BOOK REVIEW

Xavier de Planhol:  *The World of Islam*


This book is a study of the "geography of religion" in which the first chapter "The Geographical Mark of Islam" seeks to describe certain geographical elements common to the Muslim world which distinguish it from other places with particular reference to the Muslim city and the state of agriculture in Muslim countries.

The second chapter, "Groupings and Modes of Life Derived from Religion in the Countries of Islam" turns from the consideration of the Muslim word as a unit in its outward manifestations to considering "its internal differentiations". In this context, the author considers what he describes as "the Maraboutic or Saintly tribes"; general tendencies of religious segregation in Islamic countries, both in mountain refuges and in refuges of the plain (i.e. the desert and the oasis); professional segregation in the countryside; and, finally urban minorities.

The third chapter "Geographical Factors in the Expansion of Islam" considers the ways in which Islam expanded and the kind of frontiers it encountered in different parts of Africa, the European and Central Asiatic Frontiers, the appendages of South East Asia. Finally, in this chapter the author tries to reach certain conclusions as to why Islam did not expand beyond these points. The book proper ends with a short, fourth chapter of two pages entitled "Conclusion" in which the author expresses his view that Islam emerged from a precisely defined environment and mentality which explains "its rapid triumphs, but also its failures, its compulsions, its limitations".

There is also a substantial bibliography, largely from learned journals.

To the extent that one is apt to be unaware of the physical impression which strike an outsider as soon as he enters the Muslim world, the rapid impressionistic sketches of the author make for unusual reading, although one suspects that, in his desire to draw a general rule about, for example, the character of Islamic cities, he has been obliged to be highly selective in his examples and has omitted to take into account the differences which would naturally exist between any city in a cold climate and any city in a hot or humid climate. Also, if the Muslim world (at the particular point in time at which the author is writing his book) is far less industrialized and motorized than North America or Western Europe, many differences between a Western city and a Muslim city are explicable in terms of their respective stages of economic development rather than of religious convictions. To assert, as the author has, that the Muslim city is characterized by narrow winding streets, is to ignore the narrow, winding streets of European cities in the pre-industrial age or indeed the narrow streets still to be found in the older sections of a European city to this day. At the same time such a generalized description of "twisted alleys and dark courts" could only be written by consciously ignoring modern Ankara, Tunis, Tehran, Karachi, Riyadh and Jakarta.
For the reader in Pakistan, for example, which is an overwhelmingly agricultural country and where the proportion of those living in the cities is extremely small in relation to those living in the countryside, it makes interesting reading to see Islam described as an essentially "urban" religion. Even more curious is the author's assertion on page 42 that Islam has a "negative attitude towards agriculture." The author stretches this absurd conclusion even further when he tries to find its origin in certain verses of the Qur'ān (e.g. 26:33-36) and even by stretching the meaning of some of the Traditions of the Prophet. The author's view of Islam's attitude towards agriculture becomes even more remarkable when he himself quotes a little later, a hadith from al-Bukhari which says "Every time that a Muslim plants a tree or sows a seed, he will be entitled to recompense should a bird, a man, or a beast eat anything from what grows".

Perhaps the main defect of this book, apart from the very arbitrary manner in which he has selected his examples (and the curious omission, virtually, of the subcontinent of Southern Asia), is that the author has attempted to reduce into naive propositions the interaction of man and his environment. There is the effect of both the physical and the human environment and a number of historians, such as, for example, Arnold Toynbee have held the view that while primitive man was very much a product of his physical environment, the story of civilization shows a progressive change, in which man acquires increasing mastery over his physical environment and the Idea increasingly dominates Matter. Certainly the more culturally advanced a man becomes in a particular society, the less likely is he to be blown off his feet by external physical circumstances.

Undoubtedly, the relationship between the unity and diversity of Islamic civilization throughout the world affords a rewarding field of study in which geographical factors must be taken into account but for such a study to possess any validity it requires much more systematic study of the relationship between man and his environment which must go back well before the Islamic era, and consider not only the geographical facts of different areas but the religious beliefs and the cultural patterns which existed prior to Islam in the Nile valley, for example, as compared with Central Asia or the Indo-Gangetic plain.

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