the Unity of God, the Prophetical Message, and the Last Judgment.

In this sense, the original "Kerygma" of the Message of Islam is not at all difficult to define. Its first spark can be seen in the initial attitude of the people of Mekka towards Muhammad. They resolutely opposed Muhammad's proclamation that the Lord, the Creator alone, has the power to create, and that He will judge all acts of injustice at the Resurrection. To the self-satisfied and self-sufficient – the wealthy citizens of Mekka – who prided themselves on their commercial success and the wealth they accumulated through the caravan trade, Muhammad preached that the Creator alone is almighty. Contrary to what the men of Mekka believed, their material goods were not of ultimate value. And to those who denied the resurrection, preferring instead the comforts of this present life, Muhammad preached the Last Judgement and the need for solidarity in the sharing of the Creator's goods.

The Message of the Qur'ân makes an unambiguous connection between man's moral behaviour on the one hand, and the nature of the Creator on the other. It is precisely on this point that the pagans of Mekka opposed Muhammad: rather than accepting an almighty Creator, they preferred powerful divinities; instead of the resurrection and final judgment, they trusted in the intercession of pagan divinities who guaranteed the security of the wealthy life the men of Mekka enjoyed without any consideration for the need for solidarity. In the earliest Sûras recited by Muhammad, such as 96 (*al-'Alaq*), 92 (*The Night*) and Sûra 93 (*The Morning Light*, most probably a reference to the prophet's life as an orphan) and also to Sûra 107 (*Neighbourly Nees*), we can discern the central ideas of the first "Kerygma" of the recitation of Muhammad: (1) To the Lord belongs everything created; (2) The Lord will judge the self-sufficient; (3) There is a fire where the self-sufficient will burn after the destruction of the world, the resurrection of all mankind and the Day of Judgment, while the God-fearing will be satisfied. Thus the following texts:

Sûra 96, 6-7: "Nay, but man doth transgress all bounds, in that he looketh upon himself as self-sufficient. Verily, to the Lord is the return of all."

¹¹Maududi in *Challenge of the Modern Age and Youth*, Lahore, 1976.

Sûra 92, 8-18: "But he who is a greedy miser and thinks himself self-sufficient, and gives the lie to the Best, we will indeed make smooth for him the Path to Misery; nor will his wealth profit him when he perishes. Verily We take upon Us to guide, and verily unto Us belong the End and the Beginning. Therefore do I warn you of a Fire blazing fiercely; none shall burn therein but those most unfortunate ones who give the lie to Truth and turn their backs. But those most devoted to Allah shall be removed far from it, those who spend their wealth for increase in self-purification"

Sûra 107, 1-3: "Seest thou one who denies the judgment (*ad-Dîn*) to come? Then such is the one who repulses the orphan, and encourages not the feeding of the indigent."

Sûra 90, 12-20: "And what will explain to thee the path that is steep? It is the freeing of a slave, or the giving of food in a day of privation to the orphan with claims of relationship, or to the indigent, down in the dust. Then will he be of those who believe, and enjoin patience, constancy and self-restraint, and enjoin deeds of kindness and compassion. Such are the companions of the Right Hand. But Those who reject Our Signs, they are the unhappy companions of the Left Hand. On them will be fire vaulted over all round."

Given that these sentiments reflect the core of the Qur'anic message, which moreover was understood by Muhammad as the light of revelation, and was interpreted by him accordingly, it is perhaps not difficult to understand that contemporary Muslims today see the modern Western lifestyle as a return to the pre-Islamic situation of materialism and atheism; for contemporary Muslims the link has again been lost between man's moral life on the one hand, and God and the resurrection for the judgment on the other. The pre-Islamic way of life of the Meccans is traditionally called *Jâhiliyya*-Ignorance; militant Muslims today apply the term of *Jâhiliyya* to the Western world; moreover, they ask Christians, rather than falling into that secularised way of life, to join them in opposing materialism and atheism.

But if the idea of *Jâhiliyya*-Ignorance is applied to the West, the Muslim reformists were – just as the contemporary militants are now – even more concerned to criticise their own Islamic world: "Contemporary Muslims are not real Muslims any more . . . They were transformed, and by weakness, they just imitated the others" according to Muhammad 'Abdou. The once brilliant Islamic civilisation became weak because it no longer obeyed the prescriptions of God. Contemporary Muslims do not submit to God; they no longer have confidence in the Mystery of God's divine Decree, and do not subscribe to the divine Law. And since "submission to the divine Decree" is precisely the definition of Islam, the contemporary Islamic world cannot be considered Muslim anymore! Only acceptance of the path of Revelation, submission to divine guidance, and the application of the divine Law are capable of providing the Muslim community with

the strength to attend to the golden ages – not the inspiration of the West, secularism and the bifurcation of religion and society.

This idea finds expression in many of the books written by Abu'l A'la Maududi. We read, for example, in his *Economic System of Islam*¹² that

“Anyone who has studied Islam and has an enlightened belief in its doctrine cannot conceive for a single moment that as a Muslim his economy or any aspect of his life can ever be dissociated from religion; or that a system of life in which politics or economics, the court and the law are regulated by an un-Islamic system and devotion to Islam is nominal only, can ever be called Islamic.” And in his letters to the American convert Maryam Jameelah¹³ he observes that: “These westernized Muslims over whose lack of Islamic spirit you are lamenting, are the worst products of western colonialism in Muslim countries. The greatest blow of colonialism administered against us has been not in the field of politics or economics, but in the realm of mind and spirit. This imperialism has produced many mental slaves among our ranks whose souls even after our political independence remain subjected to the West and who are faithfully following in the steps of their former masters. From this viewpoint, I think our war of liberation has not ended as yet and we have to fight a long-drawn battle against such indigenous foreigners.”

The struggle for the Islamic way of life against a prevailing Western-inspired spirit in Islamic remains the main purpose of Islamic militant movements. Fear of Western patterns at the heart of Muslim society has been described by French scholars as ‘Occidentose’, that is, an inferiority complex in relation to the perceived material – economical, scientific and technical – and intellectual superiority of the West, which is at the same time mixed with Islam’s own conviction concerning its religious and moral superiority. Or to put it another way, it is a fascination with the actual technical but materialistic superiority, intermingled with Islam’s conviction of the *Jāhiliyya* – ignorance of the West and its inevitable decline. This contradiction can itself be regarded as the reason why contemporary Muslim militants are struggling to bring about the reintroduction of Islamic life to Islamic societies in such a way that the perceived sense of inferiority might be overcome. These militants are convinced that the restoration and reintroduction of Islamic Law can be the only way whereby the global natural superiority of the Islamic society could be acceded to, the pure Islamic society being the only way of life conforming to the divine Decree and the nature of creation itself.

Algerian militant Muslims like Sheikh ‘Alī Belhadj refer back to the Egyptian founder of the militant brotherhood of the Ikhwān al-Muslimūn

¹²Maududi in *Economic System of Islam*, Lahore, 1984, p. 99.

¹³*Correspondence between Maulana Maudoodi and Maryam Jameelah*, Lahore, 1986, p. 5.

– the Muslim brothers – Hasan al-Bannâ and, in particular, to Sayyid Qutb, and their battle for the purification of the Islamic Creed from corrupted beliefs.¹⁴ They also refer back to the great Muslim theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), who inspired the Islamic revival in the dark and confused times of the crusades and the Mongol invasions, when the Islamic world was almost destroyed at the hands of its enemies. The instauration of the *Minhadj as-Sunna*,¹⁵ the Way of the *Sunna*, the pure Islamic Way of Life – the same way Muhammad lived in Medina with his Companions – has always been the starting point of an Islamic revival.

The Egyptians Hasan al-Bannâ, Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Qutb are quoted by most of the contemporary Arabic Muslim militants, but as some scholars have pointed out,¹⁶ the translations of all the books of Maududi in Arabic are in fact the real inspirational source for the most recent radical and revolutionary Islamic movements in Northern Africa.

To appreciate the significance for Muslims of the idea of the instauration of the Islamic Way of Life in accordance with the Quranic prescriptions as a revival of “Islam”, understood as “submission of God’s sovereignty”, it is necessary to return again to the fundamental themes of the Qur’ân.

The themes of judgment, monotheism and creation at the beginning of Muhammad’s preaching in Mekka are very soon completed by a much wider reference to the prophets and patriarchs, and the Biblical and apocryphal (or even extra-biblical) tradition; from this period at Mekka the typology of the Prophet becomes the main theme of the recitation. The *Stories of the Prophets* underline how Muhammad’s recitation recalls previous recitations by other, previous prophets. In effect, they confirm the central Coranic affirmations concerning God, his unicity, the creation, the judgment and the divine Decree. Muhammad was convinced that the recitation of the Qur’ân did confirm previous revelations, and that his religion was identical to the monotheism of Ibrâhîm, the Father of Believers. And just as Mûsa, Nûh, ‘Isâ-Jesus and other prophets were confronted with the hostility and threats of unbelievers, so too was Muhammad similarly treated by the citizens of Mekka.

With the escalation of persecution in Mekka, Muhammad was obliged to seek refuge in the Hidjra, thus embarking upon the emigration to Medina. At Medina, Muhammad’s situation underwent a complete change: on the one hand, the Jewish tribes were strongly opposed to his message;

¹⁴M. Al-Ahnaf, B. Botiveau, F. Frégosi, *L’Algérie par ses islamistes*, Paris, 1991, p. 70.

¹⁵Title of one of Ibn Taymiyya’s main works.

¹⁶O. Carré, *Mystique et politique. Lecture révolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Qutb Frère musulman radical*, Paris, 1984, p. 20, note 2; M. Al-Ahnaf, B. Botiveau, F. Frégosi, *L’Algérie par ses islamistes*, Paris, 1991, p. 268.

on the other hand, he had the impression that some central dogmas of the Christian creed stood in direct contradiction to the coranic doctrine of the unicity of God. The religion of Islam, from inclusive, becomes exclusive: the religion of Ibrâhîm is definitively identified with Islam, the original and universal religion, while the Jewish and Christian religion are excluded as alterations and aberrations of the original message.

There is a further sense in which Muhammad's situation had changed: In Mekka he was persecuted and his companions were poor and humble; the important leaders of the city refused to accept his message. Muhammad could only rely on his being protected by some members of his family. In Medina, however, he becomes the leader of a Community, and is invited by members of the two Arab tribes, 'Aws and Khazraj, to organise the city, together with the emigrants from Mekka, according to the Recitation. If in the Mekkan period moral commandments were given, they were not given in detail. In Medina, the situation is otherwise. The prescriptions apply to practical devotions (*al-'ibâdât*) (prayers, alms, fasting, pilgrimage), transactions (*al-mu'âmalât*) (marriage, inheritance, sale and usury, property), punishments (*al-'uqûbât*) (with coranic punishments (*hudûd*) for murder, robbery, adultery, false accusation of adultery, apostasy). The divine Decree is now to be understood as the Law of God, and Islâm as submission to this Law. The Qur'ân becomes the basis of the Islamic Law, a code of Law, in the same way as the Pentateuch was distinguished by the Jews. In later Islamic history, jurisprudence would become a fundamental aspect of Islam, but it has its beginnings with the Prophets agreeing to settle at Medina: no longer is he simply the spiritual guide of the community, he is now the "temporal head" of this community as well.

From this point of view, it is more easily understandable how it is that modern militants see the Qur'an as a "a theoretical and a practical Book, which not only moralizes but also defines specifically the permissible and the forbidden;" and which "contains a complete code that provides for all areas of life, whether spiritual, intellectual, political, social or economic. It is a code which has not boundaries of time, place or nation."¹⁷

Furthermore, according to the militants, the Islamic code of life is the only way of life that conforms with nature; so all culture has to be islamized; as militants say: Islam has not to be adapted to the modern world, but the modern world has to be adapted to Islam. In his first chapter of his book *Towards understanding Islam*, Maududi makes clear how Islam is in fact "the natural religion of man:" "it is the way of nature, the religion of man;" "as the whole of creation obeys the law of God, the whole universe, therefore, literally follows the religion of Islam . . . The

¹⁷Cf. the Introduction to the *English translation of the meanings of the Holy Qur'ân and Commentary*, edited by the King Fahd Holy Qur'ân Printing Complex, Al-Madinah, Saudi Arabia, 1410 AH., p. IV-V.

sun, the moon, the earth and all other heavenly bodies are thus Muslim." I am personally convinced that the conflict with the West lays just on this level: there is no possibility for differentiation of cultures, or tolerance towards other cultures, and human freedom is seen as simple submission to one particular "natural" code of life: human freedom has no others perspectives, no wider horizon, than adaptation to natural determinism.¹⁸ And the conclusion is simply that intolerance and fanaticism have to be a consequence of this ideology: "It is the way a person exercises this freedom which divides mankind into two groups: believers and non-believers."¹⁹

The interpretation of the term "God's sovereignty" will increasingly become a matter of legal discussion in the Islamic world, being seen as a question of "application of the Law" (application of *Shari'a*). Militants refute Kemal Atatürk and others for their nationalism and secularism; they reject the Egyptian theologian 'Alī 'Abd ar-Rāziq (1888-1966) – who wrote his book *Islam and the principles of Government* just after the abolition of the Khalifate, the Succession of Muhammad in 1924 – because he tried to show that the political institution of the Khalifate was never an integral part of Islam as religion, and that therefore religion must be completely and permanently severed from the state. For much the same reason, the militants also attacked the blind Egyptian intellectual Taha Hussein (1889-1973), a former minister of education, who saw the Mediterranean Sea as a link between the North and the South, and as such, uniting both continents rather than dividing them.

In popular literature, it is common to read that it is contrary to Islam and the submission to God's sovereignty to say that human beings are legislators and that the Islamic Law can be subordinated to such human legislation; for the militants, on the contrary, only God is the true legislator. According to this perspective, it is *Kufr*-unbelief to maintain that the whole Traditional Islamic Law based on the Qur'an and the Sunna, the Tradition, does not have to be applied in its entirety and that some prescriptions have lost their importance. "Pretending that there can be any legislation other than God's Law (*Shari'at Allāh*) is *Kufr*-unbelief."²⁰ The only sovereignty is in God and in his Law.

During the last elections in Jordan, Egypt and Algeria, members of militant groups defended the slogans of the Muslims Brotherhood: "God is our purpose, the Prophet is our Messenger, the Qur'an is our Constitution;"

¹⁸Hussein Amin, *Le livre du musulman désespéré*, Paris, 1992, p. 138: "La volonté divine, c'est le déterminisme historique".

¹⁹Maududi, *Towards understanding Islam*, pp. 17-19.

²⁰Al-'Aqida as-sahiha wa-nawāqid al-Islām, Cairo. p. 31.

and "Islam is the solution: Religion and State – Justice Compassion – Freedom and Consultation - Holy effort and Mission." To stress continuity within the militant Muslim movement, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Ahmand Sayf ad-Dīn Hasan al-Bannā, was depicted on a poster together with a picture of his father, Hasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood (1906-1949).

The consequence of this action has been described in a thesis, written by Bernard Botiveau, dealing with the Egyptian radical movements:²¹ since the late seventies, it has become increasingly difficult for the governments of Islamic countries to defend both a parliamentary system and a secular legislation process. If sovereignty is to be attributed to God alone, human laws become illegitimate unless they are exactly conformed to *Shari'a*-Islamic Law; consequently governments find themselves having to defend the law against criticisms concerned with its legitimacy.

The ultimate consequence of this position has been defended by the militant Egyptian group responsible for the assassination of the late president Anwar as-Sadāt on October 6th, 1981. This group called itself "*Djamā'at al-Hidjra wa t-Takfīr*," "the People of Emigration and Excommunication;" that is, the people who decide to emigrate from the world of *Djāhiliyya*-Ignorance. It is important to note that the 'world' described here is not the West, but the Islamic nation itself, a nation in which the government does not rule in accordance with Islamic Law. The extreme Muslim militant groups in effect pronounce a sentence of excommunication upon any society whose head of state rules according to values other than those of the Coranic prescriptions. In claiming to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad in his *Hidjra*-Emigration (or Exodus) from Mekka to Medina and his *Djihād* against the citizens of Mekka who opposed him, contemporary militant groups refuse to admit any compromise, preferring instead to declare a Holy War against such rulers. In October 1990 a similar militant group was responsible for the killing of the president of the Egyptian parliament, Rifal A-Mahdjūb. Also numbered among the "enemies" of Islam are those intellectuals whose vision of Islam differs from that of the militants; examples here include Dr. Faradj Fawdah, murdered in June 1992, and Naguib Mahfūz, the famous novelist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1988, and whose trilogy is an image of the diversity of twentieth century Egyptian traditional society, and not of an idealised uniform Islamic society.²²

²¹Bernard Botiveau, *Shari'a islamique et droit positif dans le Moyen-Orient contemporain. Égypte et Syrie*, Aix Marseille, 1989.

²²The options of the grandson "Abd al-Mun'im, who is a disciple of a militant Sheikh and Muslim brother in *As-Sukkariyya*, conform with the militant Islamic ideology, and it is clear that Naguib Mahfūz is not at all sympathetic to these ideas.

The extremist position adopted by some revolutionary movements represented such a danger to the Islamic establishment that religious authorities were eventually compelled to intervene. Representing the Egyptian religious authorities, the Mufti Sheikh Djâd al-Haqq 'Alî Djâd al-Haqq first refuted the thesis of the group responsible for the killing of Sadât in a short work published in *Al-Ahram* of 8th December, 1981.²³ Under the auspices of the same author, a more extensive reaction was elaborated from within the religious university of al-Azhar in the book *Bayân li-n-Nâs*, Declaration to the People, the defense of the Community against excesses. These religious authorities grounded their argument on the classical Sunnite doctrine, namely that the exclusion of a person or a group of Muslims from the community is not permitted simply on the basis of sin if the individual or community concerned testifies that *There is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God*, and performs the essential prescriptions concerning prayers, fastening, the giving of alms and pilgrimage. In other words, the sincerity of such Muslims should never be put in doubt, even if they are regarded as sinful. The thrust of this refutation itself refers back to the earliest period of the Sunna: "Even in the exemplary community around the Prophet himself and his Companions one could find some personal sin." And the conclusion reached is quite logical: How is it possible to castigate a society as *Dâr al-Kufr* - House of Unbelief - opposed to *Dâr al-Islâm* - House of Islam - while five times a day the Call to Prayer is given, the prayers are performed all over the country, and all the religious ceremonies are celebrated in security? On what grounds is a Holy War to be declared against such a society?²⁴

As a matter of historical record, the question of God's sovereignty and the discussion about the application of God's Law, *Kufr*-unbelief or infidelity, and sin in the *Umma*-the Islamic Community, is as old as the first schism in Islam, when a group of radicals left the followers of 'Alî, the fourth successor of Muhammad because, in their eyes, he did not comply with the Command of Allah. And later on, the Sunnites have always rejected extreme radicalism and intolerant intransigence by opting for the unity and the survival of the Community.

Radical militants have also been challenged by others, such as the Arab or Egyptian Nationalists. In this regard, the slogan of the Egyptian Nationalists should not be misunderstood: "Religion is for God. The Homecountry is for all." As the Chief Justice of the Egyptian High Court, Muhammad Sa'îd al-Ashmâwî observed, in his vehement and unambiguous

²³Cf. Georges Ch. Anawati, *Une résurgence de Kharijisme au XXe siècle: l'Obligation absente*, in *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire* (MIDEO) 16 (1983) 191-228.

²⁴*Bayân li-n-Nâs*, Declaration to the People I-II, Cairo, 1984-1988, p. 248-249.

attack on the kind of Islam the militants attempt to present as the only possible form of Islam, the militants are in fact destroying Islam as a Religion.

Very much in the same way, a number of intellectuals are questioning the very roots of the militants' fundamentalist position by appealing to the status of the theoretical and juridical positions maintained in the past. This has been the strategy of 'Abd al-Madjid Al-Charfi, professor at the University of Tunis. In his analysis of the conditions and methods of independent judgment in legal matters, he maintains that Islam can only survive as an authentic religion "if the theoretical and juridical heritage of the past is seen as human construction, consecrated by the past."²⁵ A narrow concentration on juridical questions and a strict imitation of a past way of life have led to an annihilation of personal responsibility and the failure to adapt it to new situations.

Interpretation of the Recitation has been reduced to a literal reception of the text, very much in line with the way in which submission to God's Sovereignty has been understood as a repetition of a medieval legal system inspired by the Qur'ân and the way of life lived by the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. By contrast, quite clearly a different concept of Islamic Revelation is expressed in 'Abd al-Madjid Al-Charfi's statements; indeed, it can be said that he advances much further beyond the traditional position of Al-Azhar and the Sunnites - who do not fundamentally question the status of the legal prescriptions, coranic or traditional - concerning sin.

On the one hand we have observed that the Islamic world is once again involved in a debate about the central question of its own self-definition, the meaning of Islam, "Submission to God's Sovereignty," "Obedience to God," "Surrender or Reliance on God," "to comply with the command of God," just as Islam has so often encountered the same question in its past history, even as early as its beginnings during the glorious period of the first Caliphs. At the same time, we have no reason to believe that Muslims will not succeed once again in overcoming the challenge of present times in a Sunni way, that is, in a compromise between extreme radicalism and loss of identity. In order to mark the distinctive identity of Islam, it has been the strategy of its militants to oppose Islam to the West, such that the authentically Islamic is defined in terms of the confrontation itself. But while it might suit the militants to regard the West as their enemies, it is in fact the moderate Muslims inside the Community itself who pose the most serious challenge to the

²⁵Groupe de Recherches Islamo-Chrétien, *Ces Écritures qui nous questionnent, la Bible et le Coran*, Paris, 1987, pp. 122-123.

militants by daring to ask fundamental questions concerning Revelation, and who refuse the strictly literal imitation of what is in fact a human tradition based on the Revelation of the Qur'ân.²⁶ As we have seen, Sayyid Qutb and Maududi defend a strict application of the coranic prescriptions, and the sheikhs of al-Azhar themselves never question either the authority of the coranic prescriptions as Revelation or the need to apply the Tradition, the way of life of the Prophet and his Companions. At the same time, it is clear that others are somewhat more cautious concerning these traditions and how they are to be understood.

Between the extreme radical interpretations of Sayyid Qutb and Maududi, and the most critical approach of 'Abd al-Madjid Al-Charfi, a large spectrum of more or less moderate interpretations of "Islam" are actually being discussed in the Islamic world. For this reason alone, it would be a tragic misunderstanding if the West rejected Islam as a whole. A rejection of this nature would effectively deprive Muslims who want an open dialogue of the support they badly need. The continuing deaths of the victims of religious fanaticism, Dr. Faradj Fawdah being a pre-eminent example, would be even more tragic. This is one reason why dialogue between Islam and "the West" must be continued.

On the other hand, it would also be of great advantage for future relations not only between East and West, but also between North and South, if we were able to properly understand the real challenges of the contemporary Islamic crisis. In this regard Islam may well increasingly represent a challenge to Western concepts of society, and in particular a challenge to Christianity. It cannot be doubted that the West has been and still remains extremely successful, not only at the technological and economical level, but also in the propagation of ideas of democracy, human rights and individual freedoms. To this extent, it is quite obvious that militant Islam cannot be followed in its contradiction of these values: it is precisely because of its inability to take into consideration human responsibility, freedom and independent judgment in legal questions, that radical militant Islam is perverse – and even a kind of opium for the people. Nevertheless, contemporary Islam is challenging the world precisely at this level: What, after all, does human freedom actually mean? In what does it consist? There is surely some sense in raising these most urgent questions, even if they are framed in an old-fashioned and medieval pattern of thinking. The modern, post-Enlightenment Western stress on human freedom and the rights of the individual, as perceived by Muslims, threatens to develop into something very much resembling a state of absolute self-sufficiency, an all-encompassing manipulating power, submitting the whole of the creation to itself, without concern or respect for any limit,

²⁶Militants become just furious when scholars speak about "sources" of the Qur'ân (so Maududi, *The meaning of the Qur'ân VII*, Lahore, 1989 (6th ed.), p. 37).

mystery, nature, ecological harmony, social concern in modern city life, international economic and social balance, or the unassailable character of what ultimately is untouchable. Muslims will speak about the rights of God, the Mystery of his Law, and the sovereignty of His divine Decree.

If we wish to avoid new conflicts with the Islamic world, and if we want to preclude the possibility of further mutual exclusion, it will be necessary in the future to pursue dialogue with those Muslims who can explain to us the deeper sense of their struggle to defend the values of Islam, just as Christians are able to explain what it means to them to be free in Jesus Christ. □