ISLAM AND ARAB NATIONALISM

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The often quoted condemnations of nationalism by Shaikh Muṣṭafa al-Maṛāghi and other Azharītes ¹, have, for too long now, held the field as the authoritative expression of Muslim theology on this question. The impression given in some Western books on Islam, is that the division between the pious Muslims and the Arab or other nationalists is clear-cut, and that nationalism, being an importation from the West, is in complete opposition to Islam, because the materialist nature of nationalism must always make it alien to the universal spirit of Islam. This belief is deceptive. It cannot, of course, be denied that nationalism in the Middle East developed in the twentieth century directly following Western example. One must however enquire how far these imported views can be and are actually reconciled with the past history and experience of Islam. And, in fact, the argument which justifies such a belief — namely, that nationalism is material, but Islam is spiritual, therefore Islam and nationalism are contradictory — is not as decisive as it might seem at first sight. For arguments, also derived from the nature of Islam, have been adduced to justify diametrically opposite conclusions. W. Cantwell Smith, in a stimulating essay on Turkey, ² points out that modern Turkey is not a-religious as is commonly believed, but that it is staunchly Muslim. Turkish Islam, Turks hold, is different from traditional Islam in the same way as Anglicanism is different from Roman Catholicism. The Turks maintain that this is nonetheless Islam, freed from the deadhand of ignorant and medieval ṬUlême.

The Turkish argument is based mainly on a reinterpretation of the history of Islam and the Arabs. The interpretation which is now favoured both by Arab and by many Western writers, is that Islam was at its golden period at the time of the Prophet and the early Caliphs, and that, declining ever since, it reached its nadir of corruption and decadence under Ottoman rule. As Cantwell Smith points out, the Turks question this interpretation vehemently, and regard themselves rather as the saviours of religion and the true keepers of Islam. They saved Islam from the Arabs who could not preserve it, and managed to maintain its unity for some centuries. The break-up of the empire, so they argue, was speeded up by the rôle that the Arabs played in the First World War. It is on this interpretation that the Turks base their contention to be still loyal to Islam, and to have preserved its heritage. An argument on similar lines is advanced by the Arab nationalists. It is similar to the Turkish argument because it also builds its claims on a particular interpretation of history. The Arab nationalists deny the allegation that Arab nationalism is an un-Islamic movement just as the Turks deny that their national movement has no place for Islam. The best expression so far of the Arab nationalist's view of his position towards Islam is that of 'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Bazzāż who concludes that "Arab nationalism which is devoid of the spirit of Islam is like a body without a soul". The little pamphlet al-Islām wa'l-qānumiya al-tarabiyya, Baghdad 1952, from the preface of which this quotation is taken, contains the text of an address given in January 1952 to Nāḍī al-Bāṭh al-ʿArabī of Baghdad. The author

studied in London and taught at a college in Baghdad. While in London, he was active both in a students' society, al-jam'iyah al-'arabiyya, which he helped to organise, and in al-jam'iyah al-isldmiyya which consisted mainly of Indian Muslims. In Baghdad in 1939, he was a member of jam'iyyat al-jawwad al-'arabi, which was banned in 1941 together with Nādi al-Muthanna. The author was then interned and was in three different camps during the War years. These details the author himself gives in the short preface to explain his personal reasons for choosing such a topic for his address. Active both in Panarab and in Muslim organisations, he was often criticised for his illogical behaviour; people always told him that these two activities could not be compatible with one another. His argument is not altogether new, and the question had been touched on previously by personalities such as 'Abd ar-Rahmān 'Azzām and Sāṭī al-Husri. R. Montagne translates an article of 'Abd ar-Rahmān 'Azzām published in 1932, which may be compared to this address. But the importance of this pamphlet lies in its approach to the subject, self-assured and free from all apologetics. The argument had not before been presented so clearly, so logically and so completely. It also shows the essential features of the movement: pride in the Arab past, pre-Islamic as well as Islamic, and an assertion of the indivisibility of Islam and Arabism. The translation follows.

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Before I begin, I had better explain the significance of the title of this talk and limit its scope somewhat, because the title’s unqualified generality might give the impression that I wish to examine thoroughly and in detail the “Principles of Islam” and the “National Idea”. This, however important, cannot be treated in one lecture, but deserves rather a special study. All I aim at this evening is to define the relation of Arab nationalism in so far as it is a “belief and a movement” to the Islamic Shari'a in so far as it is “a religion, a civilisation and a philosophy of life”; in other words, my talk will try to elucidate the answer to an important question, which, I suspect, has often occurred to Arab intellectuals, and which has often confused them. The question is: Is it possible for one of us to be a loyal nationalist and a sincere Muslim, at one and the same time? Is there a fundamental contradiction between Arab nationalism in its precise scientific sense, and true Muslim feeling? And does the acceptance of the one entail the rejection of the other? . . . Allow me to simplify the question a little and to say: Does a contradiction and opposition lie in our saying “This man is a nationalist Muslim” or “This man is a Muslim nationalist”, as when we say “This man is an atheist believer” or “He is a religious atheist”, or when we join opposites as “This man is a communist fascist” or “He is a democratic dictator”? Or if we wanted to use