BOOK REVIEWS


The name of Dr. Montgomery Watt should be familiar to the students of Islamics. He is the author of a number of scholarly works; of these Mūḥammad at Mecca and Mūḥammad at Medina deserve special mention. In the present volume, Dr. Watt undertakes to discover those social and economic forces which had brought about Islamic Revolution in Arabia by integrating the Arab tribes to a degree that could seldom be achieved in the course of world history. The Western scholars are bewildered at the phenomenal integration of a variety of peoples and cultures into inseparable bonds of community that could be achieved in such a short time under the pervasive influence of Islam, more so because Christianity had miserably failed in this respect. Naturally, therefore, Dr. Watt feels tempted to probe into the maze of Islamic history in order to grasp the general principles and forces which had brought about so successfully a worldwide brotherhood under the Prophetic guidance of Mūḥammad. With this in view, Dr. Watt employs the Marxist method of economic interpretation. Recently, it has become a fashion with a section of Western orientalists to indiscriminately apply this method of investigation in the sphere of Islamic history; motivation for such an interpretation is obviously to deny the divine origin of Islam and emphasize its mundane character. According to this methodology, the nature of underlying economic changes in a given society, eventually determines the direction of evolution of its over-all social and religious structure.

There is no doubt that economic factors do condition to a great extent the ideological setting of human societies but religious movements arise out of much deeper human urges. A religious system provides primarily the framework of eternal moral values and goals within which economic, social and political forces of any social group are made, under conditions of predetermined control, to interact with each other so as to produce a morally efficient society. In other words, religion is not merely the product of the vagaries of the natural forces but in effect it proposes to fashion, shape and direct them meaningfully to higher forms. Especially it would be even more difficult to dismiss Islam summarily as the mere outcome of social and economic laws of nature operating in Arabia on the eve of the 7th century A.C.

However, Dr. Watt stresses this very point in Chapter II entitled “The Place of Economic and Social Factors.” Tracing the origin of Islam in its Meccan phase, Dr. Watt observes, “Thus in the course of a generation or two there had been a change from reliance on nomadic pastoralism to reliance on commerce” (p. 6). According to him this economic change had a full impact upon “some of the social phenomena of Mecca in Muhammad’s time.” One obvious result of
this was a weakening of “group solidarity” at all levels of the tribal structure from the larger tribe to the lowest family unit. In other words, it meant a change from the communal production to an atomization of economic activity; as a result the communal wealth had given place to individual ownership. From this point at which “class feeling” was most acute—and was not between the rich and the poor, but between the very rich and the moderately prosperous” (p. 7). In this social setting Islam naturally developed its own attitudes towards these economic and social changes in Meccan society.

“The Quran”, according to Dr. Watt, “nearly accepts commerce and indeed ‘big business’. There is no whisper of criticism of the mercantile activity of Mecca, as such, only of particular parts in the conduct and outlook of the merchants, such as their oppression of the weak and their unwise reliance on wealth” (p. 9). It is the words of Dr. Watt, “On the contrary the Quran is deeply penetrated by mercantile terms, not merely in illustrative material but in the formulation of its main doctrines” (p. 9).

Apparently this kind of interpretation of the origin of Islam may be appealing to the speculative mind but it does not stand the test of reasoning and historical facts. It would be hard, if not impossible, to establish the historicity of Mecca during the Prophet’s time. The social life of Mecca had been mercantile much before Muhammad’s birth. The geographical pivotal location of Mecca would easily have testimony to the fact that commerce must have been the natural occupation of the Meccans, even though they maintained their connection with the nomadic tribes outside Mecca. In fact what had happened was that Islam had set in motion the social and economic changes of most fundamental nature in the tribal structure of Arabia; these changes were cutting at the very roots of the prevailing mercantile society of Mecca. This is the reason, perhaps, that the Meccans were the most vehement opponents of the new social philosophy of Islam. This counterthrust may very well be ascertained from the early history of Islam. In interpreting the events of early Meccan life of the Prophet, Dr. Watt’s speculations tend to be fanciful and far-fetched. About Muhammad’s advice to some of the early Muslims to migrate to the neighboring Abyssinia, Dr. Watt conjectures that Muhammad did so in order to explore a new trade route. Similarly is the case with his observation that the clan groupings in Muhammad’s time were largely influenced by business interests. Subsequently the Meccans’ boycott of Muhammad and his uncle Ali ibn Abi Talib was not only an opposition to Muhammad’s new teachings but the incident had some relevance to the economic conflict that was going on in Mecca. In all these events search for any economic motivation seems to be unreasonable. The Prophet Muhammad had not come as the spokesman of the moderately rich Meccans against the monopolists: he felt invested with a divine mission of elaborating a way of life based upon the eternal principles of Islam. As a part of his mission, the Prophet Muhammad set these moral principles as the foundation-stone of economic and political superstructure: but his overall mission was the organizing of a community (ummah) upon the basis of Divine Injunctions. In fact, therefore, these early Meccan events reflect the underlying moral tensions from which the Meccan society was suffering during the Prophet’s time.

Therefore, Dr. Watt’s generalization seems to have no historical foundation.
when he asserts 'a change in the means of production underlies the importance of Islam at Mecca—men were defining their livelihood by commerce instead of stock-breeding' (p. 30).

Treading the development of Islam through the lens, Medinas phase Dr. Watt remarks, 'There is, then, an important economic change is close proximity to the adoption of Islam at Medina, namely, the change from nomadism to a settled agricultural life' (p. 14). The social change at Medina were linked up with the economic changes, but the situation was more complex than at Mecca. Migration of Muhammad to Medina, according to Dr. Watt, had some serious economic consequences. Although, it is true that the existing social malaise at Medina had paved the way for ready acceptance of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, yet it would not be fair to over-emphasize this point in order to prove that the monopoly of the existing Amb-class of Medina with the Prophet Muhammad as its head was solely because of these social and economic changes which were occurring at Medina. Therefore, his conclusion does not appear to be free from prejudice when he remarks, 'In respect of dogma the ground had been prepared by the Jews, but the social imperatives of Muhammad's religion undoubtedly had a great attraction for the Medinans' (p. 25). However, Dr. Watt's analysis regarding the social repercussions of the advent of Islam at Medina are more persistently correct as summed up by him: 'The fundamental change was that the society of Medina was unified on a new basis, namely, religion, instead of the old basis of kinship, and that through this unification internal strife was stopped' (p. 18).

It is difficult for an impartial student of Islam to agree with Dr. Watt when he says, 'There is something accidental about the way in which the dogmas of Islam met the needs of Medina in view, but with very different needs of Mecca' (p. 21). This view can be rejected on two grounds: first, the idea of divine guidance through revelation was a continuing process in the Prophet's life, solutions of problems came along with the revelations; secondly, Islam was consistent more with exorcizing fundamental principles than with providing ready-made answers to all questions of politics and economics. Islam's objective was to define a way of life and lay down the moral norms and see exemplary conduct-patterns in different walks of life.

In the same chapter, Dr. Watt observes, 'The prohibition of usury was adopted in Islam in an attempt to make the Jews of Medina lead money freely to the Muslims; but in the last century it has had the effect of retarding industrial development in Islamic countries,' and then after a few lines he continues, 'such economic consequences of a religious movement are incidental' (p. 34). Prohibition of usury constitutes an essential feature of Islam which aims at generating a community of men free from economic exploitation; therefore, it would be wrong to regard this as merely incidental.

Dr. Watt devotes a chapter to 'the Idea of Ideation.' He outlines the ideas underlying the earlier passages of the Quran and the corresponding social programme. This ideation was in sharp contrast to the attitude of the 'merchant princes' of Mecca. Islam preached upright conduct and the absence of undue reliance on human power whereas the merchant princes believed in wealth and
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power alone (p. 61). Islam emphasized the individual rather than the tribe or clan. In the words of Dr. Watt, Islam "had to oppose the centralisation of the old tribal humanism" as well as that of "the mercantile individualism" (p. 47). Moreover, Muhammad as the interposed mediator was considered a serious threat to the merchant prince and his reliance on human planning (p. 47). The early conflicts between Muhammad and the Quraysh is interpreted to reflect a deeper class-conflict between the monopolists and the oppressed weak. No doubt, there is some truth in this; however, cautious scholarship demands that this point must not be attached to an absurd degree. It would be erroneous to suggest that these ideas were the idealistic complement of a social movement which had led to a transformation of Arabian society (p. 53). The correct view, perhaps, would be that which regards Islam as the catalyst of social repercussions of great significance.

Referring to idealistic developments in Islam at Medina, Dr. Watt holds that the ideas of "the messenger" and "the umma" as an enlarged tribe and of the Arab as a unity distinct from other peoples, were significant in the formation of the Islamic state. The idea of the messenger is in no way different from the earlier idea of the warior; these are only two aspects of the general concept of prophecy. In this connection Dr. Watt ventures to observe, "Naturally the idea of 'the messenger of God' developed with the actual development of Muhammad's powers and responsibilities" (p. 57). Moreover, this statement remains uncontradicted and unanatomized. Again Dr. Watt's contention on the same page that the idea of umma in the later Medina context was the development of earlier restricted meaning of umma does not hold good because the primary object of Islam from its very inception was the radical transformation of the Arabian feudalism into a moral unity in all spheres of life. If there was any development, that was in regard to the concept of Prophetic mission attaining its perfection as Islam. Dr. Watt further asserts on page 59 that Muhammad seems to have come to think of himself as sent not merely to the Maccene or Medinene but to the Arabs as a whole. This view is wholly false in view of the numerous clear Qu'ranic verses and the traditions which do clearly establish the universal character of Islam. References to the Arabs and the Arabic language are casual and with situational context. At another place Dr. Watt maintains that Arab unity was never a guiding concept for the Islamic state. But in the same breath he maintains that awareness of the difference between Arab and non-Arab, and fear of foreign domination contributed to Muhammad's success, and it is also clear that Muhammad deliberately moulded the new religion to make it more Arabia (pp. 92-93).

Discussing 'social involvement and society', Dr. Watt does not hesitate to twist the concept of jihād in Islam. In his view, Muhammad in calling upon the Muslims to wage relentless jihād only provided 'some outlet for the energies that would normally have been expended in mutual bickering' and encouraged the newly converted tribes 'to direct their hatred against tribes hostile to himself or at least not in alliance with him' (p. 61). Thus Dr. Watt discovers 'reasons of material nature for Muhammad's developing the idea of expeditions against non-members of his alliance in the surrounding lands' (p. 61). On the contrary,
close examination of the Qur'anic verses and the early accounts regarding jihād would show that most of these raids were either retaliatory or defensive in character. Islam prescribes jihād as a collective duty wherever and whenever there are obstructions in peaceful propagation due to persistent persecutions and absence of religious freedom.

In the chapter entitled 'The Will to Unity and Domination', Dr. Watt takes great pains in discovering material factors underlying the union of different groups under the Islamic State. By recognizing Muhammad as 'messenger of God', the Medinee got rid of 'the social insecurity which resulted from attempting to run an agricultural community on a basis of non-monic idealism' (p. 88). It was for this reason that the Medinee had accepted Abū Bakr as the successor of Muhammad. But it is hard to believe how this solution could fulfill their material interests as contended by Dr. Watt. We know very well that the Medinee struggled for their claim to the Caliphate, but it was only for their higher judgment that they ultimately accepted the leadership of the Quraysh by sacrificing their claim.

In examining the disintegrating forces within the body-politic of Islam, Dr. Watt concentrates upon the development of the early Kharijite and Shi'ah movements as examples. The conclusions of this chapter seem to be quite convincing and interesting. However, in the following chapter on 'The Integration of Political Life', some remarks of Dr. Watt deserve critical scrutiny. On page 160 Dr. Watt says that the Ottoman Sultan in 1014 declared a holy war against the 'infidel' British—but the Muslims of the British empire paid no attention to it. But this is not true insofar as the Indian Muslims are concerned. Dr. Watt observes on page 163 that the religious charism of Muhammad's prophethood would enhance his authority as an orator, and would also make many people more inclined to accept him as leader. Apart from this, prophethood had little effect on Muhammad's position as ruler. In reply to this it may be submitted that the political role of Muhammad is inseparable from his religious mission since his mission was to organize a community based upon direct Divine guidance. Although the umma or Islamic community had a religious basis it was also a political body. Moreover, the political aspect of the umma emerges most clearly in the form of the Caliphate after Muhammad's death. The basis of the Caliphate was not merely satisfaction as maintained by Dr. Watt, it was in fact implicit in the very concept of the umma. At Surahh 51:66 there is no disagreement among the Muslims about the necessity of a political organization, the point at issue was as to who should be the successor of Muhammad. However, on the principle of succession itself there was a tacit ipse.

The chapter on 'The Integration of the Money' is very weak in its arguments and betrays a great deal of confusion of thought in relation to the origin and development of the system of fiscal and Islamic jurisprudence. On page 208 a reference to the term 'musādah of the Islamic community' is made but this term is never used in the law books at all. Dr. Watt's conclusion that the phrase 'Sunnah of Muhammad' came into usage in course of time is also incorrect. As a matter of fact the primacy of the concept of the Sunnah of Muhammad cannot be doubted since his model activity became exemplary guide to the conduct of the
community. On the same page Dr. Watt further confines the concept of the Sunnah of prophethood by saying that it emphasized 'the supernatural character of sunnah of the community in that it was derived from the charismatic leader'. Immediately after the sentence is complete, Dr. Watt inserts within parenthesis a very strange phrase with no context, namely, 'therefore to some extent did justice to the central idea of the Shi'ites'. In the following sentence Dr. Watt gives absolutely incorrect meaning of the term 'Shar'ah' in the course of arguing the so-called supernatural character of the Sunnah of Muhammad. He says, 'The name Shar'ah further emphasizes this supernatural character—since it means 'revelation'. The term does never mean 'revelation' (also p. 109); it simply means path and it was used by the Jauza' as the Divine path contained in the Qur'a'n. Therefore, it may be noted that Dr. Watt's assertion that the Shar'ah though largely based on Muhammad's human example, becomes a supernatural norm for the conduct of Muslims is not correct. For Ge review of Islamic jurisprudence, it appears that Dr. Watt has heavily borrowed from the scholarly researches of orientalists like Schacht and others without grasping what they mean. In interpreting the role of ijtihad, Dr. Watt links it to the idea of 'the charismatic community' (p. 204). But it is very dangerous to play with such modern concepts in applying them to Islamic institutions. Dr. Watt seems to have failed to grasp the idea of Shar'ah and its role in Islamic community when he makes a sweeping generalisation 'that the Shar'ah was hardly a practical code even for a mediaval state, it is extremely difficult to adapt it to the needs of today' (p. 208). Similarly Dr. Watt introduces a note of missionary zeal in his observations, 'it is perhaps worth remarking in closing that Christendom, at least in parts, seems to have been more successful than Islam in devising institutions in which there was a high degree of satisfaction both for those who wanted a charismatic leader and for those who wanted to belong to a charismatic community' (p. 209). Carrying this missionary zeal in its logical conclusion towards the end of the book, Dr. Watt passionately asserts 'Islam would have to admit the fact of its origin—the historical influence of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and of the cultural tradition of Syria, Iraq and Egypt'. And he adds: "It would have to be prepared to learn, even in the religious sphere, from Christians and Jews" (p. 283). 

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