BOOK REVIEWS


This remarkable book tackles a hot issue: the Islamic revival. All over the world today a revival is stirring some 800 million Muslims, one-fifth of mankind, sparking upheaval, shaking society and threatening the international order. Daniel Pipes, lecturer in history at Harvard University, blazes a trail through Islamic history from its origins to modern times, analyzing the forces igniting this revival.

Pipes divides Islamic history into three periods: the pre-modern (from Islamic origins to 1800), modern (from 1800 to 1970) and contemporary (1970-1983). He perceives European imperialism around 1800 as a shattering event that disrupted the integral civilization of Islam with its sense of God-given success, wealth and power. In the unprecedented income of the oil boom in the 1970’s Pipes discerns the most important factor reversing this two-centuries old sense of failure.

Pipes sides with those who understand Islam predominantly as a religion of sacred law (Shari‘ah): “the key to Islam in politics”. Political action has the goal of creating a government conducive to a way of life according to the shari‘ah and unimpeded by alien influences. In their history, however, Muslims were willing to accept what Pipes terms “the medieval synthesis,” giving precedence to the preservation of Muslim society over complete implementation of the law. Flanking this vast majority camp of traditionalism, radical legalist movements prepared for the imminent end of the world (‘messianism’) or looked back to a mythic golden age of the early Muslim community (‘fundamentalism’). Whereas traditionalists accepted the nonimplementation of the shari‘ah as a standard, messianists abrogated it for utopian endtimes, and fundamentalists demanded its idealized application. Legalism pitted Muslim subjects against their rulers, forcing them to abide by the shari‘ah; the desire for Islamic autonomy induced cooperation with Muslim rulers against infidels. Holy war against infidels (jihād) offered a unique avenue for Muslim leaders to associate themselves with Islam.

Islam’s rapid rise from obscurity to international empire had a touch of the miraculous for Muslims who saw in Islam a religion of salvation through victory. Memories of early invincibility created extravagant expectations of eventual universal dominion, with Christendom watching passively as Islam attracted converts by the millions. A legacy of Muslim strength and Christian weakness made Muslims scorn the Franks and Christians hate Islam. ‘Overall, premodern Muslims had a dual historical experience: They failed the sacred law but achieved great human success’; “They were bad Muslims but the best of men.”
The arrival of the European imperialists, however, destroyed the medieval synthesis and brought the Muslim world under control within a century and a half. Muslims had three options: a turn inward to their own tradition, a turn to the West or some mix of the two. Fundamentalism strove to exclude Western influences, secularism tried to emulate the Europeans and reformism attempted to reconcile Islam and Western civilization. All three were set face to face with the task of modernization (becoming technologically like Occidentals) at the risk of Westernization (becoming culturally like Occidentals). Fundamentalists, concerned to stave off European ideologies, transformed the shari'ah into a rival ideology; intent on adopting Western customs, secularists limited the shari'ah to private life; attracted by Western ideas, reformists brought the shari'ah into conformity with them.

Pipes strongly argues the fundamentalist programme: the transformation of the shari'ah from a legal system to a political doctrine, the acceptance of modernization and the rejection of Westernization, the ambition to implement the law in its entirety and the advocacy of an impractical, often fanatical idea of government. By rejecting the medieval synthesis of traditionalism, fundamentalists ignored 1,000 years of experience, sought relief of distress in redress of history rather than revision of doctrine and made the faulty assumption that Muslims can modernize without Westernizing.

In the face of the fundamentalist impasse, concludes Pipes, “secularism alone offers escape from the Muslim plight.” To prosper again, the Muslim world faces “an inescapable set of demands: worldly success requires modernization; modernization requires Westernization; Westernization requires secularism; secularism must be preceded by a willingness to emulate the West; and this willingness will gain acceptance only when Muslims are unalterably convinced that it is their only choice.” Yet, what logic required did not happen in the Islamic revival of the 1970’s; on the contrary, secularism waned and fundamentalism waxed; Why?

Pipes seeks the answer to the question by two approaches, one empirical, the other a priori. He surveys Islamic countries in the contemporary period and concludes that fundamentalism surged in most countries with dominant Muslim majorities (more than 85 percent of the population, notably in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Libya and Turkey) and impeded the process of modernization. It also strengthened autonomist impulses inimical to political balance in countries with Muslim minorities (between 25 and 85 percent) and favoured sentiments of Muslim solidarity in countries with small Muslim minorities (less than 25 percent). Though local causes and regional development held primacy, common features marked the Islamic revival across the whole breadth of the Muslim world, accompanied by signs of increased Muslim confidence, veils, robes, hostility to the West and fervent mosque attendance. Against the West's declining power and prestige, Islam provided a practical political alternative as well as a secure spiritual niche. It appeared as the only identity transferable from the colony to the nation.

The surge of Islamic fundamentalism and autonomism touched nearly all Muslims and took place within a decade. Its sudden universality was rooted in the paramount Islamic event of the late 20th century – the oil boom. Saudi Arabia, the mainstay of the 1973 embargo, epitomized the conjunction of oil and Islam. “The Arabian sheikh, characterized by a constant devotion to Islam, possessing more wealth than he could count, lording his power over Westerners, employing his fellow Muslims and patronizing the finest money could buy, gave Islam a new elan.” A wave of euphoria swept through the Muslim world. Oil was a gift of God, a sign of divine approval, vaguely linked with the holy places of Islam and the Koran.
Islam emerged as a third international movement next to Western and Communist ones. It was pressed into politics "between the Saudi anvil and the Libyan hammer." Khomeini's ascent to power with Muslim determination alone (without armaments, oil revenues or official position) had enormous appeal to Muslims far beyond Iran's borders. The excitement of his unexpected advent and his program of perpetuating the revolution at home and abroad put immense hopes in the hearts of Muslims everywhere.

Yet for Pipes, the Islamic revival resting on oil is built on sand. 'It is mirage, a bonanza of short duration, a theocratic experiment destined for the refuse bin of history'. The social disruption of fast and easy money, the delusions of greed and self-interest, and the proximate collapse of Khomeini's theocracy will have jolting consequences. The oil boom was the result of freak circumstances, not Muslim achievements; it is unearned, indebted to Western initiative and investment and maintained by a foreign work force. The Islamic revival will appear as a curious aberration in history. Secularism will make a comeback: "Nasserism will again appeal to Egyptian and Arab youth, Ataturk's legacy will be reinvigorated in Turkey, Pakistan will rediscover its British heritage, and so forth." In the bitter aftermath of Saudi greed, Libyan arrogance and Iranian fanaticism, Muslims will again be required to deal with Islam's principal legacies from premodern times: the expectation of divine rewards, the imperatives of the sacred law, Islamic patterns in public life and hostility towards the Christian West.

This detailed account of Pipes, eloquent analysis indicates the many assets of the book. It relies heavily on the Islamic research of historians, orientalists and political scientists (from H.A.R. Gibb through W. Smith to D.H. Khalid). It includes some gems like the section on male-female relations in Islamic society, and some liabilities: a strained analogy between the anticipated fate of Islamic law and the Jewish halakha is one weakness; the diminutive role assigned to Islamic messianism in the analysis is another. The controversy, however, is bound to concentrate on Pipes's causal link between oil and Islam, his view of the Islamic revival as a hiatus in the secularist momentum of Islamic history, and his predictions about the future of Islam after Khomeini.

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