THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAM

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

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An essay on its socio-economic growth

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To the memory
of my father,
who always encouraged me
in my search
for the truth,
however unpalatable
it might be

Preface

The present work is based on years of study and research. I have tried to understand various socio-economic and historical forces which gave birth to the religion of Islam. Undoubtedly any new religion is a spiritual phenomenon which provides a new moral vision to mankind, as Islam did. But to say this is not to explain the phenomenon.

My purpose, in this book, is to examine Islam's origins in the light of various social and economic factors, as it is my firm belief that any spiritual phenomenon, however unique it may be, is rooted in the society in which it arises. In my opinion Marxism provides a methodology which is most effective and most helpful in explaining socio-religious phenomena, and it is for this reason that I have preferred to use this methodology. My only motive in undertaking this study has been to understand the unique phenomenon called Islam. Though this book was written before the significant current events in the Islamic world, it may prove a useful background for the better understanding of what is called the new Resurgence of Islam.

1

The Scope and Purpose of the Study

Islam originated in the beginning of the seventh century of our era, as what I would prefer to call an ideological movement. Ideology, to be sure, is a value-loaded term, and includes a whole system of belief. To be precise, it is the body of doctrine, myth, symbols, etc., of a social movement, class, or similar large group. It may even include (and it does so in the case of Islam) the devices for putting the movement into operation. As interpreted by the French ideologists, ideology was limited to accounting for individual representations by a causal psychology. However, to Marx and Engels, the phenomenon under study became a collection of representations characteristic of a given epoch and society. "Marx," says Henri Lefebvre, "aimed at formulating a theory of general, i.e., social representation; he defined the elements of an explanatory genesis of 'ideologies' and related the latter to their historical and sociological conditions."[1]

Again, Marx draws our attention to the fact that ideology is an inverted, truncated and distorted reflection of reality. In ideologies, men and their conditions appear upside down, like images on the lens of a camera; undoubtedly this reversal has biological reasons, similar to the physical ones which account for the way images are reversed on the retina. In their mental representations, which constitute the elements of an ideology, individuals grasp their reality, in Marx's phrase, "upside down". Human beings do not perceive themselves as they are, but through a web of complex ideas and illusions which may or may not be grounded in reality. An ideology, therefore, can, if torn out of context, mean or refer to false representations of history or abstractions from history, and, in that sense, an ideology can be a collection of errors, illusions and mystifications, which can be

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx*, translated from the French by Norbert Guterman (London, 1972), p. 60.

accounted for by reference to the historical reality the ideology distorts and transposes.

Unless it is examined and seen in the context of the concrete and specific situation, an ideology cannot be seen the right way up. This study is an attempt to see the epoch-making movement of Islam in its concrete and specific situation. An attempt has been made to examine and analyse, as far as possible, all the relevant factors—political, social, and historical—as well as the socio-economic formations of the period, in order to understand the complex forces operating on the eve of Islam's birth. It is an onerous task—I am aware of it—to try to comprehend a society as a whole, with its structure, attitudes, systems of values, cultural idioms or institutions. It becomes all the more difficult when the society involved is a religious society encumbered with its own dogmas,values and attitudes. Islam is a religious ideology which completely transformed the society of its birth, while yet retaining those of the society's essential features which did not clash with Islam's new value system.

Every person understands things from a certain angle or from a specific and pronounced outlook. This need not rule out (and does not in my own case) other points of view, or cross-linkages with other perspectives. I have striven to try and understand social developments in the light of historical materialism, as this approach convinces and appeals to me.[2] This term, "historical materialism", calls for some caution. First of all, as stated above, its dogmatic application is not intended here; neither is it intended to be applied mechanically.

Marx, with whom the modern methodology of historical materialism originated, was himself aware of this danger. He made a disclaimer—and a very strong one—of such dogmatism with respect to the application of his analysis to Russian developments. In 1877, he wrote the following in his letter to an editor of a Russian journal:

> (My critic) feels himself obliged to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche générale* imposed by

2. Using the methodology of historical materialism to explain the origin and development of a religion does not necessarily mean to compromise one's faith in that religion as is often thought by the rigidly orthodox followers of that religion. Even the learned theologians explain many scriptural verses in the historical context. Similarly the socio-economic context also provides a useful ingredient for explaining certain religious institutions. An enlightened faith would certainly admit of what is rejected by unthinking or rigidly orthodox followers. It must also be noted that religionism or scientism, when stretched to its farthest extreme, can lead to a blind alley.

fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which will ensure, together with the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. (He is both honouring and shaming me too much). Let us take an example.

In several parts of *Capital* I allude to the fate which overtook the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each cultivating his own piece of land on his own account. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. The same movement which divorced them from their means of production and subsistence, involved the formation not only of big landed property but also of big money capital. And so one fine morning there were to be found on the one hand free men, stripped of every thing except their labour power, and on the other, in order to exploit this labour, those who held all the acquired wealth in possession. What happened? The Roman proletarians became not wage labourers but a mob of do-nothings more abject than the former 'poor whites' in the southern country of the United States, and alongside of them there developed a mode of production which was not capitalist but, taking place in different historic surroundings, led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them, one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.[3]

Those who apply a preconceived or "super-historical" model to the study of Islam—and this is so with most Marxists—view the historical reality mechanically, and end up by imposing "feudal" socio-economic formations on seventh century Arabian society. Here is an example. In *A Short History of the World*, the authors say about Arabia at the beginning of the seventh century: "The emergence of feudal relations in the Arabian Peninsula and the immediately adjacent territories took place in the middle of the 1st millennium A.D., with the gradual collapse of slave-holding societies in the south and south-east of the peninsula, and the disintegration of the primitive clan system of the nomads in other areas."

3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence 1846-1895* (New York, 1934), pp. 354-5. The letter was never sent and was later found among Marx's papers.

The authors further say:

> By that time a large part of the herds and pastures were in the hands of the clan nobility, while there was land hunger among the poorer nomad tribes, particularly as subsistence livestock-breeding was not sufficient to support the growing population. Inter-tribal wars for land began, in the course of which various alliances were drawn up. The urge to achieve territorial expansion at the expense of neighbouring tribes grew steadily stronger. Another factor which promoted this drive towards unification was the increasing number of economic and political links between the more developed regions of Arabia where feudal patterns were already taking shape and between these regions and the nomad peoples.
>
> A movement towards the unification of all the Arabs began which coincided with the feudalisation of both the nomad and settled peoples; the movement soon took on a religious character as well, propagating the new religion of Islam.[4]

Now, to any student of Islam, this analysis of the socio-economic formations at the time of the birth of Islam would appear to be quite out of touch with historical reality. As we shall see later, Islam was born in the highly commercialized milieu of Mecca, which was an international centre of commerce as well as of high finance. Many of the Koranic verses bear testimony to this historial fact, of which even bourgeois historians have taken note. In fact, neither in the nomadic tribes of the Arabian desert, nor in the commercial town of Mecca, were there any traces of the feudal mode of production or of feudal relations. It is also not correct to say that inter-tribal wars were fought in order to seize land or for territorial expansion. Such a position is untenable in the light of what is definitely known about the Bedouin tribes of Arabia. Agricultural production was totally unknown in and around the area where Islam was born; even pastures were not a perennial feature, as the precipitation was very scanty. Inter-tribal fights more often than not took the form of raids or forays. The Soviet historians quoted above have not been very careful in analysing the available material on the history of pre-Islamic Arabia. They have rather understood the socio-economic formations of Arabia of that time mechanically. Marx refers to such mechanical application of his theory in the passage quoted above.

Ahmad El Kodsy, an Arab Marxist, has also criticized such an

4. A. Z. Manfred (ed.), *A Short History of the World*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1974), pp. 183–4

approach, which is based on a totally wrong interpretation of the reality as it prevailed in Arabia. He says, "The picture, widely accepted not only among many foreigners but also among too many Arab Marxists, of an Arab world which is rural and feudal, is one of these commonplaces without any scientific basis which arises from an oversimplified kind of Marxism. In reality, the Arab world was very different from the Europe of the Middle Ages. Within this Arab world, moreover, one can still distinguish, today as always three zones that differ widely from each other in social structure and in political and economic organisation: the Arab East (in Arabic called Al Mashraq), embracing Arabia, Syria (meaning the present-day states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel), and Iraq, the countries of the Nile (Egypt and the Sudan); and the Arab West (called in Arabic Al Maghreb), stretching from Libya across Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. In this group, Egypt alone, which divides the Arab world in two, has always been and still is a *peasant* civilisation (I do not say a feudal one), whereas the social formations of the Mashraq and of the Maghreb alike have not been, essentially, formations based on the cultivators of the soil." [5]

This book, as far as possible, will try to avoid stereotypes or the mechanical application of any theory, ideology or model. Reality, whether it be social, political or ideological, is much more complex than the superficial approach seems to assume. It needs careful analysis, avoiding the pitfalls of stereotyping or dogmatic application. This is more so in the case of a religious ideology, as the issues are more confused, and beliefs held much more steadfastly and dogmatically than in other ideologies. It is the firm belief of this author that no single theory, model, or hypothesis, whatever its scientific degree of authenticity, can comprehensively explain the various aspects of a reality. Marxist theory, if applied mechanically, as pointed out above, can lead to ridiculous results in flagrant contradiction to historical reality. What is most laudable, according to me, in the Marxist theory, is its methodological approach, which can be called the historical materialist approach. I choose Marxist methodology precisely because it enables me to understand, better than any other methodology, various historical enigmas in all their complexity. To me, therefore, what is more important than Marxism's dogmas or beliefs—which I reject if they have not evolved organically from the concrete situation—is its methodological approach.

5. Ahmed el Kodsy, *Nationalism and Class Struggles in the Arab World*, a special of *Monthly Review* (Vol. 22, July-August, 1970), p. 4.

To elucidate my methodological approach, I would like to quote here from W. Montgomery Watt's paper, "The sociologist and the prophet—reflections on the origin of Islam".

> A religion, both in its origin and in its growth, is a social phenomenon. The prophet preaches to people belonging to a society with a distinctive structure. The sociologist can study the classes in the society to which the prophet appeals immediately, those to whom he appeals at a later stage in his preaching, and the class changes brought about by the acceptance of his preaching. In so far as he is concerned with the sociology of knowledge, he also studies the relation between the ideas proclaimed by the prophet and the distinctive interests of each class. In these respects, and others which could be mentioned, the sociologist, if he is doing his work correctly, is making true statements about the preaching of the prophet. He could say, for example—to take an instance which is not fully historical—that the prophet, in attacking wealth, was trying to promote the interests of the underprivileged against the rich.[6]

A sociologist looks for the roots of a movement in the total social structure of a society. In contradistinction to this, the theologian employs a different idiom, one on the intellectual and ideational plane, to describe the same reality. Montgomery Watt expresses it as follows:

> Thus, while the theologian is fundamentally concerned with men's beliefs and ideas about aspects of reality, the sociologist is concerned with a complex consisting of a way of life embodied in a society and having its appropriate values, mores, social structures and ideas, all these being interdependent. The sociologist is thus operating with something like a 'coherence theory', except that he is not dealing solely with ideas and beliefs, but also with various social facts. [7]

To put it in Marxist terminology, the superstructure is to be understood and explained in terms of its economic base. However, one must not be led to believe that there is a direct correspondence

6. W. Montgomery Watt, *The Sociologist and the Prophet—Reflections on the Origin of Islam* in Malik Ram and M.D. Ahmed (eds.), *Arshi Presentation Volume*, p. 31.
7. ibid. p. 34.

between this "economic base" and the social institutions. There is a tortuous mediating process in between, to which A. Labriola has rightly drawn our attention.

> The underlying economic structure, which determines all the rest, is not a simple mechanism, from which institutions, laws, customs, thought, sentiments, ideologies emerge as automatic and mechanical effects. Between this underlying structure and all the rest, there is a complicated, often subtle and tortuous, process of derivation and mediation, which may not always be discoverable.[8]

The economic base, undoubtedly, plays an important role in the determination of superstructural institutions, but it is by no means the only factor. Religio-cultural institutions, born out of the productive forces and production relations of earlier epochs, acquire an autonomy of their own and continue to exercise their influence on the socio-economic institutions of later ages. If anyone tries to establish a one-to-one correspondence between the economic base and the superstructural institutions, his task will either be hopeless or full of pitfalls. Engels was fully aware of the dangers of a mechanical application of Marxism, and duly warned his readers of it.

> Marx and I are partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasise the main principle *vis-a-vis* our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the elements involved in the interaction.[9]

In the present book, if there is an emphasis on the economic factor, it is partly because this factor has hitherto been mostly, if not altogether, ignored while studying the complex forces which gave birth to one of the most powerful movements of history. It is not my intention—and this will be clear during the course of the book—to impress on my readers that the economic factor is, in the final

8. The later-Marxists like Lukacs tried to develop a theory of mediation which is in sharp contrast to the dogmatic interpretation of Marxism, according to which there is a supposedly direct relationship between the base and the superstructure.
9. Engels, "To C.S. Schmidt, 27 October, 1980" from Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, (Moscow, 1975) p. 500.

analysis, the only determining one; far from it. I have endeavoured, to the best of my capacity, to account for other factors, those of a religious and psychological nature, as well.

An underlying problem in discussions of this kind is philosophic in nature, and concerns the relationship of men's thoughts to the world at large and to the actions they perform. The commonsense explanation of these relationships is not very illuminating. According to this commonsense approach,[10] we look at the world carefully and closely, gathering and measuring all the facts, and then we work out the most obvious solution and execute it. There are, by implication, a limited number of facts. These are unambiguous and relatively easily identified, and, if we have done our preliminary work adequately, the solutions follow. All reasonable men will follow the course of reasoning involved, and voluntarily approve the solution, since it is "obvious", given the factual information. The facts, as it were, dictate their own solution, and sensible men merely act as passive catalysts in this process. At a generalized level, if history is made by sensible men, it becomes inexorable and inevitable, an unfolding process in which sensible men are passive connecting links between the facts and action. The connecting link is devious because non-sensible men have "clouded" judgements or have imperfectly examined the facts. The elements clouding their judgement are seen as emotions or prejudices or vested interests or other extraneous factors. Also, we have ideals, and we set out to achieve them. It is usually suggested that "ideals" are the kind of aims which are, in their pure form, unrealizable. However, in seeking them, we do succeed in changing the world a little towards them, in achieving some approximation. The ideals are given. They come from nowhere, but are a datum.

Commenting on the above approach, Nigel Harris says:

> I would suggest that both models of the relationship between ideals, the world and action are a bit nonsensical, not least because in no single respect do they fit what we might, on reflection, see as the process whereby we reach certain conclusions and seek to act upon them. *For most of us, making a decision is an extremely complex matter, in which accidents, ad-hoc considerations, play a role, and where a multitude of different, often implicit, considerations come into play.*[11] [My italics.]

10. What follows is an account from Nigel Harris, *Beliefs in Society—the Problem of Ideology* (London, 1971), pp. 10-11.
11. ibid. p. 11.

Any situation, historical or otherwise, with which men interact, is extremely complex, much more so when ideals and beliefs are involved—and therefore, cannot be grasped by any single formula or thought pattern. All one can do is to establish some dominant factors or trends. However, it should also be realized that though in a normal situation the process of decision making is extremely complex and is influenced by many factors ad-hoc or otherwise, in a moment of revolution, the ideological factor does tend to become predominant at least for those who have a strong commitment to the ideology. Much, however, depends on the degree of commitment. In a historical study of a religion like Islam, bristling with contradictory viewpoints, beliefs, and ideas, such an attitude of mind is very important, as it avoids the pitfalls of stereotyped thinking. When I strive to see historical developments from the Marxist viewpoint, what I have in mind is the broadest Marxist approach, especially its methodology, as pointed out earlier, and not any rigid pattern conceived *a priori*.

Sartre points out that "The real content of these typical concepts is always *past knowledge*; but today's Marxist makes of it an eternal knowledge. His sole concern, at the moment of analysis, will be to 'place' these entities. The more he is convinced that they represent truth *a priori*, the less fussy he will be about proof. "[12] Moreover, says Sartre:

> There is no longer any question of studying facts within the general perspective of Marxism so as to enrich our understanding and to clarify action. Analysis consists solely in getting rid of details, in forcing the signification of certain events, in denaturing facts or even in inventing a nature for them in order to discover it later underneath them, as their substance, as unchangeable, fetishized 'synthetic notions'. The open concepts of Marxism have closed in. They are no longer *keys*, interpretive schemata; they are posited for themselves as an already totalised knowledge.[13]

The present study, as far as possible, tries to avoid the dangers pointed out above, i.e., it does not use unchangeable, fetishized, synthetic notions. Reliance is placed on thorough analysis, and no resort is sought to be made to sweeping generalizations on issues

12. Jean Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, Vintage Books, U.S.A. (1960), p. 27.
13. ibid. p. 27.

which cannot be substantiated by all available facts. There are, of course, areas as yet unexplored; I have tried to be cautious in hazarding opinions about them. The totalizing of investigation has not given way to a scholasticism of totality, as Sartre has very aptly put it. The scientific spirit of investigation, in the sense of humanly possible objectivity (with certain implicit philosophical suppositions unavoidable) is the life force of any seriously intended study. However, in certain areas, in the interest of objective investigation, it is desirable—not to say necessary—to suspend our philosophical presuppositions provisionally in accordance with methods that can be approved by all investigators, however different their philosophical viewpoints may be.

Lastly, I would like to make it very clear at the outset that this book is a humble attempt to explain the origin and development of Islam in the light of socio-economic factors. It is my belief that the religious point of view, though very important, cannot, by itself, explain the historical events in all their complexities. I have written whatever I felt to be true according to the methodology adopted, without any intention to prove any other point of view wrong, much less the point of view of those who adhere to Islam as a faith. In my opinion such an attempt enhances our understanding of Islam in its sociological perspective, as no religion or ideology can be fully understood if it is not seen in its concrete milieu. It does not necessarily imply that such a study stands opposed to Islam as a religion which even today moves millions of its followers.

2

Arabian Society Before Islam

Islam, as everyone knows, originated in Arabia, more particularly in Mecca. It is, therefore, necessary—more so if we want to understand it in the light of historical materialism—to study its sociological background along with other factors such as the geographical, historical, political and economic ones. Mecca was an important township in the otherwise vast Arabian desert known as "al-Rab 'Al-Khali" (an empty quarter). Mecca in fact lies to the north-west of this desert, near the western coast. Al-Rab 'Al-Khali is almost impenetrable and greatly dreaded. Mr. Bertram Thomas, a young English orientalist, crossed it for the first time in January 1931, and bared the secrets of one of the largest blank spots that was left on the world's map.[1] More recently, another British national, Wilfred Thesiger, also crossed it; he has described his adventures in his book *Arabian Sands*.

The desert around Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, is extremely inhospitable, and dictates a way of life which is hardy and primitive. Philip K. Hitti, in his celebrated book, *History of the Arabs*, observes very pertinently, "The surface of Arabia is mostly desert with a narrow margin of habitable land round the periphery. The sea encircles this periphery. When the population increases beyond the capacity of the land to support it, the surplus must seek elbow room. But this surplus cannot expand inward because of the desert, nor outward on account of the sea—a barrier which in those [pre-Islamic] days was well-nigh impassable. The over-population would then find one route open before it on the western coast of the peninsula leading northward and forking at the Sinaitic peninsula to the fertile valley of the Nile."[2] Here it must be mentioned that by the

1. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 8th edn. (London, 1965), p. 7.
2. ibid. p. 10.

time of Islam's birth, the sea route referred to by Prof. Hitti had no longer remained "well-nigh impassable". The first few Moslems who were forced to flee to Abyssinia to seek refuge had to use this sea route. The developing trade had necessitated improvement in the science of navigation. Later on, too, the Arabs made a great contribution to this important science, and built their own war fleets. There are repeated references to navigation in the Koran. Mr. Aly Mohomed Fahmy, in his book, *Muslim Sea-Power in the Eastern Mediterranean*, draws our attention to the fact that "No less than forty passages relate to the grace of God who has put the sea at the service of mankind. A special proof of this is shown by the fact that God has given man power over waters (*sakhara*), so that his ships can sail upon them. Navigation seems to have made a profound impression: 'Your lord is He who speeds the ships for you in the sea that you may seek of His grace; surely He is ever Merciful to you.'

"The purpose for which ships plied on the sea and the kind of work carried on by the Arabs are described as follows: 'And He it is who has made the sea subservient that you may eat fresh flesh from it and bring forth from it ornaments which you wear, and you see the ships cleaving through it, and that you might seek of His bounty and that you may give thanks.'

"The passage (verse) clearly indicates that the Arabs sailed principally to catch fish, gather pearls and coral, and carry a profitable cargo from one country to another. The tradition extols the sea too, praising its martyrs and giving every encouragement for sea trade."[3]

Thus we see that not only was the sea, on the eve of Islam, not impassable, but in fact extensive use was made of it for food and trade. Navigation became the Arabs' forte in developing trade as well as in expanding their conquests.

Mecca, the birthplace of Islam, as already said, was on the periphery of a vast desert. This desert was sparsely inhabited by people called the Bedouins. Ethnically of Semitic stock, the Bedouins are nomadic tribes, a few of whom occasionally settle down near oases and lead a sedentary life. For most Bedouins, however, nomadism is a passion. Just as industrialized society has produced certain habits, and a way of life, and terms of reference, nomadic society too, develops its own institutions, habits and culture. One may even agree with Prof. Hitti that nomadism in the Arabian desert is as "scientific" as industrialism in Detroit or Manchester, in its operation according to its perceived reality.

3. Aly Mohomed Fahmy, *Muslim Sea Power in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London 1950), p. 57.

The Bedouins are a hardy lot, and tenacity and endurance are their principal virtues, whereas lack of discipline and respect for authority are their main failings. These failings, as we will see later, created gigantic problems for the nascent Islamic state. Owing to inhospitable desert conditions and a lack of resources, the Bedouins have been historically conditioned to lead an utterly austere life. They wear a long garment called a *thaub,* with a belt, and a flowing upper garment (*abā*). The head is covered by a shawl (*kūfiyya*) held by a cord (*'iqāl*). Trousers are not in vogue and footwear is rare. Their food is equally austere, generally consisting of dates and a mixture of flour, or a roasted ear of corn, with water, camel's milk or goat's milk. They live in tents and, with their herds of camels, goats or sheep, are constantly on the move seeking pasturage or even avoiding a possible raid by a rival tribe. By their experience, they can tell from the footprints or droppings of a camel which tribe has travelled their route before them.

Apart from tending camels, sheep and goats, making raids on other tribes is an economic necessity for them; so much so that *ghazwa* (razzia or inter-tribal raiding) is raised to the rank of a national institution. Just as in the jungle, life lives on death, so in the Arabian desert, one tribe lives by raiding another. The Prophet of Islam, immediately after his migration to Medina, made use of this institution to humble his Meccan enemies; unfortunately, owing to a lack of knowledge of the custom on the part of Western scholars, this has caused much misunderstanding, and the Prophet has even been denounced as a brigand. Such raids were, however, quite naturally dreaded by the sedentary population of oases or other towns. Ibn Khaldūn, that historical genius of the fourteenth century, has, in the *Muqaddimah*, his introduction to history, denounced the Bedouins for these barbarous raids, and even dubs them enemies of civilization. He writes:

> . . . that the Bedouins are a savage nation, fully accustomed to savagery and the things that cause it. Savagery has become their character and nature. They enjoy it, because it means freedom from authority and no subservience to leadership. Such a natural disposition is the negation and antithesis of civilization. All the customary activities of the Bedouins lead to wandering and movement. This is the antithesis of stationariness, which produces civilization. . . . The very nature of their existence is the negation of building, which is the very basis of civilization.

> Furthermore, it is their nature to plunder whatever people possess. Their sustenance lies wherever the shadow of their lance falls. They recognize no limit in taking the possessions of other people. Whenever their eyes fall upon some property, furnishings, or utensils, they take them ....[4]

Ibn Khaldūn also points out certain other characteristics of the Bedouins which are important from our point of view, and have a bearing on the treatment of the subject. He tells us:

> Furthermore, the Bedouins are not concerned with laws, or with deterring people from misdeeds or with protecting some against others. They are only for the property that they might take away from people through looting and imposts....
>
> Under the rule of Bedouins, their subjects live as in a state of anarchy, without law. Anarchy destroys mankind and ruins civilisation, since, as we have stated, the existence of royal authority is a natural quality of man. It alone guarantees their existence and social organisation.[5]

I have quoted at length from Ibn Khaldūn in order to show the severity of the problems Muhammad had to face in disciplining the Bedouins, and in subordinating them to the central state authority which he subsequently created. Also, the Islamic laws of crime and punishment, which we will discuss at some length in subsequent chapters, must be seen in this light in order to understand them in the proper historical-sociological context.

The Bedouins are mainly dependent on the camel, and therefore move around more and have to make ever deeper inroads into the desert in search of pasturage, as the hilly pastures with their plants and shrubs do not provide enough subsistence for camels. In fact, camels are so important for these Bedouins that there are said to be about one thousand names in Arabic for the camel in its numerous breeds and various stages of growth, a number rivalled only by the number of synonyms used for the sword. Thus, through the sheer necessity of seeking food for their camels, the Bedouins acquired the rare expertise required for penetrating the formidable Arabian deserts, and were the only suitable people to man the long distance trade caravans passing through the deserts of western Arabia.

4. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, translated from the Arabic by F. Rosenthal and abridged by N.J. Dawood (London, 1958), p. 83.
5. ibid. p. 119.

It is important to note the structure of governance of these tribes. According to Prof. R. A. Nicholson, "The tribal constitution was a democracy guided by its chief men, who derived their authority from noble blood, noble character, wealth, wisdom, and experience. The chiefs, however, durst not lay commands or penalties on their fellow-tribesmen. Every man ruled himself, and was free to rebuke presumption in others. 'If you are our lord' (i.e., if you act discreetly as a sayyid should), 'you will lord over us, but if you are a prey to pride, go and be proud!' (i.e., we will have nothing to do with you)."[6]

"Loyalty" in the mouth of the pagan Arab did not mean allegiance to his superiors, but faithful devotion to his equals; and it was closely connected with the idea of kinship. The family and the tribe, which included strangers living in the tribe under a covenant of protection—to defend these, individually and collectively, was a sacred duty. Honour required that a man should stand by his own people through thick and thin.[7] If kinsmen sought help, it was given promptly without regard to the merits of giving it; even if they did wrong, it had to be suffered in silence as loyalty and honour demanded.

The Bedouins, formally speaking, had no religion; they did not worship or pray to any deity, although they believed in some sort of fate. They had their own moral system and values. In a pastoral or nomadic society, tribal collectivism and its unwritten, yet rigidly observed, code of conduct, prevents conflict between individuals, though inter-tribal conflicts generate prolonged spells of bellicosity and war. In a tribal society, since individualism is at a discount and collectivism reigns supreme, conflict between tribe and individual is minimized. Such a society, therefore, does not produce great plays or epic poetry, as there is an absence of individual conflict which is so necessary for producing them. The pre-Islamic *jāhiliyyan* poetry also lacks the drama of individual conflict and instead sings the glory of tribes and expresses the ethos of bravery, generosity, honour and genealogical superiority.

W. Montgomery Watt, a noted scholar of Islam, says:

> The religion by which the Arabs really lived may be called tribal humanism. According to this the meaning of life consists in the manifestation of human excellences, that is, all the qualities that go to make up the Arab ideal of manliness or fortitude. The bearer of this excellence is the tribe rather than

6. From the *Hamasa*, quoted by R.A. Nicholson in *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge, 1907), p. 83.
7. ibid. p. 83.

> the individual. If they are seen in the life of an individual, that is because he is a member of a tribe which is characterised by them. The thought that is uppermost in the mind of the individual is that of the honour of the tribe. Life is meaningful for him when it is honourable, and anything involving dishonour and disgrace is to be avoided at all costs.[8]

To illustrate as to how much importance the Bedouins give to certain qualities such as bravery, courage and honour, it would be best to narrate an incident given by Glubb Pasha in his book *The Life and Times of Muhammad*:

> Duraid ibn al-Simma was a famous warrior and poet, who lived into Muslim times as a very old man. One day, when he was still young, he was leading a raiding party against Beni Kinana. Topping the pass in the bare mountains of the Hijāz, he saw in an open valley beneath him a horseman, lance in hand, leading by its headrope a camel, on which a woman was mounted. Duraid called up one of his men and told him to overtake the lone rider and shout to him to leave the woman and the camel and to escape for his life, as a raiding party was coming down the pass. The man galloped down into the plain, calling out as he had been instructed. The rider, however, quietly handed the headrope to the girl, wheeled his horse, galloped straight back at his pursuer and, running him through with his lance, flung him violently from the saddle. Then, cantering after the lady, he took the headrope from her hands, and the two rode quietly on at a walking pace, as if nothing had happened.

As Duraid rode down the pass with the remainder of the raiding party, he lost from sight the two figures of the man and the woman, riding along together on the plain below. As however, his messenger did not return, he sent after him another horseman, with whom the lone rider dealt in the same manner. Duraid followed him with a third who met the same fate, but on this occasion the lone horseman's lance broke in his hand at the moment of impact. Though now he was unarmed, he once again overtook the lady and the pair rode on quietly together.

As they rode side by side, the rider recited the following verses to his lady:

8. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman* (London, 1961), p. 51

Ride on in peace, my lady fair,
Secure and safe and calm.
Be confident and debonaire
And free from all alarm.
I cannot flee from a foe
Except he taste my arm,
The boldness of my charge he'll know
Who seeks to do thee harm.

Mystified by the disappearance of his three messengers, Duraid himself galloped out on to the plain. He came upon the body of his first messenger, then that of the second and that of the third. In front of him he could see the horseman, unarmed, riding quietly at a walking pace, leading the lady's camel by its headrope.

Duraid, full of admiration for so gallant a cavalier, even though an enemy, rode up to him and cried, "O horseman, such a man as you does not deserve death. But my men are just behind me, and you are unarmed. Take my lance, my friend, and I will see that my men do not pursue you." [9]

From the point of view of the analysis we are going to attempt, it is necessary to throw some light on the hospitality and generosity of the Arabs. Again, it can best be done by narrating an incident recorded by Glubb Pasha. He writes:

> One of the most famous Bedouin personalities in the years immediately preceding Islam was Hātim ibn 'Abdullah of the tribe of Tā'ī. Hātim was an orphan brought up by his grandfather. As soon as he was of age and inherited his father's flocks, he slaughtered so many animals for his guests that he soon found himself a poor man. One day, when visited by three men, he killed three camels for their dinner. It so happened that the three men were famous poets and one of them, Nabigha al-Dhobiani, immediately improvised a poem in praise of their young host and his tribe. 'My idea was to do a kindness to you,' said Hātim, 'but your poem has put me in your debt.' Whereupon he insisted that the poets accept as a gift all the camels in his possession.
>
> Soon afterwards, his grandfather hastened to the scene and asked indignantly what had become of his camels. 'I gave them

9. John Bagot Glubb (Glubb Pasha), *The Life and Times of Muhammad* (London, 1970), pp. 31-2.

away,' Hātim replied. 'If I had kept them, they would all have been dead in twenty years. But in exchange for them, I have won a poem in praise of our family, which will pass on from mouth to mouth until the end of time.' [10]

Hāfiz bin Kathīr has also narrated an episode about Hātim Tā'ī in a separate chapter on him. Hātim Tā'ī, he says, when questioned whether there was among Arabs anyone more generous (*ajwad*) than himself, he replied that the whole Arab nation was generous and then narrated a story. 'I once stayed with an orphan boy who had 100 goats. The boy slaughtered one for me and, when I came to eating its brain I praised it for its excellent taste. The boy went on bringing more of it, until I told him that it was enough. When I got up in the morning he had slaughtered all his flock and nothing was left with him. When I asked the boy why he had done this he replied, "How could I deserve your gratefulness without doing anything.?" Thereupon I gave away the best of the hundred camels from my flock.' [11]

Though Hātim's generosity was not the rule, it was not an exception either. It would be more correct to say that it indicated a trend which was prevalent and is still prevalent among the Bedouin Arabs. However, just before Islam's advent, generosity was going by default in Mecca—an important urban conclave on the international trade route—as commercial society has its own norms and ethics as against those of a pastoral and nomadic society. It is very important to understand this contrast in order to see Islam in its correct sociological perspective.

Whereas northern and central Arabia were predominantly nomadic and devoid of any civilization—with a few exceptions such as Mecca, Tā'if or Medina—south Arabia, though in ruins at the dawn of Islam, was an important centre of an ancient civilization. It had its own distinct features. In fact the division between the south and the north was very deep rooted indeed. Joel Carmichael says in his book *The Shaping of the Arabs*: "The division may be rooted in the factual situation of the nomadism of the peoples of the north and the sedentary and agricultural condition of the south. This division was felt to be so strong indeed, that it served the fourteenth century Arab historian Ibn-Khaldūn as the framework of his whole view of world history, which he conceived of as the result of the reciprocal

10. ibid. pp. 32-3.

11. Hāfiz. Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa Al-Nihāyah* Vol.I, (Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi,, Cairo, n.d.), p. 216.

interaction between the Bedouin and the city dwellers."[12] Joel Carmichael refers in the above passage to the fact that Ibn Khaldūn has based his history on the fundamental differences and reciprocal interaction between the Bedouins and the city dwellers, and it is rightly so. In fact Ibn Khaldūn gives a great deal of emphasis to this difference, because before the dawn of Islam and even during the period when Ibn Khaldūn lived, in fact until today in certain regions of Arabia, this interaction between the sedentary and the nomadic peoples threw up many social, economic and political problems. This interaction, in many ways, greatly influenced the origin and development of Islam. Emphasizing this difference, Ibn Khaldūn writes:

> We have mentioned that the Bedouins restrict themselves to the bare necessities in their way of life and are unable to go beyond them, while sedentary people concern themselves with conveniences and luxuries in their conditions and customs. The bare necessities are no doub prior to the conveniences and luxuries. Bare necessities, in a way, are basic, and luxuries secondary. Bedouins are thus the basis of, and prior to, cities and sedentary people. . . . The toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life. Therefore, urbanisation is found to be the goal to which the Bedouin aspires.[13]

Even the Koran, the holy book of the Muslims, is full of references to the Bedouins and the city dwellers, and emphasizes the difference between the two. The Koran says, "The desert Arabs surpass the town-dwellers in unbelief and hypocrisy, and have more cause to be ignorant of the laws which Allah has revealed to His apostle. But Allah is wise and all-knowing. Some desert Arabs regard what they give for the cause of Allah as a compulsory fine and wait for some misfortune to befall you. May ill-fortune befall them! Allah hears all and knows all."[14] In these verses, as is the wont of city-dwellers, there is contemptuous denunciation of the nomadic Bedouins and a sense of distrust in them. Muhammad was a town-dweller and naturally had some reservations about the Bedouins, and it is also true that being used to the freedom of the desert, they were not easily prepared to submit to the discipline Muhammad wanted to impose upon them;

12. Joel Carmichael, *The Shaping of the Arabs—A Study in Ethnic Identity* (London, 1969), p. 10.
13. Khaldūn, op. cit., p. 93.
14. The Koran, chapter on 'Repentance', Verses 97 and 98.

and hence this expression of subdued hostility towards them. However Muhammad was not completely averse to them and was determined to bring them into the fold of Islam. They have, therefore, been addressed, exhorted and reminded of Allah's bounties to them in a number of Koranic verses. "Allah has given you houses to dwell in, and the skins of beasts for tents, so that you may find them light in your wanderings and easy to pitch when you halt for shelter; while from their wool, fur, and hair, He has given you comforts and domestic goods," declares the Koran, addressing the Bedouins.[15] Again it says, "In cattle too you have a worthy lesson. We give you to drink of that which is in their bellies, between the bowels and the blood-streams: pure milk, a pleasant beverage for those who drink it. We give you the fruits of the palm and of the vine, from which you derive intoxicants and wholesome food. Surely in this there is a sign for men of understanding."[16]

Thus it is clear that the Koran distinguishes between the nomads and the town-dwellers, and addresses both of them with a view to inducing them to follow the laws enjoined by Allah, advancing, for this purpose, naturalistic arguments. These verses also reveal the kind of economy these Bedouins had.

Coming back to our point about southern Arabia, we must bear in mind that in that area there had been highly developed civilizations, Sabaean, Minaean, and Qatabanian, based on agriculture and traffic in spices; and that trade with the outside world had brought prosperity to its people more than a thousand years before the Christian era. The Arab kingdoms in the south dammed the water courses, built castles and temples, and developed the agriculture of their country to a remarkable degree. Although these southern civilizations were based on agriculture, there do not seem to be traces of a feudalism of the European type. The ruling kings appear to be more akin to Egyptian rulers who had some kind of spiritual and priestly pretensions. The French Islamicist, Maxime Rodinson, in his biography *Mohammed*, says, while discussing south Arabia:

> Yet another contrast with the lands of the Saracens was in the existence of a widespread religious belief. There were many rich temples, which were served by a priesthood which played an important role in society. Worship took the form of offerings of perfumes and animal sacrifices, of prayers and

15. ibid. chapter on 'The Bee', Verse 80.
16. ibid. chapter on 'The Bee', Verses 66, 67.

pilgrimages, in the course of which sexual relations were unlawful. Any infringement of one of the numerous prescriptions concerning purity and impurity had to be paid by a fine and a public confession, which was inscribed in bronze tables and set up in the temple. The dead were buried with vessels and household objects. *Stelae* or monuments carried stylized representations of the deceased. Libations may have been made to them.[17]

The Arabs of the south worshipped a number of gods and goddesses, most important among whom was 'Athtar, who was supposed to be the personification of the planet Venus. They also worshipped a lunar god who was known as Almaqah in Saba, 'Wadd ('love'?) in Ma'in, 'Amm in Qatabān, and Sīn in the Hadramawt. The sun was also worshipped in the form of the goddess Shams (meaning The Sun). Different gods and goddesses were worshipped at different places, each one having its own devotees. The temples were made of stone, and were rich in their architecture. American archaeologists have discovered, during their excavations in the Sabaean city of Mā'rib, an ancient temple erected to the great Sabaean god Almaqah. The name of the temple was Awwām and it was comprised of a huge oval-shaped precinct probably 30 feet high, approximately 300 feet long and 250 feet broad. It is reported to have an ornate portico and an adjoining building with a row of eight columns. The Koran also refers to the wonders of the rich Sabaean civilization. The queen of Sheba, according to the Koran, was quite rich and ruled with great pomp and glory. Her kingdom was about to be invaded by the Israelite king Solomon when she decided to submit. She sent her envoy with gifts. Referring to this, the Koran says, "And when her envoy came to him, Solomon said: 'Is it gold that you would give me? That which Allah has bestowed on me is better than all the riches He has given you. Yet you glory in your gifts. Go back to your people: we will march against them with forces they cannot oppose, and drive them from their land humbled and condemned'."[18] This verse clearly shows that both in the south as well as in the extreme north (the Fertile Crescent) there were civilizations with a prosperity that enabled them to develop architecture and construct elegant structures. It is also interesting to note here that the Arabs in central Arabia (as there was no institution of kingship there, or even

17. Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, translated from the French by A. Carter (London, 1974), p. 22.
18. The Koran, Chapter 27, Verse 44.

the concept of a well developed state) did not approve of kingship. This is obvious from a verse in the same chapter in which it is said: "(She) said 'when a king invades a city he ruins it, and the honourable ones are demeaned and they will do the same thing.' "[19] Of course these words have been uttered by the queen of Sheba but what matters is the attitude of Prophet Muhammed towards kings. It is essentially the attitude of the Arabs.

Southern Arabia, especially Yaman, has been famous from all antiquity for the happiness of its climate, its fertility and riches (*vide* Dionysius, *Perieges.* v. 927) which induced Alexander the Great, after his return from his Indian expedition, to make preparations for its conquest, though his death soon after stayed the execution of his invasion. Yaman was an important trading centre on the route to Mecca, the trading ports of northern Arabia and finally the eastern empire of Byzantium. Many people mistakenly thought that the merchandise which they received from the Arabs was produced in Arabia. Actually, as students of history know, it really came from India, China and the African coast. Owing to its impassable deserts, the Greeks and Romans knew very little about Arabia. In fact, because of its importance, repeated attempts were made by the rival powers to subjugate Yaman. Prof. Hitti tells us that "Masters of the world as they were, the Romans failed to fasten the yoke upon Arabian necks. Their famous expedition of 10,000 men conducted from Egypt under the leadership of its prefect Aelius Gallus in 24 B.C., during the reign of Augustus Caesar, and supported by their Nabataean allies, proved a signal failure. Its object was admittedly to capture those transport routes monopolized by the South Arabians and tap the resources of al-Yaman for the benefit of Rome."[20] However, the Roman army could not penetrate the frightening desert of Arabia and the expedition ended in utter ignominy. Thereafter the Romans never made any such attempt. But later on, the entry of Roman shipping into the Indian Ocean ruined the South Arabian prosperity, and economic decline, in its wake, brought political ruin.

The Abyssinians and Sasanids of Persia also had their eyes on Yaman. There was an invasion from Abyssinia during the period A.D. 340-78. But thereafter the native Himyarite kings resumed their independent rule. In fact, if legend is to be believed, the best known Himyarite king, called Shammar Yar'ash, is said to have conquered

19. ibid. Chapter 27, Verse 34.
20. Hitti, op. cit., p. 46.

Samarqand which, according to this legend, derives its name from him. However, Abyssinia, after its first invasion referred to above, did not give up its ambition and launched further attacks. The introduction of Judaism and Christianity into Yaman made the political situation more complex. The native religion of South Arabia, as referred to earlier, was essentially based on what Prof. Hitti calls a "planetary astral" system. The cult of the moon god was most widespread. (The Islamic calendar is also based on lunar movements.) The moon, as stated earlier, was known as Sīn in Hadramawt, as 'Wadd to the Minaeans, as Almaqah to the Sabaeans and as 'Amm (paternal uncle) to the Qatabanians. Actually 'Amm stood at the head of the pantheon and was considered to be a male deity. It is interesting to note that this moon god took precedence over the sun goddess Shams who was his consort. In the Arabic language, the sun has the feminine gender. The explanation, partly, if not wholly, could be found in the seasonal pattern of Arabia. It being very hot, the cool moonlit nights had a greater attraction, and consequently the moon as a deity took precedence over the sun, whose scorching heat was dreaded. In a non-agricultural society like that of central Arabia, it is not important that particular seasons fall in particular months, as there is nothing like sowing or harvesting to necessitate a regularity of seasonal pattern. That is why a solar calendar, which ensures this regularity, was never evolved in Arabia. Lunar movements being easy to observe, the lunar calendar was adopted.

The introduction of Christianity and Judaism into South Arabia had, in one way or the other, political motives. Both the Roman and the Persian empires were interested in establishing their sphere of influence over the area. It is not definitely known when Christianity entered South Arabia, but there are indications that the first Christian embassy was sent there around A.D. 356 by the emperor Constantius under the leadership of Theophilus Indus who was an Arian. However, the possibility that the persecuted missionaries from Syria fled to the south at an unknown time cannot be ignored. The motive of the Christian mission from Rome was political, and after some time Theophilus succeeded in establishing a church at 'Adan (now Aden). Ibn Hishām[21] and Ṭabari[22] also tell us the legend of an ascetic who was of the Monophysite communion, and was

21. Ibn-Hishām, *Sīra*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (1958-60), pp. 20-22.
22. Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l Muluk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, Vol. 1 (Leiden, 1897 onwards), pp. 919-25.

captured by an Arab caravan and brought to Najrān around A.D. 500.

As for Judaism, it found its foothold during the reign of the second Himyarite king. In the early 6th century, Judaism became very strong in Yaman. The last Himyarite king dhu-Nuwās, became its votary, and rivalry between the two monotheistic faiths became intense and acquired political overtones. Dhu-Nuwās, who represented the nationalistic spirit, patronized the Jewish faith because he intensely hated Abyssinian rule, which was identified with Christianity. He persecuted the Christians and, at Najrān in October A.D. 523, massacred many of them. Emperor Justin I of Rome, who was considered to be the protector of Christians everywhere, on being implored, directed the Nagus or ruler of Abyssinia to take action. The Negus is reported to have sent a force of 70,000 Abyssinians across the Red Sea. Here the entire gamut of international politics was involved. Byzantium, through the Abyssinians, sought to dominate the Arabian tribes and use them against the Persian empire. The Abyssinians were victorious and the Negus's deputy Abraha chased away dhu-Nuwās, who is reported to have jumped, along with his steed, into the Red Sea.[23] Thus came to an end the glorious period of the Himyarite Kings in Yaman.

Abraha, according to some sources, continued to rule over Yaman up to the late sixth century and converted it into an Abyssinian colony. He built in the city of San'ā' what was considered to be one of the most magnificent cathedrals of that period. Here it is interesting to note that the motive for building this cathedral was religio-economic, perhaps more economic than religious. Ibn Ishaq, the first biographer of the Prophet says, "Then Abraha built the cathedral in San'ā', such a church as could not be seen elsewhere in any part of the world at that time. He wrote to the Negus saying: 'I have built a church for you, O King, such as has not been built for any king before you. I shall not rest until I have diverted the Arabs' pilgrimage to it'."[24] Mecca, with which we will deal later in greater detail, was a centre of international trade and also a religious centre for the pagan Arabs. A large number of Arabs were attracted to Mecca for trade as well as to pay homage to the pagan deities. Thus it was a source of lucrative income. Abraha wanted San'ā' cathedral to outdo the pagan Ka'ba and make San'ā' a rival centre of trade as well as religion. He partly succeeded in this aim. This religio-economic rivalry, according to a local tradition, caused two Meccan Arabs, belonging

23. ibid. pp. 124-5.
24. *The Life of Muhammad*—A translation of Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* A. Guillaume (Oxford University Press, Karachi, 1978) p. 21.

to the tribe of Fuqaym, to pollute San'ā' cathedral during a festival. This sacrilegious act so enraged Abraha that he undertook an expedition against Mecca in order to destroy the pagan temple and teach the Meccans a lesson. Since there were elephants with him, that year in Meccan history is known as *Am al-Feel*, the Year of the Elephant. However, Abraha's army was struck with an epidemic of smallpox (the Koran uses the metaphor of "the small pebbles" or *sijjil* for this) and had to retreat without causing any damage. This event has been referred to in the Koran in the chapter entitled "The Elephant", which says: "Have you not considered how Allah dealt with the Army of the Elephants? Did He not foil their stratagem and send against them flocks of birds which pelted them with clay-stones, so that they became like plants cropped by cattle?"[25] Thus, according to the Koran the failure of Abraha's mission was willed by God, who protected His house, i.e., the Ka'ba. Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, was born in the same year, i.e. A.D. 570-71.

It will be seen that, apart from the international trade which took place through Yaman, the prosperity of South Arabia to a great extent had depended on the dam of Mā'rib which supplied water for cultivation. Before the advent of Islam, the dam had fallen into disuse and had developed several breaches. This was one of the reasons why the prosperity of Yaman was ruined and people started migrating towards the north in search of livelihood. In historical times Arabs came up in wave after wave from southern and central Arabia and found their way into the settled lands of the fertile crescent, urged on by poverty and hunger. Settlements and oases can support only a limited number of inhabitants; the pasturage of the steppes can support only a limited number of camels and herds, and when that number is exceeded, a war of conquest or annual raids on the settlements are the only alternatives to starvation.

It may be noted in passing that the great conquests of Islam of the north-east and the north-west countries with the help of the Bedouins of the desert represent a similar phenomenon of increasing pressure on the land, resulting in mass migration towards the north. This has repeatedly happened in the history of the Arabs. Whenever some calamity afflicted the south, people migrated towards the north in search of food. The breaking of the great dam of Mā'rib is one such occasion, which has been immortalized in Islamic literature. Al-Isfahani, who devotes the eighth book of his annals, which was finished in A.D. 961, to the Himyarite kings, puts this event four

25. The Koran, Chapter 105.

hundred years before Islam. But, it seems, Yaqūt comes nearer the truth when he ascribes it to the reign of the Abyssinians. The breach it appears, was then restored. But the final catastrophe alluded to in the Koran (in Chapter 34, Verse 15), it is said: "But they gave no heed. So we unloosed upon them the waters of the dams and replaced their gardens by two others bearing bitter fruit, tamarisks, and a few nettle shrubs. Thus we punished them for their ingratitude; for we punish none save the ungrateful." may have taken place after A.D. 542 and before A.D. 570, according to Hitti. This breach, as said earlier, dealt a severe blow to the sedentary civilization of southern Arabia. Ibn Hishām, another celebrated biographer of the Prophet, also refers to the episode of breach of the dam of Mā'rib. He says, "Abu Zaid Ansārī explained to me the reason of 'Umru bin 'Āmir's departure from Yaman as follows: He saw a wild rat digging a hole in the dam in which water was stored for them. It is this water which was used by them and they used to irrigate any land they wanted with it. 'Umru understood that in this condition (when a rat is digging a hole) it is difficult for the dam to remain secure. Therefore he decided to leave Yaman and migrate elsewhere.... At that time Bani Āzad also said that we would not live here after the departure of 'Umru bin 'Āmir and so they also sold all their belongings and set out with him."[26] [Translation my own.] Prof. R.A. Nicholson says, "Mention has frequently been made of the bursting of the dyke Mā'rib, which caused an extensive movement of Yamenite stocks to the north. The invaders halted in the Hijāz and, having almost exterminated the Jurhumites, resumed their journey. One group, however—the Banu Khuza'a, led by their chief Luhayy—settled in the neighbourhood of Mecca,"[27] In his correspondence with Marx, Engels has also taken note of this fact.

> This artificial fertilization of the land which immediately ceased when the irrigation system fell into decay, explains the otherwise curious fact that whole stretches which were once brilliantly cultivated are now waste and bare (Palmyra, Petra, the ruins in the Yaman, districts in Egypt, Persia and Hindustan); it explains the fact that one single devastating war could depopulate a country for centuries and strip it of its whole civilization. Here too, I think, comes in the destruction of the South Arabian trade, before Mohammad, which you

26. See Ibn Hishām *Sirat al-Nabi Kamil*, (Urdu tr. Maulana Abdul Jalil Siddiqui and Ghulam Rasul Mehr), (Delhi, 1982), p. 37.
27. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 63.

very rightly regard as one of the chief factors in the Mohammedan revolution.[28]

This massive movement of population towards Hijāz, central Arabia and the north had its own repercussions on the economic situation. However, there were other complicating factors which also seriously disrupted the set pattern of that region's economy. Owing to the constant friction between the Byzantine and Persian empires, the trade routes were in a state of flux. It was ultimately, doubtless, the evolution of the trade routes that brought about unpredictable fluctuations in the history of the Arabs. In the second half of the sixth century A.D., for instance, the Euphrates-Persian trade route, which had hitherto benefited by the commerce between the Mediterranean and the lands further east, was encumbered and made dangerous by the constant friction between the Byzantine and Persian empires, with a concomitant increase in tariffs, political rivalries and general chaos. Egypt, too, was in a state of disarray, and, consequently, it could not have provided an alternative route. Merchants thus had to take recourse to another difficult, though more peaceful, route, leading from that served the Indian trade. As we have seen above, Yaman, before the birth of Islam, fell under the foreign yoke, and by then, Palmyra and Nabatea in the north had quite disappeared. This was the right time for Mecca to fill, as it were, a socio-economic vacuum.

The Establishment and Importance of Mecca

Mecca had doubtless risen because of its location along the spice route leading from southern to northern Arabia; it was probably a way station, favoured as the hub of lines leading to the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea through Jidda, and overseas to Africa mainly could be divided into two parts: (a) the urban and (b) the nomadic. Mecca was one of the most important urban centres, where complex commercial operations were carried out. The people who inhabited these urban areas were originally of nomadic stock. The urbanization of the Bedouins also had a long history. Faced with an acute economic crisis or a long spell of drought, they would migrate and invade the fertile areas further north. Engels, in a letter to Marx, refers to this when he says. "With regard to the great Arabian invasion of which we spoke previously: the Bedouins made periodic invasions, just like the Mongols. The Assyrian Empire as well as the

28. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion*, (New York, 1964), pp. 124-5.

Babylonian was founded by Bedouin tribes, on the same spot where later the caliphate of Baghdad arose. The founders of the Babylonian empire, the Chaldeans, still exist under the same name, Beni Chaled (Bani Khaled), in the same locality."[29]

Mecca was an important religious as well as trade centre. It acquired a great deal of importance primarily because of its international trade. It was for this reason that Abraha, the Abyssinian ruler of south Yaman, wanted to make San'ā' the main centre of trade, reducing Mecca to a secondary importance. However, it was not to be, and Mecca continued to be the most important centre of trade and pagan Arab religion. Mecca lies in a gorge in a range of mountains running parallel to the coast, the mountains being black and yellow, bare, rocky, with no scrap of soil, and sharp and jagged. The valley has been carved out by the Wadi, by particularly violent rainstorms which, at times, cause heavy flooding.[30] However, these rainstorms are erratic, and last only for a short while. Here, as at many other places in Arabia, no agriculture is possible. The valley of Mecca is arid and barren. Long before the Christian era, two considerable trading centres had evolved: Macoraba (i.e, Mecca) and, some distance north, Yathrippa (Yathrib). Mecca, as already said, was also a sanctuary of long standing, probably because of the famous well of Zamzam which supplied the settlement with water. Mecca became a trading centre, probably as a result of its admirable situation at the junction of a road going from north to south, from Palestine to the Yaman, with others from east to west connecting the Red Sea coast and the route to Ethiopia with the Persian Gulf. This trading centre was a safe haven from the devastating blood-feuds between various tribes, as the custom did not permit molestation in this sanctuary, and merchants were thus given security from the plundering ravages of the Bedouins.

Mecca, also called Becca, is certainly one of the most ancient cities of the world and by some it is thought to be the Mesa of the Bible.[31] Its length, from south to north, is about two miles and its breadth from the foot of the mountain Ajyad, to the top of another called Koaikaan, about a mile. In the midst of this space stands the city, built

29. ibid. pp. 124-5.
30. Even today temporary heavy flooding continues to occur in Saudi Arabia. According to *The Times of India* (25 December 1985), 32 persons were killed "in the worst floods in 50 years in the north-west corner of Saudi Arabia...31 people were missing in waters raging through wadis (valleys)...by a five-day downpour last week..."
31. The Bible, The Book of Genesis, Chapter. X, Verse 30.

of stone cut from the neighbouring mountains. Its soil being almost barren, no agriculture is possible. The Meccans, therefore, were obliged to procure corn from other places. Hāshim, Muhammad's great-grandfather, the chief of his tribe, in order to supply the Meccans with grain, appointed two caravans to set out yearly for that purpose, one in summer, and the other in winter, this being mentioned in the Koran (Chapter 106, which also refers to feeding the hungry and providing security from fear). By the end of the 5th century A.D., a strong man called Qusayy gained control of the town and the temple.[32] He belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, an assemblage of various clans which, through him, supplanted the Khuza'ā.

Social and Familial Structure in Mecca

Here, from the sociological point of view, it would be quite interesting to say a few words about the social structure and the units in which the Arabs lived. Here, too, we will have to bear in mind the distinction between the nomads and the city-dwellers. The Bedouins live in tents and their encampments are in the desert. The basis of Bedouin society is clan organization. Members of a family live in one tent; a group of tents (an encampment) is called a *hayy*, and the members of this *hayy* constitute a clan, called *qawm* in their tongue. The kindred clans put together constitute what is called *qabīlah*, i.e., a tribe. All members of the clan consider themselves to be of one blood, and elect their chief, called the Shaykh, who is considered to be *primus inter pares*. They use one battle-cry, and are referred to as "Banū"—a title with which they prefix their joint name. The origin of certain clan names is feminine, and from this fact some scholars conclude that the matriarchal system was still prevalent just before the advent of Islam. But this view would hardly stand up to scrutiny. At best the names indicate the existence of certain traces of the matriarchal system in the remote past. Maxime Rodinson disagrees with Montgomery Watt's view that these disparate signs could be interpreted as an indication that Arab society, which had formerly been matrilinear, was in the Prophet's time in the course of changing to the patrilinear system, and was therefore in a transitional stage associated with the general development towards individualism. "What does seem to be true," says Rodinson, "is that in certain regions such as Medina, this system co-existed with some types of polyandrous

32. Ibn Hishām, op. cit., pp. 150-152, gives details of how Qusayy gained control of Mecca.

custom, and with the accepted assignation of a substantial role to women (several sources indicate a remote period in which there were Arab queens); even in some cases with uxorilocal residence and the inheritance of property through the female line."[33]

These nomads were highly mobile and did not live in one single place. They moved from place to place in search of water and pastures for their animals; also to conduct raids on other tribes. There was therefore no concept of landed property among them. Even in Medina, which was a fertile oasis, agriculture had not developed to the extent of giving rise to individual ownership. The cultivable lands were collectively owned. In Mecca too, there was hardly anything worth calling landed property, although there were houses owned by families. There were no well developed laws of ownership of property, though some conventions did exist. Some Meccan magnates did own land in the neighbouring oasis of Tāi'f. But this was more of a summer resort for them, owing to its much better climate. The Meccan merchants constructed villas for vacations there in the summer. The Banū Thaqīf lived in Tā'if and their distinctive feature was that they lived on cereals, whereas other Arabs were content with dates and milk. In view of the absence of any landed property or individual ownership of land for agricultural purposes, it would be wrong to see early Islam in a feudal setting, as has so often been done. At the time of the emergence of Islam, there was no process of feudalization taking place as some Soviet scholars believe,[34] much less the unification of Arab tribes on that basis. We will examine this in detail later in the book.

Let us now take up the question of familial structure in the urban areas, principal among which was the town of Mecca. As we shall see later, tribal structure was disintegrating in Mecca, and the process of individualization had set in. Tribal solidarity was at a discount. The clans had broken, or were in the process of breaking into smaller familial units, as new property relations developed, although clan and tribal loyalty was still needed by the society. In the absence of institutions such as the state, clan or tribal loyalty was necessary to maintain order and enforce tribal law. Thus antagonistic contradictions were emerging in the society; on the one hand, desperately needed tribal loyalty in the absence of any other law-enforcing machinery, and on the other, the disintegration of tribal structure. Careful reading of the available sources indicates that the Meccans,

33. Rodinson, op. cit., p. 230.
34. A.Z. Manfred, *A Short History of the World* (Moscow 1974), pp. 183-4.

in the sixth century after Christ, were living in smaller familial units, though perhaps not in nuclear families. One verse in the Koran indicates just that. It says: "It shall be no offence for the blind, the lame and the sick, to eat at your tables. Nor shall it be an offence for you to eat in the houses of your own children, your fathers, your mothers, your brothers, your sisters, your paternal uncles, your paternal aunts, maternal uncles, your maternal aunts, or your friends; or in houses with the keys of which you are entrusted. It shall be equally lawful whether you eat together or apart."[35] Houses of different relations have been mentioned separately, which clearly indicates that the Meccans by the time of the Prophet of Islam had started living in smaller familial units. It also appears from the same verse that children, having come of age, lived separately or formed separate families, and that daughters went to live with their husbands after marriage. In this connection it is interesting to note that among the early followers of Muhammad there were, among others, close relatives of the leading men of the most influential clans of Mecca. These men, though closely related to the richest monopolists, were excluded from the most profitable enterprises. It would not be quite wrong to surmise that these men were attracted to Muhammad because of his attack on the monopolistic policies of the leading clans of Mecca. Or else, they were not satisfied with the patterns of resulting life under these monopolists.[36] Their dissatisfaction also clearly indicates that close relatives other than one's children did not have a share in one's wealth, as it happens in a tribal society where property is collectively owned. Thus, from all indications, it is apparent that parents and children, sometimes along with some slaves and servants, constituted the family unit.

The Religion of the People of Mecca

Having discussed the familial structure of the people of Mecca, let us turn our attention to their religion. As we have seen above, the desert nomads did not have any formal or doctrinal religion; they practised what can be termed "tribal humanism", in which the whole emphasis was on human excellence and tribal glory. But it was different with the townsmen of Mecca. Having settled in a town and occupied themselves with various professions, chief among which was commerce, they needed some formal religion, more so as the

35. The Koran, Chapter 24, Verse 61.
36. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and the Interpretation of Society* (London, 1961), p. 12.

lowest strata of the Meccan population suffered great material hardship, owing to the gross inequality in the distribution of wealth, and therefore needed some kind of spiritual relief. Religion also fulfilled, as in the city states of Greece, oracular functions.*

An agricultural society, as is well known, evolves its own cults nd rituals connected with fertility. These cults slowly develop from amorphous to concrete forms. However, as we know, there was no agriculture in Mecca, it being located in a barren region. So no native cults could develop there. However, in the sanctuary at Mecca and around it, when the Prophet of Islam began to preach, there were a number of deities being worshipped with whom he had to contend. What, then, is the origin of these deities? From all available evidence it is clear that they were not of native origin. Ibn Hishām, one of the early historians of Islam, tells us that idolatry, that is, the use of stone images carved to resemble human beings, was only introduced to Mecca from Syria in Muhammad's lifetime.[37] It is also to be noted that the Muslim historians do not refer to the unbelieving Arabs as idolaters but as "associators", persons who associate the local spirits with God. Syria was located in the northern fertile region and had an agricultural base. Al-Shahrestani, a noted Muslim historian, tells us that there were 360 idols in the Ka'ba, chief among which was Hobal, brought from Belka in Syria into Arabia by 'Amru Ibn Lohai, pretending it would procure rain when required. It is interesting to note that Hobal was supposed to procure rain, a typical trait for a deity from an agricultural region.

* Of course, I am not maintaining here that this is the only possible explanation of the growth of a religion or a spiritual movement; spiritualism, to be sure, meets some higher emotional and intellectual needs. No single explanation, however profound, would suffice. All I am trying to maintain here is that a religious or a spiritual movement assumes forms which have a definite—although complex—relationship with the immediate material environment.

37. See Ibn Hisham, op. cit., p. 108. Ibn Hishām said some knowledgeable people told me that 'Umru bin Lahī went to Syria from Mecca in connection with his work. He went to the place called Mā'b in the region of Balqā'.There used to reside in that region people called 'Amālīq... He saw them worshipping idols and inquired what are these idols? I see you worshipping them. They replied, 'We worship these idols because when we beseech them for rain, they send us rain and when we invoke their help they help us.' 'Umru bin Lahī asked them will you not lend one of the idols to me so that I may take it to the land of Arabs in order that they may also worship it. They gave him one idol which was known as Hubal. 'Umru brought it to Mecca and installed it at a place and he ordered people to revere and worship it.

The celebrated Muslim historian Tabari tells us that Hobal was placed on a well right at the centre of the Ka'ba. This was considered the most important deity in Mecca. All the offerings made to it were put into the well. Hobal also served as an oracle. There were seven dice kept near it, each with some inscription. On one die was inscribed the word 'deyat' (blood money). If any dispute arose among the Quraysh as to who should pay blood money they would throw the dice, and whoever was indicated had to pay it. On one die was written "Yes" and on the other "No"; whenever they wanted to do any work, these dice would be thrown and if they threw "Yes" they would undertake the work, and if they threw "No", they would not. On one die was written "water"; whenever they wanted to dig a well, they would throw these dice and if they threw one with "water" they would proceed.[38] Thus we see that this deity from an agricultural region, when transplanted into Mecca, underwent a change in its essential function. Here, in Mecca, oracular functions were more important than any other function connected with agricultural productivity.

The three other chief divinities of Mecca were Manāt, al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā. Tor Andrae tells us that, "Their cult was of the greatest antiquity. Judging by her name, Manāt, who was especially revered by the warlike and poetic tribe of the Hudhail, south of Mecca, seems to have been a divinity of the very prevalent type of a goddess of fate and fortune. She resembles the Greek Tyche Soteria, one of the Fates, a daughter of Zeus, the liberator and helper of man on the sea, in war, and in public assemblies."[39] The second deity, al-Lāt, was known as early as Herodotus, who called her Alilat. Al-Lāt actually meant "the Goddess". In the Nabataean inscriptions, too, the "mother of the gods" is called al-Lāt. Thus it can be assumed that in Arabic circles al-Lāt corresponded with the great Semitic goddess of motherhood, fertility and heaven, and especially with the form which she assumed in western Semitic regions. Thus it is clear that this deity also could not have originated in Mecca but was imported from the north. The third diety, al-'Uzzā, received the most worship of all the three goddesses in the Prophet's time. The name .gnifies "the mighty" or "the honoured one". Al-'Uzzā's sanctuary was in Nakhla, a few miles north of Mecca. Wāqidī tells us that in the eighth year after the

38. al-Tabari, *Tārikh al-Rasul* translated into Urdu by Syed Mohammad Ibrahim (Karachi, 1967), p. 27.

39. Tor Andrae, *Mohammad, the Man and His Faith* (London, 1956), p. 17.

Hijra, Muhammad sent Khālid the valiant with 30 horsemen to destroy this sanctuary. When he was felling the last of the acacia trees of the goddess, a naked black woman with flowing hair approached him, and her priest, who was around, shouted out: "Be courageous, al-'Uzzā, and protect thyself." First, Khālid shook with terror, but took courage and with one stroke of his sword cleft her head.[40]

It will be noticed from the preceding discussion that all the three chief deities described above are female, as in one way or the other they were connected either with the fertility rites or mother cults of the north or Mediterranean countries; while in Mecca, as we have seen, the patriarchal system predominated and, therefore, mother cults were not structurally integrated with the society. The Koran accepts the patriarchal system as legitimate and criticizes the female deities repeatedly: "What? shall ye have male progeny and Allah female? This were indeed an unfair position." As we have seen earlier, in Mecca at least, the patriarchal system predominated for ages unknown. In such a society, where male superiority prevailed, female deities could not have evolved with their paraphernalia of fertility rites. The only conclusion that can therefore be drawn is that these deities were imported from the area where agriculture predominated, i.e., the northern fertile crescent.

A mother goddess called Manāt was also worshipped. She was supposed to be the goddess of fortune, and was a household deity among the Bedouins. Desert nomads, as is quite natural in their conditions, considered Time to be the great destroyer, and this thought runs through the literature of the Arabs. Time, the Arabs thought, settles man's fate, strive how he will, and hence the importance of Manāt, the goddess of fortune. Manāt did not have any particular shape. At times, large rude stones, thought by some scholars to be megalithic structures of a bygone age, would be installed and worshipped. "The primitive worship of the Arabs," says Alfred Guillaume, "was given to the god or spirit who was believed to inhabit blocks of stone, rock, trees, or wells. These stones served as altars and the blood of the victims was smeared or poured on them, while the tribesmen danced round the stone. Herodotus states very credibly that blood-brotherhood was established in this way. The devotees licked the blood, or dipped their hands in it, and thus, a reciprocal bond held them to one another and the deity to whom the stone belonged. Nilus, a Christian writer, gives a fairly full account of such a sacrifice to al-'Uzzā. Though there is no trace of human

40. ibid. pp. 17-18.

sacrifice in the Koran, it is clear from the authority just quoted and from early Arab sources that human beings were sacrificed to these gods in Dūma and Hīra."[41] Ibn Ishaq informs us in his *Sirat* that 'Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's grandfather had taken a vow to sacrifice his son. He says, "It is alleged, and God only knows the truth, that when 'Abd al-Muttalib encountered the opposition of Quraysh when he was digging Zamzam, he vowed that if he should have ten sons to grow up and protect him, he would sacrifice one of them to God at the Ka'ba."[42] Then Ibn Ishaq goes on to describe how the lots were drawn near the goddess Hobal and the lot fell in favour of 'Abd al-Muttalib's son 'Abdallah, the Prophet's father. 'Abd al-Muttalib decided to sacrifice him but the people of Quraysh insisted to make expiatory sacrifice and saved 'Abdallah's life.[43]

It is for this reason again that we find the early Arab society, unlike the Greek, Egyptian or Indian societies, uniquely devoid of any colourful imagination or mythology. The Koranic mythology too is not native Arab mythology, but derived from Judaism and Christianity, religions that originated in the fertile north. The *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology* has no separate section of either Arab or Islamic mythology. It has been subsumed under a section on "Mythology of Ancient Persia". The subsection also claims no more than a page, most of which is devoted to Persianized Islam. The encyclopaedia says, "There is scarcely any religion less propitious to the development of a mythology than Islam. Its dry and formal conception of the law excludes, at least in principle, not only individual phantasy but flights of popular imagination."[44] The Arabs, according to the encyclopaedia, "practised a naturalistic and animistic religion, worshipping stones and trees. They peopled the universe with demons, benevolent and malevolent, the jinns, and with redoubtable genii, the Efrit, who delighted in assuming the most diverse forms in order to harm mankind. The cult gave rise to idols which were usually no more than blocks of stone such as those

41. Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (London, 1969), pp. 8-9
42. See Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah*, p. 66.
43. ibid p. 67. However, the ritual of human sacrifice does not seem to have been very common. Meccan society, as pointed out, was not an agricultural society and such sacrifices are fertility sacrifices generally integral to agricultural societies. Morever, enough surplus would be needed to maintain a priestly class who would, without performing any productive labour, be engaged in evolving and performing such elaborate rites.
44. Guirand (ed.), *New Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology*, translated by R. Aldington and D. Ames (London, 1969), p. 323.

of the goddess Manāt...." The Koran also talks of jinns as a different order of creatures who put evil suggestions in man's mind. Thus the Koran says, "Say, I fly for refuge unto the Lord of men, the God of men, that he may deliver me from the mischief of the whisperer who slyly withdraweth, who whispereth evil suggestions into the breasts of men; from genii and men."[45]

The legends of Ad and Thamūd referred to repeatedly in the Koran are of Arabian origin. The legend of 'Ād belongs to the fertile south. The tribe of 'Ād is supposed to have descended from the biblical prophet Noah, who, after the confusion of tongues, is said to have settled in al-Ahqāf in the province of Hadramawt, where his posterity multiplied greatly. Their first king was Shaddad, referred to in the Koran. He was the son of 'Ād and, as the legend would have it, built a magnificent city in which he raised a fine palace, adorned with beautiful gardens, to embellish which he spared neither cost nor labour. The Koranic legend tells us that in sheer arrogance he thought himself to be eternal and indestructible. Of course, he was punished and his city destroyed. "Have you not heard how Allah dealt with 'Ād? The people of the many-columned city of Iram, whose like has never been built in the whole land?", says the Koran.[46] The legend clearly refers to a prosperous period in the south, which had a rich agricultural base.

The Thamūd, another native Arabic legendary people referred to in the Koran, are said to have dwelt in north Arabia between the Hijāz and Syria. It seems they lived in dwellings cut out of rocks. The Nabataean inscriptions indicate that these rock-cut dwellings were perhaps sepulchral monuments which were mistakenly believed to be their dwellings. According to the Koran they sinned like 'Ād, defied their prophet Sālih and consequently were killed in an earthquake. The Koran says, "Whereupon a great earthquake overtook them with a noise of thunder, and in the morning they lay dead in their houses, flat upon their breast."[47] It is also possible that these rock dwellings were megalithic structures (large stone tombs) which can be spotted even today. The absence of mythology in Islam indicates that central Arabia, where Islam originated, had not, by then, evolved a material civilization at a sufficiently high and complex level.

45. The Koran, Chapter 114.
46. ibid. Chapter 89.
47. ibid. Chapter 7, Verse 76.

3

Islam's Origin in Mecca

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, started preaching his new religion in Mecca. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the situation in Mecca at the time when the Prophet began preaching. Mecca was situated, as mentioned earlier, on an international trade route, and was itself a very important centre of trade. Mecca had doubtless prospered because of its location along the spice route leading from southern to northern Arabia; it was probably a way-station, favoured as the hub of routes leading to the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea through Jidda, and overseas to Africa.[1] Mecca was one of the most important urban centres where complex commercial operations were carried out. The people who inhabited these urban areas were originally of nomadic stock. As we have already seen in the last chapter, the Bedouins, faced with the acute problem of their livelihood, would settle down either in some developing urban centre like Mecca in central Arabia, or would go north in search of fertile regions. This process continued long after the rise of Islamic empires in different regions and, in fact, as Ibn Khaldūn tells us, was an important determinant factor in the rise and fall of these empires. These people of nomadic stock, when they migrated to an urban centre, carried with them their own prejudices and tribal loyalty (which Ibn Khaldūn calls *'asabīyah)* and this group loyalty became their chief asset in forming a cohesive political group. Talking of this group feeling, Ibn Khaldūn says:

> Once group feeling has established superiority over the people who share in it, it will, by its very nature, seek superiority over people who have other group feelings unrelated to the first. If the one (group feeling) is the equal of the other or is able to

1. Joel Carmichael, *The Shaping of the Arabs* (London, 1969), p. 21.

> stave off (its challenge), the (competing people) are even with and equal to each other. Each group feeling maintains its sway over its own domain and people, as is the case with tribes and nations all over the earth.[2]

These different group feelings were playing their part in Mecca and had given rise to different combinations like the Order of Chivalry called Hilf al-Fudūl (described later in this chapter), and the struggle for domination by one or the other group continued to give rise to tension in the society. The struggle was, as we shall see, not for political domination but for domination of commerce and trade. Mecca, at the time of the emergence of Islam, was fast developing into the most important commercial centre. Besides, it had grown into the intellectual and political leader of western Arabia. Writes H.A.R. Gibb, "A busy and wealthy commercial town, almost monopolising the entrepot trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, it recalls Palmyra without the flashy Greek veneer. Its citizens, while reserving a certain native Arab simplicity in their manners and institutions, had acquired a wide knowledge of men and cities in their intercourse, commercial and diplomatic, with Arab tribesmen and Roman officials."[3] The nomadic tribal structure, under the pressure of the new commercial pattern of life, was disintegrating, and a new relationship cutting across the tribal barriers, was evolving. An understanding of this phenomenon is essential in order to grasp the significance of the movement which emerged in the shape of Islam.

Mecca at the time was dominated by a tribe called the Quraysh. It was an assemblage of various clans, as any tribe normally used to be. The traditional legend tells us that the four sons of 'Abd Manāf, one of Qusayy's sons (who belonged to the tribe of Quraysh), had divided among themselves the areas where trade could be developed. One went to Persia, another to Ethiopia, the third to the Yaman and the fourth to Byzantine Syria. The tribe of Quraysh did everything to promote the commercial development of Mecca and in course of time became the most dominant tribe, so much so that it considered it to be its prerogative to rule after the death of the Prophet by initiating the tradition that the caliph could come only from amongst the Quraysh, though this militated against the concept of equal rights accorded to all Muslims irrespective of their tribal associations. The Kharijite movement later on, as we will be seeing in a subsequent chapter, was,

2. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, (London 1970), p. 83.
3. H.A.R. Gibb, *Muhammadanism* (London, 1969), p. 17.

among other things, inspired by the egalitarian ideals of the Bedouins. It was a revolt against the monopoly of power by the townsmen in general and the Quraysh in particular. Thus, by about the sixth century, the tribe of Quraysh was successful in establishing its commercial hegemony. Its caravans travelled far and wide, to the cardinal points of international trade.

The important merchants of Mecca had grown extremely rich, and controlled the commanding heights of the mercantile economy. The city of Mecca had grown into an important centre of international trade. Merchants from different nations gathered at Mecca to launch new enterprises. It had also gathered a vast body of craftsmen who depended on the rich merchants of Mecca for their livelihood. Jāhiz tells us that there were a number of trades practised in Mecca at that time. Among the varied tradesmen were carpenters, smiths, sword-makers, wine merchants, oil merchants, tanners and leather merchants, tailors, weavers, arrow-makers, stationers and money-lenders.[4] Commerce, in fact, was so predominant that the profits of the export trade greatly exceeded the revenue provided by other sources, and upon it the constantly increasing community depended for their bread (which incidentally was made of corn brought from Yamāma in the north-east). He who wished to have Mecca at his mercy had only to stop their caravans (and this is what Muhammad did later to smother Meccan trade).[5] It is for this reason again that in the Koran we find similes and metaphors derived from commercial language. "God," it is repeatedly said in the Koran, "is good at accounts." Or, "the believers are doing good business and unbelievers are losing. Those who buy error for guidance make a bad bargain." Even when the Prophet was the head of state in Medina, we are told in the *Musnad* of Imām Hanbal, he was not averse to buying goods wholesale and making a profit by selling them in retail.[6] Montgomery Watt also tells us, "Mecca was more than a mere trading centre, it was a financial centre.... But it is clear that financial operations of considerable complexity were carried on at Mecca. The leading men of Mecca in Muhammad's time were above all financiers, skilful in the manipulations of credit, shrewd in their speculations, and interested in any potentialities of lucrative investment from Aden to Gaza or Damascus. In the financial net that they had woven, not merely were all the inhabitants of Mecca caught, but many notables

4. See Jāhiz, *Mahasin*, p. 165.
5. D.S. Margoliouth, *Mohammad and the Rise of Islam*, 3rd edition (1905), p. 14.
6. Imām Hanbal, *Musnad*, i. p. 255.

of the surrounding [areas] also. The Koran appeared not in the atmosphere of the desert, but in that of high finance."[7]

To understand the Meccan situation, it is also necessary to know that the main expansion of trade, specially of the more lucrative types, took place in the decades before A.D. 610. Thus Muhammad's contemporaries may not have been more than one generation removed from at least a partial dependence on pastoralism. From the conditions stipulated by Muhammad's grandfather for settlement with Abraha, we know that he had extensive herds of camels, and it is also almost certain that in Muhammad's time many of the residents in Mecca gained their livelihood mainly from commercial operation. Thus in the course of a generation or two, there had been a change from reliance on nomadic pastoralism to reliance on commerce. This transformation of the economic substructure, as we shall see, was causing a great deal of ferment in the Meccan society, as new socio-economic formations were taking shape. New property relations had developed. In the nomadic society of the Bedouins, collective ownership was prevalent, but in Mecca, owing to the emergence of a commercial society, individual ownership had replaced collective ownership, although a corresponding legal superstructure did not exist. Islam, as we shall see later, fulfilled this vital necessity. Thus D.S Margoliouth says, "The institution of private property would appear to have existed, and indeed to have been fairly developed at Mecca, in spite of its apparent contradiction to the doctrine of blood feud. Thus the Meccan heads of houses are represented as forming a joint-stock company for the purpose of foreign trade, the profits on each occasion being divided proportionately among the investors, and by them expanded or hoarded, or invested in fresh speculations."[8] Tabari also testifies to the existence of private property in Mecca. He has recorded a dispute between 'Abd al-Muttalib (the Prophet's grandfather) and his uncle Naufal involving properties including a well.[9] Tabari has also given details of property deals when Qusayy was consolidating his hold over Mecca.[10]

Now we shall see another aspect of Meccan society. Although highly complex commercial operations were taking place, there was no organized state, no bureaucracy and no standing army. As agriculture was not possible in Mecca, feudalism or the institution of

7. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (London), p. 3.
8. Margoliouth, op. cit., pp. 30-31.
9. Tabari, *Tarikh-e-Tabari*, translated into Urdu by Syed Mohammad Ibrahim, Nafis Academy, Karachi, Vol. 1, p. 134.
10. ibid. pp. 40–45.

kingship could not develop. In fact the Arabic language spoken in Mecca or among nomadic people did not have any word for king The word *malik* (king) was used for foreign rulers. Ibn Khurdadbeh, a Muslim historian, writing under the title "Epithets of the rulers of the world" gives the titles of different rulers of the world including Persia, Rome, Turkey, Tibet, China, India, Abyssinia, etc. But there is no mention of Arabia (of course, in this we do not include south Arabia and the northern buffer states on the borders of Byzantium and Persia), as no ruler existed there.[11] The only organ of government in Mecca was the senate or *mala'ā*. This senate mainly consisted of the representatives of various clans. Another important thing to note is that the council was only a deliberative body and had no executive of its own. Moreover each constituent clan was theoretically independent and therefore, was not bound by any of its decisions. The only effective decisions were the unanimous ones. No taxes were levied or collected for political or administrative functions of the state. However, contributions were said at times to be levied on the clans for the covering of the Ka'ba and the entertainment of pilgrims. One of the important contributions of the Prophet was to develop state machinery which, of course, remained in a primitive shape during his lifetime. It is also important to note that in the Meccan period the concept of *zakāt*, as we know from the Koran, was not that of a state levy (the state by then had not come into existence), but was that of a purificatory donation.

As pointed out above, even in the primarily commercial city of Mecca, the Arabs were, although partially, under the influence of certain tribal institutions. The commercial oligopoly did, at the most, tolerate institutions like the *mala'ā*. It was quite averse to the institution of kingship, as any commercial society would be. There is one more instance which shows how the Arab merchants of Mecca were quite averse to being ruled by any single powerful individual. The incident of 'Uthmān b. Huwayrith, as related by Lammens, makes interesting reading. 'Uthmān, a merchant, entertained some ambitions of his own to achieve a pre-eminent position with the help of a foreign power, in this case Byzantium. He adopted Christianity and received some measure of support. This was, perhaps, part of the Byzantine reaction to the Persian conquest of the south. But soon the wealthy merchants of Mecca became suspicious. The overt act which, it appears, led to the wrecking of 'Uthmān's scheme was his being denounced as aspiring to kingship, by a person of his own clan

11. Ibn Khurdadbeh, *Al-Masalik wal Mumalik*, pp. 16-17.

of Asad, al-Aswad b. al-Muttalib. 'Uthmān ultimately failed in his design.

It is also important to note that the Arabs were quite conscious of their strong position as suppliers of goods which were very much in demand in Byzantium, Muhammad grew to maturity in such an atmosphere of high politics and had to be very cautious in his moves to beat his enemies at their own game. Muhammad's political acumen led him to victory, where his lesser enemies failed. This was one of the reasons why the merchants of Mecca, who were normally indifferent to religion, became inveterate enemies of Muhammad.

The pagan idols worshipped in and around Mecca, as we have seen in the last chapter, were not integral to the society of Mecca, as they had only recently been imported from the Syrian agricultural society. Thus it can be seen that the merchant capitalists of Mecca, having no roots in the fertility cults of an agricultural civilization, had no great attachment to these deities whom they formally worshipped, and never considered them a matter of deep spiritual experience. The nomadic Arabs too, as we have seen, were not particularly devoted to the pagan cults, as tribal humanism was what they were passionately devoted to. Then why so much resistance against Muhammad when he started preaching his new religion? Dr. Tāha Husayn, a noted Egyptian scholar, in his book *Al-Fitnat al-Kubra* (*The Great Insurrection*) says, throwing light on this aspect, "I can say with conviction that if he (the Prophet) had preached simply unity of God without attacking the social and economic system, leaving differences between weak and strong, rich and poor, slave and master intact, and had not banned usury [this is a little doubtful, as usury, some scholars maintain, was banned by the Prophet after his migration to Medina] and had not exhorted the rich to distribute part of their wealth to the needy and indigent, the great majority of the tribe of Quraysh would have accepted his religion, for most of the Quraysh did not have sincere regards for their idols and were not emotionally devoted to them. They were sceptical towards them and worshipped them for fun. In fact they were using these idols to keep their hold over the Arab masses and to exploit them."[12] The eminent Islamicist H.A.R. Gibb too agrees with this assessment. He says, "The resistance of the Meccans appears to have been due not so much to their conservatism or even to religious disbelief (though they ridiculed Muhammad's doctrine of resurrection) as to political and economic causes. They

12. Tāha Husayn, *Al-Fitnat al-Kubra*, translated into Urdu by 'Abdal Hamīd N'omānī, Vol. I, p. 11.

were afraid of the effects that his preaching might have on their economic prosperity, and especially that his pure monotheism might injure the economic assets of their sanctuaries. In addition they realized more quickly than Mohammad himself did that their acceptance of his teaching would introduce a new and formidable kind of political authority into their oligarchic community."[13]

Any mercantile community, as we have seen in the case of 'Uthmān's attempt to become the ruler of Arabia, is generally averse to accepting the pre-eminent position of any one individual, or allowing him to assume unrestrained authority. If the powerful merchants of Mecca had accepted Muhammad's claim of prophethood, prudence and wisdom, they would have had to concede to him what would have amounted to a position of absolute power. How could they refuse to abide by his injunctions once they accepted his august office of prophethood? The *mala'ā* was the best possible organization through which the merchants could achieve an equitable distribution of power. The oligopolists of Mecca anyway would not agree to any such position for Muhammad. Tabari[14] tells us that once, when the persecution of the converts to the new faith was at its worst, Muhammad thought of entering into a compromise with the chiefs of Mecca by accepting al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā as the intercessors to Allah. But perhaps on second thoughts he realized that such a compromise would strike at the very roots of his new faith and would not enable him to have his way, and so he withdrew. This episode has been referred to in the Koran, too. To the revealed verse:

> Have you considered al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā and Manāt, the third, the other? (Koran I iii, 19-20)

Muhammad thought of adding:

> They are the Exalted Birds
> And their intercession is desired indeed.

The latter verse was later said to have been inspired by the devil, who intended to destroy the new faith. However, this episode, whatever other factors might have been behind it, clearly shows that Muhammad valued the unity of his people and even thought of accommodating their deities if that could achieve this objective. He wanted to unite the Arabs to enable them to stand up to the other

13. Gibb, op. cit., p. 18.
14. *Tārikh-e-Tabari*, Vol.1, p. 103.

peoples of the world, i.e., the Romans and the Persians. The policy of the Meccan business magnates was to steer clear of both the empires, and carry on their business as peacefully as possible. However, the international situation and the constant warfare between the Roman and Persian empires was making it difficult for them to maintain the delicate balance. The need of the hour was the emergence of an Arab power which could stand on its own and advance the business interests of the big merchants of Mecca.

In this connection, it is interesting to note the significance which the Arabs attached to the victory they first registered at the battle of Dhū Qar against the Persians. In fact it was the name of a place near Kūfa, in the direction of Wāsit[15] where one of the most famous Arab *Ayyam* took place. In contrast to most other clashes between Arabian tribes, this one had a historical importance because the Bakr b. Wā'il tribe (a coalition of all its clans except the Banū Hanīfa) among whom, significantly, were regular Persian troops, was involved too. Even if the battle was no more than a skirmish (though sources speak of several thousand combatants), it showed the Arabs that the Persians were not as invincible as had been supposed. Caetani points out that it was not mere coincidence that several years later, the same Bakr b. Wā'il tribe, led by al-Muthannā b. Harithā, took the initiative in making the first incursions into 'Irāq; it was henceforth well aware of the Persian weakness when faced with an Arab coalition. The cause of the conflict is attributable to the imprisonment of the last Lakhmid leader al-Nu'mān b. al-Mundhir, by Khusraw Parvez. From then it is possible to reconstruct the train of events: the Sasanids made an error of judgement in replacing the Lakhmid monarchy by a system of direct government. The Bakr b. Wā'il were either incited by al-Nu'mān's imprisonment followed shortly by his death, or else suddenly freed from their fear of this guardian of frontiers, they devoted themselves to plundering, and the Sasanids resolved to punish them. His troops, however, were defeated and pursued as far as Sawad, and through a combination of circumstances the expected reprisal did not ensue. The date of the battle can be put between A.D. 604 and 611. Muhammad was overjoyed at the news of this victory. A famous *hadīth* bears witness to the great importance the Prophet and the Arabs attached to this military success. The Prophet is recorded to have said, "It is the first time that the Arabs have got the upper hand of the Persians, and it is through me that God has helped them."[16]

15. See Yāqūt, iv. 10. *Mu'jam al-Budān*, ed. F. Wustenfeld (Leipzig, 1866, 73).
16. See L. Veccia Vaglieri's article on Dhū Qar in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* edited

Another event narrated by Ibn Ishaq also shows the Prophet's concern about the Arabs gaining victory over the Persians. When some leaders of the Quraysh approached Abū Tālib, his uncle, to ask him to persuade the Prophet to desist from preaching the new religion, Abū Tālib called the Prophet. Says Ibn Ishaq, "When he came Abū Tālib said, 'Nephew, these notables have come to you that they may give you something and to take something from you.' 'Yes,' he answered, 'you may give me one word by which you can rule the Arabs and subject the Persians to you.' "[17]

This incident and the Prophet's remarks on the Arabs gaining the upper hand in the fight against the Sasanids clearly shows that he, aware as he was of the Arabs' strategic situation in international commerce, wanted them to emerge as a unified power capable of standing by themselves and looking after their own security. The Prophet wanted to organize a security system for the Arabs in order to enable them to carry on their trade. Prof. Mohammad Habib also concurs with this view:

> Maulana Shiblī, the greatest biographer of the Prophet in our country, does not estimate the Prophet primarily as 'a man of affairs' on the ground that he was essentially a spiritual and moral teacher. This is correct and no biography of the Prophet, however brief, can ignore a reference to his religious teachings. Still, from the viewpoint of the growth of political institutions, the main work of the Prophet was the establishment of a *security system* for the whole of Arabia, except the regions subordinate to Byzantium and Persia. It was the rock on which his successors built.[18] [Italics mine]

Thus it is clear that Muhammad was deeply preoccupied with his project and it is quite probable that at the initial stages of his movement he thought of working out a compromise with the pagan Arabs to achieve this unity. But it appears that as soon as it dawned on him that the consequences of any such compromise would militate against the very fundamental concept of his movement, he withdrew it, ascribing the interjection of the verse to the Devil. Muhammad did succeed in establishing unity among the Arabs but he did it on his own grounds without compromising with the oligopolists of Mecca.

by B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht, p. 241.

17. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, pp. 191.
18. Mohammad Habīb and Khaliq Ahmad Nizāmi, *A Comprehensive History of India*, Vol. V (*The Delhi Sultanate*). (People's Publishing House, 1970).

To achieve this, he had to migrate from Mecca to Medina (a place 300 miles north of it) and take recourse to certain measures which amounted to throttling the economy of Mecca, coupled with other diplomatic moves and the threat of armed invasion. At this, Mecca surrendered.

Coming back to our point, it is obvious from all available sources that in Mecca there were none of the usual organs of state such as an executive, a judiciary, or a legislature (the *mala'a* was only a deliberative body which could neither legislate nor execute). And, of course, the question of a bureaucracy and a standing army did not arise. Since international trade was pursued in spite of enormous hazards and the difficulties of transporting goods, it can be assumed that this trade brought sumptuous profits. But no revenue records are available, as there was no taxation system in the absence of a state machinery; in spite of revenues from this trade, the Meccan society had not developed organs of state and repressive machinery. That does not mean, however, that it (i.e., the institution of the state) was not desired by that society. It was, very much; and despite powerful tribal institutions, a tendency in that direction had emerged. But an eminent thinker, organizer and man of action of the calibre of the Prophet Muhammad was required to give that society what was needed for its onward march. New forces that were emerging in that society needed to be institutionalized to give it a push forward. Without intra- and inter-tribal unity, a conscripted regular army, and a state machinery to direct the society, how could the Arabs, emerging from a relatively backward and primitive area, have conquered vast areas further north and shaken the two mightiest empires of the world?

Thus the human role—though the human being plays his role in and is guided and spurred by, particular historical circumstances and the conjunction of certain material and spiritual forces—cannot be minimized in history, and it can be said without fear of contradiction that in the prevalent Arabian society Muhammad played a very decisive role by fulfilling that society's much felt desideratum. "Ideas," says Montgomery Watt in his book *Muhammad*, "especially religious ones, have an important part to play in the adjustment of a social system to a change in the material environment. As stated above, the immediate result of material change is social maladjustment, and this involves dissatisfaction and discontent in the members of the society. These, however, are negative, in that they are movements away from something. They do not become effective movements until they have a positively conceived goal, and this, if it

is to be consciously accepted by many members of the society, must be expressed in ideas."[19] And to a student of Islam, there is no doubt that Muhammad expressed these ideas very forcefully and effectively through religious and spiritual channels.

In order to understand the origin of Islam, we must try to understand the basic problems of the Meccan society. In the absence of a state machinery the only way of maintaining law and order in the society was to depend on the co-operation of tribes to enforce the *mala'ā's* unanimous decisions. However, the predicament was that owing to the economic transformation from a pastoral to a commercial economy, the tribal system was falling apart. The commercial operations cut across tribal boundaries and inter-tribal corporations had been formed. The profits earned from these commercial ventures were distributed not among the tribes but among those enterprising individuals who undertook these ventures with all the attendant risks and profit motivations. Thus a few individuals were growing rich, whereas others of the same tribe experienced economic hardship and even indigence. These individuals were not prepared to share their riches with the other members of their tribes as tribal ethics required. This led to a great deal of discontent among the weaker sections of the tribes as also among those tribes which remained wholly outside the ambit of these profitable ventures or at best could manage only to remain on the periphery. Thus, to a limited extent, class solidarity was replacing tribal solidarity. As powerful merchants formed inter-tribal corporations, the deprived individuals also tried to form their own associations cutting across tribal boundaries. One such association was called Hilf al-Fudūl. "Az-Zubair," says Muhammad Hamidullah, "the eldest uncle and head of the family of the Prophet, took the initiative of convening a public meeting, in the house of a venerated old rich man, 'Abdullah ibn Jud'ān, where it was decided to found an Order of Chivalry, the famous Hilf al-Fudūl, whose members swore to come to the help of any and every person oppressed in the town. The young Muhammad also participated enthusiastically in the ceremony of oath taking. Later, when he was recognised by the country as a Messenger of God, he still used to say: 'I have attended the meeting to inaugurate Hilf al-Fudūl; I am not prepared to forego this (honour) even against a whole herd of red camels, and even today if anybody calls me for help in the name of this order, I shall run to his help.' The tribes of Hāshim, Muttalib, Zuhra and Talim had parti-

19. Watt, op. cit., pp. 45-6.

cipated in this alliance for charity."[20] W. Montgomery Watt gives a slightly different version of the purpose of this association.

> They formed an alliance of clans which we may call the League of the Virtuous, though other explanations of the name are given. Muhammad was present at the meeting at which the League was formed, and even in later life approved of it. It aimed at upholding commercial integrity, but beyond this it was probably interested in preventing the exclusion of Yemenite merchants from the Meccan market, and the clans which formed it seem to have been those which were themselves incapable of sending caravans to the Yemen, or which had specialised in trade between Mecca and Syria.[21]

However, despite this slight difference in explaining the need for the formation of Hilf al-Fudūl, one thing is clear: that it was meant to do justice whether to the weak or oppressed or to those tribes or individuals who could not stand up to the high and mighty in society. Even if what Montgomery Watt says is true, it is obvious that those tribes or individuals who could not undertake big, commercial ventures had, in order to protect their own interest, to form such an alliance. These traders may have been middle level traders who, by forming this League, sought to protect their interests against the onslaught of monopoly businessmen in the society, or if what Hamidullah says is true, it goes to indicate that in Meccan society, there were a number of individuals who were highly discontented and needed some sort of association to protect their material interests. It also shows that the Prophet, even in his youth, was concerned with doing something about the social malaise in Meccan society. Though the clan of Banū Hāshim, which was actively involved in this association, enjoyed high status in the tribal hierarchical scale, it was economically backward and was thus fast losing its earlier importance. It must have, naturally, resented this change. The conclusion of Hilf, Ibn Hishām tells us, which in some cases altered the natural tribal relationships, or extended the duties which were connected with the natural tribal community to groups which had originally been strange to one another, took place in a very solemn manner. Solemn oaths, accompanied by traditional ceremonies, were designed to help, through the memory of the forms and circumstances of the alliance, in keeping the obligations contracted by it from being broken. The

20. Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasulullah* (Paris, 1974), p. 7.
21. W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad—Prophet and Statesman* (London, 1961), p. 9.

recorded ceremonies on such occasions are reminiscent in general of the usual forms which are observed when making oaths and which have been related also in regard to other semi-primitive peoples. All this was to ensure the solidarity of the members of the assocation against the challenges of the monopolists of Mecca who had formed an organization called the Aḥlāf.

Owing to the growth of commerce in Mecca there was a marked tendency towards individualism which militated against the collective form of life in a tribal society. Everyone acted in his or her own interest rather than the collective interest of the tribe to which he or she belonged. Again, though the public order depended on the clan system (the decisions arrived at by the *mala'ā* could be effective only when the concerned clans or tribes took it on themselves to enforce them), yet in general a single family, even an individual with his dependants, could constitute a viable unit. So we frequently find men acting in opposition to their clans. Abū Lahab adopted a different attitude towards Muhammad from the rest of the Hāshim. Muhammad's earliest followers became Muslims despite the disapproval of their clans, and even of their parents. Business partnerships, it is important to note, seem sometimes to have cut across clan relationships. There were business partnerships between two or more individuals as well as larger corporations. Even women had individual rights to property. It is well known that Khadija, whom the Prophet later married, was a rich businesswoman who used to finance business caravans, thus earning a handsome profit. She found Muhammad an honest man and entrusted her business to him. The Koran also emphasizes individualism again and again. It holds individuals and not tribes or clans responsible for personal action. In tribal society before the emergence of Islam, tribes and not individuals were held responsible for acts of omission or commission of any person. For any murder committed by a person, his clan or tribe used to be held responsible. The Koran clearly says: "No soul shall bear another's burden. If a laden soul cries out for help, not even a near relation shall share its burden."[22] Thus it is clear that in Mecca, when Muhammad started preaching his new faith, individualism, as opposed to tribal collectivism, had emerged and was causing conflict in the society. The Koran clearly says in its early Meccan *sūras* that every individual has full responsibility for what he does, and none other, not even close relatives, can share it. This kind of individual responsibility was totally opposed to the concept of collective tribal responsibility. The Koran

22. The Koran, Chapter 35, Verse 18.

was not trying to break tribal morality, but was only emphasizing what had already emerged as a social phenomenon from which there was no return, as a return would turn back the wheel of history. In this sense Islam was consolidating the progressive trends in the existing Meccan society.

However, the new emerging faith had to contend with the tensions created as result of the break-up of tribal morality. How could this be done? Obviously there was no question of going back to tribal collectivism, as it would have shattered the commercial structure and created fresh tensions difficult to contend with. Nor did Muhammad contemplate, like Buddha in an analogous situation in the 6th century B.C. India,[23] an ascetic approach based on renunciation and mortification of desire in order to escape from the arena of conflict that society becomes during such historical transition from one form of economy to another. Muhammad instead—and here lies the revolutionary nature of his faith—upheld the new progressive change in the society while, to remove the tensions caused by the new change, he picked those values of tribal society which, without coming into conflict with the historical change, struck a balance between individualism and collectivism. Thus, in the Meccan *sūras*, which are terse and forceful, he exhorts the Meccan rich to take care of the poor, the indigent and needy, and orphans and widows.

There was also a large body of craftsmen who were needed by the prosperous merchants. The poor of the tribes and slaves (mostly of foreign origin) were subjected to new and untold economic hardships and nursed a sense of grievance against the dominating tribes. H.A.R. Gibb says, "But there was a darker side to the prosperity of Mecca. It displayed the familiar evils of a wealthy commercial society, extremes of wealth and poverty, an underworld of slaves and hirelings, and social class-barriers. It is clear from Muhammad's fervent denunciations of social injustice and fraud that this was one of the deep inner causes of his unsettlement. But the ferment within him did not break out in the preaching of social revolution; it was thrust instead into a religious channel and issued in a deep and unshakable conviction that he was called by God to proclaim to his fellow-citizens the old warning of the Semitic prophets: 'Repent, for the judgement of God is at hand'."[24] There are numerous verses in the Koran in which the

23. See *Buddhism—The Marxist Approach* (People's Publishing House, Bombay, 1970), especially the essays contributed by Debiprosad Chattopadhyaya and Rahul Sankrityayan.
24. Gibb, op. cit., p. 17.

evils of riches have been denounced. "Let no misers who hoard the gifts of Allah think that their avarice is good for them; it is nothing but evil. The riches which they have piled shall become their fetters on the Day of Resurrection. It is Allah who will inherit the heavens and the earth. He is cognizant of all your actions."[25] Again in another verse Allah warns, "As for the unbelievers, neither their riches nor their children shall in the least protect them from His scourge. They are the heirs of Hell, and there they shall remain forever. The wealth they spend in this world is like a freezing wind that smites the cornfields of men who have wronged themselves, laying them waste. Allah is not unjust to them; they are unjust to their own souls."[26]

The above verse also indicates that the rich merchants of Mecca had grown too arrogant and they considered wealth, material comforts and their children as an ultimate end of life. It was a sort of hedonistic approach to life, without caring much about the less fortunate ones in society or the creative spiritual side of life. As already pointed out, they were not particularly attached to their ancestral pagan religion, and therefore their riches turned their heads. Muhammad, therefore, felt it necessary to restore balance in their lives by emphasizing the spiritual side. But of course, he did it in keeping with the demands of the new situation, not by negating it. On the one hand Muhammad enjoins upon his followers to engage themselves in trade in the Koran: "Believers, do not consume your wealth among yourselves in vanity, but rather trade with it with mutual consent"; on the other, he praises those who do not involve themselves in trade and profit so much as to forget God: "In the morning and evening His praise is sung by man whom neither trade nor profit can divert from remembering Him."[27] The verse quoted above, on engaging in trade rather than wasting wealth in vanity, indicates that in the society then, there were still vestiges of the tribal way of life. As already pointed out in the first chapter, generosity was considered one of the important virtues of Bedouin society, and sometimes it used to be stretched to its extremes as is obvious from the story of Hātim Tai (see Chapter 2) who slaughtered all his camels just to earn praise for his tribe from the poets who were his guests. Naturally, such practices militated against the requirements of a mercantile society which needed precious capital for investment. The German sociologist Max Weber emphasized the virtues of hard

25. The Koran, translated by N.J. Dawood (London, 1970), 'The Imrans', p. 412.
26. ibid. p. 406.
27. The Koran, Chapter 24, Verse 37.

work and saving advocated by the Protestant religion as it originated at the beginning of the industrial revolution in Europe. Weber tried to establish the proposition that the behaviour of man in various societies is intelligible only in the context of their general conception of existence; but religious dogmas and their interpretation are an integral part of the world views that render the behaviour of individuals and groups, including their economic behaviour, intelligible. But he also maintained—this is rather contradictory to his first proposition—that religious conceptions are actually a determinant of economic behaviour and consequently one of the causes of economic change.[28]

It is also interesting to note that Max Weber has attempted a nearly correct analysis of the Islamic society in Mecca. According to him, "The chivalrous warrior class, peasants, business classes and intellectuals with literary education have naturally pursued different religious tendencies.... The contrast between warrior and peasant classes, and intellectual and business classes, is of special importance. Of these groups, the intellectuals have always been the exponents of a rationalism which in their case has been relatively theoretical. The business classes (merchants and artisans) have been at least possible exponents of rationalism of a more practical sort. Rationalism of either kind has borne very different stamps, but has always exerted an influence upon the religious attitude."[29] A careful study of the Koran makes it abundantly clear that its whole emphasis is on this practical sort of rationalism. Again and again it talks of mastering nature for mankind's benefit. "Whatever is in the heavens and on earth has been subjugated to you" declares the Koran (*Sakkharā lakum ma fis samāwāte wal ard*). Quoting examples from nature, the Koran again and again asks: Don't you think over them? Don't you comprehend them? "Do you not see," it says, "how Allah sends down water from the sky which penetrates the earth and gathers in springs beneath? He brings forth plants of every kind. They wither, then turn yellow, and then He crumbles them to dust. Surely in this there is an admonition for men of understanding."[30] Again, it says, "Surely there are signs in this for true believers."[31] Its practical rationality is obvious when it says: "We have revealed to you the Book with the truth, for the instruction of mankind. He that follows the right path shall follow it

28. Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, Vol. 2, translated from the French by R. Howard and H. Weaver (London, 1970), pp. 217-18.
29. Roland Robertson (ed.) *Sociology of Religion* (London, 1969), p. 33.
30. The Koran, Chapter 39, Verse 21.
31. ibid. Chapter 39, Verse 42.

to his own advantage; and he that goes astray shall do so at his own peril. You are not accountable for them."[32]

Thus the Koran, as pointed out by Max Weber, implies practical rationality as opposed to theoretical, as it is a product of a merchant society. Max Weber further points out, "The tendency towards a practical rationalism in conduct is common to all civic strata; it is conditioned by the makers of their way of life, which is greatly detached from economic bonds to nature. Their whole existence has been based upon the mastery of nature and of man, however primitive the means at their disposal."[33] This is very true in the case of Islam in its early period in Mecca and Medina. Also, as Islam was an urban-based religion, the syndrome of characteristics described by E. Gellen appears to be valid in its case. The syndrome is strict monotheism, puritanism, stress on scriptural revelation and hence on literacy, egalitarianism between believers, and consequently absence of special mediation (which of course on its wordly side would involve hierarchy), minimization of ritual or mystical extravagance; correspondingly, moderation and sobriety and stress on the observance of rules rather than on emotional states. All this is quite true in the case of Islam. As far as Islam was concerned, there is no stress on rituals and emotional states and hence no priestly class is needed. In early Arabian Islam there was no spiritual or mystical extravagance either. (However, this sort of extravagance developed later in the non-Arabian peasant societies of Persia, central Asia, India, etc.) And of course, there was a great deal of emphasis on egalitarianism and also an absence of hierarchy, at least in early Islam. From time to time in Arabian society there have been revolts against the development of a tendency towards hierarchy, and the proliferation of ritual and mystical practices in place of sobriety and moderation, the latest revolt being that of 'Abdal Wahhāb in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam.

Thus one has to keep these characteristics of a mercantile society in mind to correctly understand the origin of Islam in Mecca. The virtues which the Koran upholds are avoidance of wasteful consumption, to be honest in one's dealings, not to indulge in drinking and gambling, to avoid indulging in extra-marital sexual relations, thus preserving the sanctity of the family, to enter into written trade agreements, charity to the poor, etc. These virtues, needless to say, are usually

32. ibid. Chapter 39, "The Hordes', in the translation by N.J. Dawood, (Penguin, 1966) p. 277.
33. Robertson, op. cit., p. 38.

found among the trading communities, and amount to a middle way between asceticism and abstinence from wasteful indulgence. Such a path was historically necessary for Meccan society to aid and abet the growth of mercantile capitalism. Vulgar displays of wealth would waste precious resources, whereas total abstinence or ascetism would make the whole exercise of trading a meaningless activity, and therefore, striking the balance between the two was the only guarantee of the proper growth of commerce. Muhammad's genius lay in exactly emphasizing this balance, and by and large such a morality was acceptable to the general mass of the people, as it best suited the society's need. Moreover, it helped in lessening the tension in the society. As already indicated above, there was a large section of the poor and downtrodden, simmering with discontent, in Mecca. Muhammad was greatly disturbed by such a situation and wanted to mitigate the tension in the society. Muhammad's concern for the poor of the society found an outlet in the channel of religion. It is for this reason that the Meccan *sūras* are terse, vigorous and full of intimidation to those who accumulate and hoard, whereas the Medinese *sūras* are, as the situation was quite different there, sober, gentle and legislative (as the Prophet was concerned with the functions of a state in Medina).

To achieve this end, and to save the fabric of the society from being torn asunder, the Prophet laid stress on charity and looking after the poor and the needy, to take care of widows and orphans and not to usurp their rights; to be benevolent towards slaves and liberate them as far as possible; in general to be concerned with the welfare of the weaker sections of society. Such people were automatically taken care of in a tribal society, as, in that society, there was no concept of personal property. However, as already pointed out, the malaise in Meccan society arose owing to the breakup of the traditional tribal society and the development of personal commercial ventures. Moreover, even the close relatives like one's own brothers, uncles, etc., felt deprived, as they did not have any share in the individual's profitable enterprise. Thus Tabari tells us of a dispute between 'Abd al-Muttalib (the Prophet's grandfather) and his uncle Naufal on the question of ancestral property which included a well. Naufal, though comparatively better off, was not prepared to relinquish his right on the well, thus causing some difficulties to 'Abd al-Muttalib.[34] It is known that Abū Jahel, one of the Prophet's uncles, was well-to-do, as he had a trading partnership with some of the rich traders of Mecca.

34. *Tarikh-e-Tabari*, p. 34.

'Abū Tālib, another of the Prophet's uncles, who looked after him after his father's death, was, on the other hand, financially worse off. Muhammad, after his marriage to Khadīja, the rich widow of Mecca, had to lighten Abū Tālib's burden by taking over he responsibility of looking after one of his sons, Alī, and also persuading his youngest uncle al-'Abbās to adopt another. The Koran emphasizes the importance of taking care of one's relatives if they happened to be in difficult circumstances (*silaturrahim*).

The Prophet was deeply distressed by the unease and tension prevailing around him. Perhaps he was aware that these were ominous signs which might lead to a social upheaval. Thus he admonishes the Meccan rich in most of the ninety or so Meccan *sūras*. The Koran says.

> Woe to all back-biting slanderers who amass riches and sedulously hoard them, thinking that their treasures will render them immortal! By no means! They shall be flung to the Destroying Flame. Would that you knew what the Destroying Flame is like! It is Allah's own kindled fire, which will rise up to the hearts of men. It will close upon them from every side, in towering columns.[35]

Similarly in another chapter, it is said:

> Have you thought of him that denies the last judgement? It is he who turns away the orphan and does not urge others to feed the poor. Woe to those who pray but are heedless in their prayer; who make a show of piety and given no alms to the destitute.[36]

Similarly, most of the other Meccan *sūras* also passionately denounce the greed and tendency for accumulation on the part of the Meccan rich. Thus in chapter 104 of the Koran quoted above, it is clearly said that those who amass riches and sedulously hoard them think that their wealth will render them immortal. But alas they are sadly mistaken. So they will be thrown into the Destroying Flame which is Allah's kindled fire. It is interesting to note that the word used in the Koran for the "Destroying Flame" is *hotama*, which, according to al-Munjid, means an intense fire that breaks anything thrown into it to pieces, and according to al-Qāmūs al-'Asrī "to smash, break in

35. The Koran, Chapter 104, 'The Slanderers'
36. ibid. Chapter 107, 'Alms'.

pieces, dash to pieces".[37] Thus it can be inferred that Muhammad, owing to the gross inequalities between the rich and poor and the widening gap between them, had realized that if nothing was done to contain this danger, the society would soon be broken to pieces, smashed up by the developing wrath of people which would spread like fire. Of course, Muhammad, intensely religious as he was, employed a religious idiom to sound the warning, and we have more than one reason to believe that he was sincerely convinced of divine retribution. He had, one can say with certainty, intuitively sensed the coming danger if things were not set right in time. Being an experienced trader himself, he knew well that renunciation on the part of a few individuals would not help. A few persons known as Hanīf had already taken recourse to it but their individual "salvation" could not remove the prevalent evils in the society. Neither did he want to go back to the nomadic way of life which ensured equality materially as well as otherwise within the fold of the tribe, as it would have destroyed the prosperity achieved through commerce and caused more turmoil. Thus the best method of establishing harmony in the society was to make the rich realize that they would have to show generosity to the victims of poverty and indigence in the society.

In order to do that he gave them the concept of *zakāt*. To begin with, it was not a state tax as no state existed at the time. (Had the state existed, it would have taxed the Meccan rich to provide at least skeletal relief measures). In Mecca *zakāt* meant purification of one's wealth by giving away a part of it as charity. *Zakāt*, in the Meccan period, was not at all obligatory. It primarily remained a charity which the Prophet considered necessary to mitigate social tensions. Some of his traditions make this clear. He is reported to have said: "Pay *zakāt* out of your property; this will purify you and will enable you to do your duty by those related to you. Be careful of the rights of the beggar, the neighbour, and the indigent, and do not indulge in extravagance." Also, "a nation that withheld *zakāt* courted dearth and indigence" and "without *zakāt* neither faith nor prayer is acceptable to Allah."[38] It was much later in Medina that *zakāt* became obligatory as a state tax because by then a state had been founded there, as a sort of confederation of all Muslim and non-Muslim tribes. *Zakāt*, in fact, according to Tabari, became obligatory in the eighth year after the migration to Medina, and in the ninth year some

37. See *al-Munjid* (Matba'a al-Kathulika, Beirut, 1956), under the word *'A 'hatama'* and *Qamus al-'Asri* by Elias Antim (Elias Modern Press, Cairo, 1925).
38. Khalifa, 'Abdul Hakim, *Islamic Ideology*, Institute of Islamic Culture, (Lahore, 1961) p. 273

officials were despatched to different parts of Arabia to realize it.[39] By then Mecca had also been conquered, and the newly founded state, though not yet fully developed, had started functioning on a regular basis. Thus it was around the eighth year A.H. that the verse prescribing various uses of *zakāt* was revealed. It says: "Alms shall be used only for the advancement of Allah's cause, for the ransom of captives and debtors, and for distribution among the poor, the destitute, the wayfarers, those that are employed in collecting alms, and those that are converted to the faith."[40] "That is a duty enjoined by Allah. He is wise and all-knowing."[41] What was mere charity in Mecca, became an obligatory tax or "a duty enjoined by Allah" in the words of the Koran. Islam, a few years after the Prophet's entry into Medina, was no longer a conglomeration of a few individuals as in Mecca, but a religion that provided the nascent state with an ideology and guide-lines for discharging its functions.

It is important to note the various uses of *zakāt* listed down by the Koran. Firstly, it says the amount should be used for Allah's cause. This is rather vague and could be interpreted to mean any general expenditure required from time to time as decided by the Prophet who was also the head of the state. Next comes the ransom of captives and debtors. During the encounters with the enemies or in various battles fought against Meccans, a number of persons were captured. This was unprecedented and everybody wondered what to do with them. There was no repressive apparatus of the state as it was only slowly coming into existence. There were no prisons in which to shut them up. Shibli N'omāni, a reputed Islamicist from India, tells us that the Prophet consulted his companions as to what should be done with them.[42] Many of these captives were leading figures from Mecca and closely related to the Muslims. 'Umar counselled that in the matter of Islam there should not be any consideration for relatives, that the captives should be put to death, and that every one of them should put

39. *Tārikh-e-Tabari*, Vol. iv, p. 1722.
40. To me, the rendering by N.J. Dawood of *'Mo'allafatul qulub'* as 'those converted to the faith' is not very apt. A better rendition would be 'those whose hearts are reconciled'. Actually, *mo'allafatul qulub* were those who were till lately enemies of the faithful, but later embraced Islam or entered into amicable agreement with the Muslims. The Prophet, to gain their support and induce them to remain within the fold, made large presents to them. Abdul Fida tells us that out of the spoils of Hunayn, Muhammad gave generously to the chief of Quraysh.
41. The Koran, Chapter 9, Verse 60.
42. See Shiblī N'omānī's *Al-Fārouq*, (Delhi, 1968) pp. 68.9. He has quoted from Ibn Hishām and Tabari.

his own relative to death. However, the Prophet rejected this advice and accepted Abū Bakr's suggestion of ransoming them. The ransom of those who had no relatives or tribe to redeem them could be paid by the state treasury, i.e., from the *zakāt* amount collected. Also, there were those among the Muslims who had incurred debt as they had no other means after migration from Mecca, and did not have the wherewithal to pay back their creditors. It was, therefore, decreed by the Koran that part of the amount should be spent on redeeming such debts. It was necessary to accommodate the requirements of the immigrant Muslims and reduce the tension in society. Hence the Koranic directive to spend part of *zakāt* on debtors.

It was equally necessary to look after the destitute and the poor in the society, as neglect of these weaker sections had engendered tension in Mecca, and Muhammad had to exhort the Meccan rich again and again to spend part of their riches on their welfare. Hence this factor was taken care of in Medina as well, which was not without its share of the poor and destitute. Moreover, Muhammad knew from his experience in Mecca that accumulation of riches in a few hands builds up an explosive situation, and hence, to maintain stability in society, it is necessary to provide for suitable distribution, maybe by way of charity, if not by cutting at the very root of individual property — as the latter measure would hardly have been conducive to the further growth of material means at that stage and hence would not have been acceptable to the society as a whole. Therefore, the Koran makes it obligatory to spend part of *zakāt* on the destitute and poor. The Koran also prescribes that a part of *zakāt* be spent on wayfarers. Now, as we have noted time and again, the economy of Mecca wholly, and that of Medina partly, depended on interational commerce which was carried on through caravans. It was therefore necessary to set apart some funds to provide for the comfort of the wayfarers, as difficulties were often experienced by them — though, of course, Muhammad does not appear to have had a concept of public works in mind. But, probably from his own experience as a trader, he thought it necessary to make some provision in the state budget to look after the interests of the wayfarers.

Further, a part of the *zakāt* fund is also set apart for those employed to collect it. This clearly means the beginning of some sort of state bureaucracy, although it does not necessarily mean a regular corps of officers as yet. However, a beginning in that direction is unmistakable. It was to take quite a few years after the death of Muhammad to develop the institution of the bureaucracy fully. In Muhammad's time the services were more of a voluntary nature, with a sense of

commitment towards the Islamic ideology. The character of the Islamic state in Muhammad's time therefore, was less oppressive or repressive than in the period that followed it. During the Prophet's lifetime there was neither a police force nor an army. The battles against the Meccan Qurayshites or other desert nomads were fought by committed followers and not by professional soldiers. The initial foreign conquests were also made possible by an army constituted of the followers of Islam and not by regularly employed professional soldiers. The army was professionalized much later. A beginning in this direction was made by the second caliph 'Umar who started maintaining a register of those who regularly took part in the expeditions. The institution of a police force—another step in developing the repressive character of the state—was taken still later, probably in the Umayyad period. Tabari, in volume 4 of his history, tells us that " 'Umru bin Sa'eed, when he came to Medina, appointed 'Umru bin Zubayr as the chief of police (*ra'is shaṛta*) as he knew that there was animosity between 'Abd Allah bin Zubayr and 'Umru bin Zubayr (both were in fact brothers). From this point of view Ashdaq sent him (i.e., 'Umru bin Zubayr) to some people in Medina whom he beat up. He mercilessly beat up all those whom he found to be well-wishers of 'Abd Allah bin Zubayr. He lashed some persons forty times, other fifty or sixty times. When 'Umru bin Sa'eed (he was governor of Medina) asked him who would go to confront his brother, he replied that none other than himself could do that job.[43]

Now this event took place after the death of Mu'āwiya who had wrested power from the fourth caliph 'Alī's son Ḥasan. Mu'āwiya was in fact the founder of monarchical and hereditary rule in Islam, who, in order to perpetuate his rule, resorted to repressive measures. In all likelihood it was he who founded the institution of the police, as our sources do not mention any such institution before his time. 'Umar and 'Alī, the second and fourth caliphs respectively, themselves used to go, we are told by the early historians, with a whip in hand to enforce the law, i.e. the Islamic *Shari'a*. They used to lash publicly those found violating the law. Similarly in the provinces, *wālī*, the governor, used to go around personally to enforce law. The functions of *shurta* (the police) were performed, during this period, mainly by the caliph and his companions in the metropolis and by the governor and his companions in the provincial capitals, on a voluntary basis. We will discuss this further while dealing with the growth

43. *Tārikh-e-Tabari*, Vol. iv, p. 182.

of bureaucracy in the early period of Islam. In the first thirty years of the caliphate we do not come across any description of a police force in available sources, although a number of other administrative and governmental offices have been mentioned. On the contrary we find that either the caliph himself or the provincial governors inflicted physical punishments, such as whipping.

The last item of expenditure from the *zakāt* fund as mentioned in the Koran is on those who are converted to the faith. In the Islamic jargon this has been termed as *moa'lla-fatul qulūb*, i.e., those whose hearts are reconciled. As it very often happens in the case of any organized ideological movement, there were a number of people in Mecca and Medina who could be induced to join Islam for a consideration. It was necessary to induce them to do so, to neutralize them or, in some cases, to win over their active support. Thus we see that *zakāt*, which, in the early period of Mecca when the Islamic movement was in its embryonic stage and had not crystallized into an established custom, and was nothing more than a charitable or purifying act, was now transformed into an obligatory levy that had to be spent for definite state functions, in the Medinese period, when Islam developed an establishment.

As we have said earlier, the Islamic movement, to begin with, represented the aspirations of the weaker and suppressed sections of society. It would, therefore, be quite interesting to examine who its early supporters were. An Egyptian writer, 'Abd al-Muta'al as-Sa'idī, has carried out research into this, and points out that the newly founded Islam was essentially a movement of young men.[44] The great majority of those whose ages have been recorded were below forty at the time of migration (*Hijra*). These persons were converted at least eight to ten years before it. Though Muhammad's exhortations to the rich, not to hoard or be arrogant about their wealth, appealed to the downtrodden and the slaves and orphans, etc., his supporters did not come from this latter class only. They were not all down-and-outs, or the scum of the population with no strong tribal affiliations. In fact many of them belonged to the leading tribes. Just as in our time, the middle class intelligentsia, conscious of social and political processes, but nursing a sense of deprivation, plays an important role in social transformation, so did it happen with the followers of Muhammad, who also belonged to the middle stratum of Meccan society, which had developed, to a fairly good degree, antagonistic class relations.

Montgomery Watt too has attempted to explore the motives of

44. Abd al-Muta' al as-Saidī, *Shabāb al-Quraysh* (Cairo, 1947).

various groups from amongst whom the Prophet drew his following: Firstly, there were several men, mostly young, who were close relatives of the leading men of the most influential clans. These men were perhaps attracted to Muhammad and his anti-monopolistic policy because, though close to the richest monopolists, they were excluded from the most profitable enterprises. Or else, they were not satisfied with the pattern of life under these monopolists. Piling up riches was perhaps meaningless for them.

Secondly, there were men from the other clans and families of Mecca, such as the clans in the Confederation of the Fudūl. These men also were mostly young, but there were a few senior men from the weakest class. In the case of this group, it would seem that impoverishment, whether absolute or only relative, was the main reason for their attraction to Muhammad. (It is estimated that about a hundred, or the majority of them, belonged to this group).

Thirdly, a comparatively small number of Muhammad's followers at Mecca are described as weak. This probably means not so much that they were poor (for some may even have been moderately prosperous), but they had no effective protection. They were strangers in Mecca, not members of the tribe of Quraysh.[45] We will further see that the problem of the non-Arab population, specially in Kūfa, caused a great deal of tension in early Islamic society, and even brought about the downfall of the Umayyad dynasty. Though from the available sources it is difficult to estimate the exact numbers of the non-Arab population at the time the Islamic movement was launched, it can be said with some degree of certainty that their number was not insignificant. The Prophet wanted to win over their support and put them on an equal footing with the Arabs. The Koran also therefore declared that "The most honoured one unto God from amongst you is the one who is the most fearful of God." The distinction of Arab and non-Arab was thus disregarded. This was very necessary in order to mitigate tension in the society. However, it is also important to note that despite Islam's emphasis on equality between man and man regardless of his nationality, the distinction between Arabs and non-Arabs could not just be wished away, and continued to throw up many problems. The *Shu'ūbiyya* movement was, as is well known, a manifestation of this tendency. This movement created certain imbalances in the society that were not easy to correct.

Montgomery Watt, a little later in the same book, quoting Ibn

45. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and the Integration of Society* (London, 1966), p. 12.

Hishām[46] regarding four men who agreed to abstain from the pagan sacrifices at Mecca and seek the pure religion of Abraham, raises the question as to why Arabia did not become Christian or Jewish rather than Muslim. "The answer," Watt says, "appears to be that both Christianity and Judaism would have led to political involvements which were distasteful to many influential Arabs. Christianity was primarily, from the standpoint of the Arabs, the religion of the Byzantine empire and Abyssinia, while Judaism had close association with the Persian empire."[47] Whereas, what Watt says is true, he does not fully explain the Arabs' aversion to these Semitic religions which were associated with foreign countries in the Arab mind. He leaves off by saying that it would have meant involvement with the politics of those empires. It would be interesting and relevant, too, to delve deeper into this, as it also throws light on the origin of Islam.

In order to do so, we will have to examine the international situation at that time and also throw some light on the nature of the Christian faith. Let us first try to understand the nature of Christianity. It was the official religion of the Byzantine empire— one of the most important powers Islam had to reckon with. Christianity, which subsequently became the religion of the Roman empire, was, to begin with, a religion of those who were brutally oppressed and mercilessly exploited by the tyrannical rule of the Roman emperors. As Engels[48] rightly points out, "Religions are founded by people who feel a need for religion themselves and have a feeling for the religious needs of the masses." (This applies to the Islamic movement as well, as we shall see.) Of all the people in the Roman provinces, the lot of poor freemen, and slaves who themselves were once freemen or sons of freemen, was the worst. The situation for them was hopeless. They saw no possibility of rescuing themselves from the iron clutches of the Roman tyrants. For them the flight from the disheartening external world into the internal world was inevitable. Among them the hatred for their condition of life was very strong. Thus it was in the midst of this general economic, political, intellectual and moral degeneration that Christianity appeared on the scene. It provided solace to the discordant and dispirited humanity in the subjugated Roman province. Christianity did not spark off revolt against the Roman tyrants; instead, it attempted to provide solace against the unbearable external conditions—balm for the injured souls. In time

46. Ibn Hishām, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Gottingen, 1859-60), 143 ff.
47. Watt, op. cit., pp. 13-14.
48. Marx and Engels, chapter on 'Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity' in *On Religion*, p. 197.

to come, it evolved its syncretic dogmas based on Oriental religious ideas, Greek rationalism and the Stoic doctrines.

Here it will once again be interesting to quote Engels. In "Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity" he says, "One cannot get an idea of what Christianity looked like in its early form by reading the so-called Book of Revelation of John. Wild, confused fanaticism, only the beginning of dogmas, only the mortification of the flesh of the so-called Christian morals, but on the other hand a multitude of visions and prophecies. The development of the dogmas and moral doctrines belongs to a later period, in which the Gospels and the so-called Epistles of the Apostles were written. In this—at least as regards morals—the philosophy of the Stoics, of Seneca in particular, was unceremoniously made use of. Bauer proved that the Epistles often copy the latter word for word; in fact, even the faithful noticed this, but they maintained that Seneca had copied from the New Testament, though it had not yet been written in his time."[49]

In its syncretic form, Christianity became palatable to Rome itself, against whom it was originally intended to protest. The Emperor Constantine saw in the adoption of this religion the best means of exalting himself to the position of an autocrat of the Roman world. A religious challenge was thus conveniently blunted by the Roman emperor by incorporating it in his imperial system. It totally failed as a challenge to the Hellenic domination of the east. Islam, on the contrary, was the religion of the dominant and powerful mercantile bourgeoisie of Mecca.* The Meccan merchants had their own ambitions and wanted to steer clear of both the major powers, i.e., the Byzantine and the Sasanid empires. Their main objective was to carry on their trade maintaining their independence. They largely succeeded in preserving their independent position, aided no doubt by an impenetrable desert which foreign powers dreaded. Moreover, Byzantium greatly depended on the Meccan merchants for luxury items. "The objects of trade from East to West were Indian and Chinese goods, the products of 'Iraq and Iran, and those of Yaman and Hadramawt. The first included live animals and birds (as curiosities), furs and hides, Kashmir wool, musk, ivory, (mostly from Abyssinia), pearls, mother of pearl, precious and semi-precious stones, lac (red dye), and, most important of all, silk. Among vegetable products were pepper (very important), ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, spikenard, nutmeg, indigo, a little cotton, and precious wood (ebony,

49. ibid. p. 198.

* See note at the end of the book, p. 198.

rosewood, sandalwood). All these were high-priced luxury articles which would carry heavy transport charges and tariffs.[50]

The traders of Mecca were quite conscious of their important role, and there was an undercurrent of an ideology which, to satisfy the aspirations of these merchants, could create an effective system of security in which to carry on the trade peacefully. Thus, unlike Christianity, their ideology could not have been an ideology of the suppressed people helping them to find solace from the unbearable conditions of life. Quite naturally, therefore, whereas Christianity as a reaction against Hellenism failed, Islam proved successful. Prof. Toynbee, the renowned historian, very aptly remarks, "Again, the intrusion of Hellenism upon the Syriac world in the train of Alexander the Great presented a standing challenge to the Syriac society. Was it, or was it not, to rise up against the intrusive civilisation and cast it out? Confronted with this challenge, the Syrian society made a number of attempts to respond and these attempts all had one common feature. In every instance the antihellenic reaction took a religious movement for its vehicle. Nevertheless there was a fundamental difference between the first four of those reactions and the last one. *The Zoroastrian, the Jewish, the Nestorian and the Monophysite reactions were failures; the Islamic reaction was a success.*"[51] [Italics mine]. He further says, "the emperor Heraclitus himself was condemned not to taste of death until he had seen 'Umar the Successor of Muhammad the Prophet coming into his kingdom, to undo, utterly and for ever, the work of all the Hellenisers of Syriac domains from Alexander onwards. For Islam succeeded where its predecessors had failed. It completed the eviction of Hellenism from the Syriac world. It reintegrated, in the Arab Caliphate, the Syriac Universal State which Alexander had ruthlessly cut short, before its mission had been fulfilled, when he overthrew the Persian Achaemenidae. Finally, Islam endowed the Syriac Society, at last, with an indigenous universal church and thereby enabled it, after centuries of suspended animation, to give up the ghost in the assurance that it would not now pass away without leaving offspring, for the Islamic Church became the chrysalis out of which the new Arabic and Iranic civilizations were in due course to emerge."[52]

Prof. Toynbee makes these statements with penetrating insight but fails to give, or refrains from giving, reasons for this unprecedented

50. D.S. Richards, *Islam and the Trade of Asia* (London, 1970), p. 4.
51. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. 1, abridged by D.C. Somerwell (London, 1946), p. 174.
52. ibid. p. 175.

revolution. He is content to look at the phenomenon but does not go beyond it and analyse the material factors behind it. Montgomery Watt too, as we have seen, did not go much deeper although he professedly set out to discover the social and economic factors. Let us, therefore, try and discover those factors which brought about this revolution.

As already explained, Christianity—though a religious protestant movement of the oppressed of the Roman eastern province—was, in times to come, itself hellenized with the admixture of Greek rationalism, doctrines of Stoic philosophy and native eastern nomadic or pastoral cults. In this form, it was embraced by the Roman emperor Constantine himself, in order to pacify the brewing discontent among the vast multitudes of slaves to whom this religion tremendously appealed. Christianity, from now onwards, came to be identified with the oppressive rulers themselves, and lost whatever anti-exploitative sting it had. It could only talk of the "Kingdom of Heaven" due to dawn in a remote future. Here and now there was only suffering for the faithful in order to redeem themselves from the sinful life. Islam, on the contrary, was the ideology of the powerful and ambitous emerging class of traders and warriors for whom the fruits of their endeavour should be realized now, within the framework of historical praxis.†

Moreover, Islam, cutting across tribal bonds as it did , provided a rallying point to all the Arabs—nomads as well as townsmen. Thus Carmichael perceptively remarks in his book *The Shaping of the Arabs*, "Thus it was not Islam that brought about the folk migration, originating for quite independent reasons, that united them under Islam. The expansion of the Muslim Arabs was the culmination of a long drawn-out development. What Islam changed was simply the slogan under which the general fighting was conducted, or rather it gave this general movement a simple slogan capable of drawing all Arabs together in opposition to the great empires, which thus, after mistrusting the small buffer states of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, finally found themselves face to face with a far more numerous confederation of Arabian tribes temporarily unified by the simple tenets of primitive Islam."[53]

It is important to note, in this connection, the role played by the two buffer states of Ghassān and Lakhm in defending the interests of the two empires along whose respective borders they came into existence. About the middle of the third century of our era, Arabia

53. Joel Carmichael, op. cit. pp. 64-5.

† See note at the end of the book, p. 198.

was enclosed on the north and north-east by the rival empires of Rome and Persia, to which the Syrian desert, stretching right across the peninsula, formed a natural termination. In order to protect themselves from the Bedouin raiders, who poured over the frontier provinces, and after laying hands on all the booty within reach, vanished as suddenly as they came, both powers found it necessary to plant a line of garrisons along the edge of the wilderness. In this way, the tribals were held in check, but as force alone seemed an expensive and inefficient remedy it was decided, in accordance with the well-proved maxim, *divide et impera*, to enlist a number of the offending tribes in the imperial service. Regular pay and the prospect of the immediate plunder—for in those days Rome and Persia were almost perpetually at war—were inducements that no true Bedouin could resist. The inhospitable desert of Arabia hardly provided any other worthwhile means of sustenance (except to plunder the rich trade caravans or townspeople living in urban centres). This plunder, known as *ghazwa* (i.e., raid), became institutionalized on account of its sheer economic necessity. Even Muhammad, as is well known, made use of this to bring his recalcitrant enemies to their knees.

His raid on a Meccan caravan returning from Yaman took place in January, A.D. 624. This raid and subsequent ones have been much maligned by the opponents of Muhammad. Some of the western writers, too, have gone to the extent of calling him a mere brigand pretending to be a prophet. They in fact try to understand Muhammad in contrast to the mystical character of Christ, who surrendered himself to the Roman tyrants and sacrificed his life on the cross. Muhammad, it must be carefully understood, was not only a prophet but also a statesman trying to build a state power out of the tribal wilderness in Arabia. He used the strategy of attacking a trade caravan (which was by no means unusual in those days, as explained above) to strike a blow at the Meccan merchants and provide much-needed sustenance from the booty so gained to the Meccan immigrants, as well as to consolidate his position in Medinese society. All these objectives were splendidly achieved by this raid and Muhammad, made his presence felt as a master strategist.

It would be interesting to narrate here the account of one of the raids given by Ibn Ishaq in his Prophet's biography. He says, "The apostle sent 'Abdullah b. Jahash b. Riāb al-Asadī in Rajab on his return from the first Badr. He sent with him eight emigrants, without any of the Ansār. He wrote for him a letter, and ordered him not to look at it until he had journeyed for two days, and to do what he has ordered to do, but not to put pressure on any of his companions...

When 'Abdullah had travelled for two days he opened the letter... and this is what it said: 'When you have read this letter of mine proceed until you reach Nakhla...Lie in wait there for Quraysh and find out for us what they are doing.' He journeyed along the Hijāz...and... went on to Nakhla. A caravan of Quraysh carrying dry raisins and leather and other merchandise of Quraysh passed by them...The raiders took council among themselves, for this was the last day of Rajab...Then they encouraged each other, and decided to kill as many as they could of them and take what they had...'Abdullah and his companions took the caravan and the two prisoners and came to Medina with them...When they came to the postle, he said, 'I did not order you to fight in the sacred month,' and he held the caravan and the two prisoners in suspense and refused to take anything from them...and when there was much talk about it, God sent down to his apostle: 'They will ask you about the sacred month, and war in it. Say, war therein is a serious matter, but keeping people from the way of God and disbelieving in Him, and in the sacred mosque and driving out His people therefrom is more serious with God.' ''[54] This was the beginning of the founding of an Islamic state which culminated in elevating Muhammad to the most pre-eminent position of an unchallenged ruler—something unheard of in the Arabia of his days.

To come back to the international scene: we observed that both the great powers of the day tried to woo some nomadic Bedouin tribes in order to protect the boundaries of their respective empires from their greatly dreaded raids. To penetrate right into the heart of the desert to subjugate the Arabs was beyond their wildest dreams. The method both the empires employed was to support a prince on the borders between the Desert and the Sown and to see that he was strong enough to prevent the nomads from raiding the settled lands. The dynasty of Ghassān, bordering over the Byzantine empire, and receiving support from it, adopted Christianity. But, significantly, they did not adopt orthodox Christianity, which was the religion of the Byzantine rulers. They rather preferred the native variety called Monophysitism. Orthodox Christianity maintained an ambivalent attitude towards Monophysitism, i.e., at times compromising with and at times persecuting the Monophysite heretics. The persecution was scaled upwards if the loyalty of the prince became suspect. Thus religion was inextricably involved with politics and the significance of this was not lost on the shrewd Arabs of Mecca who wanted to maintain their distance from the overlordship of the Byzantine

54. See Ibn Ishaq, op. cit., p. 288.

rulers. The Lakhmid kings were downright enemies of Byzantium and therefore, preferred a form of Christianity which was totally unpalatable to the Orthodox (i.e., Nestorian or East Syrian) Christianity. To assert political supremacy, the Byzantine overlords on the one hand and the Sasanids on the other, persecuted the ruling Arabs of the buffer states and thus created their own enemies. Alfred Guillaume writes: "From the sixth century onwards the history of the Arab west is one long series of persecutions in the name of orthodoxy, culminating in the alienation of the Arabs and the downfall of the Greek empire in Syria. As Monophysites the Arabs steadily refused to accept the doctrine of two natures in Christ. The persecutions which these unhappy people suffered were sometimes worse than their treatment by the Muslims in subsequent years."[55] When in A.D. 563 a famous Arab chief went to see the emperor of Byzantium, he carried a declaration of his faith in a written letter. One sentence in it is characteristic of the Arab defiance and hints at the beginning of Islam. That sentence reads: "The Trinity is one Divinity, one Nature, one Essence; those who will not accept this doctrine are to be anathematized." When two bishops refused to sign the declaration of faith he brought, Hārith replied with ominous words: "Now I know that you are heretics. We and our armies accept this doctrine, as do the orientals." Guillaume comments, "Here plainly is a claim to a native Arab Christianity stripped of the subtle refinements of the Greek theologians, and explicit claim to the right to defend that faith by the sword."[56] Thus we see that Christianity was either unacceptable to the Arabs, or accepted by them in a form different from that of the Byzantine orthodox church. This was the direct result of political confrontation and the pride the Arabs had in their nativity although they were subservient to the Byzantine rulers. Moreover, Christianity, even in its native Monophysite or Nestorian form, could not make much headway except in those areas which were in the sphere of influence of the two great empires. Christianity, with its elaborate rituals, originated in a slave-holding agricultural society and, therefore, had hardly any appeal for the Arabs, for whom freedom was above everything else.

It is clear from the discussion above, why Christianity did not strike root among the Arabs. The main reasons, stated briefly, are: (1) As far as Meccan Arabs were concerned, Christianity was associated with the Roman rulers and, like good merchants, they wanted to steer clear of any involvement with them, and maintain their inde-

55. Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (London, 1969), p. 16.
56. ibid. p. 17.

pendence. Thus, they kept Christianity, too, at a distance. (2) Nomadic Arabs were too anarchic to accept any faith like Christianity with its elaborate rituals, dogmas and doctrines which were more suited to sedentary agricultural people in the north. (3) The Ghassanids and Lakhmids had established buffer states on the borders of the Roman and Sasanid empires respectively, and, for political reasons adopted Christianity; but the form of Christianity differed from that of their imperial overlords, as that was the only way they could assert their national pride and resentment against the imperial overlordship. (4) The Arabs in general were too proud of their race to surrender easily to any foreign ideology, however well established it may have been. They were far more inclined to accept their own native faith and Islam provided them with one. This is also proved from the fact that the Ghassanid and Lakhmid rulers after a little initial resistance happily embraced Islam and joined their other Arab brethren in launching attacks on their former masters. The same reasons, more or less, apply to Judaism as well. The Arab mercantile bourgeoisie, it can be deduced from the discussion above, wanted to create its own ideology and its own state apparatus to guarantee the growth of commerce at home as well as abroad. It did not want to be subservient to any other power, as that would mean the hampering of this growth by tariff barriers and other means. Also, Christianity, for the reasons stated above, emphasized renunciation, whereas the Arabs would not accept a negative attitude towards life, as their trade was expanding and their ambition was to conquer further areas north, so as to make their trading zone secure.

The economic transformation, from a pastoral to a commercial economy, which had taken place in Mecca, and the concomitant tribal disintegration necessitated corresponding changes in the superstructure as well. By corresponding changes we do not mean any kind of mechanical correspondence; the human mind has tremendous creative potentialities and synthesizing power. Any exponent of a new ideology is influenced, apart from his immediate *milieu*, by other factors too, including of course his traditional heritage. We are told by the early historians of Islam that a few individuals in Mecca were highly dissatisfied by the state of things there and they had started their quest for the "new truth". They were known as hanīf (pl. hunafā). These hunafā were also, we are told, attracted by the idea of the unity of God. Perhaps the tribal division of society was generating problems in the new situation and the need for unity in society was, on the cognitive and conscious level, expressing itself in the form of unity of godhood.** At last, this quest for the new truth reached its

** See note at the end of the book, p. 198.

culmination in the form of Islam. The cardinal principle of Islam is the unity of God. This was the cardinal need of the society as well. Historically speaking (though its expression may have been through a religious channel), unity of godhood was as necessary for Meccan society as the nation states were for the industrial society emerging out of the feudal age in medieval Europe. Muhammad's genius lay in giving it the most cohesive and forceful expression. Along with the economic transformation, cultural changes become inevitable. In a tribal society, culture, like economy, would usually be found in a primitive shape. As the basic structure changed from the tribal to the commercial form of economy, a need was acutely felt for changes in the cultural and ideological superstructure.

Till Islam appeared on the scene, primitive tribal laws had been followed in the economic, social or moral field. In the absence of any written laws, tribal conventions guided the people. Islam, which emerged on the scene after Mecca had undergone economic transformation, provided that society with written and codified laws in different spheres, social as well as economic. It even gave it a criminal code which, in many respects, bore a resemblance to that of tribal society. But—this is important to note—unlike earlier practice, it did not remain a mere custom of vengeance, but became a criminal law which required that the offence be proved either by circumstantial evidence or by eyewitnesses. It was emphasized in the Koran that trade agreements should be executed in writing. The Koran also laid down elaborate rules for inheritance, divorce, marriage, etc. The fact that the Koran had to tell the Arabs when and how to enter houses shows how culturally backward they were till then. Says the Koran, "Believers, do not enter the dwellings of other men until you have asked their owner's permission and wished them peace. That will be best for you. Perchance you will take heed. If you find no one in them, do not go in till you are given leave. If you are refused permission, it is but right that you should go away. Allah has knowledge of all your actions. It shall be no offence for you to seek shelter in empty dwellings. Allah knows what you hide and what you reveal."[57]

Thus it will be seen from the verse quoted above that the Koran had to attend to even minor details of behaviour. In other words, Islam, apart from providing an ideology and a *weltanschauung* to the Arabs, also fulfilled a civilizing role which was of historical importance. The freer sexual behaviour which was a legacy of tribal

57. The Koran, Chapter 24, Verses 27-29.

culture was also sought to be restrained, and women were told how to dress so as to preserve their modesty. We shall deal with some of these aspects in the next chapter, as the detailed laws regarding them were revealed in the Medinese *sūras* (chapters). Here we shall deal with only those problems and aspects attacked in the Meccan period. One of the aspects of Meccan life which had, in its own way, contributed to the malaise of Meccan society was that of slavery. These slaves, it should be borne in mind, were almost all of foreign origin, though of course, some may have been Arabs belonging to lesser or vanquished tribes. It appears from the available records of pre-Islamic Meccan society that these slaves were not treated well, especially as they belonged to foreign lands. The unrest among the slaves was also disturbing the peace and it was necessary to improve their lot as best as it could be done in the historical circumstances then prevailing. It is a significant fact that among the earliest followers of Islam, there were some slaves of foreign origin, among whom was Bilal, who was in the personal service of Muhammad. He was given the honour of calling people to prayer by repeating a fixed formula.

Here, the important question is: how necessary was the system of slavery to the Arabian society of the Prophet's time? How integral was it to the economy of Mecca? The Meccan economy depended on international commerce, and agriculture was almost unknown; so much so that some of the Meccan companions of the Prophet saw agricultural operations for the first time after their migration to Medina. Thus Tabari tells us, quoting 'Ammār b. Yāsir, "In this raid on Dhāt al-'ashīra I and 'Alī were accompanying the Messenger of God (peace be on him) and we encamped at a place. There we saw some people of Bani Madsaj busy doing agricultural work in an oasis. I thereupon told 'Alī, come, let us see how they carry out agricultural operations."[58]

Commercial economy as such does not need slavery, this economic formation being the product of primitive agricultural society as it emerged from the tribal mode of life. In our case Mecca took a direct leap from a tribal to a commercial society without any intervening period of agriculture or feudalism. Even in Medina, where agriculture was possible, cultivable land was collectively owned in most cases. Thus slavery was not the socio-economic formation of Meccan or, for that matter, Medinese society. It was, in all probability, a borrowed institution. The Meccan traders, as of necessity, had constant intercourse with the people of north-east and north-west Arabia, i.e., the peoples of the Sasanid and Roman empires. In the Roman empire

58. *Tarikh-e-Tabari*, Vol. 1, p. 154.

of course, slavery was an ancient institution. We have already seen above the inhuman plight of slaves in the Roman provinces. The institution of slavery, therefore, in all probability, was adopted from these provinces. Thus Philip Hitti also says, "Islam preserved the ancient Semitic institution of slavery, the legality of which the Old Testament admitted, but it appreciably ameliorated the condition of the slave. Canon law forbade the Moslem to enslave his co-religionist, but promised no liberty to an alien slave who adopted Islam. Slaves in early Islam were recruited from prisoners of war, including women and children, unless ransomed, and by purchase and raiding. Soon the slave trade became very brisk and lucrative in all Moslem lands."[59]

Thus we see that slavery was not integral to the economy of Meccan society, but, in all probability, was borrowed from ancient Rome. But it appears to be certain that before the rise of Islam there were a number of slaves of foreign origin in Mecca who were on the bottom rung of society, and that there appears to have been unrest among them. Islam, although it did not abolish slavery, sought to ameliorate the lot of slaves in order to pacify them. The Prophet also encouraged their liberation as a religious duty. He is even reported to have said, "I shall be the respondent on the day of judgement against one who captures and trades a free man." (Bukhāri, *Kitab al-Buyū'*). According to the Koran, the liberation of slaves expiates various sins such as accidental homicide (90:11), breaking of an oath which one does not want to observe (5:89), or revoking a divorce in which one had compared his wife to his own mother (58:3). Also, as already mentioned, the Koran earmarks a portion of the *zakāt* for liberation of the slaves (9:60). Another source of slavery, since ancient days, has been war. But the Koran does not encourage slavery through this source either. It lays down: "When you meet the unbelievers in the battlefield strike off their heads and, when you have laid them low, bind your captives firmly. Then grant them their freedom or take ransom from them, until war shall lay down her armour. Thus shall you do."[60] But in another verse (33:50) the Koran permits the taking of slave girls as war booty. In this verse it is said: "Prophet, we have made lawful to you the wives to whom you have granted dowries and the slave-girls whom Allah has given you as booty....". In order to reconcile the two verses one may have to admit that the direction in 47:4 above is alternative and not exclusive, much less abrogative,

59. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (London 1970), p. 235.
60. The Koran, Chapter 47, Verse 4.

although Ibn Rushd quotes a consensus among the companions of the the Prophet himself had recourse to enslavement not only in the case of Banū' l-Mustaliq in the year 5 A.H.,[62] and of Hawāzin in 8 A.H.[63] but even in that of the Banū 'Anbar as late as 9 A.H.,[64] although, it is said, all these enslaved persons were liberated later on.

Despite all these instructions in the Koran, slavery continued on a large scale in the Muslim countries till it was finally abolished in our own era. From the Muslim sources we can have an idea of the number of slaves flooding the Muslim empire. Mūsā b. Nusayr took some 300,000 captives from Africa, one fifth of whom he forwarded to al-Walīd,[65] and from the Gothic nobility in Spain he captured 30,000 virgins;[66] Qutayba's captives from Sogdiana alone numbered 100,000; al-Zubayr b. al-'Awwām bequeathed among other chattels one thousand male and female slaves.[67] The famous Meccan poet of love, 'Umar b. Abī-Rabī'a, had more than seventy slaves. Prof. Hitti tells us that "For an Umayyad prince to maintain a retinue of about a thousand slaves was nothing extraordinary. Even the private in the Syrian army at the battle of Siffīn had from one to ten servants waiting on him."[68] Thus we see that mere religious obligation to mitigate slavery did not help much as the objective conditions necessary to abolish or mitigate it did not exist. Of course, Islam had not abolished slavery, but only tried to mitigate it. Even if Islam had done so, as it did in the case of usury, it would have nevertheless, like usury, persisted. Some slaves, either belonging to underprivileged tribes or of foreign origin, caused a great deal of trouble to the establishment after the death of the Prophet. The second caliph 'Umar was assassinated by a slave of Persian origin called Firoz. The cause of the Assassination was as follows: Firoz one day complained to the caliph 'Umar that his master Mughira b. Shu'ba was taxing him heavily, and the tax should be reduced. The caliph inquired how much he was made to pay. The slave replied that he was required to pay two dirhams a day. Whereupon the caliph asked what he did (i.e., his profession). The slave replied, carpentry, smithy, and engraving. 'Umar then said that

61. Ibn Rushd, *Bidāyat al-mujtahid* I 351 ed. Mustafa al-Babi (Cairo)
62. Ibn Hishām, op. cit., p. 729.
63. ibid. pp. 877-8.
64. ibid. p. 983.
65. Ibn al-Athīr, Vol. IV, p. 448.
66. ibid. p. 454.
67. Masūdi, *Murūj al-Dhahab* ed. and tr. by Meyad and Courteille, (Paris, 1864).
68. Hitti, op. cit., p. 235.
Footnotes 62 to 66 above are quotations in Hitti's book.

in that case what he was paying was not too much.[69] Firoz was greatly perturbed by this decision, and the next day, after the morning prayer, he stabbed the caliph 'Umar, who later succumbed to his injuries. It is important to note that the slave was discontented because he was exploited beyond his capacity. This cannot be treated as an isolated case.

There have been other instances, 'Ammār b. Yāsir, who was the son of a slave woman, though moderate by temperament, was in the forefront of the agitation against the third caliph 'Uthmān. 'Ammār b. Yāsir once criticized 'Uthmān for taking more than his share from the state treasury. 'Uthmān lost his head and said, "O son of a slave woman! How dare you speak against me?" 'Ammār then was caught at the instance of 'Uthmān who beat him so much that he became unconscious.[70] Kūfa, as we shall see later, became the storm centre of rebellion, as its population mainly consisted of slaves and others of foreign origin. The famous Zanj revolt during the 'Abbāsid period, which succeeded in shaking the foundations of the empire, was also led by African slaves. All this convincingly shows that despite a religious obligation to treat the slaves well, nothing much changed, and the slaves and other exploited sections of the society had to fight their own battles.

Arab society, owing to the transformation taking place in it from a pastoral to a commercial economy, was aspiring to develop its own ideological superstructure, including its own jurisprudence, to serve its newly developing needs. The Arabs' national pride, and their sense of being subjugated, did not allow them to adopt Christianity or Judaism. Moreover, as we have already seen, these religions, having originated in altogether different circumstances, would not have served their situation. Besides, some of the early verses of the Meccan period show that the merchants of Mecca were aspiring to a society flowing with the proverbial "milk and honey". These verses are an illustration: "He will reward them for their steadfastness with robes of silk and the delights of Pāradise. Reclining there upon soft couches, they shall feel neither the scorching heat nor the biting cold. Trees will spread their shade around them,.and fruits will hang in clusters over them. They shall be served with silver dishes and beakers as large as goblets which they themselves shall measure: and cups brimfull with ginger-flavoured water from the Fount of Selsabil. They

69. Shibli N'omāni, *Al-Farouq*, op.cit., p. 241.
70. Balādhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, p. 48.
†† See note at the end of the book, p. 198.

shall be attended by boys graced with eternal youth who to the beholder's eyes will seem like sprinkled pearls. When you gaze upon that scene you will behold a kingdom blissful and glorious. They shall be arrayed in garments of fine green silk and rich brocade, and adorned with bracelets of silver. Their Lord will give them pure beverage to drink. Thus you shall be rewarded; your high endeavours are gratifying to Allah." [71]

It is obvious from the description in these verses that at least some people of Mecca dreamt of all conceivable luxuries. Was it that the Prophet's imagination wanted to project before the Meccan merchants what they were aspiring for? For such statements are repeated again and again in the Meccan *suras*. In another *sura*, it is said:

> The righteous shall surely dwell in bliss. Reclining upon soft couches they will gaze around them; and in their faces you shall mark the glow of joy. They shall drink of a pure wine, securely sealed, the seal whereof shall be musk and to this let those aspire, who aspire to happiness: and the water mixed therewith shall be of Tasnim, a fountain whereof those shall drink who approach near unto the divine presence. (83: 22 to 28)

In yet another Meccan verse, it is said:

> They shall repose on couches, the linings whereof shall be of thick silk interwoven with gold: and the fruit of the two gardens shall be near at hand together. Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny? Therein shall receive them beauteous damsels, refraining their eyes from beholding any besides their spouses, whom no man shall have deflowered before them, neither any genie, (which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will ye ungratefully deny?) having complexions like rubies and pearls. (Which, therefore, of your Lord's benefits will you ungratefully deny?)... (55: 54 to 59).

Many more similar verses could be quoted from the Koran. It is also significant to note that descriptions of such luxurious ways are most forceful in the Meccan verses. The Medinese verses, on the other hand, though they talk of paradise and its comforts, underplay the emphasis on the varieties and richness of these luxuries. Why this change of emphasis? If we keep the different conditions prevailing in

71. The Koran, Chapter 76, Verses 11-22.

Mecca and Medina in mind, the Prophet was not addressing the rich merchants, as he was in Mecca. There, he was mainly concerned with a determined band of his followers, as well as the Jews. The followers in Medina were faced with scarcity and forced to live an austere life. The Meccan merchants on the other hand, dealt in luxury goods and definitely aspired to all the imaginable comforts of life. They were in close touch with the rulers of the Roman and Sasanid empires, as well as both the buffer states on their respective borders. Not only that, but also, they were supplying those states with luxury goods, such as fine silk, musk, incense, etc. They must have been enjoying these luxuries, with the company and the attendants described so often in the *suras*. Muhammad himself was a trader and used to go north on business trips. He must have seen such luxuries himself, and known the aspirations of fellow-businessmen from Mecca. These verses quoted above appear to project the coming life for the virtuous in paradise; but in fact reflect the aspirations of the Meccan merchants, to whom these verses are addressed, to a cultured life with all its delicacies. The idyllic scene visualized is something that can occur only to someone who has seen an affluent society. Such images would not occur in arid deserts. As we have already seen, the city of Mecca had, in the Prophet's time, extreme riches on the one hand, and extreme poverty on the other. These Koranic verses, therefore, must have soothed the ruffled feelings of the Meccan have-nots as well, by promising them hereafter what they were denied in this life.

After long years of meditation in the cave of Hīra, Muhammad (who after his marriage to the rich widow Khadīja, was sufficiently provided for and had leisure to meditate), came to certain conclusions which, if translated into practice, would completely transform Meccan society. Obviously, he was convinced that all this was revealed to him by the Almighty God through the Archangel Gabriel (could it have been an hallucinatory image?). Muhammad's revelation begins characteristically with the words "Read, in the name of thy Lord, who has created all things; who has created man of congealed blood. Read, by the most beneficent Lord; who taught the use of the pen; who teaches man that which he knows not!" (96: 1 to 5). The importance of these verses can be understood when we note the fact that in Mecca, though international commerce had developed, illiteracy prevailed to such an extent that in the early days of Islam only seventeen men of the tribe of Quraysh could read and write.[72] (Muslims believe that the Prophet himself was *ummī*, i.e., did

72. Al-Wāqidi, cited by Al-Balādhuri, *Futūh al-Buldān*, ed. D. Goeje, pp. 471-2.

not know how to read or write.) The first revelation thus rightly emphasizes the importance of reading and writing. The beneficent Lord teaches the use of the pen! What could be more beneficial then in Meccan society than the use of the pen?

Muhammad, who had seen the progressive society of the north and its civilization, must have felt quite disturbed at the state of affairs in Mecca which, despite the riches earned through trade with the advanced societies of the north, was still stuck in the quagmire of tribal life. Despite intertribal alliances and business corporations, the outlook of the Meccan people continued to be tribal. The Arabs, in contrast to Christianity and Judaism, had no religion of their own, no scripture, no written laws or law-enforcing machinery. All they had was a hotch-potch of tribal cults reinforcing divisive tendencies, and certain age-old tribal traditions which were becoming anachronisms and downright obstacles in the new situation. Muhammad, in the usual manner of great seers and prophets, took to meditation in the cave of Ḥīra. The most important conclusion he reached was the necessity of pulling the Meccan people out of their decadence and putting them on the highway of progress by giving them well codified laws and a proper organizational machinery to serve their new needs. What Muhammad was proposing was not mere tinkering with the old tribal practices, but a thorough-going change. By a simple formula "There are no gods but one God" he set out to achieve complete unity of the faithful, cutting across all tribal bonds.

Thus, after his declaration of the message of God, a new community of the faithful came into being. The faithful who joined the new community did not represent any tribal interest, but were there as individuals. Many had joined this new movement in defiance of the wishes of their elders—a phenomenon unthinkable in a tribal society. The Koran expressly declared that "You do not carry anyone else's burden". The Koran also emphasized the fact that on the day of judgement no one will come to your rescue, not even your closest relative. This was very much in keeping with the tendency for individualism developing because of the economic transformation taking place in the society. The movement, for obvious reasons, remained "underground" for some time. The followers, including Muhammad himself, were persecuted. Those who had tribal protection were harmed less, but those like the slaves or *mawālīs* who could not claim such protection were mercilessly tortured. Thus writes Muhammad Hamidullah:

> Not only the younger members of families and slaves, but also the clients or adopted brothers (maula) were victims of their pagan patrons. 'Ammār ibn Yāsir of Yemenite origin and affiliated to the tribe of Makhzūm (to which Abū Jahel also belonged) is a case. He was so much tortured that he used to lose his senses, and would say anything demanded of him to escape the unbearable persecution. On one such occasion he came weeping to the Prophet and said how he was forced to pronounce blasphemy. The Prophet replied 'No matter, so long as your inner conviction is unchanged.' Pamīkh (alias Sumaiya), the old mother of 'Ammār, could naturally not bear the torture of her son; she once cursed and insulted Abū Jahel, who enraged thrust his lance into the poor lady's abdomen and killed her.[73]

Thus we see that as in any other society, the lesser people like slaves and unprotected foreigners suffered greater persecution. The fact that they bore their hard fate with fortitude and courage and did not abandon Muhammad's cause shows that they had deep conviction. Also, there is no doubt that the new religion wanted to establish social justice, and remove the deeper causes of conflict in the immediate present, unlike other religions such as Christianity which promised to do so in the life hereafter. The emphasis of Islam was on historical praxis, not on passive surrender. This again, was due to the historical and material circumstances of Arabia at that time, as repeatedly explained in this and the earlier chaper. This very Islam—and this very well demonstrates our point of view—when transplanted into the decaying feudal *milieux* of other countries, was transformed into a kind of religion with emphasis on fate, passive surrender, expectation of rewards in the world hereafter, and so on. Its early dynamism and vigour was lost, as in those feudal societies Islam could not play the same historical role as it did in the transformation of Arabian society. Muslim theologians throughout the ages, and some Muslim intellectuals even today, take the ahistorical view that the Muslims lost their vigour and dynamism as they did not abide by the teachings of Islam. They fail to understand that the teachings of Islam in a changed historical context cannot infuse that vigour and dynamism, unless of course they are creatively reinterpreted so as to conform to the new historical context. A few Muslim intellectuals satisfy their conscience by pointing out that Islam enshrines both democracy and socialism.

73. Hamidullah, op. cit. p. 43.

Now let us examine how the Prophet went about remedying the situation in Mecca so as to remove the malaise and establish a just society. First he emphasized unity, i.e., doing away with the tribal bonds. This was absolutely essential, for the society to register further progress. The emphasis on a common nationhood among diverse linguistic, cultural and religious groups in our own time serves to illustrate this well. Of course, the Prophet could not establish such a society in Mecca, owing to powerful opposition. Secondly, Muhammad, in the Meccan period, put complete emphasis on equality between his followers irrespective of their social status or nativity. The slaves too, more or less, enjoyed this status of equality. Of course, in Medina, after the Prophet succeeded in establishing a state, things changed a little, as we shall see. The concept of equality became a powerful magnet for all those who had been slighted in one way or the other by the established interests in Meccan society. Muhammad also advocated the cause of those who, though belonging to the same tribe or clan as well as they did, felt neglected by them. He also emphasized that business deals should be just and free of any deception. One should be quite conscientious in weighing and selling also. The Koran says, "Woe to the unjust who, when others measure for them, exact in full, but when they measure or weigh for others, defraud them! Do such men think that they will not be raised to life upon a fateful day, the day when all mankind will stand before the Lord of Creation?" (83: 1 to 6). This Koranic verse shows that there were dishonest deals and short weighing etc., and as there was no state to take measures against such defrauding, Muhammad had to condemn it as immoral and induce in the defrauders' hearts the fear of the Day of Judgement.

The powerful merchants vehemently opposed Muhammad once they realized fully that the new religion preached by him was not so harmless after all, as it attacked their privileged position in society, giving equal status with them to the slaves (without, of course, completely abolishing slavery), the less talented and less successful fellow tribesmen, and others whom they considered the mere scum of society. Besides, acceptance of Muhammad's new faith would have given him a pre-eminent position above them all as the prophet of God—an idea to which the powerful merchants of Mecca could not reconcile themselves. A question arises here: how is it that the rich merchant class of Mecca rejected Islam, even though it was more in keeping with the new realities of a developing mercantile economy than the old tribal cults which had outlived their utility? The reasons are not far to seek. The most common reason is

resistance to change and fear of the unknown and untried. Also, Muhammad was launching vitriolic attacks on the insatiable greed of the rich and mighty of Mecca. He was not prepared to accord special privileges to them on account of their wealth and power. The very idea of being equated with the lesser people—mere wretches from their viewpoint—was abhorrent to them, owing to their class prejudice. (It is a well-known fact that real material equality could not be established in any Islamic society and therefore, the concept of equality remained operative only in the religious/spiritual domain, as in the case of congregational prayer, in which all stand in one line irrespective of their social status, whether king or slave, rich or poor, etc. However, in real life, class distinctions in Islamic societies remained as strong as in any other society. Real equality cannot be achieved without the social ownership of the means of production, and this put a natural limit to the concept of equality in Islam). Muhammad had sensed the discontent below the surface, which was assuming alarming proportions and could have soon led to an explosive situation. The Prophet wanted to avert such a situation by establishing a just society, and by making radical changes in favour of the oppressed. This demanded some sacrifice from the rich merchants of Mecca and also hit their economic interests as then they could not resort to brazen exploitation. Only a farsighted few could grasp the long term advantages of such a course. The Meccan merchants (as it usually happens anywhere) failed to realize their long term interests. Again, like profiteers anywhere in the world, they did not want to accept any discipline or curbs on their freedom to engage in unlimited exploitation. On the other hand, the lawgiver—as Muhammad certainly was—has to keep the general good of the society in view in order to make his laws acceptable to the overwhelming majority of the people. The Meccan merchants also failed to understand that, once organized into a state which their class could easily dominate, they could have made much speedier progress (which they ultimately did, and achieved undreamt-of prosperity). As for the tribal cults, the powerful merchants were completely unconcerned about them, and only paid lip-service to the gods and goddesses. They were powerful enough to disregard all moral laws, in the absence of any law-enforcing machinery. It is because of this that the Koran repeatedly warns them, in the Meccan as well as Medinese verses, that ultimately their wealth will not stand them in good stead, and their good deeds (which, among other things, included the welfare of the poor and scrupulous regard for justice) can help them.

Thus the Koran says: "Believers, fulfil your duties to Allah and bear true witness. Do not allow your hatred for other men to turn you away from justice. Deal justly; justice is nearer to true piety. Have fear of Allah. He is cognizant of all your actions. Allah has promised those that have faith and do good works, forgiveness and a rich reward." (5:8,·9). It is also true that a section of Meccan people opposed Muhammad and his new faith, as their ancestral religion was sacred to them, and could not be abandoned. It is a fact that a religion or an ideology, long after it has played its historical role, continues to be followed quite sincerely, even vehemently. For these reasons the Meccan people, specially the rich merchants, opposed the new faith preached by Muhammad. The persecution was gradually stepped up. Social and economic boycott, public ridicule, heaping of abuse, stone-throwing, everything was tried. Muhammad, however, was spared physical torture as his uncle Abū Tālib never withdrew protection from his nephew, although he did not embrace his faith, and under the tribal laws, as long as this protection was available from the clan chief, no one could dare to harm him. Some of his followers who had no such protection were subjected, as already stated, to severe physical torture. Muhammad looked on helplessly and prayed. Muhammad lost his privileged position with the death of his uncle Abū Tālib,*** when Abū Lahab, who was his sworn enemy, became the new chief. He therefore decided to try his luck in Tā'if.

Muhammad went to Tā'if along with his faithful servant Zaid b. Hāritha, leaving his wife and children behind. Perhaps the Prophet thought that the people of this cool, green, hillside town would react differently, and he might succeed in persuading at least some of them to accept his religion. He is reported to have stayed there for ten days. But Muhammad's expectations were soon belied. The rich merchants of Mecca owned land and other properties in Tā'if, which were looked after by the Thaqīf tribe. Thus their interests were common. Muhammad had to face scorn and ridicule. Some street urchins threw stones at him and he was wounded. A Christian slave gave him asylum in a garden belonging to two Qurayshites from the clan of 'Abd Shams. He left the town when passions had cooled down. He returned to Mecca but could enter the town only after seeking protection from a relative of his former wife Khadīja, without which protection anyone could have made an attempt on his life. After this sad experience Muhammad realized the impossibility

*** See note at the end of the book, p. 198.

of continuing to live in his native city. He was really sad that his people did not comprehend what was in store for them if only they would accept his religion. It is quite clear from what Ibn Hishām tells us that Muhammad understood very well that his religion could enable the Arabs to organize themselves and also rule others. When Abū Tālib was on his deathbed, he made a last attempt to bring about a reconciliation between Muhammad and the Meccans. "Nephew," said his uncle Abū Tālib, "here are the leaders of your people gathered together on your account. They will make some concessions to you if you will make some concessions to them." "My uncle, let them give me only one word and with it you will rule the Arabs and strangers will obey you." "By your father, speak!" Abū Jahel exclaimed. "The words even!" The Prophet thereupon said: "Say only, 'There is no god but Allah,' and abandon those you worship besides him." Then they clapped their hands, "Would you make all the gods into one, Muhammad? What an idea!" And they went away disappointed.[74]

The Meccans did not realize the importance of Muhammad's new religion, which could break their tribal bonds and unite them into a formidable force. They continued to oppose him and persecute his followers. At last he started thinking in terms of seeking refuge outside Mecca. After meeting with a rebuff at Tā'if, the only refuge was Medina.

74. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ed F. Wüstenfeld (1959-60), p. 178.

4

Islam and Medinese Developments

As we have seen in the last chapter, when the persecution became unbearable, Muhammad thought of migrating to a safe haven from which he could operate with ease and safety. He chose Medina, which was earlier called Yathrib. Before finally choosing Medina, he had sent a group of his followers to Abyssinia. According to Tabari,[1] this group consisted of about eleven men and four women. Among them were 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, a well-to-do merchant, and his wife Ruqayya who was the Prophet's daughter. Abyssinia was a Christian country (following the Monophysite form of Christianity) under the sphere of influence of Rome. There could have been various motives for Muhammad's sending some of his followers to Abyssinia. Maybe he was trying to establish contacts with the Romans, to undermine the power of Mecca. But that would have been self-defeating, as the Romans could have exploited this opportunity to bring the Arabs under their domain. Muhammad might have toyed with that idea earlier but, on second thoughts, dropped it altogether, realizing the consequences. Or maybe there was no favourable response from the other side, as the relations between the Romans and the Arab dynasty of the Ghassanids were already strained. However, nothing much came out of this migration to Abyssinia by a batch of Muhammad's followers. There could have been other motives as well. Could he have been trying to attack Meccan trade, as he did later from Medina? Or was he trying to develop an alternative trade route (he himself was an experienced trader, as we know) from the south to the Byzantine empire, out of reach of the Meccan traders, in order to break their monopoly? Or was he trying to get rid of some of his undesirable followers like 'Uthmān b. Maz'ūn who was too extreme

1. *Tarikh-e-Tabari*, Vol. 1, pp. 96-7.

in his views and would not always get along with him? Tabari's account of this event is as follows:

"When this took place (i.e., desertion of some Muslims due to persecution by the Meccans) among the Muslims, the Messenger of Allah commanded them to depart to Abyssinia. There was in Abyssinia a good king called the Najāshi. Nobody was oppressed in his land and through him prosperity reigned there. Moreover, Abyssinia was a market for the Qurayshites who traded there because they found food in plenty, security and good business. The Messenger of Allah bade them do this, and for the most part they went there when they were oppressed at Mecca. He feared they might be led astray. But he (the Prophet) remained there (i.e., at Mecca) all the time."[2] Thus Tabari's text also shows that the Prophet had some fear of their being led astray. It is important to note that not much importance was attached to this migration in the history of Islam. The immigrants to Abyssinia did not even get the importance that immigrants to Medina got later. Why? The reason seems to be that Abyssinia was, after all, a non-Arab country which had Christianity as its official religion. Muhammad could not have dominated the scene in that country with his new faith, which was itself a product of the changing Arabian society. Muhammad did not want to settle for anything less than the total or near total domination befitting his prophethood. Moreover, Muhammad wanted the Arabs to unite and emerge as a force. Naturally, immigration to Abyssinia could not have achieved these goals. It therefore remained only an exploratory expedition undertaken either to establish goodwill in that country and project Islam as a sister religion of Christianity (in fact some verses were recited from the Koran to convince the Najāshi of this) at a time when the Christian empire of Rome was in danger, or probably to explore the possibility of developing alternative trade routes to bring the Meccan merchants to their knees.

However, the migration to Medina was a different matter altogether. After his failure to carry the Meccan people with him, Muhammad started thinking of establishing, somewhere else in Arabia, a base from which he could spread his faith and work out his strategy to bring the Meccans into line. During the pilgrimage season, when people from all over Arabia came to Mecca, he started exploring this possibility by establishing contacts with them. Thus says M. Hamidullah, "During the season of the pilgrimage we see the Prophet at Minā, going from the camp of one tribal contingent to

2. Tabari, Vol. 1, 3, pp. 1180 ff., quoted by Maxime Rodinson in *Mohammad* (London), p.114.

another, asking each to believe in him as the Messenger of God and to help him in preaching Islam under their protection, and promising to the incredulous that very soon they would become masters of both the big realms of the epoch, the Byzantine and the Sasanid empires. Close at his heels was always his inveterate enemy and uncle Abū Lahab, who forthwith warned the listeners of the Prophet of the risks they would incur, and covering the Prophet with calumnies."[3] We are told by Ibn Hishām that he met men of around fifteen tribes in this connection. But he did not meet with any success. However, his contact with the Medinese delegation was fruitful. He met six persons from the tribe of Khazraj, two of whom were quite eager to meet him. This encounter between the Prophet and the six men of the Khazraj has been described by Ibn Hishām thus:

> He said to them: 'Won't you sit down and let me talk to you?" 'Certainly,' they said, and they sat with him. He called them (to accept faith in) Allah, talked to them about Islam and recited the Koran to them. Allah had set them on the road to Islam, for there were Jews with them in their own country—people who had scriptures, and were endowed with knowledge, while they themselves were polytheists and idolaters. The Jews had the upper hand to them in their country. Whenever there was a dispute among them, the Jews said to them: 'Now, a prophet will be sent, his time is almost come. We shall follow him and with his help we shall obliterate you as 'Ād and Iram were obliterated.' When the Messenger of God spoke to them and called them to Allah, they said to one another: 'People! Understand! By Allah, this is surely the Prophet with whom the Jews threatened us. We must not let them get ahead of us with him.' They answered the things he asked them, they believed him and accepted the Muslim dogmas which he explained to them. They told him: 'We renounce our people. No other is so divided by hatred and rivalry. It may be that with your help Allah will bring them together. We will go to them and call them to your party. We will tell them all that you have told us in your answer about this religion. And, if Allah unites them in this faith, there will be no man more powerful than you.[4]

There are certain things to be noted in this narrative. Firstly, Ibn

3. Muhammad Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasulullah* (Paris, 1974). p. 54.
4. Ibn Hishām, p. 286 ff.

Hishām heaves a sigh of relief that Allah set these people of Medina belonging to the tribe of Khazraj in the right course, lest they should have been lured by the Jews who had their own scripture. This shows that the Arabs were yearning for scriptures of their own, and no religion of foreign origin was acceptable to them. The Jews had an advantage over them as these Arabs of Medina were polytheists and idolaters. Thus the Arabs were looking for some higher form of religion, of local origin, which could reflect their aspirations and way of life: a religion with a scripture which could qualify them for a higher culture. Secondly, the Arabs of Medina resented the domination of the Jews which they could not rid themselves of, in spite of their numerical superiority. This domination was partly economic, as they (the Jews) controlled trade as well as date plantation. The Jews, moreover, used to threaten them with the advent of a Prophet with whose help they would destroy the Arabs as 'Ād and Iram were destroyed in the past. Thus we see that the sedentary Arabs of Medina, unlike the powerful merchants of Mecca, were dominated rather than dominating and were divided by infighting. They had no vested interest as the Meccan merchants had and, as such, were not in any way motivated to oppose Muhammad. On the contrary, they saw in him an Arab leader who also claimed to have been commissioned by God as a prophet. Such a leader and a prophet perhaps could, they must have thought, unite them and enable them to get rid of the Jewish domination.

The same event, Ṭabari has described a little differently, but in a way which brings out the Arabs' fear of the Jews more clearly. He says:

> When the Messenger of God preached Islam among the men of Khazraj, the Banū Khazraj thought (if they refuse Muhammad's invitation to accept Islam) lest the Jews, who have occupied our lands and every time in the event of a dispute frighten us by saying that very soon a prophet will arise amongst us with whose help we will obliterate you like the peoples of 'Ād and Iram in the past, come to know about this prophet and approach him. They (the Banū Khazraj) told the Messenger of God that mutual animosity and rivalry have totally destroyed us, the Arab people, it is possible that God may unite us through you. . . . If Allah unites us all on this then there will be no person more respected in our eyes than you.[5]

5. Tabari, Vol. 1 (Urdu translation) op. cit., p. 115.

Tabari thus tells us that the Jews had occupied the lands belonging to the Arabs and thus added an economic factor, too, to the resentment felt by them. This seems quite probable as most of the fertile land in Medina was in the possession of the Jews. Thus the Medinese Arabs saw an opportunity of uniting themselves under the leadership of Muhammad. It also appears that the Medinese Jews had economic ties with the Meccan merchants and later on too, they entered into an understanding with them to undo the nascent Muslim state. The delegation of six Medinese which met Muhammad promised to meet him again in the next pilgrimage season and departed. Coming back to Medina, they spoke of their interview with Muhammad and won over a few more to their side. Negotiations and secret meetings continued for at least two years. They could break through resistance in the other important Medinese tribe called Aws, and in A.D. 621 they brought with them to Mecca more members, three of whom belonged to the Aws. They were thirteen now, and seem to have given some kind of pledge to acknowledge Muhammad's authority, to observe the moral code prescribed by him and to give up polytheism. Muhammad sent along with them one of his lieutenants, Mus'ab b. 'Umayr, to recite the Koran to the people of Medina and to teach them the new faith. More adherents were won over, and in A.D. 622 another secret meeting took place at 'Aqaba, near Mecca, in which some seventy-five Medinese participated. There were three women among them. It was declared solemnly that "We are yours and you are ours. If some of your companions should come among us, or if you come yourself, we will defend you against all things as we defend ourselves." Thus the way was paved for the migration to Medina.

Before dealing with further developments in Medina, let us examine the malaise in the city of Medina so as to understand its social background better. The account of this social and political malaise has been borrowed from Montgomery Watt's book, *Muhammad—Prophet and Statesman.* The situation in Medina was quite different from that of Mecca. In Mecca and its neighbourhood no agriculture was possible, but only the pasturing of camels. Consequently the very existence of the town depended on commerce. Medina, on the other hand, about 250 miles north of Mecca, was an oasis of twenty square miles or more, and gained its livelihood chiefly from growing dates and cereals. Of course, there was some commerce, for there was a market in the area inhabited by the Jewish clan of Qaynuqa', who were not merely traders but goldsmiths and manufacturers of weapons and armour. Maybe there was some tra-

de with Syria too but not on the same scale as that of the Meccans. There were more or less, eleven groups which can be called clans, as well as a number of smaller ones. Three of the main groups professed the Jewish faith. It is difficult to establish whether these Jews were descendants of Jewish refugees or were of local origin, but in either case there seems to have been considerable marrying between Jews and Arabs, and in their general manner of life the Jewish clans were hardly distinguishable from the Arabs. At one time, the Jews had political control of Medina, and the remnant of the previous Arab settlers had become dependent on them. Perhaps it was the Jews who developed agriculture at Medina as they did in other parts of Arabia.

The eight main Arab clans were descended from families which had settled in Medina when it was already dominated by the Jews. In the earlier part of the sixth century they had wrested their independence from the Jews, and they were much the stronger. The Jewish clans of al-Nadīr and Qurayza, however, still retained some of the best lands on the higher grounds in the south of the oasis, and were superior to the small groups of Arabs, belonging chiefly to the clan of Aws-Manāt, who lived either interspersed among the Jewish settlements or close to them. The Jewish clans had to enter into alliances with the Arab clans and had to content themselves with being the junior partners. Medina, it is important to note, was not a compact town, but consisted of diverse settlements scattered among the palmgroves and fields. There were numerous fortifications in Medina. When attacked, they would seek refuge in these small forts.[6] Why were there so many forts in Medina?

The system of blood feuds did not bring much disaster in a vast desert as the chances of contact were few, whereas in an oasis like Medina, it proved to be calamitous, as there were frequent contacts between the warring groups. That is why Medina had developed a system of fortifications. Before Muhammad's advent in Medina, there had been frequent quarrels among various groups, and pointless bloodshed. Much of the violence was, perhaps, due to the increasing pressure of population on the limited resources available though there were, doubtless, other reasons too. In some of the fighting the avowed aim of clans was to seize the land of weaker neighbours. To begin with, the fighting was between single clans but gradually it spread and involved most of the groups. The climax came, finally, in

6. See W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad—Prophet and Statesman* (London, 1961), pp. 84-5.

the year 618 at the battle of Bu'āth, in which almost all the Arab clans of Medina were engaged in battle and the Jewish clans too, were involved as the allies of one or the other clan. It is said that there were heavy fatalities in this battle. The parties in the battle were so exhausted that hostilities ceased, but there was no agreed peace. The city of Medina existed in a state of tension. Apart from human resources, material resources, too, were exhausted. Peace was absolutely necessary in order to extract a livelihood by cultivating the land. As international commerce developed in Mecca, various tribes entered into actual alliance to guard their material interests (the Aḥlāf and Mutayyabūn had composed their differences in Mecca), whereas in Medina the two principal tribes were fighting fierce battles against each other. Owing to the absence of commercial activities on as large a scale as in Mecca, tribal bonds were stronger, and blood relationship valued much more than in Mecca. The concepts of valour, prowess and the honour of one's tribe had led to prolonged warfare which had exhausted both parties, and they were in need of an arbiter who enjoyed unqualified support.

Though individualism was not very pronounced, the sedentary life of Medina was not very compatible with the tribal way of life either. For reasons already given, in the smaller area of the city blood feuds proved disastrous. Moreover, the device of fortifications developed to ward off attacks was costly and an extra burden on an economy which was not much above subsistence level. Besides, most of the fertile lands were in the possession of the Jews, who also controlled whatever trade there was. This had led the Arabs to realize that they must unite if they wanted to dominate or prosper. The enviable prosperity and wealth of the Arab merchants of Mecca must have accentuated this feeling. Thus they were looking for a leader who could command the respect and loyalty of all the rival parties in order to bring about reconciliation and peace. There was no one of that calibre among the Medinese Arabs. One of the leading men of Khazraj, 'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy, had remained neutral at the battle of Bu'āth and had a chance of becoming such a leader. But for the arrival of Muhammad, he would, perhaps, have become the king. But this is a little doubtful. As he himself belonged to one of the rival tribes, he could have been suspected of partiality. 'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy, however, aspired to this leadership, and as the arrival of Muhammad deprived him of this chance, he never took kindly to him. He never gave up his ambition and tried to remain neutral between the Muslims and the Jews and thus he was called a hypocrite.

After the pledge of 'Aqaba (early in July, A D.622), Muhammad encouraged his followers to migrate to Medina. They left Mecca quietly in small bands. Eventually some seventy of his followers slipped out of Mecca and took refuge in Medina. In Mecca the only Muslims remaining, it seems, were Muhammad, Abū Bakr, 'Alī and some of their families. Of course, apart from them, there were some who were either unable or unwilling to make the journey. By then sending his followers before him, Muhammad wanted to ensure that there was no repetition of his failure at Tā'if. However, as the situation in Medina demanded a really neutral leader, Muhammad was eminently qualified for this role and was thus most welcome, along with his followers. About the middle of September that year, Muhammad was ready to depart. It is said that the Meccans got wind of this and plotted to kill him. Some young men, one from each of the clans, were to thrust their swords simultaneously into his body in order to avoid the individual consequences of shedding his blood. Ibn Ishaq (op. cit. p.222) has described this story in detail. Thus it is certain that between Mecca and Medina his life was in danger. Along with his trusted companion, Abū Bakr, he hid for three days in a cave some distance from Mecca and then set out for Medina, travelling through dubious and unfamiliar routes with the help of a guide. At last, on 24th September, A D 622, they reached the settlement of Qubā on the edge of the Medina oasis. The journey was safely accomplished.

It is interesting to note that the Arabs had not developed their calendar till then. Tabari, giving examples of some of the poets of the *Jāhiliyya,* tells us that there was no universal method of reckoning dates. Usually the tribals took some well known incident as the basis for counting dates. Naturally this basis varied from tribe to tribe. But the Quraysh of Mecca Tabari tells us,[7] had started counting their dates from *'Am al-Feel,* i.e., the year in which Abraha attacked Mecca. The Meccans had to have a common reckoning date as otherwise there would have been total confusion in commercial transactions. The Muslims, when the need arose for a common calendar, started counting dates from 16th July, A D.622 as it was the day on which the immigration to Medina began. Their year, however, remained lunar.

Muhammad was very cautious in his moves in Medina. He would not do anything to appear partisan. Moreover, even the Arabs in Medina had not completely accepted him as the prophet or a leader. Muhammad stayed in Qubā for two or three days, probably to assess

7. Tabari, Vol 1 (Urdu translation), op. cit., pp. 142-3.

the situation in Medina. He did not want to stay on there as nearby were two strong Jewish clans and their Arab associates, who had not joined in the invitation to Muhammad, and the pledge. Proximity to them, he must have thought, would be a constant source of weakness. Finally he chose a plot of land belonging to the clan of Najjar. It was a populous clan. It is not clear from the account given by Tabari whether the land belonged to the clan as a whole, or to two orphans belonging to the clan, as we find in some other sources. Anyway we know that the institutions of both collective as well as individual property existed in Medina. The first one was of course on the decline. The Prophet offered to pay for the land but, according to Tabari, the Banū Najjar declined.[8] It was waste land, perhaps partly cultivated. There were a few groves and date-palm trees. The site was cleared of all this and the building work began. Sun-dried bricks, a few stones, clay and palm trunks were used for construction, in which all the companions of the Prophet participated. The Prophet, too, lent his hand. This building is regarded in Muslim tradition as the first shrine or masjid. The Nabataean and Syrian form of the word is *masgeda*, which meant a place where people prostrate themselves, i.e., a place of worship. The building had a large rectangular courtyard, and next to the eastern walls were constructed two cabins, one for each of the Prophet's two wives (the Prophet had also married Ā'isha—the young daughter of Abū Bakr—in Medina). The courtyard of the mosque became the centre of all the activities and most of Muhammad's time was spent here. It was here that he received ambassadors and delegations, conducted the business of the community and held public meetings. Even prisoners of war were confined here and the sick cared for. The poor companions slept there, and it was used for communal prayer too. In short, it was the first public building of the nascent state in Medina. It was a most primitive structure, as local resources were limited. (When the Muslims acquired a great deal of wealth through foreign conquests, they built palatial houses. We deal with this aspect later.)

After migration to Medina with his large number of followers, Muhammad had to do something about the food and shelter as all of them were not well off. Muhammad himself lived a very austere life and often went without food. Frequently he had to satisfy himself and his family with dates and water. In winter they often had no fuel to light a fire and keep themselves warm. His followers too, faced such difficulties. Muhammad enjoined his Medinese followers (they were

8. See Tabari, Vol. 1, p. 146; also M. Watt, *Muhammad*, p. 92.

called *Ansārs,* meaning helpers) to take one Meccan immigrant each as their brother and provide for him. The Prophet himself made the pairs, keeping in view the status of the persons concerned. Theoretically of course, every one of the faithful is equal before God. The Koran declares: "The most respected unto God from amongst you are those who are most pious."[9] However, in reality, equality was not possible. People were status-conscious and with the passage of time this tendency was accentuated. Thus the much talked about equality in Islam was never realized in practice. (Only in congregational prayer did everyone stand in one line irrespective of status, and this was a poor consolation to the less fortunate in society.) Considering the balance of productive forces in the society then, no such equality was possible. Recent experiences in various socialist countries also demonstrate clearly that strict equality is not possible in a society where scarcity predominates, whatever the theory or ideology may be.

The process of fraternization did help the Meccan immigrants. However, in most cases, they were not a burden to the Ansārs, but worked along with them in the fields to make a living. A few examples will illustrate:

> 'Umar told his Medinan brother: I shall work one day to irrigate your garden, and you shall pass the day in the company of the Prophet, recounting to me in the evening all that had passed: revelation of new texts of the Quran, political and social decisions, and the like; the next day I shall go and you work in the farm. Another Meccan, 'Abd ar-Rahman ibn 'Auf, was told by his host: 'This is my property, half of it is yours; I have two wives, select the one you like, I shall divorce her and you marry her.' But he replied: 'God bless you in your property and your family. Show me only the way to the local market.' There he purchased something on credit, and forthwith sold it; and did that several times during the day. In the evening he had not only paid his debt, but had also earned enough to purchase his dinner. A few days later he visited the Prophet, clad in a new and costly dress, which showed that he had just married. Soon he became one of the richest merchants in the town....[10]

The passage above throws a great deal of light on various aspects of socio-economic formations in Medina. It shows that the collective property (land belonging to the tribe or clan) had almost given way to

9. The Koran 13:49.
10. Hamidullah, op. cit., p. 62.

individual or family property. One easy way out of these trying conditions for the Prophet in Medina would have been to form communes, but, instead, he formed fraternal pairs and linked up one immigrant family each to the families of the Medinese followers. This again shows that the property relations had so developed as to exclude a possibility of forming communes. The passage also shows that polygamy was practised in Medina too and that patriarchy prevailed (Montgomery Watt tells us that in the distant past matriarchy was prevalent in Medina and adduces rather far-fetched evidence in its support). It shows too, that economic independence was considered to be a great virtue, and also that manual labour was not considered to be degrading, as important companions of the Prophet, like 'Ati and 'Umar, and sometimes even the Prophet himself used to do manual labour. It shows clearly that marrying and divorcing was quite easy and that women had a subordinate status in that society. All this had an important bearing, as we shall see later, on the laws revealed in the Koran.

Within a few days of his arrival in Medina, Muhammad had to sort out other problems too. In Medina also as in Mecca, there was no ruler or state set-up, not to speak of any army, police or bureaucratic machinery. Even a deliberative body such as the *Mala'a* or senate of Mecca did not exist. Here each tribe was a law unto itself and therefore, different tribes clashed with each other, resulting in a lot of bloodshed. It was, in fact, a clash between the tribal outlook and the demands of a settled urban life. This gave rise to malaise in Medina and made the people feel the need for a properly constituted authority to bring about peace and order on the one hand, and a transcendent vision of life on the other. Also tribal laws operating in a sedentary people create problems, some of which we have stated above. Thus new laws which conformed to the changed situation were equally necessary. Muhammad as a prophet and leader of the people of Medina had to fulfil these functions. He set about meeting these challenging tasks. First he applied his mind to shaping a unified community out of the various clans and groups that existed in Medina. It was no easy task. He had to draw up a constitution with multiple clauses to cover the various groups and their interests. The community set up by the Prophet was a confederation of various clans and groups. Its membership was not open to individuals.

Regarding the constitution that was drafted Ibn Hisham tells us: "Ibn Ishaq said that the Messenger of God drew up an agreement between the immigrants and the helpers (and) in which the Jews were also included. They (i.e., the Jews) were allowed to follow their

religion and retain their properties. Some conditions were laid down on them and they were allowed some conditions. (The document began) in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate! This is a writing of Muhammad the Prophet between the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib (i.e., Medina) and those who follow them and are attached to them and who crusade along with them. They are a single community distinct from other people. The Jews would share the expenses with the Muslims so long as they fight. The Jews of the Banū 'Auf would constitute one *'umma* with the Muslims. For Jews it is their religion and for Muslims theirs (persons themselves along with their slaves are included)....[11] As already stated there were a number of clauses in this agreement; it covered almost all the people of Medina and was a sort of united front. Some of the clauses were: "Those Jews who follow us are entitled to our aid and support as long as they shall not have wronged us or lent assistance (to any enemies) against us (paragraph 16). They (i.e., Jews and Muslims) shall help one another in the event of any attack on the people covered by this document. There shall be sincere friendship, exchange of good counsel, fair conduct and no treachery between them" (paragraph 37). Muhammad included even pagans in this agreement. "'No pagan is to give protection to any person of Quraysh, either his goods or his person, or take his part against any believer" (paragraph 20).

The agreement also spelt out a variety of obligations by which all the believers were bound (with the exception of the Jews and pagans). They were to help any one of their members who was crushed by the burden of debt (paragraph 11). They were not to take the side of an unbeliever against a believer, or kill a believer on account of their connections with an unbeliever (paragraph 14). All believers, even the humblest, were assured of the "protection" of Allah and so owed one another exclusive aid and protection (paragraph 15). In the event of war, believers were not to make peace individually with the enemy (paragraph 17). If one of their number was killed, they were to make common cause against the murderer and those who helped him, and either fight them together or accept the blood-price together (paragraphs 19 and 21). They were not to give aid or shelter to any evil-doer (*muhdith*, literally "innovator", in other words anyone infringing the common moral code) (paragraph 22). They were to maintain their own internal law and order, themselves punishing any wrongdoers amongst them (paragraph 13).[12]

11. Ibn Hisham, *Sira*, Vol. 1, p. 2780.
12. Rodinson, op. cit., pp. 153–4.

Thus we see that this agreement not only brought a community into existence but also laid down the foundation of a state. As we know, private property had already developed both in Mecca and Medina. In Mecca some sort of senate was looking after the interests of these property holders, but that was not adequate. In Medina even that semblance of authority did not exist and thus there was no agency to protect the interests of either property holders or individuals in the event of a crime committed against them. This agreement laid the foundation of such an agency. In many respects this document was of revolutionary importance for Arab society. Nicholson remarks, "....No one can study it without being impressed by the political genius of its author. Ostensibly a cautious and tactful reform, it was in reality a revolution. Muhammad durst not strike openly at the independence of the tribes, but he destroyed it, in effect, by shifting the centre of power from the tribe to the community; and although the community included Jews and pagans as well as Muslims, he fully recognized what his opponents failed to foresee, that the Muslims were the active, and must soon be the predominant partners in the newly founded state."[13] Here it would be quite interesting to note the comments made by Montgomery Watt:

> Muhammad was by no means the ruler of this community. The immigrants were treated as a clan, and he was their chief, but there were eight other clans with their chiefs. If the Constitution is good evidence at this point, he was only marked off from other clan chiefs by two things. Firstly, the people primarily concerned in this agreement which we are calling the Constitution are *believers*, and that implies that they accept Muhammad as prophet. That should mean accepting as a binding rule whatever comes as revelation, and attributing to Muhammad a certain prestige as the recipient of revelation and perhaps a wisdom beyond that of ordinary men, at least in religious matters. It does not mean the acceptance of his opinion in matters not covered by revelations. Secondly, however, the Constitution states that 'wherever there is anything about which you differ, it is to be referred to God and to Muhammad' ....In these early months, then, Muhammad could have been no more than the religious leader of the Medinese community. In

13. R.A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge, 1907), p. 173.

> strictly political matters he was only the head of the 'clan' of immigrants, and probably less powerful than several other chiefs.[14]

Thus it is clear that it was not very easy for Muhammad to become an unchallenged leader whose every word would be obeyed. Even after he consolidated his position and acquired a great deal of power, his opinion was not always uncritically accepted, except in religious matters finally decided by revelation. The traditions of tribal democracy and a stateless society were so strong that it was very difficult to uproot them right away. The institution of private property had arisen, as pointed out above, as a result of productive forces operating in the society, and, therefore, the need for a state machinery was slowly being felt on the conscious level, too. However, in a society which had not known any repressive state in its history, it was not very easy to evolve one with the stroke of a pen. It required a great deal of patience, understanding and tactfulness. The above agreement drawn up by him convincingly shows that Muhammad did not lack these qualities. He was not only the prophet of God, but also a statesman and a tactful political leader. After sensing the situation in Medina, he was in no hurry to assert his leadership. He gave full autonomy to the clans and various other groups so as not to undermine their authority but to make them agree to form a larger community with a constitution in which the rights and duties of every individual constituent had been defined. He remained content with the chieftainship of the group of immigrants. As the agreement was drawn keeping the local situation in view, it was readily accepted by the people of Medina. Its ready acceptance also shows that the need was being felt for such an organization, which could arbitrate between warring groups.

The immediate problem which Muhammad had to face in Medina was the "Jewish problem". The Jews as the Arabs were part of the new community. Muhammad thus made efforts to win over the Jews and get himself accepted as a prophet. In order to please the Jews and Christians as well, he initially directed his followers to pray in the direction of Jerusalem. Even the Fast of 'Ashūrā, the Jewish day of Atonement, seems to have been observed by the Muslims in Medina. However, the Jews never took kindly to the Prophet, and his efforts to woo them ultimately failed. Rodinson also agrees with this. He

14. Watt, op. cit., pp. 95-6.

says. "The Jews did not on the whole respond to these advances as Muhammad expected." Further on he says, "Muhammad's followers for their part—quite apart from their adherence to the fundamental ideas of Judaism and to the precepts of Noah—showed perfect willingness to conform to a number of Jewish rituals. In theory, therefore, there was no reason why the two communities should not have lived peaceably together. But the Jewish tribes of Medina had probably not abandoned the idea of exerting a considerable political influence over the oasis as a whole. It was quite obvious to them, probably before very long, that Muhammad's behaviour and the importance he was assuming were likely to interfere with this objective."[15]

There is other evidence as well which shows that Jewish domination, especially in the economic sphere, was deeply resented by the Arabs of Medina. The incident of the Banū Qaynuqā is a good example of this. An Arab woman went into the market belonging to this Jewish tribe. A shopkeeper teased her by pulling off her garment and others started laughing at her. She cried for help. An Arab passing that way killed the shopkeeper. Now other Jews also gathered and the Arabs and the Jews started fighting. The Prophet came and condemned the incident. The Banū Qaynuqā' thereupon were enraged and taunted, "Do not get elated over the victory at the Badr. They (the Meccans) belonged to your race and did not know how to fight. When confronted with us you will know what a real fight is." They broke their agreement, and in the twentieth month after the migration the Prophet and his followers attacked them.[16] Many verses in the Koran too point out that the Jews never cooperated with the Muslims and their Prophet. The Koran says: "They (Jews) listen to falsehood and practise what is unlawful (i.e., they eat what is forbidden). If they come to you give them your judgement or let them be. If you avoid them they cannot harm you; but if you act as their judge, judge them with fairness. Allah loves those who deal justly."[17] Again the Koran says: "Believers, take neither Jews nor Christians for your friends. They are friends with one another. Whoever of you seeks their friendship shall become one of their number. Allah does not guide the wrong-doers."[18] When Muhammad was convinced that the Jews would not accept him as a prophet nor would they cooperate with the Muslims, he changed.

15. Rodinson, op. cit., p. 160.
16. Maulana Hakīm Abul Barakāt, *Asah al-Siyar*, p. 115.
17. The Koran, Chapter 5, Verses 41 and 42.
18. ibid. Chapter 5, Verse 51.

Muhammad's step of changing the direction of prayer to Mecca was a momentous one. Determined to do it alone, he cut himself loose from the Jews and Christians (though he did not repudiate their religion but accused them of distorting their revealed scriptures and not following the injunctions in them. Culturally speaking, the only inheritance the Arabs could be proud of was the religion of the Israeli prophets). By setting his face to Mecca in prayer, he decided to make Arabia in general, and Mecca in particular, the centre of Islam. After all the Arabs could now hold their heads high as they too had a scripture and a revealed religion. If certain powerful interests in Mecca opposed Muhammad, it did not matter. Soon they would realize their error and would embrace the new religion.

Muhammad went ahead, severed connections with the Jews and fought against them. The Jews, divided into tribes and clans, lost to the Muslims, who had united, overcoming tribal barriers. The Muslims were destined to achieve victory not only against the Jews, but over their Meccan and other Arab rivals too, as Islam, at that point of time, represented a blueprint for restructuring society in keeping with the new emerging economic relations. It provided Arab society with the concept of state and the concept of law at a time when neither existed among them; although, as the conditions in Mecca and Medina show, a need for them was strongly felt. Muhammad gradually consolidated his hold, and soon emerged as the unchallenged leader of the Medinese people. Muhammad, it is important to note, as this has caused much misunderstanding, was not only a prophet like any other Biblical prophet, but also a founder of the state in Medina. His behaviour as a political head did clash with his behaviour as a religious head. As a religious head, he was a law-giver, visionary and idealist, whereas, as the head of a state, he had to make compromises, enter into alliances (some of his marriages were motivated by such considerations), give concessions to win over enemies, or devise strategies to humble them. To bring his Meccan enemies to their knees, Muhammad attacked their trade caravans.

Many western scholars and historians including H.G.Wells have been horrified by Muhammad's conduct, as they usually have the stereotype of Christ in their mind. This stereotype is that of an oppressed, persecuted prophet who surrenders but does not resist, who, when slapped on one cheek, presents the other. I maintain that it all depends on the situation. Christ was confronted by the mighty and well-organized state of Rome. He was born in an exploited and persecuted nation. He chose to preach the doctrine of love, surrender of the self and mortification of desire. Thus he became an embodi-

ment of mercy.* Though, of course, Christ could have chosen to organize resistance against the Romans, and there comes the question of the role of a person in history, we cannot debate this question here. Also, despite modern research, not much is known about Christ, in terms of concrete historical facts. Most of what we know about him is tradition.) Muhammad ran into trouble while in Mecca and, as described earlier, he was oppressed and persecuted there. There are many instances when Muhammad, harassed and persecuted by his enemies, prayed like Christ for them. But, unlike Christ, he was not prepared to surrender. When he did not succeed in organizing resistance in Mecca, he migrated to Medina for that purpose.

After sorting out initial problems, he turned his attention to Mecca. He wanted to devise a strategy which would strangulate Mecca's economy as well as provide sustenance to his followers in Medina. What could be better strategy than attacking the trade caravans going to or returning from Syria? It was easy to do this, as these caravans had to pass within sixty miles of Medina which was some 300 miles north of Mecca. Such an attack could serve a double purpose: to harass Meccan caravans as well as provide sustenance to his followers who were economically in a very bad condition. Moreover, such attacks, or rather raids, were not unethical in the Arabian desert. Such occurrences were very frequent, as we have pointed out in a previous chapter. In mounting them, Muhammad was serving the interest of the new movement which according to him and his followers was a 'divine mission'. For any new movement, which wants to establish a new society with a new morality, even to violate the morality of the established system is not considered immoral. Here, in attacking the trade caravans, Muhammad was not doing even that, as such raids were considered perfectly normal in that time and place.'

To begin with, Muhammad sent some probing missions. Tabari,

* The liberation theologists of today do not agree with the stereotype of Christ as the embodiment of love, peace and non-violence. One such theologian says: 'Here I would like to add a note of my own on Jesus' attitude to violence. Jesus, unlike, say, Mahavira, Buddha and Gandhi, was not a preacher of non-violence. Jesus was kno , not as an ascetic like John the Baptist, but as 'a glutton and a drinker'(Mk 11:39)—and surely as a meat eater, too! Among his disciples and, even, apostles, were zealots, who, we have no reason to believe were converted to non-violence and pacifism before or after joining Jesus' company — any more than Peter and other fishermen in the group gave up their trade as part of their conversion (cf. Jn 21:1ff). Indeed, the non-zealot Peter is reported to have used his sword in a brave attempt to defend the Master from being arrested. Why, Jesus (according to Luke, of all people) went as far as to tell the apostles on that fateful night, "whoever has no sword must sell his coat and buy one" (Lk 22:36) (See "Liberation Theology and Marxism" by Kottukapally, S.J.in *Vidyajyoti—Journal of Theological Reflections* Delhi, August 1985, pp. 361).

quoting Wāqidī, says that in the seventeenth month after Hijra, the Messenger of God sent Hamza b. Abd al-Muttalib with a white flag and 30 men to intercept the trade caravan belonging to the Quraysh.[19] Again, Tabari says, "In Dhi Qa'da [name of a month in the Islamic calendar] that year, the Messenger of God sent Sa'd bin Abi-Waqās with a white flag to Kharrār. Miqdād bin 'Umru was appointed the flag bearer. Sa'd himself reports, 'I set out on foot with some twenty persons for Kharrār. We used to hide during the day and march at night. We reached there on the fifth morning. The Messenger of God had given me instructions not to go further than that. The trade caravan of the enemy had passed that way one day before and their number was sixty. I had all immigrants with me.' " [20] All these were probing missions and nothing much happened. However, in Rajab, the seventieth month after migration, blood was shed for the first time. The Prophet sent 'Abd Allah b. Hajash with twelve men on a secret mission. A sealed letter was given to him with instructions to open it after two days' march (after one day's march according to some others). When the letter was opened, there were instructions to proceed to Naklila between Tā'if and Mecca. They reached Nakhla after some hesitation during the last days of Rajab. When the trade caravan belonging to the Quraysh passed that way in the evening, it was attacked by a party of Muslims. One person in the caravan, 'Umru b. al-Hadramī, was killed and the Muslims returned to Medina with rich booty and two captives [21] However, the encounter had taken place during the month of Rajab in which the Arabs did not fight. There was some outcry against it and Muhammad had to act very tactfully. For some time he did not touch the booty. After some time it was revealed: "They ask you about the sacred month, whether they can fight therein; say, to fight therein is serious; but to obstruct the way of God, and infidelity towards him, and to keep men from the holy mosque, and to drive out his people from there is more serious in the sight of God and idolatry is more grievous than to kill (in the sacred months).[22] Thus the verdict was very clear. If the people of Mecca obstructed the new faith and new movement, retribution would be exacted against them, and traditions would not be allowed to stand in the way. In fact no movement which aspires to establish itself as a power can succeed without breaking old traditions and adopting strategies designed to suit the exigencies of the situation,

19. *Tārikh-e-Tabari,* op. cit., p. 149.
20. ibid. p. 150.
21. See *Asah al-Siyar,* op.cit., pp. 126-7.
22. The Koran, Chapter 2, Verse 217.

and that is exactly what Muhammad did without much ado. One-fifth of the booty was taken by Muhammad and the rest was divided between his companions. From now on the Prophet always took one-fifth of war booty as head of state. To be sure, most of it was spent on looking after delegates coming to meet him and other similar expenses which had to be incurred by the chief of a newly founded state.

This encounter between the Muslims and the Quraysh of Mecca did not go unchallenged. It infuriated the Meccans. The Quraysh merchants were shrewd enough to realize that, if not dealt with properly, Muhammad would be a constant threat to their trade. Abū Jahel, the powerful head of the Makhzūm clan, took this view. The opportunity soon presented itself. A large caravan with a great deal of merchandise was returning from Gaza to Mecca two months after the Nakhla raid, in Ramadān of the year two (March, A. D. 624), led by Abū Sufyān b. Harb. Most of the clans of Quraysh had interest in the merchandise carried by the caravan, which was accompanied by some 30 or 40 persons. Muhammad soon came to know about it. He told his companions, "A richly laden caravan of Quraysh is passing this way. It is they who drove you out of your homes and seized your belongings." It was a splendid opportunity, as the caravan was estimated to carry merchandise worth 50,000 dinars. Many were interested, 'Urwa says frankly, "not seeking (to attack) anyone other than Abū Sufyān and those who rode with him, with no thoughts in their head but of the booty to be won from the Qurayshites, and they did not expect the encounter to lead to any serious fighting. That was God's revelation concerning it: You wished that the band unarmed might be yours" (Koran viii, T).[23] Abū Sufyān got the wind up and changed his route. Nevertheless, he sent word to Mecca to despatch men and arms to fight, as Muhammad was on the track of the caravan.

The Meccans seem to have despatched around 950 men and plenty of arms. The encounter took place near a place called Badr on 17th of Ramadān. The party of Muslims consisted of no more than 300 men (at the most 313). Here it is interesting to make certain observations. As there was no regular government in Mecca, there was no army either. All men of Mecca with fighting ability were induced to join. Naturally, there was no unified command or proper formation. Different clans constituted different units and they could opt out if

23. al-Tabari, *Annales*, Vol. 1, 3, pp. 1285 and Hakim Abdul Barakat, *Asah al-Siyar*, op. cit., p. 128.

they so desired. In fact, before the battle a clan did opt out, reducing the number of combatants. Thus the greatest disadvantage was lack of discipline. Morever, the opinion amongst them was divided upon whether or not they should fight. For them it was a unique fight, of a kind never fought before, as people of their own tribe were in the ranks of the enemy. (In Arabia battles were never fought among the members of the same tribe or clan.) This bewildered them, and some argued that even if they won, their victory would be at the cost of slaying their own kith and kin. However, Abū Jahel persisted and forced the Meccans to fight. (By the way, the caravans which the Muslims had set out to attack and plunder had slipped out of their reach.)

The Muslims, on the other hand, despite numerical and other disadvantages, had certain advantages. They were a disciplined and determined lot. Muhammad was well aware of that. Addressing his companions before the battle, he is reported to have said, "The victory depends neither on pomp and pageantry nor on abundance of weapons. What is needed most for victory is patience and steadfastness." Then he exhorted them to have patience and remain steadfast.[24] The Muslims were also charged with the enthusiasm of a new faith. They had a strong conviction of the justness of their cause (although there were always some among them who were either doubters or hypocrites or some interested in material advantages. Such persons are repeatedly reprimanded by the Koran). People convinced of their cause throw themselves with full vigour into fighting for it, and do not care for the consequences. Muhammad also showed an uncanny military ability in selecting the battleground so that his enemy had to fight facing the dazzling sun. The Muslims, moreover, had a unified command and were not bothered about whom they would kill. They were following a new religion which recognized no tribal bonds. Even if one's father were on the opposite side, it would be perfectly legitimate to kill him. (In fact the son of 'Abd Allāh b. Ubayy—an influential leader of Medina who was a hypocrite—wanted the permission of the Prophet to kill his father for his treachery towards the Messenger of God. The reasons for wanting to kill his father himself was that if any one else did so he might be enraged to seek revenge.) This single-mindedness is nothing new. It happens with all revolutionary movements which seek to overthrow the existing order. The revolutionary movements of our own time clearly demonstrate this. The Muslims charged on the "unbelievers"

24. *Asah al-Siyar*, op. cit., p. 133.

and soon they were in disarray and taking to their heels. Muhammad, who was witnessing this fight from a hut, was tense throughout it, as the future of the new movement would be made or marred by the result of this battle. And the victory of so few Muslims over so many Meccans gave a tremendous boost to Muhammad's prestige. Muhammad and his religion acquired a new respectability. He was a force to be reckoned with and many who were previously uncommitted to either side now joined him. A number of neighbouring Bedouin tribes too rallied around him. In Medina his position was further consolidated and without any doubt he became the unchallenged leader.

After Badr, the Muslims got one more opportunity to attack a caravan. The Meccans sent a caravan to Mesopotamia in which the rich businessmen of Mecca had invested heavily. The Meccans tried to keep it a secret. However, through a conversation in a Jewish tavern, Muhammad came to know of it. He despatched a party of a hundred men under the command of Zaid bin Hāritha. The caravan was attacked and plundered. It is said that the captured merchandise amounted to 100,000 dirhams. The half-Jewish poet Ka'b b. al-Ashraf was killed by some Muslims at the instance of the Prophet as he had instigated the Meccans to a high pitch against Muhammad and had written poems denigrating him. Muhammad had authorized his followers to use treachery if necessary to get rid of this enemy of the faith.[25] The assassination of this poet struck terror into the Jewish tribes of Medina. Many of Muhammad's acts can be explained only when we try to understand his dual role as the head of a newborn state as well as the bearer of a religious mission. In his first capacity as a political head, he had to act in the interest of the state he had founded even if it involved the assassination of this or that enemy, or putting all the male members of a Jewish tribe to death. He showed no mercy, if showing it would be politically disastrous. Perhaps he thought that sparing the Jews would weaken his position, as they would conspire with the Meccans to overthrow his rule. His attacks on the trade caravans of the Quraysh of Mecca, as already pointed out, were part of his strategy to paralyse Mecca's economy, as that was the only way to break its power. Muslims have been apologetic about this role of Muhammad and Westerners have been completely baffled by it. Frankly speaking, Muhammad was a shrewd and gifted statesman as well as a religious visionary and a lawgiver. He was no mere idealist, living in an ivory tower. He could and did tackle difficult situations

25. ibid. p. 144.

with uncanny ability, and the skill of an experienced politician, even if it involved suspending some principle temporarily or compromising any ideal. In the famous treaty of Hudaybiya when Muhammad asked his scribe 'Alī to write "Messenger of God" against his name, the Meccans objected to this as they were not yet prepared to accept him as such. 'Umar b. Khattāb, an eminent companion and rather ebullient, could not conceal his feelings and asked Muhammad, "Are you really a Messenger of God?" Muhammad of course said, "I am."[26] As a shrewd statesman he knew very well that these words did not count for much. What mattered was a negotiated settlement which would give him breathing space to consolidate the position further. For this purpose he even accepted some unfavourable terms of peace. The Muslims were only a rising power, and there is nothing wrong in accepting such terms in an unfavourable situation. They could be set right when the proper time came. It was this shrewdness on the part of Muhammad which made him master of the situation. Even Muslim historians have tried to differentiate between Muhammad's acts as a statesman and those as a prophet.

Muhammad dealt with the Jewish tribes one by one, and finally broke their effective power and reduced them to subjugation. The deal struck by the Prophet with the Jews of Khaybar and Fadak has bearing on the concept of ownership of land in Islam.

As agriculture, except in a few cases, was not possible in the Arabian desert, feudalism and its various other practices did not develop. However, when the Muslims conquered vast, agriculturally rich areas having a feudal system, the concept of ownership of land assumed a great deal of importance. Khaybar and Fadak were fertile regions owned by the Jewish tribes. They had a number of caves and settlements there. The ancient Khaybar, according to the old Arab geographers, lay in a very fertile district which was rich in palms and luxurious cornfields, and consisted of seven castles.[27] It was some hundred miles north of Medina.

"The Messenger of God," says Balādhurī, "attacked Khaybar in 7 A.H. The people of Khaybar resisted for a long time, obstructed (Muhammad's advance), and continued to fight against Muslims. The Messenger of God kept the blockade for about a month, then they (the Jews) came to terms with him on the condition that their lives be spared, their women and children not be arrested, and they would

26. ibid. pp. 218-20.
27. M.T. Houtsma and others (eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London, 1913-36), Vol. II, p. 869.

leave Khaybar surrendering their land and other possessions including silver and gold, except that which was on their bodies....Then they appealed to the Messenger of God that they knew cultivation well and they be allowed to stay on. He consented to their request and settled with them for half the produce of date-palms and cereals and he said, 'I keep you here as long as Allah keeps you here' "[28] This was construed to mean that the ownership of land was with the Muslims and the Jews were only sharecroppers. Further on Balādhurī says that "Because the Messenger of God and his companions did not have enough slaves who could be put to work on the land there and since they themselves did not have enough time to manage, he acceded to their request to return all the fields and orchards on condition that half the produce would belong to them (the Jews) and half the produce to the Messenger of God." Balādhurī also tells us, that every year at the time of harvesting 'Abd Allah b. Rawāha used to fix the half share.[29]

From what Balādhurī tells us it is quite clear that the Jews were deprived of ownership of their land and reduced to the status of sharecroppers. Politically Muhammad may have thought it necessary to deliver an economic blow to the Jews of Khaybar, in order to destroy an active centre of conspiracy against him. But he unwittingly created a justification for the later development of feudalism in the Islamic state. The question of *jagirs* or ownership of big chunks of land, as we shall see later, generated pressures which transformed the entire character of the Muslim state. Fadak, another Jewish settlement near Khaybar, was also quite fertile and a more or less similar deal regarding it was struck with the Jews. As the Jews of Fadak had willingly surrendered without fighting, they were allowed to retain the ownership of half the land. Unlike Khaybar, whose produce was shared equally by the Muslims, Fadak was allocated to Muhammad *(Khālisā lahu)*, who devoted the revenues from it to needy travellers *(abnā' al-sabīl)* and also for the maintenance of the least rich of the Banū Hāshim; the reason given to justify this measure was that Fadak had been acquired by treaty (without fighting). However, during the reign of the second Caliph, 'Umar, the Jews living in the northern Hijāz suffered a very severe blow; the Caliph decided to expel them, since by this time the great number of slaves captured in the battle were at the disposal of the Muslims and enabled them to exploit all the fertile land in Arabia. The Jews of Khaybar, as pointed

28. Balādhurī, *Futuh al-Buldan,* Vol. 1, Urdu translation by Syed Abul Khair Maududi, (Hyderabad, n.d.) p. 35.
29. ibid. p. 37.

out above, were allowed to remain and work the lands because the Muslims did not have enough slaves at the time. It is also to be noted that while the Jews of Khaybar had to leave the oasis and emigrate to Syria without receiving any indemnity, those from Fadak were granted one based on the valuation of their property. This confirms the fact that the Jews of Khaybar were regarded simply as usufructuaries, so that the sharecropping agreement with them could thus be broken without compensation, whereas the rights of ownership of the Jews of Fadak to one-half of the oasis were recognized.

Even after the expulsion of the Jews, 'Umar used different methods for Khaybar and for Fadak: to the Muslims who had received from Muhammad a share in the produce from Khaybar (or to their heirs), he gave ownership of the land in proportion; as regards Fadak, he did not change the system. Fadak's annual produce was approximately 10,000 dinars (Ibn Sa'd,v.286). The question of Fadak is interesting from the legal point of view as it proves that from the earliest times of Islam, there was a very precise conception of the differences between private and collective property, and an awareness of the duties and rights relating to each. It is moreover an example of the difficulties encountered by the rulers who respected the *Sharī'a* when, for political motives, they proposed to modify a situation established by the Prophet and his immediate successsors.[30] 'Umar's action in expelling all the Jews from Fadak and Khaybar, after enough slaves were available to cultivate these oases (no doubt the primary reason was the continued hostility of the Jews which was further aggravated after they were deprived of their rights of possession and reduced to mere sharecroppers overnight) shows that a mere religious directive could not succeed in abolishing slavery, as long as economic reasons necessitated it. In fact, with more foreign conquests and acquisition of huge landed properties, this problem was aggravated. When the Islamic caliphate was turned into an Islamic empire, first by the Umayyad and then the Abbasid rulers, slave girls came to acquire an importance of their own in the imperial harem. Even special slave detachments were created as personal bodyguards of caliphs. Discouraging slavery in the commercial milieu of Mecca was one thing, and abolishing it in a vast empire with landed property, agriculture and plantation as its basis, was something quite different.

30. B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat and J. Schacht (eds.) *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (London, 1913-1936), Vol II, Fasciculus 33, pp. 725-6 by L. Veccia Vaglieri.

In Mecca, slavery had no economic roots (at the most slaves could be employed either as personal attendants or for loading and unloading operations or for other sundry work in a commercial society), whereas in later Islamic empires it acquired a definite economic function, which was why slavery continued in Islam till very recently.

The question of land ownership in Islam is a much debated one, and some Muslims maintain that Islam has advocated the concept of collective ownership of land and there is no place in it for feudal exploitation. A Pakistani theorist, Nasir Ahmed Shaikh, maintains that Muhammad and the Koran were opposed to private ownership of land, at least in so far as this exceeded the scale of holdings cultivated personally by the owner.[31] Maulana Maududi, the chief theoretician of Jam'at-e-Islāmī, on the other hand, maintains that the private ownership of land is allowed in Islam, and it appears that he is right. The Koran does not deny the right of ownership in any respect. Of course, some traditions ascribed to the Prophet do hedge in this right with certain conditions. For example a *hadīth* in *Sahīh Muslim* (one of the authentic books of the Prophet's traditions) says, "....The Messenger of God said whosoever has land should cultivate it and if he cannot cultivate or does not have competence to do so then he ought to bestow the land (or that part thereof) on a brother Muslim; he must not rent it out (or give it on sharecropping) under any circumstances."[32] Another *hadīth* from Sunan-e-Abi Dāūd is more categorical: "...from Jābir it is learnt that the Messenger of God said, one who does not give up sharecropping (mukhābirah) should be ready for war with God and his Messenger.' " (Sunan-e-Abi Dāūd, *Kitāb al-Buyū' Bab al-Mukhābirah).* The strong words reprimanding sharecropping indicate that Islam has no room for feudalism, although it does not do away with the private ownership of land altogether.

Dr Fazlur Rehmān, an eminent Pakistani scholar, maintains that sharecropping has been strictly prohibited in Islam, and with as much vehemence as for ribā'; and as such, feudalism which so much distorted it, has no justification in Islam. He maintains that rarely have so many eminent reporters of *hadīth* been so nearly unanimous as on the issue of sharecropping, renting of land, etc. They have all

31. Nasr Ahmad Shaikh, *Some Aspects of the Constitution and Economics of Islam*(Woking, 1961), pp. 139-229, quoted by Maxime Rodinson in *Islam and Capitalism* translated by Brian Pearce (Allen Lane, 1974) p. 19.

32. *Sahīh Muslim, Kitāb al-Buyū, Bāb Kirā, al-ard.* See Dr. Fazlur Rehman's paper on *ribā* in *Fikro-Nazar*, Vol. 1, Issue v (Karachi, November 1963), p. 72.

reported that sharecroppers, renting, etc., have been unequivocally condemned by the Prophet.[33] The question then arises: why did the Prophet of Islam enter into a similar sharecropping agreement with the Jews of Khaybar and Fadak? In fact, this was cited as a precedent by those who sought to justify feudal practices such as land renting.

The collectors of the Prophet's traditions were well aware of this fact. Imām Abū Hanīfa for example says that the agreement with the Jews of Khaybar was in respect of *kharāj*, i.e., land tax or tribute. He maintains, in fact, that the Prophet obliged the Jews by entering into this agreement, as he had conquered the land and so could just as well have driven them out from there. To allow them to remain and cultivate, with a share of half the produce, was an act of grace.[34] This argument is not very convincing and appears to be a laboured rationalization. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the Muslim theologians were aware of the ill effects of permitting share-cropping and thus creating in the society an exploiting rentier class. But, as socio-economic relations have their own logic—whatever the concern of the theologists based on religious vision—feudal practices struck deep root in all the agricultural regions of the Islamic empire. The reality based on socio-economic formations could not be wished away by setting forth an ideal which did not have the roots in the social system. This makes it very clear that without changing the social system, basic changes cannot be brought about in the society. Proclamation of ideals, though necessary, is not enough by itself.

Another important question in Islam is that of the prohibition of interest on loans. This has been a most controversial question, especially in recent times. Some people maintain that it is usury which has been banned, not commercial interest. This view seems to be more plausible although everyone concerned does not agree. Let us examine it in some detail as it is important from our point of view. The word used in the Koran for this purpose is ribā'. Much confusion has arisen, as ribā' is used in various senses. Dr Fazlur Rehmān has brought a great deal of erudition to bear on this question.[35] What follows is based to a great extent on his essay on ribā' (though not exclusively, as other sources are also available to me). This word in its different forms, has been used in different senses in the Koran. Here are some examples: to grow, to swell. The Koran says: "You

33. Dr. Fazlur Rehmān, ibid. p. 72.
34. ibid. p. 74. Dr. Fazlur Rehmān has quoted Imām Abū Hanīfa from *'Umdat al-Qārī Lil'Aynī*, Vol.v. (Istanbul, 1310 A.H.), p. 724.
35. ibid.

sometimes see the earth dry and barren but no sooner do We send down rain upon it than it begins to stir and swell (rabat) (22:5). Also, in the Meccan chapter called "The Greeks",the Koran says: That which you seek to increase by usury will not be blessed by Allah; but the alms you give for his sake shall be repaid to you many times over. (Koran, 30:39. This is the first reference to ribā' in the Koran). Here it has been used to mean increase. One form of this word is "rabwah"which means high ground or protrusion. Thus the Koran says: "We made the son of Mary and his mother a sign to mankind and gave them shelter on a peaceful hill-side (rabwah) watered by a fresh spring." (Koran 23:50). Another sense of this word is to rear, to bring up. The Koran says, "Treat them (parents) with a humility and tenderness and say:'Lord, be merciful to them. They nursed me (rabbiyani) when I was an infant.' " (Koran, 17:24).The technical meaning of the word ribā', has been derived from its lexical meaning. Ribā', in Islamic literature has not been used only in the sense of interest as is commonly understood. Actually, lexically speaking, it is not very precise to render ribā' as "interest". Ribā', in fact, has been used to indicate speculation in trade, exchange of similar commodities with increase in quantity, etc. The Muslim theologians maintain that all these practices have been banned. Against the opinion of some other theologians, Dr Fazlur Rehmān maintains that ribā' was banned in Mecca itself through the verse in the chapter "The Greeks"quoted above. (It is condemnatory, but not yet prohibitive.) I think he is right when he says that condemnation of usury was, at this stage, quite in keeping with the Prophet's vision of overall economic justice. It is well known, as we have also pointed out in the earlier chapter,that Muhammad was condemning various economic ills of Meccan society such as hoarding, profiteering, usurping orphans' rights, etc. It is, therefore, not surprising that he condemned the practice of usury, as many wealthy Meccans were indulging in this practice, causing a great deal of trouble to the economically weaker sections of society. As Ibn Jarīr tells us while explaining the verse on ribā', the Prophet's own uncle 'Abbās conducted such business on a large scale. It is also important to note that, like most other verses of the Meccan period, this verse on ribā' too is only condemnatory, but as yet there is no prohibitive command. The reason is obvious. In Mecca, Muhammad was a seer, a visionary, and not the head of a state. In the Medinese verses, on the other hand, we find clear formulation of laws, not mere condemnations, or disapprovals, as here Muhammad had become a law-giving head of state in addition to being a seer and visionary.

After the migration to Medina, usury was categorically prohibited in these words, "Believers, do not live on usury, doubling your wealth many times over. Have fear of Allah, and you shall prosper. Guard yourselves against the fire of Hell." (Koran 3:130). In other Medinese verses which were subsequently revealed, ribā' had again been prohibited: "Those that live on usury shall rise up before Allah like men whom Satan has demented by his touch; for they claim that usury is like trading. But Allah has permitted trading and forbidden usury. He that receives an admonition from his Lord and mends his ways may keep what he has already earned; his fate is in the hands of Allah. Allah has laid His curse on usury and blessed almsgiving with increase.He bears no love for the impious and the sinful. Those that have faith and do good works, attend to their prayers and pay the alms-tax, will be rewarded by their Lord and will have nothing to fear or to regret. Believers, have fear for Allah and waive what is still due to you from usury, if your faith be true; or war shall be declared against you by Allah and his apostle. If you repent, you may retain your principal, suffering no less and causing loss to none. If your debtor be in straits, grant him a delay until he can discharge his debt; but if you waive the sum as alms it will be better for you, if you but knew it." (The Koran, 2:272 to 280).

These verses on ribā' are the last of the verses on this issue and clear instructions have been given in them about banning the practice. The severe punishment prescribed, of war against usurers, and the other directions, about postponing payments from debtors in straits, about even waiving the principal, indicate that this was intended to be a thorough-going reform. It would be necessary to understand the extent of the malaise that resulted from the high rates of usury then prevailing in the Meccan or Medinese society.

From certain sources it is obvious that in the period of *jāhiliyya* (i.e., the pre-Islamic period) usury was widely practised. We find a tradition in Imām Malik's *Muwattā* to this effect. He says, "In the *Jahiliyya* ribā' meant that when somebody owed some amount to someone for a certain period and when the period was over the creditor would ask the debtor whether he would pay up or would like to extend the period? If he paid up the creditor would accept; otherwise he would increase the debt amount and enhance the period."[36] Tabari too while explaining the verse on ribā' (Believers, do not live on usury, doubling your wealth many times over) says

36. Imam Mālik, *Muwatta*, Kitab al-Buyū' no. 38.

that this verse refers to the usury of the pre-Islamic period when, if the debtor could not pay in time, the creditor would double the amount. Thus an amount of 100 would become 200 the next year; 200 could become 400 a year after that, and so on.[37]

Dr Fazlur Rehmān has quoted from Imām Qayyim to elucidate the whole concept of ribā'. It is a lengthy quotation. A summary will serve our purpose: Ribā' is of two kinds: (1) a clear and evident form, and (2) a hidden or latent form. The first form is categorically forbidden as there is great harm in it, and the second form is forbidden since it leads to the first form. The first form is usury which in the *jāhiliyya* meant increasing the principal for delay in payment—a practice that brought about the ruination of the debtor as the amount would multiply a thousandfold sometimes without benefiting the debtor in any way. The creditor became rich at the expense of the debtor. It was for this reason that God in His wisdom forbade it. God made charity the opposite of usury.[38] As for another form of ribā', Imām Qayyim says that any trade which is primarily motivated by profit-seeking is a hidden form of usury and is, therefore, banned. Another learned commentator on the Koran, 'Allāma Hajar 'Asqalāni, also maintains that the concept of ribā' is applicable to any banned trade practice.[39]

Some Pakistani economists[40] have also recently pointed out that mere abolition of interest on bank deposits in an inflationary capitalist economy might lead to greater exploitation of small depositors by big capitalists who would immensely benefit by interest free loans invested in high profit areas, especially by investing in luxury goods manufacturing and apartment houses for the rich whereas the small depositors would lose as the value of their deposit would be eroded by inflation without any compensation in the form of bank interest. Mere setting up of interest free banking without taking other steps to curb profiteering and encouraging more production of wage-goods would not solve the problem. These economists urge that ribā' should be interpreted to mean 'profiteering' and not only interest, thus supporting what the medieval thinker and Koranic commentator Ibn Qayyim said of ribā'. In fact most talk about interest free banking in

37. *Tafsir al-Tabari*, Vol. vii, pp. 204-205.
38. *A'lām al-Muq'in*, Vol. 1 (Delhi, 1313 A.H.), pp. 200-201.
39. 'Allama Hajar 'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bāri*, Vol. iv (Cairo, 1319 A.H.), p. 250. Quoted by Fazlur Rehmān, *Fikro-Nazar* (See 32 above), p. 93-4.
40. See "*An Agenda for Islamic Economic Reform*," Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 1980, mimeograph, p. 7.

some Islamic countries today is nothing but an attempt to save 'profit principle' at the cost of interest as after all in a capitalist economy it is profit and not the interest which is the main form of exploitation.

Thus we see that the Prophet, by banning usury and its various harmful forms tried to correct an economic imbalance in the society which had attained serious proportions. In Medina too, the extortionate practices of the Jews were causing concern to the Muslims who were economically weaker. Thus Muhammad took the inevitable step of banning it altogether. It would be interesting to note that Germany in the fifteenth century faced a similar situation owing to the extortionate practice of usury and the church had to intervene decisively to condemn it. "Usury," writes R.H. Tawney, "long a grievance with craftsman and peasant, had become a battle cry. From city after city municipal authorities, terrified by popular demands for the repression of the extortioner, consulted universities and divines as to the legitimacy of interest, and universities and divines gave, as is their wont, a loud, but confused, response. Melanchthon expounded godly doctrine on the subject of money-lending and prices. Calvin wrote a famous letter on usury and delivered sermons on the same subject."[41] Thus there was enough pressure from the exploited sections of the population to abolish usury, which Muhammad did. Undoubtedly, though we do not have any figures, this must have brought relief to many groaning under its burden. However, in Islamic society, as it happens with any religious dogma, ribā' came to mean, apart from other disapproved trade practices, any form of interest. Thus, apart from usury, even reasonable commercial interest was totally banned. Dr Fazlur Rehmān, by tracing the evolution of various traditions on ribā', has convincingly shown that ribā' in the Prophet's time did not mean what it came to mean later. He quotes one tradition from Sunan-e-Abi Dāūd on the authority of Ahmed b. Hanbal to the effect that Jābir b. 'Abd Allah had given a loan to the Prophet who, while returning it, paid a little more than the original sum. Nevertheless, in the later period there was near unanimity among all the theologians on the question of prohibition of interest in Islam. But this injunction was out of keeping with the realities of society and, therefore, was honoured more in the breach than the observance. Interest was given and taken right from the beginning of Islamic society. Later on, a book was even written called *Kitab-al-Hiyal* (i.e., a book of ruses or wiles) for those "conscientious"

41. R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1969), p. 91.

Muslims who wanted to take interest while pretending they were not. Let us illustrate the trickery used. I sell a boat to X for Rs. 125 payable after one year and immediately buy it back from him for Rs. 100 payable on the spot. Thus X gets the Rs. 100 which he requires and I would get Rs. 125 after one year. This trickery was widely resorted to in the Islamic world in order to avoid the stigma of taking interest. This once again illustrates that ideology by itself cannot bring about the desired change unless the basic economic structure (i.e., relations of production), with which the ideology is in conflict, is also changed. It would, otherwise, remain a mere statement of an ideal. However, this should not be read to mean that the reality can be moulded to fit any ideological framework perfectly. The recent experience of communist countries is also a pointer in this direction. Ideology, however "scientific", always remains value-oriented (in fact its value-component is much more important than its science-component, whatever the "faithful" might believe), whereas reality is moulded by a host of complex factors which may even be pulling in different directions. If the desired shape is a circle, the conflicting forces of ideology and social realities might generate an ellipse.

In Medina Muhammad gradually consolidated his position and, especially after solving the "Jewish question", he became the most powerful man whose every word was respected. In fact, whatever he spoke regarding any important issue acquired the authority of law, and his actions became worthy of emulation by his companions and all subsequent generations of Muslims throughout the world. Any problem which the Muslims faced later was seen in the light of what the Prophet had said or done in a similar situation. It would, therefore, be interesting to take up certain pronouncements of Muhammad regarding certain issues which became the legal foundation for the Islamic state, and see them in their proper historical and sociological context. This approach alone will enable us to understand them properly. We have already examined the two important questions of slavery and usury in this light. Let us now turn our attention to the question of women's status as established by the Prophet of Islam.

As we already know, the Arabian society was essentially a tribal one and in such a society women enjoy a comparatively better status. In a feudal system women are totally subjugated and men acquire unchallenged superiority. This does not mean that in a tribal system, if it happens to be patriarchal, women enjoy equal status; certainly not. They have only a comparatively better status. The Arab tribes, it must be noted, had been patriarchal for ages past. Although Mont-

gomery Watt maintains that in Medina there may have been a matriarchal system in the remote past which was, during Muhammad's time, in a state of transition, this view does not seem to be borne out historically. Even the neighbouring areas like Babylonia in the north-east and Palestine, Syria, etc. in the north were predominantly patriarchal in historically known times. Moreover, in the trying conditions of the Arabian desert, male superiority was inevitable to a great extent. The Koran also maintains this superiority and clearly declares that "Women shall with justice have rights similar to those exercised against them, although men have a status above women. Allah is mighty and wise". (Koran, 2:228). This statement of the Koran reflects the actual position of a woman in the Arabian society of Muhammad's time. Her status was not inferior, although man had an edge over her. She enjoyed property rights too, as we shall see. Muhammad's first wife, before her marriage to him, had an independent business. She had already invested money in it as an independent person before Muhammad joined her in the venture. Historians also tell us that Muhammad recommended deserving cases of orphans, widows, etc., for help to his wife Khadija. This indicates that the husband could not spend what belonged to his wife without her consent. Ibn Hishām tells us that Salmā an-Nājjariya, who was the mother of 'Abd al-Muttalib, used to stipulate the condition at the time of marrying that she would retain the right to divorce her husband whenever she liked.[42]

R.A. Nicholson says in his book *A Literary History of the Arabs*: "On the whole their [i.e., women's] position was high and their influence great. They were free to choose their husbands, and could return, if ill-treated or displeased, to their own people; in some cases they even offered themselves in marriage and had the right of divorce. They were not regarded as slaves and chattels, but as equals and companions. They inspired the poet to sing and the warrior to fight. The chivalry of the Middle Ages is, perhaps, ultimately traceable to heathen Arabia."[43]

The sexual norms, too, were not rigid. Women even took the initiative in such matters and invited men's attention. Thus Tabari tells us of an event in the life of the Prophet's father: "After sacrificial offerings he ('Abd al-Muttalib) was returning from the Ka'ba holding the hand of his son 'Abdallah. He happened to pass by a

42. See Hamidullah, op. cit. He has quoted Hishām to this effect on p. 8.
43. Nicholson, op. cit., pp. 87-8.

woman of Bani-Asad, 'Umm-e-Qital bint Naufal, who was present in the Ka'ba. She, looking at 'Abdallah's face, said, 'Where are you going?' 'Abdallah said, 'I am with my father.' 'Take from me,' she said, 'all the camels slaughtered in redemption (of vow) if you (agree to) sleep with me right now.' 'Abdallah said, 'My father is with me. I do not want to act against his will nor do I want to separate from him.' "[44] The woman, it will be seen, directly and in a public place, issued an invitation to sexual intercourse. Thus it will be seen that women in tribal Arabia enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom. Though polygamy was widely prevalent, there was no ruling class as such, and no large harems where women were treated as mere chattels. It can be noted by way of contrast that in the north and north-east where the state and a ruling class had developed, women were not as free and harems had already been set up. (The same thing happened on a much larger scale when Muslims became masters of a vast empire.) We hear of singing and dancing girls, especially of foreign origin, in the court of the Ghassanids. Muhammad, while in Medina, came across a number of problems concerning women. How should they behave towards others, and how should others behave towards them? Marriage and divorce also posed a number of problems, as also the question of women's inheritance, and what their status should be in society, *vis-à-vis* men, and so on.

Though there were some conventions, there were no set rules. Moreover, in the new situation, these conventions, evolved over the ages in tribal society, created conflict, and, therefore, had to be replaced by laws in conformity with a sedentary civilization. On account of the number of battles fought, persons killed and men and women taken prisoners, quite a few problems had arisen. The situation in Mecca and Medina was also changing fast during those days. Certain immediate problems had to be tackled too. Many of the Koranic verses refer to such immediate problems. In short, the most important aspect of these Koranic laws is in the context of a concrete situation, and they should be seen in that perspective. It would be pertinent to see that while framing these rules the local conventions were not totally disregarded. Islamic laws which were later on codified as the Islamic *Sharī'a* retained these local influences and it would be wrong to consider all the laws as immutable. Polygamy, for example, was widely prevalent in Arabia much before the advent of Islam. Muhammad retained it with certain restrictions, just as he permitted slavery while encouraging the emancipation of slaves. A

44. *Tarikh-e-Tabari*, op.cit., p. 27.

law-giver and a reformer had to bear a concrete historical situation in mind. While having transcendental vision, a successful reformer cannot ignore the present. Muhammad moreover struck a balance between what is and what is to be. It would, therefore, be wrong to cogsider as immutable all his laws, some of which were framed keepin the concrete situation in mind. Some modern apologists try to rationalize polygamy even today.

Let us discuss these laws. As I have said earlier, there was a great deal of sexual freedom for Arab women. This was suitable in a tribal society. However, a society with a definite pattern of property and, production relations as in Mecca and Medina needed appropriate sexual behaviour. The Prophet of Islam set out applying restrictions. The Koran prescribes: "Enjoin believing men to turn their eyes away from temptation and to restrain their carnal desires. This will make their lives purer. Allah has knowledge of all their actions. Enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity;*to cover their adornments (except such as are normally displayed); to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their stepsons, their women-servants, and their slave-girls, male attendants lacking in natural vigour and children who have no carnal knowledge of women. And let them not stamp their feet in walking so as to reveal their hidden trinkets." (Koran, 24:30-31).

It is clear from the verse quoted above that the Prophet wanted to establish new sexual norms for a society which aspired, by virtue of its transition from a nomadic to a commercial and agricultural society, to an advanced civilized status. In earlier tribal society, as we have seen above, the sexual instinct was not totally repressed, although some restrictions did exist. However, for a civilized society, sexual repression was thought to be absolutely necessary. Sigmund Freud also thought it necessary to sublimate part of the sexual energy in order to spend it on the creative endeavours so necessary for a civilized society. Sexual suppression, it must be remembered, is a result of changing production relations. Freud, however, does not take historical or material development into account and furnishes a purely psychological explanation. Material progress, with the development of an exploitative relationship between man and woman (and of course, between man and man as well), always disturbs the sexual economy of a primitive society. Thus Wilhelm Reich says, "The sexual misery in authoritarian, patriarchal society is a result of its

intrinsic sexual negation and suppression, which create sexual stasis, which in turn begets neurosis, perversions, and sexual crime. For that reason a society that has no interest in sexual suppression must be free from sexual misery. Historically speaking, so long as, and to the extent that, there is no such interest, it will remain free from sexual misery. We can then say that the members of such a society live sex-economically, by which we only mean that they have a naturally regulated energy economy."[45] Further on Reich also tells us: "Since moralistic sex education first enters the history of mankind with the interest in economic gain and develops along with it, neuroses are a feature of a society that has a patriarchal organisation. Malinowski's observations and comparative investigations provide irrefutable proof of these connections, while they also convince us of the possibility of self-regulation of sex life by genital gratification."[46]

Although among the Bedouin tribes sex does not seem to have been as free as among the Trobrianders, there were, comparatively speaking, much fewer constraints. A sort of sex-economy, as Reich puts it, does seem to have existed. With the change in relations of production this sex-economy was getting disturbed in centres like Mecca and Medina and ultimately the Prophet of Islam, who was laying down rules and regulations for the new civilized society, evolved new, restrictive sexual norms. But, it is interesting to note, the difference between the sexual norms of Bedouin society and urban society persisted till recently. Thus Wilfred Thesiger, who has lived among the Bedouins for quite some time, tells us: "Homosexuality is common among most Arabs, especially in the towns, but it is very rare among the Bedu, who of all Arabs have the most excuse for indulging in this practice, since they spend long months away from their women. Lawrence described in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* how his escorts made use of each other to slake their needs, but those men were villagers from the oasis, not Bedu. Glubb, who knows more about the Bedu than any other European has ever known, once told me that active homosexuality among them was almost unknown. I myself could not have lived as I did with my companions and been unaware of it had it existed among them; we lived too close together. Yet during all the time I was with them I saw no sign of it. Nor did they talk about it."[47] Similarly in societies like that of the Trobrian-

45. Wilhelm Reich, *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex Morality* (London, 1975,) p. 31.
46. ibid. p. 52.
47. Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (London 1976), p. 125.

ders where sexual suppression is unknown, such perversions do not exist.

The Koranic verse quoted above formalized sexual repression in the Arabian society. It was henceforward strictly laid down to whom a woman could reveal her sexual charms. She could reveal them only to those with whom sexual intercourse was not permissible, or to those who had not yet experienced sexual desire for woman, such as children. She could not even stamp her feet, lest it should suggest her hidden trinkets, let alone reveal her sexual charms, in the presence of anyone not within the prescribed relationship with her. However, man was given considerable latitude in sexual matters. Not only could he marry up to four wives, he could also have sexual relations with his slave-girls and there was no restriction of number in this case. The Koran says, "Marry of the women who seem good to you two or three or four, and if you fear that you cannot do justice (to so many) then one (only) or (the captives) that your right hand possesses. Thus it is more likely that you will not do injustice." (Koran, 17:4) In the verse just quoted there are two things: permission to marry up to four wives and to have sexual relations with the slave-girls (that your right hand possesses). The traditional commentators maintain that the man has been permitted to marry up to four wives if he can do justice with all and, in addition, he can have sexual intercourse with his slave-girls or captive women caught in the war.

However, some modern interpreters of the Koran do not agree with this view They maintain that both the verses on polygamy in the Koran have been revealed in the context of properties of orphan girls and widowed women. The guardians of these orphan girls used to either misappropriate their properties or would exchange their good properties with their bad properties. The Koran permitted these guardians to marry upto four of these orphan girls rather than tinker with their properties. Thus the choice before the Koran was either to allow these guardians to misappropriate orphan girls' properties or allow these wards to marry these orphan girls upto four. As property was more important than becoming co-wives, the Koran chose the latter course, thus securing the properties of the orphan girls and widowed women. According to this view to marry upto four wives was not a general permission but only conditional in the case of orphan girls. It was generalized by future commentators who invented many traditions accordingly to suit their point of view. In the case of orphan girls also the Koran laid down the strict condition of justice and equal treatment if the guardians wished to marry them.

As for sexual intercourse with slave-girls and captive women the modern commentators maintain that the verses in question do not allow sexual relationship without marriage. Thus they translate the verse as under: "Give back to the orphans their properties and do not exchange (their) good properties with your (bad) ones, nor consume their properties by mixing them with yours; it is indeed, a great sin. But if you cannot do justice to orphans, then you may marry from among (orphan) women such as please you—two, three or four. If, however, you fear you cannot do justice (among co-wives), then marry only one or (marry) your women-slaves; this would be nearest to avoiding injustice."[48]

Thus we see that there is no sex-negative attitude in Islam and man has a slight edge over woman. But this was inevitable due to socio-historical conditions. The Kóran could not have dispensed with the socio-historical context and property relations as they were rooted in the society in which it was revealed. It would not have been otherwise acceptable to the people whom it was immediately addressing itself. It had to and it did make certain concessions to their social practices. At the same time it was made clear that values and norms ought to be different though certain practices are being tolerated.

The elaborate laws of inheritance prescribed by the Koran also indicate that the institution of private property was well developed both in Mecca and Medina and this also required that the paternity of the child be properly determined. The Koran also required of woman that in the event of her husband's death, or if she is divorced, she has to wait for a certain period (three to four months) before re-marrying. Thus the Koran says: "Divorced women must wait, keeping themselves from men, three menstrual courses. It is unlawful for them, if they believe in Allah and the Last Day, to hide what He has created in their wombs, in which case their husbands would do well to take them back, should they desire reconciliation." (Koran 11:228).

Here two purposes are served by prescribing a three month period of waiting for divorced women. Firstly, it can be made quite sure whether they are carrying or not. Sometimes menstrual courses stop for reasons other than pregnancy. Over three menstrual courses it can be made quite certain whether she is carrying or not. Secondly, three months' period can give sufficient opportunity for reconciliation as

48. See "The Status of Women in Islam: A Modernist Interpretation" by Fazlur Rehmān in Hanna Papanek & Gail Minualted (eds.) *Separate Worlds—Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi, 1982).

indicated by the Koranic verse itself. On discovery of pregnancy, it is quite possible that the husband might change his view and may reconcile. This verse also clearly indicates that three divorces in one sitting (as is the normal practice among the Hanafi Muslims) is not permissible as three divorces in one sitting makes the divorce irreversible and irreconciliable which is certainly against the Koranic spirit.

Similarly in the event of death, the Koran says: "Widows shall wait, keeping themselves apart from men, for four months and ten days after their husband's death. When they have reached the end of their waiting period, it shall be no offence for you to let them do whatever they choose for themselves, provided that it is decent. Allah is cognizant of all your actions." (Koran, 11:234). Before Islam the waiting period used to be quite long for widows. The Koran, again served two purposes by prescribing four months and ten days waiting period for widows. Firstly, it helped determine pregnancy, and, secondly, it amounted to showing respect to the dead. After the waiting period the Koran allowed her full freedom to marry or not: she could not be coerced either way. This was, to be sure, a very important measure.

It is also true that the Koran does not prescribe any such waiting period for a widower in the event of a wife's death. It does not mean that the Koran approves of immediate marriage of a widower (there is nothing for or against it in the Koran). But as the Koran requires man to respect women in general and one's own wife in particular, immediate marriage of a widower, though not disallowed specifically, would not be appreciated. Also, in a patriarchal system, and in a stage of well-developed property relations, paternity certainly assumes greater importance even in highly modern societies. Women do suffer from certain handicaps in such a society, whatever the ideals. The Koranic injunctions, as pointed out earlier, cannot be detached from their socio-historical contexts; this would be quite unrealistic.

The Koran strictly forbids sexual intimacy outside wedlock. Sexual intimacy out of wedlock was made punishable both for men as well as women. "The adulterer and adulteress," says the Koran, "should each be given a hundred lashes. Let no pity for them cause you to disobey Allah, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day; and let their punishment be witnessed by a number of believers." (Koran, 24.2)

The Koran also lays down that: "The adulterer may marry only an adulteress or an idolatress; and the adulteress may marry only an

adulterer or an idolater. True believers are forbidden such marriages." (Koran, 24.3) Thus the Koran had made it clear that adultery is as grave a sin as idolatry, and sexual freedom can go well with paganism and the *jāhiliyya*, not with civilized society with well developed property relations. It is also worth noting that later on the punishment for adultery changed into stoning to death. 'Ā'isha is said to have reported a tradition according to which a chapter in the Koran which now consists of 73 verses originally contained 200 verses and that when 'Uthmān compiled the Koran the missing verses could not be found. One of them, it was claimed, was the verse on stoning, and it is said to have contained the order to stone a man or woman who had committed adultery. It is, of course, very difficult to vouch for the authenticity of this claim. The earlier four caliphs are also reported to have inflicted the punishment of stoning on adulterers. But what is more probable is that when Muslims came into contact with highly feudalized civilizations with much more repressive sexual laws and a far greater degree of subjugation of women, the punishment of stoning was introduced in place of lashing. Keeping the nature of the Arabian society in view, it appears improbable that the Prophet could have prescribed such a harsh punishment (even the punishment of lashing was quite harsh, for that matter). The biblical punishment for adultery was also stoning to death. The later commentators were undoubtedly greatly influenced by Israelites and biblical traditions. It is quite likely that they might have uncritically accepted the biblical concept and rationalized it by inventing the Prophetic traditions on the subject. However, it is difficult to say anything with absolute certainty. What is important in the present context is that the changing property relations necessitated regulations of sexual relations, and Islam regulated them. It was in a way a historical necessity.

The Prophet of Islam also laid down rules concerning inheritance. These rules also show the developed form of property relations in that society. Regarding inheritance, the Koran says; "Men shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave; whether it be little or much, they are legally entitled to their share. If relatives, orphans, or needy men are present at the division of an inheritance, give them, too, a share of it, and speak to them kind words.... A male shall inherit twice as much as a female. If there be more than two girls, they shall have two-thirds of the inheritance; but if there be only one, she shall inherit the half. Parents shall inherit a sixth each, if the deceased has a child; but if he leaves no children and his parents be his heirs, his mother shall have a third. If he has two brothers, his mother

shall have a sixth after payment of his debts and any legacies he may have bequeathed." (Koran, 4:7-11). Further on it says, "You shall inherit the half of your wives' estate if they die childless. If they leave children, a quarter of their estate shall be yours after payment of their debts and any legacies they may have bequeathed. Your wives shall inherit one quarter of your estate if you die childless. If you leave children, they shall inherit one-eighth after payment of your debts, and any legacies you may have bequeathed. If a man or a woman leave neither children nor parents and have a brother or a sister, they shall each inherit one-sixth. If there be more, they shall equally share the third of the estate, after payment of debts and any legacies that may have been bequeathed, without prejudice to the rights of the heirs. That is a commandment from Allah. He is gracious and all-knowing." (Koran, 4:12)

These laws of inheritance clearly show that the right to property was firmly established, and the individual's right to property was inviolable. Even a husband could not touch his wife's property except in accordance with certain rules. Parents too, could claim only a portion of their children's property in the event of their death. However, a daughter was given half the share that was given to a son, and a wife one-fourth to one-eighth depending upon whether or not she had children. So a woman was not denied the right to property by Muhammad (as she has been in many societies) but was given a smaller share than her male counterpart. The Koran clearly tells us that no one should envy the superiority God has given to some above others, "Do not covet the favours," it says, "by which Allah has exalted some of you above others. Men as well as women shall be rewarded for their labours." (Koran, 4.32) Further on it says, making its intention clear, "Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them. Allah is high, supreme." (Koran, 4:34)

In these verses woman emerges in rather an unfavourable light. It is made clear that "men have authority over women" not only because Allah has made "the one superior to the other" but also because "they (men) spend their wealth to maintain them." Thus the one who pays the piper calls the tune. Whether it be raiding or long distance commerce, men played the main role and earned wealth. Women, therefore, had to be subordinated to men. Also, when Islam emerged

on the scene, the memory of the tribal way of life which permitted greater latitude in sexual behaviour both for men as well as women was still green. To enforce new social conduct, therefore, entailed repression. It was, therefore, decreed that if you feared disobedience from women, you were to admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them if necessary. However, the Koranic laws, owing to the historical and sociological reasons explained above, were quite reasonable for women. But, what is worth noting in this respect, is that when Islam spread to Persia and other areas with highly feudalized civilizations, these laws were interpreted in keeping with the social attitudes prevalent among the people there. This would be illustrated by quoting a later Muslim writer. An ideal woman, according to him, "speaks and laughs rarely and never without a reason. She never leaves the house, even to see neighbours of her acquaintance. She has no women friends, gives her confidence to nobody, and her husband is her sole reliance. She takes nothing from anyone, excepting her husband and her parents. If she sees relatives, she does not meddle with their affairs. She is not treacherous, and has no faults to hide, nor bad reasons to proffer. She does not try to entice people. If her husband shows his intention of performing the conjugal rites, she is agreeable to his desires and occasionally provokes them. She assists him always in his affairs, and is sparing in complaints and tears; she does not laugh or rejoice when she sees her husband moody or sorrowful, but shares his troubles, and wheedles him into a good humour, till he is quite content again. She does not surrender herself to anybody but her husband, even if abstinence would kill her.... Such a woman is cherished by everyone."[49]

Thus we see—and it must be borne in mind—that the laws made in one society, however progressive they may be, change into something else when transplanted to a different one, in conformity with the sociological attitudes prevalent there. Marriage in Islam, owing to tribal practice prevalent earlier in Arabia, is contractual (not sacramental as in Christianity and Hinduism), and necessitates the consent of the woman as a party to the contract. Also, as a contracting party she has the right to stipulate conditions. She was given the right to divorce her husband as well, or she could stipulate conditions regarding divorce in her marriage contract. Thus the Arab woman was not anywhere near the description given above of a dutiful and devoted

49. Shaykh Nefzawi, *The Perfumed Garden,* translated by Sir Richard F. Burton (New York, 1964), p. 97. Quoted by Vernal L. Bullough in *The Subordinate Sex—A History of Attitudes Towards Women* (Chicago 1974).

wife. It was during the medieval period and in a feudal environment that these laws were given conservative shape. Though in Islamic jurisprudence woman has the right to divorce, in practice she has almost lost it.

Certain Islamic practices and institutions can be properly understood only when we bear in mind that Islam was a city-based religion and in Muhammad's time there was conflict between nomadic practices and the city dwellers' chosen way of life. G.E. Von Grunebaum has pithily observed, "A 'national' feeling among the Bedouin had become sporadically effective and to some extent articulate in the conflicts with the Persian overloads of the Mesopotamian fruitlands (we have already referred to this heightened 'national' feeling while dealing with the battle of Dhū Qar in Chapter 3) and the townspeople had long striven, with great success in Mecca, and with less in Medina, to control the disruptive influence on their advancement and on their security of the unadapted features of nomad organization and ideology in their own midst. Islam, with one stroke, justified and encouraged the town as the political centre of a nation which was to be unified through an expansion that was almost required by its religious superiority. The acceptance of Islam both cemented and spiritualized the vague feeling of Arab unity that had so far found its main expression in the general recognition of the hypothesis of a common descent of the Arab-speaking inhabitants of the peninsula (apart, perhaps, from South Arabia proper) and a consequent sense of separation from the *'ajam* or *barbaroi*.'[50]

Thus urbanization, as we have seen earlier plays an important role in Islamic legislation as well as the Islamic prayer system. For a community of Muslims a Jāmī (Friday prayer mosque) is a must. Now a Jāmī requires a fixed settlement with a permanent population, of whom at least forty legally responsible men must be present to make the ceremony valid. "These were," Riaz Hasan tells us, "no less than urban conditions for the circumstances of the 7th century Arabia. The mosque (where Jāmī prayers are held) was to become one of the most important features of all Muslim communities."[51] The analytical studies of civilization attempted by that historical genius Ibn Khaldūn also emphasize the difference between a primitive nomadic culture and a developed urban culture and the effect it has on various institu-

50. G.E. Von Grunebaum, *Islam—Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition* (London, 1961), p. 32.

51. Riaz Hasan, 'The Nature of Islamic Urbanisation—a Historical Perspective', article in *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XLIII, No. 3, July 1969, p. 234.

tions, religious as well as secular. Muhsin Mahdī has given a summary of Ibn Khaldūn's analysis of primitive and civilized culture. Primitive culture, according to him, is characterized by the relative dominance of simplicity and the satisfaction of only necessary needs. Communities are small and self-sufficient, foodstuffs are simple and eaten without processing; animal skins are used as clothes and makeshift tents are used for dwelling. There is no organized rational knowledge, no cities, public works, market economy or taxation. Social solidarity is based on common ancestry, common interests and common experience of life and death. Nomadic culture engenders the love of personal feuds and indifference to authority, the habit of continuous movement and lack of attachment to a certain region, and the habit of appropriating whatever is in sight regardless of the rights of others.

Civilized culture, on the other hand, cannot exist without respect for authority, attachment to a certain locality and *deference to the rights of others.* Ibn Khaldūn also tells us that the transformation of a primitive culture to a civilized one takes place by overcoming the shortcomings of the primitive culture and by enhancing and buttressing social solidarity. To achieve this an additional force is required. This force is religion, according to him. Once religion is adopted and supported by a primitive group, it becomes a highly effective force. Religion creates a new loyalty as well as absolute belief in and obedience to the demands of law and authority. This then becomes the source of social solidarity based on natural worship and worldly desires. Social solidarity based on religion is the most powerful force in the creation of civilized culture which is centred around the life in cities.[52] Islam fulfilled all these functions for the transformation of a primitive culture into an advanced sedentary one. It became a cohesive force generating social solidarity, inculcated deference to authority and the rights of others, and created a new loyalty. What was most important for the stateless Arabia is that it established the rule of law, and in this Muhammad's genius cannot be overrated. He gave to that society both a civil as well as a penal code. These codes were of course, based on social customs and tribal practices. He systematized them. He prescribed punishments for various crimes. The penal code was largely based on tribal practices and was, therefore, revenge-oriented—nose for nose, ear for ear and tooth for tooth. "We decreed for them," says the Koran, "a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a

52. Muhsin Mahdī, *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (London, 1957), Chapter IV.

tooth, and a wound for a wound. But if a man charitably forbears from retaliation, his remission shall atone for him." (Koran, 5:45) It is interesting to note that except for prisoners of war, nowhere in the Koran is any crime punishable by imprisonment. It is probably because in the nascent state of Islam, the concept or institution of the jail had not been born.

Thus, originating in Mecca, Islam took final shape in Medina.

5

The Caliphate, Outward Expansion and Civil War

Muhammad's death created a great vacuum which it was almost impossible to fill. He was not only the head of the state (a head of state could be and was found to succeed him) but also a prophet, a law-giver, a spiritual guide and a man with a transcendent vision. It was difficult to replace him in these respects. His death, in fact, came as a rude shock to his companions, though he had never inculcated a belief in his immortality. However, the immediate problem for his followers was to find a suitable successor to him as the head of the Islamic state he had founded. His companions applied their mind to this even before the Prophet was buried (it was inevitable, after all). The immediate problem for the Muslims was who should succeed and what procedure should be adopted. There was no precedent, as earlier there had been no state. Of course, they must have known (at least those of them who had commercial dealings with the Roman and Sasanid empires) that a ruler is succeeded either by his son or by one of the closest relatives and that dynastic rule was perpetuated thus.

Such a succession was not possible not only because Muhammad had no son, but because historically speaking, the stage was not yet set for the adoption, in the Arabian peninsula, of dynastic rule, which requires a different social structure. Though the demands of a sedentary urban life were different, the town-dwelling Arabs were still living under the shadow of nomadic norms and traditions. (Of course, the conflict between the demands of urban life and the norms and practices of nomadic life had given rise to the basic malaise which Muhammad successfully tried to resolve in the form of Islam.) The outlook of the Arabs, by and large, continued to be tribal. In pre-Islamic Mecca, as we have seen, there was a senate (*mala'ā*) represented by the heads of various clans and tribes. Muhammad, owing to his unique functions and qualities, became the unchallenged ruler and

needed no senate, although he consulted his colleagues in important matters. It was of course also a Koranic injunction to consult his companions. There is an interesting verse in the Koran. It says, "Thus it is by Allah's mercy that you are gentle to them. And had you been rough, hard-hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around thee. So pardon them and ask protection for them, and consult them in (important) matters." (3:158). This verse throws important light on the state of affairs prevailing in Arabia then. Even a man of the Prophet's status could not have behaved the way he liked. He could not dictate as the Arabs were very proud of being free and autonomous. It is for this reason that Allah advises His Prophet to be lenient towards his people and to consult them in important matters lest they should run away from him. In such a situation to build up an authoritative and repressive state-structure was very difficult, if not impossible. No other person after Muhammad enjoyed such preeminence as to assume his role automatically. The only precedent or model before them was their tribal traditions. It suited them to keep up their social structure which had not yet evolved the feudal institutions needed for establishing dynastic rule. Thus, in keeping with their tribal tradition, they gathered after Muhammad's death at a place called Saqīfa Banū Sā'ida. Of course, they were all clan or tribal chiefs and important companions. It is difficult to ascertain who took the initiative. In Musnad Abū Y'alī, it is reported "We were sitting," says 'Umar b. Khattāb, "in the house of the Messenger of God, and someone suddenly shouted from behind the wall; 'O Ibn Khattāb, be out with you.' ('Umar) said, 'Away with you, we are busy with (funerary) arrangements of the Messenger of God.' He said something had happened. 'The Ansār (helpers) have gathered in Saqīfa Banū Sā'ida. Go and reach them (the Ansār) lest there be some move on their part which might result in war.' I (i.e., 'Umar) told Abū Bakr to get going."[1]

It is obvious from what is said above that before the Prophet was buried, some people were seized with the ambition of succeeding Muhammad as head of the Muslim community and state. There are in fact indications to the effect that the struggle for power had started when Muhammad was on his death bed. The legitimists (i.e. Shī'as) believe that the Prophet had appointed his son-in-law 'Alī as his spiritual as well as temporal successor. However, this is difficult to ascertain, as the tradition of the Prophet quoted to prove this can be interpreted differently. Moreover, it was not in keeping with the

1. See *Fath al-Bari*, Vol. VIII, p. 13.

tradition of the Arabs to nominate a successor without consulting tribal or clan chiefs and other important persons. What is probable is that the Prophet might have desired that 'Alī, who was undoubtedly a man of great courage, valour, character and intellectual accomplishments, should succeed him. But, perhaps, in view of the powerful contending groups, he might have thought it best to avoid stating his desire in categorical terms. According to one tradition he is even reported to have asked for a pen and inkpot to write down something which would save the Muslims from being misled. However, 'Umar said, "the Messenger of God is suffering from severe pain and as for us the Koran is enough." Someone suggested he was raving. The words used in *Sahīh Muslim* are: "Verily, the Messenger of God is raving."

All this clearly shows that the different parties were contending for political power in the newly founded state and that they did not want any categorical statement from the Prophet lest it should diminish the chances of one or the other of the contending groups. The issue of succession, in fact, has ever since divided the Muslims. The celebrated historian al-Shahrestani says that "Never was there an Islamic issue which brought about more bloodshed than the caliphate."[2] Tribal prejudices also came to the fore. The Banū Hāshim rallied round 'Alī, the Qurayshite emigrants fell behind Abū Bakr, and the Ansārs supported Sa'd b. 'Abada who was their leader. The Banū Hāshim being in the minority, 'Alī's chances were very bleak. All the emigrants and helpers gathered at Saqīfa Banū Sā'ida and both the parties staked their claims to the office of the caliphate. At one stage the Ansārs suggested a compromise: one each from amongst the emigrants and helpers to share the office. However, this was rejected, as two persons sharing the same office would lead to wrangling and confusion. The debate became acrimonious as claims and counter-claims were staked. At one stage tempers were frayed and swords were about to be drawn. 'Umar who was a very shrewd observer understood the delicacy of the situation and as per Arab custom took Abū Bakr's hand in his hand and pledged his support to him for the office of the caliphate. Some other prominent leaders of the Quraysh like 'Uthmān, 'Abd al-Rehman b. 'Auf, etc. followed suit, and soon the tide in favour of Abū Bakr swelled. Abū Bakr was thus "elected" as the first caliph of the Islamic state on the basis of Muhammad's alleged traditions that a caliph must be from the tribe of Quraysh. Thus the town-dwelling Arabs, on the basis of this tradition, sought to dominate the desert nomads who, as we shall see later, rejected this

2. al-Shahrestānī, p. 12.

Qurayshite claim and raised the banner of revolt against urban domination.

Let us examine certain aspects of these developments which took place after the death of the Prophet. The installation of Abū Bakr as the first caliph of the Islamic state was democratic—if it can be so described—really in a restricted sense, as any such claim in the context of the present institutionalized democracy would be unhistorical. It was more in keeping with the Arab tradition of that time. There was no question of "one person-one vote" for the election. Only tribal chiefs and other important persons could take part in pledging their loyalty. (The word used for pledging support is *bay'ah* which means to buy and sell and by implication it means according to al-Munjid, "taking of a person's hand whom the chiefs of a city want to appoint their ruler as a token of their acceptance and pledging to abide by his rule."[3] The terminology in a commercial society also tends to be commercial). Women, of course, had no role in the election, neither had ordinary men. The election of the caliph was not their business. As we have explained in the first chapter, monarchical rule or the institution of kingship could not evolve in this part of Arabia owing to lack of agriculture and the consequent absence of a feudal mode of production. The Islamic state being newly founded, there was no written constitution, nor well established conventions. Certain Koranic injunctions coupled with Muhammad's *Sunna* was all that the newly installed caliph could rely upon. His powers were not defined; he was absolute in theory at least. But in practice there were many restraints. As pointed out the state was a comparatively new institution. People were used to a considerable degree of freedom. They would not agree all of a sudden to total submission to an extraneous authority. Though Muhammad had established his control nearly all over Arabia, he could not reduce the turbulent nomads to total submission. Abū Bakr, therefore, had to proceed very cautiously.

On assumption of office he addressed the people thus: "O people! Behold me charged with the cares of Government. I am not the best among you; I need all your help. If I do well, support me; if I mistake, counsel me. To tell the truth to a person commissioned to rule is faithful allegiance; to conceal it, is treason. In my sight, the powerful and the weak are alike; and to both I wish to render justice. As I obey God and His Prophet, obey me; if I neglect the laws of God and the Prophet, I have no more right to your obedience."[4] Thus the source

3. See *al-Munjid* (Matba'a al-Kathulika, Beirut) p. 57, under the word *bay'ah*.
4. Sayed Athar Husain, *The Glorious Caliphate*, (Lucknow, 1974) p. 19.

of authority for him was God and His Prophet. He conceded to the people the right to caution him if he went wrong. Thus, the state was far from fully consolidating its hold over the people. This does not mean that it had no repressive character at all. It did begin to use force against inconvenient dissidents or those who hesitated to accept the legitimacy of the new regime. The Banū Hāshim, for example, under the leadership of 'Alī, did not pledge their support to the new caliph for quite some time. They used to gather at 'Alī's house to discuss their plans. 'Umar stood near the door of Fāṭima's house (Fāṭima was the Prophet's daughter and 'Alī's wife) and shouted: "O daughter of the Messenger of God! By God,we respect you and you are dear to us. But if you continue to gather people at your place, I will set fire to it."[5] It is alleged by some historians that 'Umar did kick the door, which crashed on Fāṭima who was standing behind it, and injured her. Ultimately the Banū Hāshim submitted. All town-dwellers, had, after 'Alī's submission, accepted the authority of the state . 'Alī and his followers did not dispute the desirability of the state, but only pressed *his* claim, rejecting Abū Bakr's. However, the Bedouins rejected the idea of state itself, as it interfered with the unbounded freedom to which they had been used for generations. That is why even the Koran remained suspicious of their Islam. "The desert Arabs," it says, "surpass the town-dwellers in unbelief and hypocrisy, and have more cause to be ignorant of the laws which Allah has revealed to His apostle. But Allah is wise and all-knowing. Some desert Arabs regard what they give for the cause of Allah as a compulsory fine and wait for some misfortune to befall you. May ill-fortune befall them! Allah hears all and knows all." (Koran: 9:97-98).

Thus when 'misfortune' befell the Muslims, i.e., when the Prophet died, many nomadic tribes revolted against the authority of town-dwellers. It is called the war of *ridda* (apostasy). It was a general insurrection throughout Arabia. The Bedouins never wanted to submit to any authority. The condition of their economy did not warrant submission to any state. While, inside Medina, a struggle for power was on between different groups, one nomadic tribe after the other was forsaking Islam on hearing the new of the Prophet's death. It would be interesting to understand this problem in the proper perspective. The nature of the conflict between the new religion and the Bedouins was social and moral as well as economic. First let us look at the social and moral conflict. Goldziher has discussed this in detail in his book, *Muhammaden Studien,* in a chapter entitled "Muruw-

5. Maulana Shibli N'omānī, *Al-Farouq*, p. 99.

wa und Din."[6] Prof. Nicholson has given an excellent summary of it. I quote the summary: "In the first place, the fundamental idea of Islam was foreign and unintelligible to the Bedouins. 'It was not destruction of their idols that they opposed so much as the spirit of devotion which it sought to implant on them: the determination of their whole lives by the thought of God and of His pre-ordaining and retributive omnipotence, the prayers and fasts, the renouncement of coveted pleasures, and the sacrifice of money and property which was demanded of them in God's name....' Again, the social organization of the heathen Arabs was based on the tribe, wnereas that of Islam rested on the equality and fraternity of all believers. The religious bond cancelled all distinctions of rank and pedigree; it did away, theoretically, with clannish feuds, contests for honour, pride of race—things that lay at the very root of Arabian chivalry....Against such doctrine the conservative and material instincts of the desert people rose in revolt; and although they became Moslems *en masse*, the majority of them neither believed in Islam nor knew what it meant. Often then their motives were frankly utilitarian; they expected that Islam would bring them luck; and so long as they were sound in body, and their mares had fine foals, and their wives bore well-formed sons, and their wealth and herds multiplied, they said, 'We have been blessed ever since we adopted this religion', and were content; but if things went ill they blamed Islam and turned their backs on it. That these men were capable of religious zeal is amply proved by the triumphs which they won a short time afterwards over the disciplined armies of two mighty empires; but what chiefly inspired them, apart from love of booty, was the conviction, born of success, that Allah was fighting on their side." [7]

Thus there was a widespread revolt of these desert Arabs, which almost scared those in Medina, and shook the new state.* (In fact, as we shall see further, the nomadic Arabs remained in a state of insurgency, even during the mighty empires of the Umayyads and

6. See Goldziher's introductory chapter 'Murawwa and Dīn' in *Muhammaden Studien*, Part 1, pp. 1-39.
7. R.A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, pp. 178-9.

* Even after a state was founded in Medina, the Bedouins' main source of sustenance was raids and plundering, although these were then forbidden by Islam. Except for personal belongings, there was no institution of individual property. The emergence of the state with its well-defined laws and repressive apparatus requires definite economic and property relations in a sedentary culture. Thus for the Bedouins the institution of the state did not make any sense. On the contrary, they resented its repressive character.

Abbāsids). Balādhurī, quoting 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ūd (I am omitting the chain of narrators here) says that "After the death of the Messenger of God, we were standing at a cross-road where, if Allah had not obliged us in the person of Abū Bakr, it was probable that we would have been destroyed. We had decided with unanimity that we should not fight over a bint makhād (i.e., a baby camel just one year old) and ibn labbūn (i.e., a camel who has entered into the third year of life) and we live on the income of an Arabian village (meaning thereby that we should not fight against the desert Arabs and reconcile ourselves with the income of villages around Medina)."[8] Many of these desert tribes refused to pay *zakāt*, i.e., poll tax, although they agreed to remain Muslims.

It is interesting to note that till then the Bedouins had been raiding cities and towns for booty, but now a city-based state was demanding payment of tax from them. It was certainly repellent to them, as their nomadic economic base had not yet undergone any appreciable change.

The invasion of foreign lands did, later on, provide them with alternative resources of which they fully availed themselves. But, as soon as the Prophet died, they saw an opportunity to revolt, thus not only ridding themselves of the authority of a state imposed upon them, but also of the obligation to pay *zakāt*. Morever, the Bedouins did not have any share in the power structure of the state as it was monopolized by townspeople in general and the Meccan aristocracy in particular. It is also to be understood that political changes often result in economic repercussions as the degree of exploitation increases or decreases. This may also result in a better organization of trade, irrigation, alteration in the distributory pattern of economic surplus, etc. In the case of the Bedouins, political change brought about a great many economic repercussions. Raids on other tribes, which provided them with their wherewithal, stopped (Islam forbade those raids and the new state enforced this injunction). Over and above that they were made to pay *zakāt*. As for the reorganization of trade, irrigation, etc., the Bedouins had nothing to gain from it, as they were not integrated into the urban or agricultural economy. Hence the Bedouins revolted throughout Arabia. Abū Bakr took firm steps to put down the revolt, and finally succeeded. The legitimacy of the new state could not be challenged. Balādhurī has given a complete account of this war of *ridda* in the first volume of his celebrated book.

8. Balādhurī, *Futūh al-Buldan*, Urdu translation by Syed Abulkhair Maududi, (Hyderabad, nd) Vol. 1, pp. 150-151.

Apart from nomadic tribes, the rulers of outlying regions like Bahrein, Oman, Yaman, etc., who had accepted the suzerainty of Medina, also revolted. Their revolt was also put down by armies despatched from Medina.

Let us turn our attention to foreign conquests and their probable reasons. Muhammad in his own lifetime had written letters to certain foreign rulers inviting them to embrace the new faith. Among them were Heraclitus of Rome and Kisra of Persia. He had written to Heraclitus: "From the Messenger of God Muhammad to Heraclitus, the Emperor of Rome (the word used in the text is *'azīm*, i.e., great). Peace be on him who follows the right path. (Thereafter) I invite you to adopt Islam; if you accept, you will be safe and God will reward you twice. But if you reject it will be a sin and you will be answerable on behalf of your people."[9] A similar letter was written to Kisra also. Muhammad also undertook an expedition involving confrontation with the forces of Heraclitus at a place called Tabūk in between Medina and Syria to the north. Muhammad was aware of the consequences and hence took twenty to thirty thousand troops according to some sources. It is difficult to determine the motive of this expedition. Could he be challenging Heraclitus? That is difficult to believe. Muhammad was a shrewd statesman. He could not have indulged in wishful thinking, especially when he knew that Heraclitus had recently defeated the Persians and had been complimented for this achievement by some rulers. The time chosen too, was not very propitious. It was gruellingly hot, and food, fodder and water were in short supply. Some opposition also surfaced at this time. There was a secret conclave at a Jew's residence which Muhammad had burned down. They (Muhammad and his army), reached Tabūk, some two hundred and fifty miles from Medina, on the border of the Byzantine empire, and stayed there for ten or twenty days. There was no fight, but their presence in such strength impressed the petty chiefs in the area, who came to terms with the Lord of Medina. He concluded an agreement with Yuhannā (John), the King of Ayla, a small town at the end of the Gulf of 'Aqaba, who agreed to pay a tribute of three hundred dinars a year. Similar agreements were reached with the three Jewish settlements in the region. A few of Muhammad's men went to the oasis of Dūmat al-Jandal and forced its Christian king to go to Tabūk and conclude an agreement with the Prophet. After these successes Muhammad returned to Medina with his army. Thus Muhammad's intention in going on this expedition may have been to

9. Hakīm Abul Barakāt, *Asah al-siyar*, p. 433.

unify Arabia under his rule and to exact tribute from small principalities. According to the agreement with the ruler of Dūmat al-Jandal all the unsettled land, fallow land, jungle, armour and arms, all the beasts of burden etc. belonged to the Muslims, whereas all the date-palm trees within the citadel and the flowing water belonged to the people of Dūmat.[10]

Thus we see that Muhammad had made a beginning in the direction of conquests which was later continued by his caliphs. It helped consolidate the Muslim state and also provided financial resources which were badly needed by the Muslims. Let us closely examine the pressing necessity for outward expansion of the new state. The Arabs in the city of Mecca enjoyed a lucrative international trade. Expanding commerce demanded the existence of a powerful state which could guarantee the development of trade, and keep the unruly nomads (the Bedouins) in check. (The Bedouins often used to plunder trade-caravans, or impose a levy for the safe conduct of caravans in their region, frequently resulting in heavy monetary losses.). The safety of the trade routes was very important. Moreover, a stronger state commands more respect and could mean more favourable trade agreements. However, it would not be quite correct to rush to the conclusion that the mercantile class exercised full control over the nascent Muslim state. No doubt Islam was the product of a commercial society and not only encouraged commerce and profit, but fully approved of them. But the caliph was not solely motivated by this interest although this interest was not ignored (here we are referring to the first four caliphs only, who are known as the rightly guided caliphs). The character of the state was partly theological, and partly dominated by the commercial bourgeoisie. Subsequently, as we shall see, the character of the state changed.

After the establishment and consolidation of Islam, the Bedouins faced a real problem. In their case at least, the political change brought about a change in economic status. Earlier they used to raid other tribes for their sustenance. Now that all Arabs were unified and a political set-up was established to enforce a new morality and a new set of social and economic laws, it became very difficult, if not impossible, to raid other tribes. How could they survive then, if an alternative was not found? And, what is important to note here is that within the Arabian peninsula, there was no alternative available, as fertile land was scarce, and increasing pressure on the land upset the economic balance. Outward expansion, therefore, was the only

10. Balādhuri, Vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 97-8.

alternative. Caetani,[11] Becker[12] and other modern critical scholars have drawn our attention to the economic factor involved in outward expansion. But what is worth noting is that it was not entirely ignored by the early Muslim chroniclers. Balādhurī, the historian of the Islamic conquests, was the most judicious of them, and has objectively recorded various important incidents. He tells us that in recruiting for the Syrian campaign Abū Bakr "wrote to the people of Makkah, al-Tā'if, al-Yaman and all the Arabs in Najd and al-Hijāz summoning them to a 'holy war' and arousing their desire for it and for the booty to be got from the Greeks."[13] Balādhurī puts those who responded into two categories: (1) *Muhtasib* (i.e., those who seek naught other than pleasure of the Lord) and (2) *Tamī* (i.e., those who sought booty). Balādhurī again tells us that Rustam, the Persian general who defended his country against the Arab invasion, made the following remark to the Muslim envoy: "I have learned that you were forced to what you are doing by nothing but the narrow means of livelihood and by poverty." Mughīra (the Muslim emissary who was conversing with Rustam) replied in words which again give a similar indication: "God sent his Messenger amongst us and made us prosperous by responding to his call and following him."[14]

Thus we see that outward expansion was partly necessitated by the economic circumstances of the Arabian peninsula. Abū Bakr, therefore, despatched his forces towards Syria as soon as he had successfully quelled the Bedouin uprising. Perhaps this uprising made him conscious of the fact that the Bedouins, if they were to be contained, had to be engaged in fighting an external enemy, a war which would also provide them with economic resources. Apparently there was no provocation from either Heraclitus or his governor in Syria or Palestine. Moreover, these sources also clearly indicate that there was no professed intention of launching these crusades for spreading Islam (at least it was not the only reason). How else can one explain the fact that in most of the treaties signed, no one was forced to embrace Islam? If somebody did so of his own accord or for some material advantage to be derived by entering into the Islamic fold, it was a different matter. The conquerors, it seems, were more interested in *jizya* or poll tax (though this should not be construed to mean that it was their only motivation. There were many who fought for higher relig-

11. *Annali*, Vol. ii, pp. 831-61, quoted by Philip K. Hitti in *History of the Arabs*, p. 144.
12. In *Cambridge Medieval History* (New York, 1913), Vol. ii, Chapter xi.
13. Balādhurī, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 173.
14. ibid. p. 443.

ious motives). Whosoever agreed to pay *jizya* and surrendered was not harmed further, and was guaranteed peace. Thus Balādhurī, while writing about the invasion of Armenia, says, "After this he (Marwān) entered the territory of Sarīr, suddenly attacked it, conquered many of its forts; the ruler of Sarīr surrendered and agreed to supply 500 male and 500 female slaves (the latter should have black hair and thick eyelashes and long eyelids) and one lakh *mudi* grains for the godown of Albāb. Similarly he entered into agreement with the people of Tumān on condition that they supply 50 male and 50 female slaves every year (the latter should have black hair, thick eyelashes and long eyelids) and 20,000 *mudi* grains for the food godowns .... Thereafter he entered into Hamzīn. The people of Hamzīn refused to sign any treaty. He besieged the town, and the siege lasted for a month. He conquered the fort and burnt it. It was then agreed that they (the people of Hamzīn) would supply 500 male and female slaves (once) and 30,000 *mudi* grains every year for the godowns of Albāb.[15] Thus we see that nowhere is there any clause relating to forcible conversion to Islam. The Arabs' purpose of conquest was more mundane than it is generally understood to be.

Another interesting question is how these almost semi-nomadic Arabs with their primitive weapons could defeat the mighty empires of their time, i.e., the Byzantine and Sasanid empires. Within a couple of years these Arabs took possession of 'Irāq and penetrated into Persia on the one hand, became masters of Syria and Palestine as well as Egypt on the other. It would be worthwhile to analyse the reasons. These rapid victories were, in fact, the final stage in the age-long process of gradual infiltration from the barren desert to the adjacent Fertile Crescent, the last great Semitic migration in that region. The early Muslim historians too, in their own way, have tried to explain this phenomenon. There are, of course, various aspects of this complex phenomenon. Let us examine some of them here. For our convenience, we can divide them broadly into two categories: (1) internal and (2) external to the Arabs. First, let us consider the internal category.

The Arabs, as we know, were divided into a number of tribes even in cities like Mecca and Medina. However, after a great deal of struggling, the Prophet eliminated all those who had vested interests in the tribal structure of the society and united them under the banner of Islam. After this unity, the Arabs registered many victories within Arabia itself by subduing small principalities as well as the Jewish settlements in and around Medina. These victories brought them rich

15. ibid. pp. 348-9.

dividends in the form of tribute and they very well realized the importance of this unity. When they launched attacks on foreign lands they were imbued with this spirit of unity. They also knew that it was the only effective weapon they possessed when pitted against the most formidable authority. They were fully conscious of this, and repeatedly emphasized this point even while addressing their enemy. They told them: "We were divided and fighting among ourselves. God sent His Messenger amongst us and we were united." This feeling of unity was not yet affected by the dissensions which normally follow in the wake of wealth and power (this was soon to happen; in fact, within two decades of their major conquests in the Fertile Crescent region). The Arabs, moreover, had a fervent zeal for a cause. They were fighting for the cause of God and believed that God was helping them. (Even those fighting for booty, called *tamī'*, could develop such conviction in the thick of the battle.) This conviction must have played no mean role. In our own time we have seen that a few men with no particular means but armed with socialist or democratic convictions have been able to successfully overthrow quite powerful but decadent empires.

Another important reason is that in contrast to their enemy, the Arabs fought with rather primitive but light weaponry and were, therefore, highly mobile. Their enemy as against this relied on heavy armaments, elephants, etc., which greatly hampered their movements. Arabs, no masters of military science and hardly having any experience of fighting in disciplined formation on fronts, devised spontaneous strategies and swiftly charged the enemy. Those pitted against the Arabs, on the other hand, were dogged not only by their heavy weaponry but also by their age-old orthodox methods devised for fighting frontal wars. Rustam, who was heading the Sasanid army, on seeing the crude weapons which the Arabs possessed (they were not even properly sharpened) and their haggard uncivilized appearance, ridiculed them and thought that the battle would be over within a couple of hours. The enemy was not worth any trouble. But when the battle lines were drawn and the fighting started, Rustam soon realized that he had grossly underestimated his enemy.

Now let us examine the external reasons for the swift victory of the Arabs, and how they could become masters of the great empires of their time. The Roman and the Sasanid empires, as we know, were faced with internal dissension. The ruling classes in these empires were used to luxuries which had corroded their spirit and their will to fight. Moreover, their luxuries and pomp and show were based on the exploitation of the impoverished peasantry on the one hand, and

slaves and other people of lowly origin on the other. In this connection it will be quite interesting to go through a piece of conversation between Mughīra and Rustam before the battle of Qādisiyya began. This conversation has been recorded by Tabari in his annals. "Mughīra" (he was the Arab emissary to Rustam), says Tabari, "crossed the bridge and when he reached the Persian troops, he was stopped so as to obtain prior permission to visit Rustam. When Mughīra reached there (i.e., the court of Rustam) he saw Persians in their elegant dresses made of golden threads. They had crowns on their heads. And, for quite some distance, they had spread rugs so that the visitor had to walk through that distance. When Mughīra bin Sho'ba came, he sat on the cushion on Rustam's throne. Some people rushed towards him and pulled him down from the throne. He (Mughīra) said, 'We had heard of your wisdom but I see that there is no other nation more foolish than yours. We Arabs are equal. We do not enslave anyone except in war. I, therefore, thought that you too have the same degree of national sympathy as we have, but by your action today you have shown that some of you have become masters of others (of your own people). This (i.e., becoming masters over your own people) is not the right way. We do not do this. I have not come of my own accord but you have invited me today and I have come to know that your rule has weakened and that you will be defeated because no country with such ways can survive long.' Hearing this the Persian people said, 'By God, this Arab is speaking the truth.' The feudal lords said, 'By God, he has such things that our slaves would always be on his side. A curse be on our forefathers who considered Arabs insignificant and lowly!' " [16]

The above statement is very significant as it throws light on the social conditions prevalent there. Islam, in a certain sense, was a social leveller in as much as there were no feudal institutions and concomitant gross inequalities. Moreover, theoretically at least, Islam did not recognize race or colour as discriminating factors, and accorded equal treatment to all the faithful. When compared with Persian society or those regions which were ruled by the Roman emperor in the north of Arabia, Islamic society was far more egalitarian and hence had tremendous appeal for the oppressed of the other societies. This apprehension, in fact, has been shown in the passage quoted above from Tabari, by the landowning lords of Persia. The common masses of these countries in fact welcomed the Arabs as liberators and even actively helped them in conquering those regions.

16. Tabari, Vol. II translation, op. cit., pp. 402-403.

We will quote some passages from Balādhurī to this effect. "When the Muslims," says Balādhurī "came to know that (Heraclitus) had collected forces which were advancing for the battle of Yarmūk, they (the Muslims) returned to the people of Hams all the *kharāj* (taxes) they had collected from them and said, 'We are unable to protect you on account of other engagements, so now take care of yourselves.' (In return for taking *jizya*, Muslims were duty bound to protect their non-Muslim subjects and so they returned *jizya* to absolve themselves of that obligation.) Thereupon the people of Hams said, 'We much prefer your judicious rule to the oppression and tyranny we were faced with before: we will resist the forces of Heraclitus and will protect the city along with your governor.' And the Jews said, 'By the Torah, the governor of Heraclitus cannot enter this city unless he defeats us and until we have made all efforts (to stop him).' Then they closed the doors of the city and started guarding them. The Jews and Christians of other cities too, which the Muslims had conquered and had an agreement with, did the same thing. They said, 'If the Romans and their allies conquer us again, then our condition will be what it was before.' . . . . When God defeated the infidels (i.e., Romans) and made the Muslims victorious, they opened the doors of their cities and came out dancing and singing, celebrated the victory and paid *kharāj*. . . . "[17]

Now let us see in what way the Muslims proved to be better rulers than their predecessors. The Arabs, as pointed out earlier, were either nomads or traders from the cities. They had not known or developed an agricultural system and its concomitant feudalism. The economy of the conquered provinces, both in the Roman and the Sasanid empires was mainly agricultural, and the main income of the state was based on land tax. A large share of the crop was thus taken away either by the emperor's men or by the feudal class. Whereas in the case of the Arabs, at least in the beginning, the conquered people had to pay only *jizya* (later on a land tax was also imposed) which was much lighter than what they had been paying to their masters. Peasants thus became masters of their land once again, as the Arabs did not occupy or take away their lands. Thus we see that 'Umar had instructed Abū 'Ubayda to leave the land with the landholders after conquering the territory.[18] The conquered people were also not forced to change their religion if they agreed to pay *jizya*. This the people agreed to pay readily, as its burden was not very heavy. In every peace treaty their lives, properties and places of worship were

17. Balādhurī, op. cit., pp. 221-2.
18. Shibli N'omānī, op. cit., p. 164.

fully protected, and in every subsequent invasion such clauses became valuable assets for the Arabs in winning over people's hearts. Their simplicity, incorruptibility and egalitarianism were some other positive virtues which were in marked contrast to the ostentatious living, corruption, reckless exploitation of the impoverished peasantry, gross inequalities, etc., found among the ruling class of the Roman or Sasanid empires.

It will be interesting to take note of Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *'asabiyah* (group solidarity) here. According to him nomadic people, who precede civilized people living in cities, have stronger feelings of group solidarity, as there are no vested interests (such as power, wealth, etc.) to divide them and, therefore, they prove far more effective in confronting their civilized counterparts who are used to a life of luxury and are divided amongst themselves owing to conflicting interests. But once the desert tribe achieves power and wealth, it loses its courage, is corrupted by wealth and power, and faces a fate similar to what its enemy suffered before it. He writes: "As a result (of achieving power and wealth), the toughness of desert life is lost. Group feeling and courage weaken. Members of the tribe revel in the well-being that God has given them. Their children and offspring grow up too proud to look after themselves or to the other things that are necessary in connection with group feeling. This finally becomes a character trait and a natural characteristic of theirs. Their group feeling and courage decrease in the succeeding generations. Eventually, group feeling is altogether destroyed. They thus invite their own destruction. The greater their luxury and the easier the life they enjoy, the closer they are to extinction, not to mention (their lost chance of securing) royal authority. The things that go with luxury and submergence in a life of ease break the vigour of the group feeling, which alone produces superiority. When group feeling is destroyed, the tribe is no longer able to protect itself, let alone press any claims. It will be swallowed by other nations."[19]

This is exactly what happened with the Muslims too. We have already seen that the Muslims (whose armies comprised large numbers of Bedouins from the desert, possessed by the feeling of group solidarity, stormed the centres of the most powerful empires of the world and humbled them with their primitive weapons. According to Ibn Khaldūn's theory *'asabiyah* and absence of luxurious living and corruptibility were their greatest weapons. The Romans and the Sasanids on the other hand, owing to a long period of life of

19. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, p. 109.

luxury and power, had become utterly corrupt and owing to differing interests were divided amongst themselves, thus weakening their solidarity. Moreover, a life of luxury needed more resources which could be raised only through more oppressive taxes on their subjects which, naturally, made them unpopular with them. That is why their people actively collaborated with the Arabs and welcomed them as conquerors. But, a couple of centuries later, in 1258, the Muslims met the same fate at the hands of the Tartars. The Mongol invaders inflicted a crushing defeat on the 'Abbāsid empire. The reasons were not very different. The Muslims, after the years of living in luxury and ease, had lost their original vigour and *'asabiyah*, and were divided amongst themselves. Their infighting had made them utterly weak and incapable of resisting the enemy attack. Though compared to the invading Mongols they had a well trained army and better weapons to fight with, they were completely routed in the battlefield. Like the Sasanids whom they had defeated, they were now divided into different classes and no trace of equality was left. If at all, it remained only in theory. The Arabs had warned the Sasanids of these evil practices and now they themselves were victim to them. The Mongols who came from the steppes of central Asia had the feeling of group solidarity and had not as yet been corrupted by wealth and power. Their ranks were not divided. Thus with crude weapons; but with courage and determination, they could easily defeat the Arabs, as the Arabs in similar conditions had been able to defeat the Romans and the Sasanids. A student of history can easily understand that it was not merely superiority of faith which ensured the Muslims' victory over the great empires of the world, but certain historical conditions and socio-economic factors, as well. Religion could at best be said to have inspired them to fight, but these other factors helped them to win.

Islam gave the Arabs pride, and provided them with a rallying point. Once the foreign invasions began, all the Arabs realized its importance and joined its ranks. Even the Christian Arabs were overwhelmed by the feeling of Arab nationalism, and joined the Muslims in fighting against the Sasanids or the Romans. When in 'Irāq the Muslims suffered an initial set-back, the Arabs took it as an insult to the nation and the Arab tribes from all directions came to the caliph 'Umar to offer their services to avenge the insult. Shibli N'omānī tells us that the set-back so greatly enraged the Arabs that even a Christian tribe of Arabs, the Taghlab, rallied around the Muslims. Its chiefs came to 'Umar and told him, "Today the Arabs are pitted against the non-Arabs *(ajam)*. In this national expedition, we are also

with you."[20] Even the border states of the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, who were vassals of the Romans and the Sasanids, embraced Islam and joined their brethren in fighting against their former masters. They gained an opportunity to avenge themselves under the banner of Islam. Thus we see that for the Arabs Islam was a national revolution, more than anything else. The Arabs, who were considered to be an insignificant force living either in the desert or in small towns, now became the masters of a vast empire. It was perhaps for this reason that 'Umar considered it to be compulsory for the Arabs to embrace Islam, whereas for non-Arabs there was no such compulsion, as already shown above. Thus Tabari tells us: "Walīd bin 'Atba insisted that the Banū Taghlab (a Christian tribe) should become Muslim. He wrote to 'Umar about it. 'Umar replied as follows: 'It is very necessary for the people of the Arabian peninsula to embrace Islam. *Arabs will have to* become Muslims. Even then we can allow them to follow (their own religion) on condition that they do not continue their children in the Christian faith and whosoever wants to become Muslim (from the Banū Taghlab), his Islam should be accepted.' "[21] Thus for the Arabs Islam was a national religion.

The Arabs, as we have shown above, were fully united when they launched the attack on foreign countries and their unity became one of the very important weapons in their fight against the enemy. Could the Arabs remain united for long as Islam emphasized unity and brotherhood? The answer is in the negative. They remained united only as long as they did not acquire wealth and power. But with the conquest of the Roman and Sasanid provinces, the tide of wealth and power could not be kept in check for long. Soon the riches piled up along with their conquests. As per the tradition, whatever was brought by way of booty was immediately distributed among those who took part in the battle or other deserving people. Very little was retained in the treasury; sometimes it would be completely emptied out. Even by way of taxes, enormous wealth was pouring in from the provinces. Balādhuri tells us that the *kharāj* (tax amount) from Jordan was one lakh eighty thousand dinars, from Palestine three lakhs fifty thousand, from Damascus four lakh dinars and from Hams and Qinissarīn and from the region called al-'Awāsim it was seven to eight lakh dinars.[22] These are only a few provinces. There were many more, yielding far more than these. Abul Farj in his book *Kitab al-Kharaj* has given figures from various provinces. According to

20. Shibli N'omani, op. cit., p. 166.
21. Tabari, Vol. III, Urdu translation by Rashid Ahmad Arshad, p. 70.
22. Balādhurī, op. cit., p. 324.

him Hulwān alone yielded around ninety crore dirhams.[23]

Initially 'Umar tried his best to prevent Muslims from acquiring wealth or landed properties. He sent strict instructions to all his provincial governors and framed a code of conduct for them. But the tide of history was against him. Nothing could help. Heedless of 'Umar's insistence on the old-fashioned simplicity characteristic of al-Hijāz, Sa'd erected here a residence modelled on the royal palace of Ctesiphon. 'Umar tried to punish severely those who indulged in extravagance. Khālid b. al-Walīd, the famous general, once gave a poet 10,000 dirhams, pleased with his composition. The secretary immediately wrote to 'Umar about it. Thereupon 'Umar wrote to Abū 'Ubayda that if Khālid had given this reward from his pocket, he had indulged in extravagance, and if he had given from the state treasury then he was guilty of misappropriation, and in both cases he deserved to be dismissed. The messenger who had come with the letter from 'Umar, asked Khālid publicly where he had paid this money from. Khālid did not confess his guilt. As a symbol of dismissal, his cap was removed and his neck was tied with his own headgear. This was public humiliation of one of the greatest generals of Islam at that time.* But even such exemplary punishments could not stop people from accumulating wealth. These punishments did not strike at the root of the problem which was caused by the fact that private property was thought to be permitted by Islam and no ceiling was fixed on the accumulation of wealth.†

Ibn Khaldūn has quoted certain figures of accumulated wealth from Mās'udī. He says: "In the days of 'Uthmān, the men around Muhammad acquired estates and money. On the day 'Uthmān was killed, 150,000 dinars, and 10,00,000 dirhams were in the hands of his treasurer. The value of his estates in Wadi al-Qura and Hunayn and other places was 200,000 dinars. He also left 1,000 horses and 1,000

23. Abul Farj, *Kitab al-Kharaj* ed. de Goeje, Urdu translation by Sayed Abul Khair Maududi, (Hyderabad, nd) p. 250.

* 'Umar inflicted such a severe punishment for the generosity shown by Khālid bin Walīd as he wanted to follow the Islamic ideal. But the situation completely changed when Islam was completely feudalised and became part of a powerful establishment. In this connection it would be pertinent to quote an episode from *Tarikh al-Fakhri*.

Yahyā al-Baramaki was a powerful *wazir* (minister) during the 'Abbāsid period. He had a very high reputation for generosity. Once he gave a beautiful orchard with several houses and 10,000 dinars to a man who invited him for dining though he was a man of no means. (See Muhammad bin 'Ali bin Taba Taba *Tarikh al-Fakhri*. Urdu tr. by Maulavi Ali Khan, (Delhi. 1969), pp. 296-97).

† However, the Quran does not encourage accumulation of wealth. It says, "They ask thee what they ought to spend. Say: What is surplus (more than your need) with you." (2:219)

female servants. Talhah's income from the 'Irāq was 1,000 dinars a day, and his income from the region of ash-Shrah was more than that. The stable of 'Abd-ar-Rahmān b. 'Awf contained 1,000 horses. He also had 1,000 camels and 10,000 sheep. One fourth of his estate after his death amounted to 84,000. Zayd b. Thābit left silver and gold that was broken into pieces with pickaxes, in addition to the (other) property and estates that he left, to the value of 100,000 dinars. Az Zubayr built himself a residence in al-Basra and other residences in Egypt and al-Kūfa and Alexandria. Talhah built one in al-Kūfa and had his residence in Medina improved. He used plaster, bricks and teakwood. Sa'd b. Abī Waqās built himself a residence in Medina and had it plastered inside and out. Ya'lāb. Munyah left 50,000 dinars and estates and other things the value of which amounted to 300,000 dirhams." After quoting this from al-Mās'udī, Ibn Khaldūn makes an interesting comment. He says, "Such were the gains people made. Their religion did not blame them for (amassing so much), because, as booty, it was lawful property." Ibn Khaldūn tries to defend the amassing of wealth by saying that "They did not employ their property wastefully but in a planned way in all their conditions as we have stated. Amassing wordly property is reprehensible, but it did not reflect upon them, because blame attaches only to waster and lack of planning as we have indicated. Since their expenditure followed a plan and served the truth and its ways, amassing (so much property) helped them along on the path of truth and served the purpose of attaining the other world."[24]

Whatever Ibn Khaldūn might say, the fact remains that the amassing and concentration of wealth became a real curse for the early Islamic society, as we shall see a little later. It created a great deal of tension, and when it was coupled with the struggle for power, the early Islamic society was plunged into civil war. It really is surprising that a perceptive historian like Ibn Khaldūn who, on another plane, theorizes that the amassing of wealth and easy and luxurious ways bring about the downfall of a ruling dynasty, defends, in the above passage, the amassing of wealth by the eminent companions of the Prophet. 'Umar, the second caliph, as already pointed out, was aware of this danger and he sincerely tried to prevent concentration of wealth. 'Umar took some measures to curb concentration of wealth during the last phase of his regime. He is also reported to have said "Had I done before what I did later I would have taken away surplus wealth from the rich and given it away to

24. Ibn Khaldūn, op. cit., p. 163.

the poor and needy."[25] He also forbade private ownership of cultivable land and made it a state property. He allowed the benefit (of cultivation) to the cultivators with full security, whether they accepted Islam or did not.[26] In fact 'Umar, in collaboration with 'Alī tried very hard to put into practice the ideals of Islam as propounded by the Koran but failed as the third caliph 'Uthmān, under pressure from the newly emerged powerful class of rich reversed all those policies and gave all the concessions to the vested interests they asked for.[27] But he was swimming against the current. The Arabs were shrewd and practical people. For a long time, they had seen the splendours of the Roman and Sasanid civilizations. Islam had now provided them with an opportunity to realize their ambitions. Soon the Muslims, among whom were the most revered companions of Muhammad, took to the ways of the Roman and Sasanid rulers. Mu'āwiya's shifting of his capital to Syria, in the former Roman province, was symbolic of this. He constructed an elegant palace in the style of the former rulers. Thus, says Hitti, "Damascus, which young Muhammad according to tradition hesitated to enter because he wished to enter paradise only once, had become the capital of this huge empire. In the heart of the city, set like a pearl in the emerald girdle of its gardens, stood the glittering palace of the Umayyads, commanding a view of flourishing plains which extended southward to Mount Hermon with its turban of perpetual snow. Al-Khadrā (the green one) was its name. Its builder was none other than Mu'āwiya, founder of the dynasty, and it stood beside the Umayyad Mosque which al-Walīd had newly adorned and made into that jewel of architecture which still attracts lovers of beauty. In the audience chamber a square seat covered with richly embroidered cushions formed the caliphal throne, on which during formal audiences the caliph, in gorgeous flowing robes, sat cross-legged. On the right stood his paternal relatives.[28] Courtiers, poets and petitioners stood behind."[29] Thus we see in which direction the wheel of history was moving. Those Arabs who were, till the day before, ridiculing the

25. See Ahmad 'Abbās Saḥlih, *Al-Yamīn wa al-Yasar fi'l Islam*, (Beirut, 1973) p. 64.
26. ibid. p. 91.
27. ibid. p. 66. The entire book is based on the thesis that while the first Caliph Abu Bakr was centrist, 'Umar and 'Alī were leftist and 'Uthmān was rightist in economic policies. Sāḥih maintains that until 'Uthmān's time the private property in land did not consolidate. It was only during his regime that such a consolidation took place and hundreds of thousands of slaves began working on the privately owned lands.
28. See also Aghānī, Vol. iv, p. 80.
29. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 215.

Romans and the Sasanids for creating differences between man and man, masters and slaves, rulers and the ruled, gave up their tribal simplicity, broke with democratic functioning and adopted the manners of the erstwhile Romans and Persians. It would not do to say that they gave up Islamic ways and took to the path trodden by foreign ideologies, and that had they continued to follow Islamic ideals, they would not have been plunged into mutual infights and much trouble could have been avoided. This would be an idealistic and unhistorical approach. The whole problem must be viewed in its proper context. The simplicity, egalitarianism and democratic functioning of a sort among the Muslims in the pre-conquest period was partly due to the situational constraints then obtaining, and partly to Islamic ideals or principles. When the tide of material wealth came, the whole situation was totally transformed, and despite the Islamic ideals and principles, their pattern of behaviour changed completely. Only a few individuals here and there held fast to those ideals. However, they could not gather much momentum. A caliph of the stature of 'Alī, who strove to revive this earlier simplicity and to practise the Islamic ideals, was soon outmanoeuvred by unprincipled and pragmatic persons like Mu'āwiya.

Let us briefly mention here the role played by Abū Dharr Ghifārī —an eminent companion of the Prophet. Abū Dharr was well aware of the social tensions arising out of the concentration of wealth in a few hands. The socialists or the communists left in the Muslim countries see in him a precursor of socialism. At least, his case is cited to prove that socialist ideals are not alien to Islam. It is said that he used to criticize severely those who had accumulated a great deal of wealth which flowed from foreign conquests, and led a life of luxury and ease. Says Maxime Rodinson, "Statements were attributed to him according to which, for instance, everyone ought to spend on the service of God, or in charity, the whole of his wealth or income beyond the minimum needed for subsistence. He was said to have shocked people, about ten years after the Prophet's death, by maintaining that the threatening verses in the Koran about rich men unwilling to give alms (i.e., Koran, 9.34 *et seq)* were applicable to leading members of the Muslim community no less than to the Jewish and Christian clerics aimed at in the preceding verse."[30] Rodinson further remarks, "What must be kept in mind is this. The semi-mythical Abū Dharr of the Sunnah and of the historians of medieval

30. Maxime Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, English translation by Brian Pearce (London, 1974), p. 25.

times reflects very well, quite apart from any religious factors, the protest of the disinherited against the frustrations forced upon them by the luxury and oppression of the rich and powerful. This tendency existed both in canalized forms, harmless to the social order, and in activist, revolutionary forms, but it remained without decisive influence."[31] We are also told by the historians that, because of his radical views, Abū Dharr was persecuted by the established order. He was exiled from one place to another. Thus we see that though persons like him constantly reminded Muslims of certain ideals or teachings of Islam, no one heeded them. Thus, more than the ideals the actual situation (which includes the forces of production relations) decides the actual course of action.

We now propose to examine the factors which plunged the Muslims into a state of civil war less than thirty years after the death of the Prophet. The fundamental cause was the new tensions created by wealth flowing from the foreign conquests. 'Umar tried to keep the situation under control by his exemplary punishments. However, 'Uthmān, his successor, reversed this policy and gave all sorts of concessions. Moreover, he assigned most of the important gubernatorial posts to persons belonging to his clan, ignoring the claims of certain more deserving people. 'Uthmān was also alleged to have spent money from the state treasury in a way not permitted by earlier practice. He gave generously to his own relatives from Bait al-māl, i.e., the state treasury. When someone questioned him about this, he is reported to have said, " 'Umar never gave anything to his relatives for fear of God and I give to my relatives for fear of God." (The Koran teaches *sila-e-rahmī* i.e., maintaining relations and taking care of the relatives).[32] Thus 'Uthmān tried to rationalize a practice which had been assiduously avoided by his predecessor. Coupled with other acts of omission and commission, this spread a great deal of resentment against 'Uthmān, which slowly snowballed into formidable opposition.

Of the many different groups of people among the population of the Islamic empire at that time, the Egyptian scholar Dr. Tāha Husayn has thrown light in detail on some.[33] Here we give a brief summary from Tāha Husayn's book. According to him, there were four groups, namely: (1) the Quraysh of Mecca, (2) the Helpers (the Ansār), (3) the nomadic Arabs and (4) the subjects of the conquered

31. ibid. p. 25.
32. Dr. Tāha Husayn, *Al-Fitnat al-Kubra*, translated into Urdu by 'Abdal Hamīd N'omanī, Vol. 1, p. 56.
33. ibid. pp. 113-125.

countries. The tribe of Quraysh was the most dominant tribe among the whole of Arabia. Its domination was not due to its fighting power. The Quraysh enjoyed this pre-eminent position for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were in charge of the Ka'ba, which was considered holy by all the Arabs. Secondly, they were rich businessmen who controlled international commerce. In fact they were an important link between the Romans in the west and the Indians and the Chinese in the east. The Arabs of the other regions were dependent on them in one way or the other for their livelihood. Thirdly, the Quraysh had acquired a great deal of experience of different peoples as they had to deal with them. They were, therefore, quite astute and skilled diplomats. For these reasons other Arabs accepted their leadership and primacy. The first four caliphs were all selected from amongst them. They considered it their right to rule over the Arabs after the formation of the state in Arabia. This naturally created some resentment among the others. According to Tāha Husayn, 'Umar was well aware of this, and while selecting governors and other important officials, he did not ignore the claim of non-Qurayshites. He had even advised 'Uthmān to follow his example, but Uthmān ignored his advice, and gave most of the important posts to his relatives among the Quraysh, which created hostility among the others.

The second group was that of the Helpers. They had defeated the Quraysh along with Muhammad in the battle of Badr. They had, therefore, won respectability. The Ansārs staked their claim to the caliphate after the death of the Prophet. But the immigrant Quraysh outmanoeuvred them. However, they were consoled by being told they would have "rulers from the Quraysh and ministers from the Helpers". They were, of course, consulted on important occasions. All the caliphs followed this policy. But only important companions from amongst them were consulted. However, the new generation, which came of age by the time 'Uthmān became caliph, was nursing the grievance that the Ansārs had been let down and they did not have any distinctive role to play in the matters of governance. There was deep resentment against the leadership of the Quraysh and the way Qurayshites imposed themselves on others. The younger generation, especially, felt it very acutely. Moreover, it was not in keeping with Islamic ideals and, therefore, they did not want to give more importance to the Quraysh over other Muslims. During 'Uthmān's regime these feelings were further accentuated as he distributed most of the important governmental posts to the Qurayshites, ignoring the claims of others. Thus the Ansārs felt badly let down, and their

hostility was intensified. This was also a contributing factor in the civil war.

The third group was that of nomadic Arabs who had accepted Islam by force of circumstances. (In fact, Islam was considered the religion of the city-dwelling Arabs and thought to be catering to their cultural and spiritual needs and material ambitions.) They had rebelled soon after the death of the Prophet. The rebellion was quashed and to divert their resentment they were sent out in large numbers on expeditions of conquest. They constituted the hard core of the fighting forces and it was because of them that many important conquests became possible. Islam had promised that they would be treated equally as all were equal, and only those who were more pious had superiority over others. But, nevertheless, they were considered as inferiors by the city Arabs, as they were notcultured and hence had not been able to assimilate the Islamic teachings and had not developed the Islamic *weltanschauung*. These Arabs therefore, felt let down, in as much as they were not treated on a par with others as promised. They greatly resented the Qurayshites for monopolizing the leadership of the Islamic world (later on the resentment of the nomadic Arabs against the city dwellers intensified to such an extent that the Bedouin soldiery became the mainstay of the Kharijite movement, one of whose fundamental doctrines was that every free Arab is entitled to become the caliph). This group also harboured a grudge against the establishment.

The fourth group was that of the non-Arab people of the conquered countries. This was the least privileged among the groups, had no share whatsoever in running the affairs of the Government, and in fact was totally subjugated and helpless. In the conquered provinces the income of the treasury rose considerably during 'Uthmān's period, mainly on account of increased taxation on the *dhimmīs* (i.e. the protected subjects of the conquered provinces). The Muslims, who were welcomed as liberators by these people, soon became their masters, and after having aroused their expectations, left them embittered. It was for this reason that Kūfa—an important military camp in 'Irāq—became the centre of rebellion for the malcontents. Kūfa, it is important to note, had about half its population composed of *mawālī* (clients), who monopolized handicrafts, trade and commerce. They were mostly of Persian origin and had come to Kūfa mainly as prisoners of war and had there been converted to Islam. However, they remained dependent on the Arabs and had no hope of freeing themselves from the status of clientship; hence the ferment among them. This resentment was,

more often than not, expressed by the people of Kūfa by supporting the Shī'a heterodox movement, as the rulers were orthodox Sunnis. We have observed this phenomenon in the case of the pre-Islamic buffer state of the Ghassāns, who adopted the Monophysite form of Christianity as against their Byzantine masters who followed the Orthodox Church.

Thus we see that during 'Uthmān's rule a section of the tribe of Quraysh monopolized office and created a great deal of resentment among other peoples. When their repeated demands to remove the causes of discontent were ignored a bloody civil war broke out. As we have seen earlier a great number of Bedouins from the desert joined the army to take part in various expeditions sent to conquer foreign countries. A large number of these Bedouins settled in Kūfa, which was a huge military camp in that area. These Bedouins were uncivilized and restless people who found it difficult to submit to any authority and jealously guarded their natural freedom. There was a constant inflow of these Bedouins into Kūfa, and, to add to the gravity of the problem, a huge number of male and female slaves captured in the wars of conquest were brought to Kūfa and settled there. The children born of female slaves and other non-Arab parents multiplied and had a great impact on the overall composition of the population of Kūfa by the time 'Uthmān came to power. On the other hand the entry of a large number of Bedouins and their fast breeding had also created tensions of their own as far as the cultured city Arabs were concerned. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the population belonging to the lower strata of society, the ruling classes were fast losing their grip over the situation. Most of these poorer people hated their masters, and often resorted to cunning and treachery against them. Sa'īd, the governor of Kūfa, in a letter written to the caliph 'Uthmān, has mentioned all these factors while referring to the situation in Kūfa and the complications they had created for the authorities. The turmoil created by these elements was indeed getting out of hand.

Dr. Tāha Husayn tells us that 'Uthmān took one decision which proved to have far-reaching economic consequences for the world of Islam.[34] In order to reduce the pressure of population on certain cities like Kūfa in the conquered provinces, he took the bold step of allowing the exchange of lands held by the Arabs of Hijāz in the conquered provinces with those they held in the Hijāz itself and vice versa. In other words free transactions in land were permitted.

34. What follows is a summary from *Al-Fitnat al-Kubrā*, (Bombay, nd) pp.146-150.

('Umar had put a number of restrictions on such transactions, to avoid the concentration of wealth in a few hands, and he was right.) 'Uthmān thought that the Arabs of Hijāz would prefer to stay in their native province if they were permitted to exchange their lands in the conquered provinces with those of Hijāz. Thus their slaves and servants would also remain in Hijāz along with them and the pressure of population in the conquered provinces, which was causing concern to the authorities, would be greatly reduced. However, 'Uthmān and his advisers could not grasp the future consequences of such a step. In fact it initiated a new economic revolution in Arabia which changed the entire class composition of that society. Having gained permission to exchange lands, some shrewd persons like Talhahmade the most of it. Talhah sold all his lands in Hijāz which were not very fertile, in exchange for fertile lands in 'Irāq. Soon he became the owner of a huge landed property yielding a rich income. A large number of slaves and other servants worked on these lands. This was not an isolated instance. Many people became big landowners, thus giving rise to a new class. The small holders could not benefit from this scheme, as a handful of persons bought whatever good land was available. This big landholding did not remain confined only to 'Irāq. It spread to all the conquered provinces. Most of the companions of the Prophet who had immovable properties either in Hijāz or in the conquered provinces benefited to the maximum extent by this scheme. Thus a new class of plutocrats was born in Islam.

Similarly, many persons who had lands in the conquered provinces exchanged them with those in the Hijāz. Thus in Hijāz too big landholdings came into existence. Now these big land-holders wanted to cultivate their lands, and for that reason imported a large number of slaves and servants from outside to work in the fields. In no time the formerly barren Hijāz became most fertile and productive. A highly centralized state had also come into existence now, which could, with its large resources, undertake big irrigation schemes (Marx has also pointed out that in many Asiatic regions with big desert areas despotic and highly centralized states came into existence, as only such states could undertake large irrigation schemes). 'Umar, the second caliph, had started work on many irrigation canals and watering wells, etc. Maqrīzī tells us that in Egypt itself around one lakh and twenty thousand workers were employed daily round the year for irrigation schemes.[35] During

35. Maqrīzī, Vol. i, *Khitat,* p. 76.

'Umar's time a special irrigation department was established.[36] Thus, Hijāz too produced a lot of surplus and the upper classes became wealthy. In Mecca, Tā'if and Medina a class of wealthy landowners, who did not work but lived off the labour of slaves and workers, came into existence. They had plenty of leisure and now passed their time in all sorts of worldly pleasures. During the Prophet's lifetime so much surplus was not available, and therefore, extravagance and conspicuous consumption was strongly condemned. Now abundance of wealth generated pressures of its own and the old base of Islamic morality was being metamorphosed. Dance, music and poetry, which were forbidden by Islam, were now in vogue right in Islam's birthplace. The nature of poetry also changed. It was no longer written to encourage warriors or to help bear the hardships of life with fortitude and courage; it was now written to cater to the pleasure instincts.

The very purpose for which 'Uthmān had initiated these measures, i.e., reducing the pressure of population in the conquered provinces, was not fulfilled. The foreign conquests continued and the slaves acquired in the wars continued to pour into these towns. Moreover, the big landholdings also created, owing to 'Uthmān's measures in the conquered provinces, a demand for more workers and slaves. Thus the measures initiated by 'Uthmān, instead of solving the problem, aggravated it. In fact, it proved to be the beginning of feudalism in Islam. (The word feudalism is here used in rather a loose sense.) The foreign conquests really created many problems. Firstly, four-fifths of the booty was directly distributed among those conquerors who were directly or indirectly connected with the war operations. Those living in the cities would go to the border regions once in four years, stay there for six months and acquire war booty including slaves of foreign origin and come back. As no check was being applied on acquiring private property, the concentration of wealth went on increasing with every new conquest. The Arabs vied with each other in conquering new provinces, which brought them rich booty as well as greater honour in the world of Islam. Secondly, annexing more provinces to the Islamic empire changed the composition of its population and multiplied the number of slaves. Needless to say, they remained the most discontented section of the population and thus were always ready to take part in any dissident or insurrectionary movement. It is significant to note that 'Uthmān initiated these measures in 30 A.H. and he was assassinated in 35 A.H. and during

36. Shibli N'omānī, op.cit., p. 304.

this period, especially during the last two years of his life, things were in a very bad way and the great insurrection had really begun. Most of the people who took part in this insurrectionary movement and in the assassination of 'Uthmān were from the conquered provinces of Kūfa and Basra. The foreign conquests, by bringing various provinces under the control of the Islamic empire, multiplied the opportunities for international trade. In fact, in that region now Muslims had the monopoly of trade. They made the most of this opportunity and earned fat profits. This also led to further increase in wealth. Thus it can be seen that a powerful class of oligarchs had by now come into existence which exercised a great deal of pressure on the caliph. 'Uthmān's decision to allow free transaction in land must also have been, at least partly, due to pressure from these powerful oligarchs who stood to benefit greatly from the land transaction.

'Uthmān was the second caliph to be assassinated. However, his assassination did not bring matters to an end. The class of wealthy landholders and merchants had a great stake in the government. 'Alī, the son-in-law of the Prophet, was now installed in office. Those who had taken part in the insurrection against 'Uthmān had stayed over in Medina and were instrumental in installing 'Alī in office, as they feared reprisal from the supporters of 'Uthmān. Morever, they were afraid that if Mu'āwiya, the powerful governor of Syria, annexed Medina, the murderers of 'Uthmān could be caught and punished. For many days after the assassination of 'Uthmān, no caliph was installed. What was worse, there was no set procedure for doing so. Different procedures had been adopted for choosing the three preceding caliphs. Medina, the capital of the Islamic empire, was under the control of rebels after the assassination of 'Uthmān, and they forced an unwilling 'Alī to assume the reins of office. It is important to note that the powerful oligarchs like Talhah and Zubayr and many others were either instrumental in inciting rebels or remained on the sidelines and did nothing to save 'Uthmān. This was done probably with a view to exercising greater control over the next caliph or becoming caliph if the situation so permitted. But their ambitions were thwarted when the rebels threw their weight behind 'Alī.

Perhaps the rebels had no other choice but to elect 'Alī, as he was the most judicious person among the whole lot. 'Alī was, undoubtedly, a man of scrupulous integrity and an intellectual bent of mind. Politicking was not his forte, and therefore, his rival Mu'āwiya, who was a consummate politician, soon defeated him at this game. Mu'āwiya was the governor of the very strategic province of Syria. He nurtured the ambition of becoming the caliph himself and like a sea-

soned politician considered no means immoral that would enable him to achieve this goal. 'Alī knew that his Syrian Governor was ambitious and unscrupulous and moreover had been appointed by his predecessor, with whose policies 'Alī did not always agree. And, as a caliph, he had every right to frame his policy and appoint such governors as had full faith in his policy. 'Alī wanted to exercise this power but friends advised him against this as Mu'āwiya had become an independent centre of power and had an army loyal to him. 'Alī did not reckon with these political factors and straight away sent an order setting aside Mu'āwiya from the governorship of Syria. Mu'āwiya contemptuously disregarded 'Alī's order and raised a banner of revolt against him. Avenging 'Uthmān's murder came in as a handy issue, though Mu'āwiya knew fully well that 'Alī was quite innocent and it was not very easy to trace the culprits and punish them. He also knew very well that 'Alī was a man of scrupulous integrity and given time he would definitely try to bring the culprits to book. But Mu'āwiya, it appears from all available accounts, was not so much interested in avenging 'Uthmān's blood as in making a political issue out of it to embarrass 'Alī. He also wanted a plausible excuse to fight against 'Alī and in such circumstances this (the revenge of 'Uthmān's murder) turned out to be the best one.

Some of the Prophet's companions like Talhah, Zubayr and others who had accumulated a lot of property both movable and immovable, had ambitions of their own and wanted to have a greater say in state policy so as to safeguard their vested interests. But when 'Alī was installed as the next caliph after 'Uthmān, they knew that their interests would no longer be safe in his hands as, like 'Umār, he would be very strict in enforcing a proper code of behaviour. Therefore, Talha and Zubayr, who were no less instrumental in inciting rebellion against 'Uthmān (at least Talhah certainly was), now joined hands with Mu'āwiya to demand that 'Uthmān's murder be avenged. Their motive too was to destabilize 'Alī's regime and pave the way for his removal. Zubayr even aspired to become caliph himself with the support of Ā'isha, the wife of the Prophet. Ā'isha had a strong dislike for 'Alī, the reasons for which need not be discussed here. She also had played a role in inciting rebellion against 'Uthmān. She was the most outspoken critic of 'Uthmān and his governors. But now she also started opposing 'Alī on the grounds of his not avenging 'Uthmān. Dr. Tāha Husayn tells us that when she (Ā'isha) learnt that the people of Medina had pledged their support to 'Alī for the caliphate, she was enraged and returned to Mecca. She encamped in the courtyard of the Ka'ba and drew a curtain around it. People used to gather around her

and she would talk to them from behind the curtain. Resenting 'Uthmān's assassination, she would say, " 'Uthmān's tongue and whip created resentment amongst us. We were angry with him for all that and he apologized. The Muslims accepted his apology. Thereafter, the Bedouins and the insurrectionists rebelled against him and wrung him like a laundered cloth till he was killed."[37]

Thus we see that many were opposed to 'Alī either for personal reasons, like Ā'isha or for political and class interests like Talhah, Zubayr and others of their ilk. All of them combined into a formidable opposition to overthrow 'Alī and wrest political power from him. 'Alī wanted to enforce Islamic laws rigorously. Not that these laws did not permit accumulation of wealth and private property; they did. But, nevertheless, they had laid down certain ground rules which were in the interest of Muslims as a whole. These rules certainly stood in the way of those who wanted to accumulate as much as they could. Moreover, 'Alī was very scrupulous in the distribution of war booty. He would give equal shares to all, irrespective of their status, race or regional origin. This naturally antagonized the Arabs, who now considered themselves to be the ruling race, and attracted the non-Arabs, slaves of foreign origin and other downtrodden sections of society. It was for this reason again that Kūfa, which was full of such elements, became a stronghold of Shī'ite heresy (about half the population of Kūfa at that time was comprised of such elements). In fact the resentment of those exploited sections of society was expressed through this channel and 'Alī, because of his love of justice and fair play, became an idealized and charismatic leader of this faith. Further persecution of the house of the Alids by the Umayyad rulers certainly added to the Alids' halo.

'Alī's brief reign was full of turmoil. Against him were ranged Mu'āwiya and his party aspiring to wrest the caliphate from him on the one hand, and Ā'isha, Talhah, Zubayr and others on the other hand. All of them raised the slogan of avenging 'Uthmān's murder in order to hide their real intentions. However, 'Alī, despite great pressure on him, remained uncompromising and fought alone till he was assassinated. Like 'Umar, he led a very simple, unpretentious and unostentatious life and had no personal ambitions. But powerful forces had developed in the society, mainly on account of the flow of wealth due to foreign conquests, and the early ideals of the Islamic society which 'Alī wanted to enforce created enemies for him all around. What was most tragic was that even his faithful followers

37. *Al-Fitnat al-Kubrā*, op. cit., Vol. ii, p. 47.

like 'Abd-Allah b. 'Abbās whom he had appointed governor of Basra did not obey his strict instructions in respect of the code of conduct and fell prey to the temptation of wealth. All this happened within thirty years of the death of Muhammad. It therefore very effectively refutes the argument of those who contend that if state policies are based on the principles of Islam, everything will be all right, and a just society free of the usual evils will be established. They fail to reckon with the historical and material forces operating in society, and take an idealistic view. When those who were around Muhammad could not, for long, practise Islamic principles in the changed conditions, how could anyone practise them today in an industrial society? No convincing answer has been provided by any partisan of the concept of the Islamic state. By the time 'Alī became caliph the conditions had changed so drastically that despite his best possible efforts to restore the early simplicity of Islam and establish a just society, nothing much could be achieved. At last he was assassinated like his two predecessors. Dr. Tāha Husayn says, "There is no doubt that 'Alī failed to establish his rule over all the occupied territories. It was not his personal failure alone, the entire system of caliphate failed and it became obvious that this new form of government (i.e., the Islamic form of government) too, of which it was expected that it will set an example of a different type of government, at last proved to be no different and adopted the same path which other governments had trodden earlier. Like earlier governments, it also based itself on class interests and power struggle—a government in which various nationalities (and classes) are dominated and exploited by a small section of a (dominant) nationality. Moreover, along with 'Alī and his caliphate, that rebellion also finally failed, which, as the rebels claimed , was started against 'Uthmān's regime in order to protect the purity, tolerance and justness of the Islamic caliphate and to do away with selfishness, waywardness and other evils which had crept in."[38]

Mu'āwiya at last succeeded in wresting political power, for which he had employed all possible means, fair as well as foul. Hasan, the eldest son of 'Alī, who was elected caliph after the assassination of his father, surrendered power to Mu'āwiya on condition that after his death the next caliph would be elected by the Muslims. Mu'āwiya accepted this condition only as an expedient and took no time to violate it by appointing his son Yazīd as his heir apparent, in the style of the Byzantine and Sasanid rulers. It is also alleged that in order to pave the way for his son he poisoned Hasan who had surrendered

38. ibid. pp. 311-12.

power to him. Thus the Islamic caliphate ended in failure within a short span of time, and there began the dynastic rule of the Umayyads. Historically speaking, this was more in keeping with the genius of the peoples of the conglomerate empire of Islam and its historical development, whereas the concept of the Islamic caliphate was in keeping with the conditions in Arabia with its simple institutions (and absence of any powerful class of land-holding gentry) and relative egalitarianism. Once the vast conquered areas of the Roman and Sasanid empires, with their in-built institutions, were incorporated into the Islamic empire, based on the interests of land-holding nobility possessing military power, the success of the concept of the Islamic form of government became doubtful. 'Uthmān's historic step of allowing free transaction in land was not just a personal quirk or a fortuitous step. Pressures were building up in that direction. 'Umar with his strong views and dominating personality tried to hold them back, whereas 'Uthmān could not resist them much longer, as the pressures were intensifying with every conquest. The role of a person is quite important in history, but there always exists a dialectical relationship between man and his circumstances, and his free choices are always limited by the material forces operating around him. 'Alī desperately tried to revive earlier simplicity and equality of treatment customary among the Arabs, but, as we have seen, failed in his mission and died a disillusioned man; what he wanted to achieve was no longer in keeping with historical forces. A powerful class of wealthy land-holders had now come into existence which resented the equal treatment of all the Muslims. They resented being put on a par with Muslims of lowly origin, and generated strong pressures for exclusive privileges. Whereas, on the other hand, the masses of Muslims who were either Bedouins or people of foreign origin who had embraced Islam, attracted by its egalitarian preachings, pressurized the caliph for strict observance of the teachings of Islam, which favoured them. Islamic society was torn by this conflict.

The process was completed by Mu'āwiya's having declared his son Yazīd as his heir apparent, thus initiating dynastic rule, which perhaps suited the new conditions better. Moreover, the Umayyads gave up pretensions of theocratic rule and instead established what can be called the secular national rule of the Arabs. During the Umayyad rule, the regularly paid military and bureaucracy expanded. Fighting was no longer voluntary as in the earlier period of Islam. The militia was replaced by a professional army. Similarly, voluntary workers and tax-collectors were replaced by a regular bureaucracy. The functions of tax collection, political administration and religious

leadership were now in the charge of three different officials. Each officer was called either *amīr* or *sāḥib*. Sāhib al-Kharāj was, more often than not, directly responsible to the caliph. Mu'ā-wiya was apparently the first to appoint such an officer, whom he sent to Kūfa.[39] The political administration was looked after by the viceroy (i.e., *amīr* or *sāhib*) who appointed his *'āmils* or agents over every district. Sometimes these viceroys remained in the capital and sent their deputies to the provinces. The viceroy had full charge of political and military administration in his province. The revenue of the state was chiefly derived from tribute from subject peoples. Muslims had to pay *zakāt* whereas non-Muslims paid *jizya*. The non-Muslims in addition to this, also had to pay land-tax (*kharāj*). The following episode shows how the authorities were more concerned with revenue than with the faith of Islam "....conflict between the claims of faith and those of the Royal Treasury took place in 728, under the caliph Hishām, when the governor of Khurāsān, Ashrab ibn 'Abdallah, planned to convert all the inhabitants of Transoxania to Islam by offering freedom from taxation as an inducement. The Muslim missionaries who were sent out were so successful that protests were raised not only by the revenue officials, whose perquisites depended on the sum they collected but also by the local chieftains (the *dihqans*) who had reason to fear considerable harm to their own prestige if the democratic faith of Islam took too firm a hold on the peasantry. The arguments of the treasury officers were at last able to convince the governor that since the Arab garrisons in Persia depended on the revenues collected locally, they would soon be reduced to starvation if all the taxes were remitted. He accordingly re-imposed the *kharāj* or land tax, on everyone who had formerly been liable to it and whether they had submitted to the test of circumcision or not. The result of this change of policy was wholesale rebellion, which for some years lost the Arabs the whole of Transoxania.... Some of the lost territory was regained for Islam—though not for the Umayyad caliph Hishām then reigning at Damascus—when in 734 the supporters of the claims of the Prophet's family, the Alids, rose in revolt against Hishām and gathered adherents by promising to observe the contract made with the adherents of the protected religions (here mainly Zoroastrians), not to levy tribute on the Muslims and not to oppress anyone."[40]

39. Ibn Khaldūn, Vol. III, p. 4, 1.24; quoted by Philip K. Hitti in *History of the Arabs*.

40. Reuben Levy, *Social Structure of Islam*, pp. 23–4.

The Umayyad caliphs, with one or two exceptions, cared little for the injunctions of Islam. Yazīd, the son of Mu'āwiya, was a confirmed drunkard (alcohol is strictly prohibited by Islam). He was known as Yazīd al-Khumūr, the Yazis of wines.[41] He had trained a monkey which participated with him in drinking bouts (see Mās'udī, Vol.V,p.157. Yazid II was so much attached to two of his singing girls that when one of them choked on a grape he playfully threw into her mouth, the young caliph fretted himself to death. His son al-Walīd beat everyone in drinking. He is said to have had the habit of swimming in a pool of wine, of which he would gulp enough to lower the surface appreciably.[42] We read in Aghani (Vol.VI, p.125) that when al-Walīd opened the Koran one day, and his eye fell upon the verse "And every forward potentate was brought to naught," he shot the sacred book to pieces with his bow and arrow, meanwhile repeating in defiance two verses of his own composition.[43] Thus we see that the Umayyad rule was essentially secular in nature. In fact, after the first four caliphs the Islamic theocracy came to an end.

The Umayyad army too was, Prof.Hitti tells us, "modelled in its general organisation after that of the Byzantines.The division was into five corps: centre, two wings, vanguard and rearguard. The formation as of old was in lines....In outfit and armour the Arab warrior was hard to distinguish from the Greek. The weapons were essentially the same. The cavalry used plain and rounded saddles not unlike those of the Byzantines and precisely like the ones still in fashion in the Near East. The heavy artillery was represented by the ballista ('arrādah), the mangonel (manjaniq) and the battering ram (dabbābah, kabsh). Such heavy engines and siege machines together with the baggage were carried on camels behind the army."[44]

The Arabs had no coinage of their own although they were involved in international commerce. This was so because they had no state of their own in the pre-Islamic era. During the early caliphate period and until some time later, Byzantine coins were mostly used. *Fals* (pl.*fulus*) was the designation of the copper or bronze coin current in the early centuries of the Islamic era. The term *fals* for copper coinage, like those of *dinār* and *dirham* for gold and silver, is of Greek

41. 'Iqd al-Farid, Vol. III (Cairo, 1302), p. 403; also Nawayri *Nihayat al-Arab* (Cairo, 1923-33), Vol. iv, p. 91.
42. *Al-Nawāji, Halbat al-Kumayt* (Cairo, 1299 A.H.), p. 98; quoted by Philip K. Hitti in *History of the Arabs.*
43. Quoted by Hitti in *History of the Arabs*, p. 227.
44. ibid. p. 226.

origin. The copper coins previous to the monetary reform of 'Abd al-Malik (77/696) fall into three broad categories: Arab-Byzantine, Arab-Sasanian and Byzantine-Pahlavi. Immediately after the conquests the Arabs continued to strike copper coins almost exactly as they found them: religious formulae, obsolete dates and all. Those imitations, frequently barbarized, are probably the earliest extant Islamic coins .While the basic Byzantine types were maintained until 'Abd al-Malik's reform, various modifications of an Arabicizing nature were introduced before that date. The Arab-Sasanian type copper coins are very rare. They have the regular Sasanian bust on the obverse, and some modifications of the fire altar and attendants on the reverse. The third category, i.e., the Byzantine-Pahlavi, exists only in copper. These coins represent a unique combination of Byzantine and Sasanian elements, with the obverse usually following the Byzantine model, and the reverse the Sasanian one.[45]

Thus we see that since the Arabs lacked various institutions necessary to run a vast state machinery, they liberally borrowed from the erstwhile empires, the Umayyads mostly from the Byzantine and the 'Abbāsids from the Persian empire. It is also important to note that after the incorporation of various conquered provinces into the Islamic empire the centre of gravity shifted from Medina, first to Kūfa, then to Syria, and finally to Baghdad. The fourth caliph 'Ali first shifted the capital to Kūfa, probably because it was no longer possible to administer the vast empire from Medina. The second important reason for shifting the capital to 'Irāq could be to mollify the discontented elements who had organized the rebellion against 'Uthmān. Most of them came from Kūfa and Basra, the two important military centres, where a considerable chunk of population was non-Arab *mawālis*. Because of 'Alī's judicious and non-discriminatory policies, he was sure of retaining their loyalty, whereas the powerful vested interests which had by then developed among the Arabs were opposed to him. This would have worked well, but for the intrigues of Mu'āwiya on the one hand, and the opposition of the Bedouin Arabs in the form of the Kharijite movement (which we propose to analyse in the next chapter) on the other. 'A..'s rival Mu'āwiya made Syria into his powerful bastion. Syria was a strategic province as the trade with the Byzantine empire was carried on through that town. Moreover, it was important from the point of view of keeping the

45. These details are available in John Walker's *A Catalogue of Mohammedan Coins in the British Museum* (London, 1956), pp. xxviii-xxxii, 22–43, and Catalogue ii, pp.li-liii; 81-3.

Byzantine power in check. Thus Mu'āwiya was in control of a very important province of the Islamic empire. He made it into his capital once political power passed into his hands. Moreover, he had won this power with the help of the Syrian army. Shorn of political importance, Mecca and Medina retained only religious importance throughout Islamic history. Under the pressure of events, the cities which respectively gave birth to Islam and the first Islamic state, lost their importance forever. Can religion still be held as a determining factor, in the final analysis?

6

Heterodoxies — Politico-Economic Genesis

"Those who enter a religious movement," remarks Montgomery Watt in his book *Islam and the Integration of Society,* "if it is at all widespread, do so for different reasons. . . . The very heterogeneity of the adherents of the great religions makes it unlikely that the spread of a great religion is the outcome of a homogeneous economic change."[1] After the conquests of various provinces this heterogeneity increased and threw up a number of baffling problems. As rightly pointed out by Watt, different peoples belonging to different regions and different classes did not embrace Islam for similar or identical reasons. They had different motives. Islam, as we have seen in earlier chapters, sought to resolve social tension in Mecca by exhorting the rich to take care of the poor, feed the orphans,etc. The problem in Mecca, was, however, a simple one and could admit of easy solution. The social malaise created after the external expansion of Islam was much more serious in as much as it was almost impossible to satisfy the conflicting aspirations of the peoples of different classes and different nationalities. In this chapter we propose to examine various centrifugal tendencies—internal as well as external—which emerged in the world of Islam, and to analyse the social and economic factors behind them.

The challenge came from the "internal and external proletariat," as Prof. Toynbee calls them. Let us first examine the challenge posed by the internal proletariat.The nomadic Arabs called the Bedouins were the internal proletariat of the Islamic empire. The sedentary Arabs settled in towns considered themselves superior to the Bedouins. Even the Koran did not accept their embracing of Islam without reservation. It says, "The desert Arabs surpass the town

1. W. Montgomery Watt, *Islam and the Integration of Society* (London, 1966), p. 33.

dwellers in hypocrisy, and have more cause to be ignorant of the laws which Allah has revealed to His Apostle. But Allah is wise and all-knowing. Some desert Arabs regard what they give for the cause of Allah as a compulsory fine and wait for some misfortune to befall you. May ill-fortune befall them! Allah hears all and knows all." (Koran, 9: 97-98).

The desert Arabs had an altogether different *weltanschauung* and did not have much time for the laws which served the needs of town-dwelling Arabs, as pointed out by the Koran itself. The Bedouins, since time immemorial, were used to living freely and never stayed permanently at one place. For them, therefore, institutions such as a government or tax-collection machinery did not make any sense. On the contrary they resented the imposition of these institutions. They first revolted after the death of the Prophet on the question of paying *zakat*. The revolt was quelled with great difficulty. However, since they were conscripted in large numbers for fighting wars which ensured them rich booty, they more or less submitted themselves to central discipline. Thus, applying Watt's proposition, we can say that they entered this religious movement because it ensured them a livelihood. It is interesting to note that in his second proposition, Watt comes quite close to Marx. He proposes: "If it is further asked whether economic changes always lead to religious changes, a brief survey would suggest the following answer: Where the economic change is a change in the means of methods of production, then this usually has social repercussions and those in turn lead to a religious change . . . . Islam, as we have seen, was itself a result of similar economic changes of great magnitude. And, what is relevant to us here, with the stoppage of inter-tribal raids, there was a fundamental change in the economic situation for the Bedouins too. They therefore entered Islam in large numbers."[2]

Now, the question arises, why a rebellion again? As far as the Bedouins were concerned, the foreign conquests and expansion changed the very nature of the Islamic state. It lost its earlier simplicity and democratic and egalitarian proclivities and became the monopoly of a few plutocrats belonging to the tribe of Quraysh. Nepotism and political corruption had reached new heights during 'Uthmān's period, all governmental posts having been monopolized by the Umayyads a section of the tribe of Quraysh. Islam, in theory at least, had not shown any preference for any tribe. But, in practise, the city-based tribe of Quraysh monopolized power, leaving the

2. ibid. p. 33.

Bedouins high and dry. In the conquering armies too, the Bedouins were mere soldiers, the command being in the hands of either the Qurayshites, or the Ansārs from Medina. Moreover, the bloody power struggle between two sections of the same aristocratic tribe did not make much sense of them. They therefore revolted after the battle of Siffīn, which took place between 'Alī's and Mu'āwiya's armies. They were called Kharijites (seceders) as they seceded from 'Alī's army. Their slogan was, *"la imāra,"* i.e., no government, to which al-Shahrestani tells us, 'Alī remarked, "But there must be a government, good or bad." This very well brings out the contrasting attitude of the city and the desert Arabs. The desert Arabs, owing to the absense of individual property, hardly felt any necessity for the the repressive state machinery which was so necessary for the city Arabs. To them Islam was acceptable only in the early "uncorrupted" form with its emphasis on equality and fraternity. Tabari tells us that Mustawarid b. 'Ullifa, the Kharijite leader, wrote to Simāk b. 'Ubayd, the governor of Ctesiphon: "We call you to the book of God Almighty and glorious, and to the Sunnah (custom) of the Prophet—on whom be peace—and to the administration of Abū Bakr and 'Umar—may God be well pleased with them—and to renounce 'Uthmān and 'Alī because they corrupted the true religion and abandoned the authority of the Book."[3] Thus the Kharijites drew the line between the pure and the corrupted form of Islam from the time of 'Uthmān. Islam, as we have seen, was metamorphosed after the foreign conquests and never regained its earlier simplicity (though many revivalists from time to time tried to restore it) as this was historically not possible. One cannot, after all, put the clock back. 'Alī very sincerely tried to apply the Islamic principles rigorously, but failed to do so as this directly hit the powerful vested interests.

The question then arises, why did the Kharijites oppose 'Alī as much as they opposed 'Uthmān? Montgomery Watt suggests an answer: "With regard to these Kharijite revolts, two points are worthy of note. The first is that the Kharijites were just as much opposed to 'Alī as to Uthmān and the Umayyads, and this tends to support the hypothesis that their dissatisfaction was with the whole social structure and not simply with a particular man or family. It is true that 'Alī came from another section of the Meccan aristocracy, and in this respect was no improvement on 'Uthmān from the standpoint of former nomads.... The second point to be noted is that in these revolts of small bands of men, the Kharijites were recreating

3. Tabari, ii, 40, 13 et seq. Quoted by Prof. R. A. Nicholson in *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge, 1930), p. 210.

something like the tribal or clan units with which they had been familiar in their lives as nomads."[4] Thus Kāmil b. Athīr, Tabari, etc., tell us that during the remaining one or two years of 'Alī's caliphate there were about five Kharijite risings involving about 200 men, while during the caliphate of Mu'āwiya (661-680) some fifteen risings are recorded, the number of participants varying from 30 to 500.[5] Thus the Kharijites became the most extreme faction which fanatically strove to restore the earlier simplicity of Islam.

Certain extreme sub-sects of the Kharijites believed in putting to death all other Muslims who did not agree with them. From time to time these Kharijites rose in revolt against the established government, and caused a lot of trouble. Many insurrections were led by them which shook the government. Even if they were routed, they would regroup and strike again. They lived a very simple life and rigorously followed the injunctions of the Koran. They were idealists and, historically speaking, their concept of Islam was utopian. Some Kharijites even denied any need for a caliph and believed that the Koran sufficed as a divine guide. Al-Shahrestani in his *Milal Wa al-Nahl* and *Fihrist,* and Baghdādi in his *Al-Farq Bayn al-Firaq* and Ibn Hazm in *Milal Wa al-Nahl,* have described in detail various aspects of the Kharijites and their insurrectionary activities.[6]

The Kharijite propaganda proved quite effective among the discontented sections of non-Arab Muslims. The Ibādiyah sect of the Kharijites (named after its leader 'Abd Allah b. Ibād) was one of the major sects which established itself in 'Uthmān and from there spread towards Zanzibar. In the second century after the hijra it spread to North Africa, specially among the Berbers. The Berbers of North Africa were a most turbulent people and would not easily bow down to any authority. Any dissident movement opposing the established government would find supporters among the Berbers. It is quite interesting to note that some Shī'a sects too, though religiously opposed to the Kharijites, found supporters among these Berber tribes. The Shī'a Ismā'īlī missionaries had so much success among the Berbers that ultimately they could establish their dynasty in North Africa with their help. The Kharijites or Shī'a fully exploited the resentment felt by the turbulent Berbers against the established

4. Watt, op. cit., p. 99.
5. Tabari, I 3310, 3339, 3380, II 10, 15 ff, 20 ff, 27, 29, 35 ff, 40-59, 61, 64, 67, 76, 83, 90 ff. Ibn al-Athīr, III 205-7, 209-17, 225 ff, 229, 244, 254-6, etc. Quoted by Watt in *Islam and the Integration of Society.*
6. See *Hādir al-'Alamal Islami*: rendered into Arabic by 'Ijāl Nuwayhis Vol. II (Cairo, 1343 A.H.), pp. 351-66. There is a detailed note on Kharijites in the appendix by Amīr Shakeb Arslān.

governments. The Ibādiyah sect had well established themselves in 'Ummān, which remained their storm centre for quite some time. The Umayyads as well as the 'Abbāsids had to face their uprisings time and again. That historical genius Ibn Khaldūn writes about Berbers: "One may compare what has happened in this connection in Ifriqiyah and the Maghrib from the beginning of Islam to the present time. The inhabitants of those lands are Berber tribes and groups. The first (Muslim) victory over them and the European Christians (in the Maghrib) was of no avail. They continued to rebel and apostatized time after time. The Muslims massacred many of them. After the Muslim religion had been established among them, they went on revolting and seceding, and they adopted dissident religious opinions many times. They remained disobedient and unmanageable.... The Berber tribes in the west are innumerable. All of them are Bedouins and members of groups and families. Whenever the tribe is destroyed, another takes it place and is as refractory and rebellious as the former one had been. Therefore, it has taken the Arabs a long time to establish their dynasty in the land of Ifriqiyah and the Maghrib."[7]

Now we come to another heterodox movement in Islam, i.e., the Shī'a movement. The Shī'as are partisans of 'Alī and consider him to be the legitimate successor of Muhammad and denounce the preceding three caliphs as usurpers. Kūfa was their stronghold and their main following was among the non-Arab clients (*mawālī*) and other persons of lowly origin though the leadership, as usual, was in the hands of the Hāshimite Arabs. As opposed to the Kharijites, we can say they constitute the external proletariat of Islam, to use Toynbee's term again. The nomadic Arabs who became the mainstay of the Kharijite movement, because of the primitive democratic structure of their social organization, resented any governmental authority, and precisely for this reason the central slogan of the Kharijite movement was *la imāra* (i.e., no government). Whereas, it is interesting to note that as the followers of the Shī'a movement were from amongst those who had their roots in Persia and had settled in Kūfa and around it, the movement's central doctrine was the concept of hereditary *imāma* (i.e., religious as well as secular leadership). Persia, as we know, had an age-old tradition of hereditary dynastic rule, to which its people had been accustomed for centuries. Therefore, any movement which aspired to succeed among them had to adapt itself to their national traditions. This is what the leaders of the Shī'a movement did. They polarized the non-Arab malcontents of Kūfa and other places around

7. Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, pp. 130-31.

the charismatic personality of 'Alī and evolved the concept of hereditary leadership in his progeny.

Why did 'Alī and his family become the central axis of the Shī'a movement? This is an important question which must be correctly understood. There are several reasons. 'Alī, compared to the Umayyads like 'Uthmān, Mu'āwiya, etc., was less a partisan of the Arabs. He strictly followed the Islamic principle of equality of the faithful, irrespective of their race or nationality. He showed no preference to the Arabs in any matter, whether of governmental appointments or of distribution of war booty or money from the state treasury. His behaviour even towards slaves was quite exemplary. The Umayyads, on the other hand, wanted to establish the hegemony of their clan in particular and that of the Arabs in general. Moreover, 'Alī was harassed in every conceivable way by Mu'āwiya who was the leader of the clan of the Umayyads, and who, in this, had the support of other plutocrats of the tribe of Quraysh, such as Talhah, Zubayr, etc., who were unhappy with 'Alī's policy of observing equality among all Muslims whether Arabs, non-Arabs, masters or slaves. It will not be out of place to quote an instance of this. One day, two women came to him and told 'Alī of their need, asked his man to buy them some food grains, clothes and also to give them some money. But one of them said she should be given a little more as she was an Arab and her colleague a non-Arab. 'Alī took some soil in his hand and looking at it he said, "I do not know if God has given preference to someone over the other except on grounds of piety and obedience to Him."[8] 'Alī was, besides, unsparing to his provincial governors. Anyone who showed any laxity or looseness of conduct would be punished by him. He would conduct an independent inquiry in cases of complaints against his governors. If found guilty, he would remove them and even send them to jail. He reprimanded them through letters and demanded scrupulous behaviour befitting a pious Muslim. Here I quote from a letter which he wrote to Ziyād, the deputy governor of Basra, when the latter misbehaved with the slave 'Alī had sent to him for fetching the tax amount collected by Ziyād: "S'ad (the slave sent by 'Alī) has told me that you misbehaved with him, abused him and arrogantly hit him on his forehead. The Messenger of God has said that greatness is for God alone. Arrogance on the part of man annoys Him. He also told me that your table is laid with delicious food and a variety of dishes, and you are using oil every day. What would you have lost if you had observed fasts for a few

8. Dr. Tāha Husayn, *Al-Fitnat at Kubrā*, Vol. II, p. 288.

days and had spent some of your things by way of charity?.... Do you want to roll in luxury while your poor neighbours, weak beggars, orphans and widows are neglected?"[9]

All this could not go unnoticed by the weaker sections of society, specially those of non-Arab origin. Also, when Mu'āwiya finally established his hegemony over 'Irāq the Umayyad aristocracy resorted to repressive measures and meted out harsh treatment to those sections of the society. This contrast must have been very striking to them. Moreover, 'Alī became the victim of political assassination and at least in certain sections, it was construed as an Umayyad conspiracy to eliminate their rival. All this added to 'Alī's image and the external proletariat of Islam found in his person a charismatic personality under whose banner they could fight against the unjust and repressive government. Thus we see that most of the revolts, first against the Umayyads, and later against the 'Abbāsids, were led either by Kharijites or by Shī'as. The tragedy at Karbalā in which Husayn, the second son of 'Alī from his first wife Fātima, was martyred, became the focal point of the Shī'a movement. It would be quite in place here to throw some light on the tragedy of Karbalā. When Hasan surrendered the reins of the caliphate to Mu'āwiya, one of the conditions of the agreement was that Mu'āwiya would leave the question of electing the next caliph after his death to the Muslims, and would not appoint any successor. Mu'āwiya honoured this agreement only in the breach, and before his death, employing both fair and foul means, paved the way for appointing his son Yazīd as his successor. This was greatly resented by many eminent Muslims, among whom were some companions of the Prophet. However, Mu'āwiya used inducement as well as repression. Thus some were bribed into accepting this measure whereas others were terrorized into silence. Hasan was allegedly poisoned by Mu'āwiya, who advised his son Yazīd to be tactful in dealing with Husayn and 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr, the latter being himself an aspirant to the high office of the caliphate. Yazīd, it seems, did not heed his father's advice.

Yazīd, when he succeeded his father was young and inexperienced in running the affairs of the vast empire which his father had left behind. Mu'āwiya was an ace politician and could use repression only where necessary. First he would try to break his enemy through inducement or intrigues and would strike only where it became absolutely necessary. Mu'āwiya had to make ceaseless efforts to build his empire, whereas Yazīd got it as a gift on a platter. Moreover,

9. ibid. pp. 296-7.

right from his childhood he had seen riches all around and wallowed in luxury. He spent most of his time with wine and women, and became notorious as a drunkard. Naturally, lacking in maturity and wisdom in tackling his opponents, he demanded outright obedience. He wrote to the Governor of Medina, Walīd b. 'Utba, to obtain the pledge of loyalty *(bay'ah)* from Husayn, 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr and others. They of course refused and left Medina for Mecca. Husayn had bidden farewell to Medina and came over to Mecca along with his family. He was well aware of the implications of staying in Medina. Meanwhile he received a number of letters from his supporters in Kūfa who invited him to come over there and lead them against Yazīd. The Umayyad tyranny and exploitation was on the increase. There was a complete about-turn in the political nature of the Umayyad state. Yazīd belonged to the generation which had neither participated in the Islamic revolution which swept the Arabian peninsula, nor cared to know what it was about. He had been brought up in an alien land (i.e., Syria), where Caesarean traditions had struck root. Thus a pleasure-loving boy became the ruler. 'Alī's non-compromising and strictly principled behaviour was still green in the minds of the people of Kūfa. They now pined for his rule. Hasan was already dead and now Husayn was the leader of the house of 'Alī. Moreover, he was firm in refusing to acknowledge Yazīd as the legitimate caliph of the Muslims. So the people of Kūfa wrote and pleaded with him to lead them against Yazīd. It is interesting to note that though 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr had also refused to accept the legitimacy of Yazīd and had fled Medina, no one from Kūfa wrote to him to lead the revolt against Yazīd. They knew that 'Abd Allah was an ambitious man and would prove to be a ruthless ruler if enthroned. Whereas Husayn, they knew, was a man of principle like his father and, if installed as caliph, would revive Islamic rule.

The people of Kūfa wrote innumerable letters to Husayn to induce him to lead them, but Husayn wanted to be on surer ground and so he sent his personal emissary, Muslim b. 'Aqīl, to ascertain the situation in Kūfa. Muslim was received warmly by the people of Kūfa and a large number rallied round him, pledging their loyalty to Husayn. Muslim spoke accordingly to Husayn. Husayn's stay in Mecca was not quite safe. Yazid's men were hovering around. So Husayn left Mecca when he received the letter from his emissary Muslim, though many well-wishers advised him against this step. He did not even leave his family behind. Perhaps Husayn had realized that neither he nor his family would be spared by Yazīd. He must have thought that if at all the people of Kūfa rallied round him, he would have a safe

haven. However, that was not to be. When Yazīd learnt of the rumblings in Kūfa he sent his trusted governor 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyād to handle the situation. 'Ubayd Allah was a most unscrupulous and ruthless ruler. He terrorized the people of Kūfa into submission and killed Muslim b. 'Aqīl, the personal emissary of Husayn. Husayn got this news on his way to Kūfa but it was too late for him to retreat. 'Ubayd Allah also sent a detachment to forestall Husayn's entry into Kūfa. Husayn's argument that he came because the people of Kūfa invited him fell on deaf ears. In a couple of days more troops arrived from Kūfa and threw a siege around him and those who were with him. Husayn had a small band of dedicated followers with him—seventy-two in all—many of whom happened to be his relatives. However, though hopelessly outnumbered, Husayn preferred death to abject surrender. Though he was prepared to negotiate with Yazīd, he refused to pledge his loyalty to his crony 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyād. There was an encounter between Husayn and his followers on the one hand, and Ibn Ziyād's forces on the other. It took place on the 10th of Muharram in 61 A.H. (i.e., 10th October A.D 680) and Husayn and his followers were killed.

Apparently, this was an insignificant event—an encounter between a powerful army of the state and a small band of rebels. But the issues involved were much deeper and this turned out to be a turning point in the history of Islam. Its analysis is quite important from the point of view of later developments. Prof. Nicholson points out, "The Umayyads had indeed ample cause to rue the day of Karbalā. It gave the Shī'ite faction a rallying cry—'Vengeance for Husayn!'—which was taken up on all sides, and specially by the Persian *mawālī*, or clients, who longed for deliverance from the Arab yoke. Their amalgamation with the Shī'a—a few years later they flocked in thousands to the standard of Mukhtār—was an event of the utmost historical importance...."[10] The Umayyads, as already pointed out, had usurped power from the legitimate caliph (legitimacy is not being spoken of here in the historical sense; it merely applies here to the established tradition in the post-Muhammad era of installing a caliph after consulting at least some prominent Muslims, and of not treating this office as hereditary). Moreover, for the Umayyads the high office of caliph had lost its religious or ideological dimension, and they looked at it from a purely political angle. This meant freeing themselves from certain obligations to which Islam had bound them such as equality between all the faithful irrespective of their race, nationality, etc. Husayn challenged Yazīd, not so much because he

10. R.A. Nicholson, op. cit., p. 198.

aspired for power himself (a rebel preparing for a showdown with the established ruler will not walk into the enemy's hand with his family and small children) as for certain principles, although the power motive may not have been altogether absent. But the very fact of his refusal to bow down before an unscrupulous governor like 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyād, despite his desperate situation, boosted his image. He naturally became a rallying point for the opponents of the Umayyad dynasty.

Husayn, it could be justifiably argued, threw himself into the hands of his enemies and proved to be a poor strategist. There seems to be a great deal of truth in this argument. He perhaps failed to anticipate the likely moves of his enemy and thus walked into the trap. But it could also be said that like his father 'Ali, he was not interested in unprincipled politics and so did not care much for planning out correct strategies and indulging in subterfuges. He cared more for principles. Here his character can be contrasted with that of 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr. As 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr aspired for the high political office, he did not precipitate matters and carefully planned his strategy till he was able to take on his enemy though ultimately he lost. Though Ibn Zubayr could hold out much longer and even succeeded in capturing some important centres, he could not leave any lasting impact on the world of Islam as he was fighting purely to capture power, whereas though Husayn was a very poor strategist who could not hold out even for a day, his martyrdom shook the Umayyad empire. Moreover, when the Shī'as made a serious bid for power, they organized underground movements very carefully. Montgomery Watt says, "Shī'ite risings are mostly serious attempts to gain control of the caliphate as a whole or some sizeable part of it. Such attempts must be carefully prepared and so a feature of the Shī'ite movement is 'underground' planning. Kūfa was the main centre. There was a Shī'ite revolt there against the Umayyads in 671, there was the ineffectual attempt of al-Husayn to seize the caliphate in 680, encouraged but in the end not supported by the men of Kūfa; in Kūfa was organized in 684 the unsuccessful rising of the so-called Penitents (who, be it noted, had four thousand men); from the remnants of the rising and from other sources al-Mukhtār in 685 collected an army which enabled him to control Kūfa and the surrounding region for over a year."[11]

The first serious challenge to the Umayyad empire came from Mukhtār's rebellion which systematically exploited Husayn's

11. Watt, op. cit., p. 106.

martyrdom for political ends. Mukhtār cashed in on the sympathy for Husayn found specially among the non-Arab clients, who resented the unequal relationship with the Arabs. The Arabs also looked down upon them with contempt. This will be obvious from a dialogue recorded by Kāmil b. Athīr. When the opponents of Mukhtār approached 'Abd ar-Rehmān Azdī for help, he said, "If you listen to me, don't fight against him." "Why not," they asked. He said, "It will divide you. With that man (i.e., Mukhtār) are this man and that from among your brave and intrepid horse riders, and your slaves and clients are also on his side. They are mutually united whereas your clients hate you more than they hate your enemies. Remember they will fight against you with Arab bravery and *ajam* (Persian, non-Arab) animosity."[12] Thus it is obvious that the non-Arabs, especially the slaves and the clients, were with Mukhtār. Again it is interesting to know why Mukhtār leaned towards these *mawālī* (clients). The class structure of the Umayyad state was such that the Arabs, especially those of the tribe of Quraysh, formed the ruling class. They would not, therefore, as a whole rise against the state (except those whose sectional interests were not served, like 'Abd Allah b. Zubayr). Only the slaves and clients should be relied upon by any revolutionary or insurrectionary movement. At another place Ibn Athīr records a dialogue between Mukhtār and one of the Arab nobles which makes this very clear. He writes, "....The Arab nobles gathered around Shabath bin Rabi'ī and said: "Mukhtār is ruling us without our consent. He faced trouble for the clients, he put them on the mounts and distributed our money among them." Shabath their leader, thereupon said: 'Let me talk to him (i.e., Mukhtār). So he went to Mukhtār and placed before him one by one all that had transpired between him and his colleagues. Whatever he placed before Mukhtār, he would say yes to it. Thus Mukhtār conceded to all their demands. The Shabath told him about the clients and their sharing of money. In reply to that Mukhtār said: 'If I desert your clients and reserve the active treasury for you, will you then fight with me against the Umayyads and Ibn Zubayr? And to convince me of that would you swear by God?" Shabath said that he would like to consult his colleagues and let him know what they thought. Shabath went back and never returned."[13] Thus we can very well understand why Mukhtār had to rely upon the clients and slaves who were "have-nots" of that society. The extent of their participation can be guessed

12. Kāmil b. Athīr, *Tārikh*, Vols. III & IV, Urdu translation by Maulvi Mohammad Jamil ur Rehmān (Jāmi'a 'Uthmania 1922) p. 381.
13. ibid. p. 397.

from the fact that in one detachment sent by Mukhtār to fight against the enemy there were two thousand and three hundred clients and only three hundred Arabs. However, Mukhtār was ultimately defeated and killed. The Shī'as were persecuted very badly. In many cases, Ibn Athīr tells us, their hands and feet were cut, they were blinded and hanged from the trees. Even from the captured troops of Mukhtār, Arabs were spared but all the clients were beheaded.[14]

Mukhtār's defeat proved only a temporary set-back to the movement. We also see that the Islamic state which was supposedly based on theocratic principles turned into an instrument of repression and class rule. It had, by now, turned into a vast bureaucratic machine and a police-state hunting down its enemies. In Muhammad's lifetime even the army consisted of voluntary participants and in that initial phase there was no systematic repression of the opponents. Mu'āwiya, in order to wrest political control, started gradually building the repressive paraphernalia needed by his state. Moreover, as he was the governor of Syria, the Byzantine model served him well. Foreign conquests, and the incorporation into the Islamic state of the foreign peoples, made repression inevitable for the Arabs in order to perpetuate their rule. Also, considering the historical forms operating then, whatever vestiges of democracy existed in Arabian society and found their way into the Islamic system, would not have worked in the vast conglomeration that the Islamic empire was. It would have been utopian to expect the Islamic system to work among diverse peoples with different social, political and cultural systems. Ideals were sacrificed to the harsh realities of life and what emerged was a repressive state machinery—a complete antithesis of what Islam proclaimed. The Umayyads, in order to retain their control, resorted to more repressive measures and in turn made themselves more unpopular, giving rise to underground opposition.

It will be pertinent to note that those Arabs who led the resistance movement against the Umayyad rulers had to promise their non-Arab followers a legitimate share in power as well as protection of their rights and interests as Muslims. In other words they had to agree to an equal status which Islam theoretically proclaimed. The 'Abbāsids (who were descendants of the Prophet's uncle 'Abbās) made common cause with the Shī'as to overthrow the Umayyad rule and spread an underground network of propagandists, especially in Persia. Their chief propagandist was Abū Muslim Khurāsāni. As he himself was a non-Arab and hailed from Persia, he could easily win

14. ibid. p. 369.

over the confidence of his people. The 'Abbāsids were very shrewd and had the qualities of caution, duplicity, and worldly wisdom which ensure success in political intrigue. They had instructed their propagandists to make common cause with the Shī'as by carrying on propaganda in the name of Hāshim, the common ancestor of 'Abbās and 'Alī, though of course secretly they had the intention of turning the tables against the Alids. The descendants of 'Abbās and 'Alī apparently led a life of retirement in a distant town called Humayma, south of the Dead Sea, but, in fact, this town, owing to its proximity to the route by which Syrian pilgrims went to Mecca, afforded opportunities for communication with the remotest lands of Islam. From this centre they carried on their propaganda with consummate skill.

Also, as already pointed out, they very well knew that the most fertile soil for their anti-Umayyad propaganda was Khurāsān—an extensive north-eastern province of the old Persian empire. "These countries," says Prof. Nicholson, "were inhabited by a brave and high-spirited people who in consequence of their intolerable sufferings under the Umayyad tyranny, the devastation of their homes and the almost servile condition to which they had been reduced, were eager to join in any desperate enterprise that gave them hope of relief. Moreover, the Arabs in Khurāsān were already to a large extent Persianised: they had Persian wives, wore trousers, drank wine, and kept the festivals of Nawrūz and Mihrgān; while the Persian language was generally understood and even spoken among them."[15] Referring to their mode of operation, he says: "Starting from Kūfa, the residence of the Grand Master who directed the whole agitation, they went to and fro in the guise of merchants or pilgrims, cunningly adapting their doctrine to the intelligence of those whom they sought to enlist. Like the Shī'ites they canvassed for 'the House of the Prophet', an ambiguous expression which might equally well be applied to the descendants of 'Alī or of 'Abbās....It was, of course, absolutely essential to the 'Abbāsids that they should be able to count on the support of the powerful Shī'ite organization, which, ever since the abortive rebellion headed by Mukhtār, had drawn vast numbers of Persian *mawālī* into its ranks."[16]

Thus through such propaganda and assiduous organizational work, these underground organizations fully exploited the explosive situa-

15. Nicholson, op cit., p. 250. Nicholson has referred to Wellhausen *Das Arabische Reich*, p. 307.
16. ibid. p. 307.

tion that existed against the Umayyads. They made such tremendous progress that the governor of that province, Nasr bin Sayyār, wrote to the caliph Marwān to send him immediate reinforcements as two hundred thousand men had sworn allegiance to Abū Muslim the chief dā'ī (propagandist) of the 'Abbāsids, At the foot of his letter he added these lines:

> I see the coal's red glow beneath the embers,
> And 'tis about to blaze!
> The rubbing of the sticks enkindles fire,
> And out of words come frays.
> 'Oh! is Umayyad's House awake or sleeping?'
> I cry in sore amaze.[17]

What was worse, the Arab troops in Khurāsān were riven with tribal dissension, another sign of the Umayyads' decline. The Khurāsanīs are described by this poet as "a mixed rabble without religion or nobility, their only creed being 'death to the Arabs' "; and it proved to be no exaggeration. When the insurrection broke out the Arabs were indiscriminately slaughtered, even Persian wives of Arabs joining their fellow countrymen in killing their own husbands. From this one can judge the depth of hatred these Persians nursed against their Arab masters. The insurrection started on 9th June A.D. 747, when Abū Muslim raised the black banner of the 'Abbāsids at Siqadanj, near Kerv—a city which he occupied a few months later. The Arabs, as pointed out earlier, were not themselves united. The old feud between Mudār and Yaman raised its head and whereas the Northern group remained loyal to the Umayyads, those of Yamanite stock more or less openly sided with the insurrectionists. Umayyads were slaughtered almost to a man except those who could flee and they were not many. Thus was established the dynasty of the 'Abbāsids in A.D. 749 with the accession of Abul 'Abbās al-Saffah as caliph. The Umayyads finally paid for their excesses.

The 'Abbāsids, in keeping with the new aspirations aroused by the revolution among the Persians, shifted their capital from Damascus to Baghdād which was near the earlier Sasanid capital Ctesiphon. The Persians also got some share in the state bureaucracy which they had been denied earlier. Now the ministerial office was controlled by the Barmecides, who were of Persian origin. (It is said that the Barmecides were originally connected with the Buddhist vihara

17. Nicholson, op. cit., quotes these lines from *Dinawari*, ed. Guirgass, p. 356.

somewhere near modern Kabul in Afghanistan.) However, these concessions did not go much deeper and the happy marriage between the Arabs and the Persians did not last for more than fifty years. The 'Abbāsids, as already pointed out, had made common cause with the Shī'ites to overthrow the Umayyads. But it was nothing more than political chicanery. They soon turned against their erstwhile partners and started persecuting them. However, one branch of the Shī'as, called the Ismā'īlīs, by a sheer genius for organization succeeded in establishing their rule in Western Africa. Philip K. Hitti observes: "The Ismā'īlītes organized one of the most subtle and effective means of politico-religious propaganda that the world of Islam ever experienced. From their places of retreat they began to send out missionaries to traverse the Moslem world preaching the doctrine known as *bātin* (inner, esoteric). According to the unorganized schools of thought, called Bātinites by the orthodox, the Koran should be interpreted allegorically and religious truth could be ascertained by the discovery of an inner meaning of which the outer form *(zahir)* was but a veil intended to keep that truth from the eyes of the uninitiate."[18]

There is no more doubt that this was quite a unique sect of Islam. Though it drew heavily from Greek sources to evolve its doctrines, it was no mere mechanical replica but a creative application of Greek thought. During the heyday of the 'Abbāsid empire, a lot of surplus was available to be utilized for academic pursuits, and the 'Abbāsids, no doubt, greatly encouraged such literary activities. The Arabs, being either semi-nomadic or engaged in commerce from the pre-Islamic days, had not developed any philosophical system or school of thought. Their highest achievement was the religion of Islam. They could boast of only one book and that was the Koran. As the Koran was meant to be a book of religious guidance and was addressed to people who were not very literate, let alone highly cultured, it was couched in simple language which could be easily understood and avoided philosophical subtleties. Also, being addressed to the Arabs who were highly practical people it tended to be extrovert in its general outlook. Now the conditions had changed totally. The power centre of Islam was no longer Mecca or Medina. After Damascus it was Baghdād. The Muslims had a great deal of wealth which could be spent on a variety of things. In Mecca and Medina and the surrounding desert, the problem was how to feed the Muslims. No other thing could be thought of Philosophy, fine arts, the inner probings of the human mind, were sheer luxuries the Muslims could

18. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, p. 443.

not afford at that stage. The Koran even decries poets, saying that the "useless" art of poetry was mere distraction. Such pleasurable pastimes were most "deplorable" when Muslim energies were needed for consolidating and spreading Islam or defending it against the enemies in Mecca as well as Medina. With the unheard-of wealth which the Muslims got through foreign conquests, the earlier constraints no longer applied. By the time the Umayyads came to power, the Muslims were already in possession of abundant wealth which was still multiplying through further conquests. Their seat of power was Damascus in Syria which till then, had been a centre of Hellenic culture. But this culture was never assimilated by the local populace who deeply resented domination by the Byzantine elite. The question of its being assimilated by the Arabs, therefore, did not arise. So the Umayyads revived their own national culture which belonged to the *jāhiliyya* period, i.e., pre-Islamic in origin. They did not care for the fact that Islam had condemned that culture. It was their *desideratum*. The *jāhiliyya* poetry was revived by them in a big way. In fact, it became a favourite pastime for the leisured ruling classes. The Arabs themselves never turned to philosophy and other higher pursuits of culture. The Koran was not Hellenized.

However, the genesis of the 'Abbāsid caliphate was altogether different. It was not the result of external conquest of alien lands, but the wresting of political power by one section of the Arabs from another section with the help of the disgruntled Persians, thus shifting the centre of power from Damascus (i.e., Syriac society, which was alien to Islam, as Islam had partly drawn inspiration from Judaism and Christianity which were native to Syriac society) to Baghdād (i.e., to Iranic society which was equally alien to Islamic society). This shift in centre proved to be a turning point for the Islamic civilization. Islam now developed an "Iranic tincture". Culturally speaking, it was no longer confined to its own national boundaries. It was being universalized; for this reason Toynbee describes the 'Abbāsid caliphate as the universal state of Islam. The Arabs were not very fond of learning; such pursuits were left to the Persian intellectuals. These Persian intellectuals imported into Islam much that was alien to it. A great number of books on Greek and Indian philosophy were translated into Arabic, and Islam now fell under the influence of the Greek and Hindu philosophies. These liberal intellectuals started judging Islam and its teachings in the light of reason, and logical subtleties. Thus Justice Ameer Ali writes: "Ma'mūn, surrounded by the elite of savants and artists, collected afresh the writings of the school of Alexandria, and by his connection with the emperors of

Constantinople, secured from Athens the best philosophical works of ancient Greece. As soon as they were brought to Baghdād they were translated by competent scholars and issued to the public. The translation of works from Greek, Syriac and Chaldaic was under the supervision of Costa the son of Luke; from ancient Persian, under Yahya bin Harūn; from Sanskrit under Dūbān the Brahmin. Vast impetus was also given to original research and production by the establishment of special departments under qualified professors for the promotion and prosecution of special branches of study, and authorship was encouraged by munificent allowances."[19] Thus we see that systematic efforts were made to incorporate and inject into Islam whatever was available in the arena of higher knowledge.

Greek philosophy became the intellectual fashion and many sects and sub-sects of Islam came into existence which assimilated it to different degrees. The Koran itself was now subjected to different interpretations in the light of new philosophical concepts. It no longer remained a simple, practical and forthright book with emphasis on sense perception knowledge (of course in a primitive culture such as the nomadic Arabic culture of the pre-Islamic era, the emphasis is always on sense perception rather than on intellection); new interpretations under the influence of Greek thought with its emphasis on intellection made the Koran a complex book with subtle meaning. A new sect came into being which is called the Mu'tazila. It insisted on applying the criteria of reason to all the Islamic teachings and beliefs. For this reason its members have been called rationalists. Referring to the Mu'tazilites, H.A.R. Gibb says, "These thinkers developed, by the aid of Greek logic, new theological systems in order to defend their dogmatic positions, and as time went on they advanced more and more boldly into the field of metaphysics. They carried the advanced wing of orthodox scholarship part of the way with them, but the latter stopped short when the Mu'tazilite extremists began to force Muslim doctrines into the mould of Greek concepts and to derive their theology speculatively from Greek metaphysics instead of the Koran."[20] And at times these tendencies (to use Greek logic) were so extreme that "thrown into the wide sea and utter freedom of Greek thoughts, their idea had expanded to the bursting-point and, more even than a German metaphysician, they had lost touch of the ground of ordinary life, with its reasonable probabilities, and were swinging loose on a wild hunt after ultimate

19. Ameer Ali, *A Short History of the Saracens*, (London, 1951) pp. 278-9.
20. H. A. R. Gibb, *Muhammedanism* (London, 1969), p. 78.

truth, wielding as their weapons definitions and syllogisms."[21]

This all-pervasive influence of Greek philosophy and logic had its reaction in the world of Islam. Now a class of dialecticians (called *mutakallimun)*, who used the very weapons of Greek logic to defend the Islamic dogmas, came into existence. The result was that whether the commentator was for or against the tools of Greek philosophy, they were considered essential for any commentary on the Koran. From now on, the Koran could not be understood without invoking Greek philosophy. Maulana Abul Kalām remarks, "The manner of argument observed by the Prophet was not to assume logical poses and confuse the bearer. He adopted the natural way of direct appeal, such as might reach every type of mind, and touch every heart. But the commentators, obsessed by the philosophy and logic of Greece, could hardly bring themselves to look at reality in its naturalness and appreciate it. They thought that they were honouring their Prophet by turning themselves into dialecticians. They sought to demonstrate the greatness of the Koran by pressing it into the framework of Aristotelian logic, hardly realising that it was never its primary object. The result was that the beauty and attraction of the Koranic method of argument and of demonstrating its truth was lost in a network of dialectical disquisitions."[22] Be that as it may, in the changed circumstances, the simplicity and directness of the Koranic style could not have prevailed. It was no longer being handled by either illiterate or semiliterate people of a practical sort. As pointed out in an earlier chapter, people of the merchant and artisan classes to which the Arabs of Mecca and Medina generally belonged tended to be practical rationalists, and the Koran was revealed among such people and hence its simple and direct style. Now, with abundant resources at its command, the new society produced a class of learned men and theologians who specialized in these fields. Being intellectuals (unlike their predecessors to whom the Koran was directly addressed) they were theoretical rationalists. The source of higher knowledge for them was Greek philosophy and therefore they imported all its theoretical concepts into Islam and saw the Koran also in the same light. With a historical advance forward and with people different from those for whom the Koran was directly meant, the earlier simplicity and directness could not be retained. It would not do simply to point out, as some latter-day thinkers like Dr. Iqbal do, that Islam lost its vitality as it fell under the influence of Greek

21. D.B. Macdonald, *Development of Muslim Theology*, p. 140. Quoted in Gibb, op. cit.
22. Azad, Maulana Abul Kalām, *The Tarjuman al-Qur'an*, 'Vol. I, ed. and translated into English by Syed Abul Latif, (Asia Publishing House, 1965) pp. xxxvi.

thought. In the changed context it was inevitable. The Koran was what it was because of its circumstances and it became what it did owing to changed circumstances. History could not have remained at a standstill in the Arabian desert. The foreign conquests set new forces into motion which were bound to transform Islam into something which was acceptable to more sophisticated people like those of Persia. Iqbal's condemnation of the influence of Greek thought on Islam completely ignores historical realities. He bemoans that though the Koran encouraged external observation and knowledge through sense-perception, the Muslims fell under the spell of Greek speculative thought, and completely lost sight of the real import of the Koran. In Mecca and Medina, which had just begun to develop an urban culture, people naturally depended more on external observation and sense-perception for the knowledge of nature. Speculative thought, deep spiritual experiences and inner probing of the mental world are the hallmarks of an advanced culture which has risen above a hand-to-mouth existence. Persia was a country with an advanced culture, and the thinkers and poets had already probed the inner world. When its intellectuals assumed the leadership of religious thought in Islam, their attitudes with their inward orientation were bound to influence it. The emphasis could not remain on sense-perception and external observations only; deeper probings and a philosophical quest for truth also became the desideratum of its intellectual world. The only way to stop this process was to bring Islam back to the Arabian desert, and this was historically impossible. Iqbal thus takes an unhistorical view of Islam. As for his view that Islam lost its vitality owing to Greek influences, he can be said to be taking an idealistic position. Again he fails to link it up with the objective situation. Any movement loses its full-blooded vigour after it has passed through its scarcity-based phase (which poses a challenge and evokes a response) to a comparatively affluent phase (which makes people used to the comforts of life and concentrate on mental and psychological aspects rather than physical struggle. This is more true in the case of the upper leisured classes whom Toynbee calls the "creative minority" which provides intellectual leadership to society).

The Ismā'īli sect of Islam, it is important to bear in mind, was the first sect of Islam to have systematically attempted to interpret Islam in the light of Greek philosophy, drawing heavily from Platonic ideas. They applied these ideas even to explain the genesis of the universe. It is important to note that the Ismā'īli leadership came from among eminent Persian intellectuals. Greek emanationist ideas were syste-

matically applied by these persons. Hamidud-Dīn Kirmāni, Hātim Rāzi, Muayyad Shīrāzi, Nāsir Khusrao etc., all of Arabian origin, were its pillars of strength. Its founders too, Maymūn al-Quddāh and his son 'Abd Allah b. Maymūn, were of Persian origin. They preached esoteric doctrines which were based on Hellenic concepts. The Ismā'īlis believe that the esoteric meaning of the scriptures, however, is known only to the Imāms, owing to divine knowledge inherited by them from 'Alī. Furthermore, allegorical interpretation of the Koran constitutes religious knowledge of God (M'ārifa) which is indispensable for salvation. For Ismā'īlīs worship as a means of salvation is twofold: one of action and one of knowledge. According to Hamidud-Dīn Kirmāni the Prophet concentrated on exoteric worship only, whereas 'Alī and the Imāms from his progeny have been left in charge of esoteric worship, i.e., *'ilmal-m'ārifa*. Both types of worship are interdependent.[23] Thus according to 'Ismā'īlīs, "Ta'līm, therefore, is necessary because religion does not consist of sense-perceived knowledge. Evidently it is 'gnosis' whose truth emanates from a teacher. The Prophet and his progeny, exclusively, have specialised in the religious sciences, esoteric and exoteric. The Imāms teach the du'āt (i.e., summoners) and the du'āt in turn, instruct the mustajibin or learners in the d'awa."[24] (In fact Dr. Kāmil Husayn, an Egyptian scholar, maintains in a foreword written to *Majālis al-Mustansiriya* that it is the du'āt who have formulated the esoteric doctrines and then ascribed them to the Imāms. See his introduction to *Majālis al-Mustansiriya*, p. 7 ff.)

The Ismā'īlī movement remained underground for quite some time as its leaders wanted to organize resistance to the 'Abbāsid rulers. The whole organization was structured accordingly. Strict secrecy had to be maintained and anyone desirous of joining it had to go through an initiaion ceremony designed to maintain secrecy. The new entrant was screened by the dā'i and his assistants and then he was administered an oath of secrecy called *mīthāq*. This was necessary to keep out 'Abbāsid agents who always hovered around to smash the organized resistance against the dynasty. The du'āt, referred to above, skilfully spread their network throughout the Islamic world and through their elaborately worked out philosophic interpretation of Islam, attracted the best intellectuals of the time. Not only that, they attracted the common masses of the people too through their Shī'a beliefs which, as pointed out above, held great attraction for the

23. Hamīdud Dīn Kirmāni, *Rahat al-'Aql*, pp. 27. 30-32.
24. Panayiotis J. Vatikiotis, *The Fatimid Theory of State*, (Oriental Publishers, Lahore) p. 37.

non-Arab people in general and the Persians in particular. It is also worth noting that owing to its underground operation, the Ismā'īlī sect was the first one to have evolved a tightly structured hierarchy of priesthood in Islam, and this hierarchy bore a close resemblance to that of the Christians. There was the Imām at the top, followed by the hujjas (proofs) who had a variety of dā'īs (summoners to the faith) below them. The dā'īs, in turn were assisted by mā'dhuns (literally one who is permitted) and mukāthirs (those who break their opponents). The followers of this sect known as Ismā'īlīs and Bohras are mostly found in India. The founders of this sect succeeded in working out a perfect synthesis between Arabian and Perso-Greek elements. The Ismā'īlīs, also known as Fātimids in history, at last succeeded in establishing their rule first in West Africa and subsequently in Egypt where they rose to glory.

The Qarāmita or Qarmatians were one of the sub-sects of Ismā'īlīs. Founded by Hamdān Qarmat around A.D. 874 the Qarmatian sect has been described as one of the most revolutionary sects of Islam. According to Tabari (Vol. iii, pp. 2127, 2125) the word Qarmat is of Aramaic origin, meaning "secret teacher" or teacher of occult knowledge. Hamdān was an Iraq peasant converted to the occult Iṣmā'īlīte teaching by 'Abd Allah b. Maymūn. Passing through the grades of initiation he conceived a keen vision of power in store for the adepts of its highest orders. An ambitious person himself, he fully exploited the unrest among the Nabataean peasants against heavy taxation as well as the ancient feud between the native peasantry and the sons of the desert. He carried on active propaganda among the native masses especially the Nabataean peasants and artisans, and also among the Arabs. The community of Qarmatians worked on communistic principles, so much so that some modern writers have called them the Bolsheviks of Islam. Prof. Hitti writes, "They stressed tolerance and equality, organised workers and artisans into guilds and in their ceremonial had the ritual of a guild. The earliest sketch of the organization of Muslim guilds occurs in the eighth epistle of the Ikhwān al-Safa, themselves probably Qarmatians [this is of course not correct]. This trade guild movement, in the opinion of Massignon, reached the West and influenced the formation of European guilds and Freemasonry."[25]

The empire of the 'Abbāsids was very extensive and highly heterogeneous in nature, and the sole unifying factor was the payment of tribute and religious allegiance to the caliph. However, owing to

25. Hitti, op. cit., p. 445.

exactions and unbearable exploitation, many sections of the population revolted and, more often than not, their revolt was canalized through some dissident religious sect. It is quite apparent that the Nabataean peasantry was restive, and responded readily to Qarmats' call because he was preaching communistic principles.

Most of the Islamicists, I think, have been prejudiced against the Qarāmita on account of their radical doctrines. They are often referred to very contemptuously. Thus Ameer Ali says in his *History of the Saracens,* "The rise of the Fātimids in Africa, and the appearance of the communistic Carmathians (the Karāmita), who soon filled with rapine and carnage the whole of Arabia, Syria, and Iraq, and ultimately brought ruin and disaster on the Moslem world, occurred in this reign.... They continued in this course, defeating army after army, until in the year 317 of the Hegira (in the reign of Muktadir), they suddenly swooped down upon Mecca during the most important day of the Hajj, slaughtered the pilgrims, desecrated the Kaaba, and carried away the Black Stone."[26] It is also worth noting that the area of operation of the Qarāmita was 'Irāq and its surroundings. The native population had belonged to the lower rungs of society, and for this reason, it was always a hotbed of dissident sects and revolutionary creeds. The community of the Qarāmita was founded on the full equality of all members, and common ownership of all property, for a time also of women. Workers and artisans, grouped into guilds with an elaborate, quasi-mystical ceremonial, provided a subsistence for the warriors. Public finances were at first based on voluntary contributions, but soon became increasingly dependent on taxes which finally were levied with the utmost severity. The half-rationalistic, half-allegorical interpretation of the Koran was adapted to the level of the primitive peasant mind. Nāsir Khusrao, who himself was an Ismā'īlī and an eminent author, traveller and keen observer of the eleventh century. has left a graphic description of the organization of the Qarmatian state."It is ruled by the six sons of Abū Sa'īd in common; in their palace there is a dais on which they sit in council and from which they promulgate their orders and decrees after they have come to an agreement. These princes possess 30,000 negro slaves purchased with money, who are employed in agriculture and gardening. The people have to pay neither taxes nor tithes. To any one who becomes poor or gets into debt, advances are made from public funds until his affairs are in good state again. Only

26. Ameer Ali, op. cit., p. 298.

the capital has to be paid back, no interests are claimed...."[27]

Thus we see that the Qarāmita were not mere plunderers and killers as they have generally been termed by the historians on account of prejudice against their radical doctrines and socialistic principles. The evidence of Nāsir Khusrao cannot be lightly brushed aside, as he belonged to another sect of Ismā'īlīs with which the relations of the Qarāmita were not cordial. Moreover, he was a keen observer, not carried away by prejudice. However, in what Khusrao has recorded we notice that even in the "communistic" organization developed by the Qarāmita slaves were not given equal treatment. Slaves were purchased and employed for agricultural operations, and all this despite Islam's teachings to treat them more humanely (Islam too, as already pointed out, did not abolish slavery though it discouraged it in the Meccan phase). We do not however, get much information from the historians' accounts as to what treatment was meted out to the slaves by the Qarāmita. Dr. Zāhid Alī (who is by no means pro-Ismā'īlīte) also has given certain details of the Qarāmita's organization. He says, "All the followers (of the Qarāmita sect) were ordered to turn over all their mobile and immobile properties to the treasury of the presiding dā'ī. No one should possess anything, so that financially no one should have preference over the other. Everyone should get according to his needs from the treasury of the dā'ī In support of this a verse of the Koran was quoted: 'Remember the bounties of God on you. You were (each other's) enemies and God brought about reconciliation of your hearts and by his bounty you became brothers.'

"It was explained to the people that it is not necessary for them to keep their properties with them as very soon they are going to become masters of this world. This period is the period of testing their sincerity and truthfulness.... A dā'ī was appointed to collect the earnings of the villagers. He was asked to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and help the weak and the afflicted out of that fund. The whole scheme was implemented with such thoroughness that no needy person or beggar was left. All the citizens started discharging their duties promptly and steadfastly and liv. l their life satisfactorily. So much so that poor women used to deposit their income earned by spinning in the dā'ī's treasury and small children too did the same with their income earned by looking after the birds."[28]

Thus we clearly see that the Qarāmita had established a communis-

27. Quoted from Stephen and Nandy Ronart, *Concise Encyclopaedia of Arabic Civilization* (Amsterdam, 1966), pp. 433-4.
28. Dr. Zāhid Husayn, *Tārikh, Fatimiyeen-e-Misr,* (Karachi, 1963) pp. 436-7.

tic society to whatever extent was historically possible in that period. There is no doubt that the Qarāmita justified their actions on the basis of the Koran and Islam. They emphasized the principle of justice in Islam and quoted relevant Koranic verses to that effect. Ibn Athīr tells us that 'Ali bin 'Isā, the minister of Caliph Muqtadir 'Abbasi who was a man of large landed estates, once caught a Qarmatian and asked him the reason for adopting that faith (i.e.the Qarmatian faith). The man replied that I think it is the true faith and you and your master (i.e. the caliph) are kafirs (nonbelievers) because you take (from people) what does not belong to you. This shows that the Qarāmita were inspired by the Islamic sense of justice and did not work against the *Sharī'a* as alleged by their opponents.[29] There is no doubt that the 'Abbāsid rulers would have panicked at such an attempt on the part of small peasants and workers, and tried to crush this movement ruthlessly, at any cost, as is the wont of exploiting rulers. And the Qarāmita must have retaliated. The historians, victims of their class prejudice, ignored the violence inflicted on the Qarāmita and condemned their retaliatory violence severely. This is nothing new, as it has always happened. The very fact that the Qarāmita withstood the onslaught of a powerful empire so long, and could also capture important cities like Mecca, shows that they were supported by the oppressed people. The historians have also alleged that the Qarāmita believed in free sex and had common wives. At that stage of history there is no evidence of anything of that sort, and the allegation is no better than fabrication by the historians, though of course it is difficult to state the contrary with any certainty. However, it is more probable that, since the Qarāmita lived in a sort of commune the historians thought that they had common wives too, although this may be far from the truth. Some historians, either out of malice or due to sheer misunderstanding have accused the Ismā'īlīs in general of common ownership of women and of a socialistic organization, etc. Thus Joel Carmichael says, "By the beginning of the tenth century the ('Abbāsid) empire was passing through an acute social crisis. The peasants and slaves were defeated and harboured resentment, and an immense urban proletariat was exacerbated by the increasing concentration of labour and capital. The Ismā'īlī sect seems to have elaborated its doctrines in such a way as to attract a great part of the social discontent into its own channels and to have had immense appeal for the common people who were suffering so much from the social afflictions of the period. Beginning with

29. See Mahmoud Ismā'il, *Al-Harakat al-Sirriyah fi'l Islam* (Cairo, 1973), pp. 192.

substantial peasantry support and gradually infiltrating the urban workers, especially the craftsmen, with their revolutionary ideas, the Ismā'īlīs seem to have created some of the Islamic craft guilds; in any case they incorporated them into their sect. The sect was accused of communism and also, curiously enough, of collective ownership of women, i.e., licentiousness, all of which may mean no more than that they had some sort of social programme for ameliorating the conditions of the lower classes and for granting women a higher status than they enjoyed in orthodox Islam of the time."[30] While the author's analysis of the rise of the radical movement is quite correct, it appears that he is confusing the Ismā'īlīs with the Qarāmita, the latter being the sub-sect of the former. Some Muslim historians have also confused the two.

Another revolt which nearly shook the 'Abbāsid empire was that of the negro slaves, which is called the Zanj revolt. It lasted for about fourteen years from A.D. 869 to 883. Though Islam has always been a slave-owning society, slaves were not the principle factor in production, as was the case in Roman society. In the Islamic empire a substantial portion of surplus wealth came from trade, and it was for this reason that Islamic society was more dynamic than other comparable societies, which were purely feudal, and whose surplus came from the exploitation of the peasantry alone. Of course, a part of the surplus in Islam came from free or semi-free peasantry which produced foodgrain and other cash-crops. Slaves were generally used either for domestic or military purposes. Those used for the latter were known as *mamlūks*, and actually constituted a military caste based on extensive privileges. The Islamic state in its very early phase could be said to have been mindful of the interests of the merchant classes, as the Arabian society at that point of time had no other organized class with well-defined interests. However, later on, though the trade expanded with the incorporation of various areas into the Islamic state, the merchant class slowly and gradually lost its hold over the state. One apparent reason was the increasing importance wielded by the army in foreign conquests. Large garrisons had to be maintained in conquered territories to retain hold over them. As the army was professionalized, most of the conscripts came from among the slaves from Central Asia and other places. In the later days of the 'Abbāsid empire, these slaves known as *mamlūks* had become so powerful that the real power was wielded by them. The caliph became just a shadow of his former self. One more reason why these slaves, who were personal guards of the caliph, became so powerful

30. Joel Carmichael, *The Shaping of the Arabs*, pp. 239–40.

was that the caliph derived his authority partly by virtue of his religious office, and there was no powerful class of feudal estate-holders to counter-balance it. Thus, if the caliph was weak, the real power was enjoyed by the personal guards, who later on made and un-made caliphs.

To return to the Zanj revolt: there was another aspect of the life the slaves led in the 'Abbāsid empire. The great business enterprises led to the gathering together of huge numbers of slaves in specific agricultural enterprises based on substantial investments of the liquid capital arising out of large-scale business speculations. These slaves, thousands in number, would be thrown together in a colony working on the business enterprise of one landowner. These slaves were either captured in East Africa or received as tribute from the territories subject to the 'Abbāsid empire. Then there was a salt marsh complex east of Basra which constituted one such large-scale business enterprise. Hundreds of thousands of slaves were employed for draining these salt marshes in order to use these lands later for agricultural operations and to extract the salt for sale. It appears that their condition was quite bad and, what was worse, these slaves, as newcomers, without even a knowledge of the language spoken there, were strangers to the society and its religion. One 'Alī b. Muhammad (it is not known whether he was Arab or Persian; some historians call him of mixed blood) called *Sāhib al-zanj* i.e., leader of Zanj, organized these slaves against their masters. Of course he did not preach any reform nor did he call for the abolition of slavery. He talked of their deliverance by visions of occult essence and promised them an improvement in their lot after the rebellion. Tabari denounces him as a rogue and as Allah's enemy.[31] The slaves, of course, considered him to be their Messiah and rallied under his banner. This leader, though claiming to be the follower of 'Alī, the Prophet's son-in-law, did not join the Shī'as, probably because these slaves had a different problem altogether. Though claiming to be an Alīd, he preferred to make common cause with the Kharijites, who were essentially egalitarian anarchists opposing rather than supporting the Shi'ites. The reason appears to be that all forms of hereditary distinction and following the idea of personal merit as the sole criterion of leadership, whereas the Shī'ites believed in hierarchy and leadership by birth. The Kharijites thought all other Muslims the same as infidels, and the Zanj followed them. From this point of view all Muslims were subject on capture to slavery or death.

The movement was quite successful, in fact remarkably so, and

31. Tabari, Vol. iii. pp. 1785-6.

spread rapidly. The most remarkable thing about its deep revolutionary import was the fact that the black troops sent to quell the rebellion joined it. Even some free peasants joined it, probably on account of their resentment against the land-owning class. By A.D. 870, after capturing the important sea-port of Ubullah, and then expanding into southwest Persia, the Zanj had become a major threat to the Islamic empire. A year later they even succeeded in capturing the city of Basra. They sacked it and left. By A.D. 879 they were carrying out raids right within seventeen miles of the imperial capital, Baghdad.[32] To crush this menacing rebellion, the caliph's brother Al-Muwaffaq had to take charge of the operation. At last,in A.D. 883, al-Mukhtarah, the fortress built by the leader of the rebellion, was stormed and he was slain. Thus came to an end one of the fiercest and bloodiest revolutionary upheavals ever recorded in Muslim history. The very fact that it could be sustained for over fifteen years in the face of the mighty imperial army shows its revolutionary appeal.

There were other minor and major revolts too. Almost all of them had their epicentre in 'Irāq and Persia, and hardly any in the heartland of Arabia from which Islam originated. The most probable reason appears to be resentment of the Arab domination by the non-Arab peoples of the empire. Farouk Omar, in an article, 'The Nature of the Iranian Revolts in the Early Abbasid Period', says, "With the Abbasid succession to power, the masses, whether Arab or non-Arab, expected to see the dawn of a new era of equality and prosperity. This new consciousness and those expectations were impossible to suppress. In Iran the central government was faced with a twofold problem: (1) Rebellious outbreaks which followed in the footsteps of the 'Abbāsid upheaval and were, in a way, its natural results, as the great 'Abbāsid revolution had stirred up the masses, who expected better conditions of life. (2) The conflict between the central government and the local princes in the region of the Caspian Sea, i.e., in Tagaristan, Daylam and Transoxania, which was primarily a war of occupation.... The establishment of the Arab rule was naturally equivalent to the introdution of Islam whose spread the natives resented, as they identified it with the ruling class and consequently with oppression. Even after the Muslim conquest, the social stratification had been preserved. The Iranian *dihqans* (village landlords) adopted Islam and co-operated with the ruling Arabs."[33] In the footnote, the author quotes Ibn Qutaybah from *Kitab al-'Arab* to

32. Carmichael, op.cit., pp. 237-8.

33. Faroukh Omar, "The Nature Of The Iranian Revolts In The Early Abbasid

the effect that it was the masses and not the aristocracy who hated the Arab ruling class.[34] It was for this reason that in most of the movements against the 'Abbāsids the oppressed and the downtrodden were involved in such large numbers.

Omar Farouk further points out: "If one studies the movements of Sonbādh, Ustādh Sīs, al-Muqanna', etc., one notices that they expressed a conflict between the oppressed population, whatever its ethnic origin, and the representatives of the existing regime, whether Arabs or non-Arabs, and were generally not ethnically, but socially and economically motivated. The people either participated in movements led by local rebels such as Bihāforīd, Ustādh Sīs, Sonbādh, Ishaq al-Turk and al-Muqanna', or joined the Kharijites in Sistan and Kurāsān or the Alids in Khurāsān and Daylam. On the other hand, they also supported the Arab rebels such as Jawhar al-'Ijlī, 'Abdul Jabbār al-Azdī and Rafi' b. al-Layth : when the governor was loyal to the central government they opposed him, but they joined him if he rebelled." Omar Farouk is very right in pointing out that these revolts did not have an ethnic character alone, as many western Islamicists would have us believe; they were primarily motivated by social and economic factors as we have seen in the case of the Zanj revolt.

Among other revolts the insurrection of Hurufiyah and that of Pasikhaniyan are also quite important though much has not been written about them. The founder of the Hurufiyah movement was Fadlullah Na'īmī, a cap-maker. He was born in Astrabad (a province in Iran) and his movement, joined by mostly urban artisans, flourished in eighth-century *Hijri*. Na'īmī was a poet, had visited many eastern cities and had imbibed a progressive outlook. According to Na'īmī man was measure of everything and was pivotal to religion and philosophy. In a way Na'īmī's movement upheld Hallaj's slogan of *ana'l haq* (I am the truth). Many of his verses proclaim this doctrine of his with verve and force.[35] Fadlullah maintains that 'good' and 'evil' do not owe their existence to any outside agency; they exist within us. He rebels against the powers that be. In fact in one of his verses he says that 'I vomit on the crown of Qaisar'.[36]

Period", article in *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XLVIII. No. I, January 1974. The author has quoted Tabari, *Tārikh*, Vol. iii. (Leyden 1881), pp. 458, 995, 1470; Narshki, *Tarikh-i-Bukhara;* p. 58; Sadighi, *Les Mouvements* (Paris, 1938), p. 42 ff.

34. ibid. pp. 344-5.

35. See 'Ali Mir Fitros *Jumbish-e-Hurufiyah wa Nahdat-e-Pasikhaniyan* Intisharat-i-*Kar* n.d.) p. 51.

36. ibid. p. 56.

Another important leader of 'Hurufiyah' was 'Imadud Din Nasīmī. Nasīmī was a materialist who believed that matter was eternal and only changes forms. Naturally the leaders and followers of this movement were massacred and their bodies were burnt. Their organization, according to 'Abdur Razzāq Samarqandi functioned underground.[37]

The 'Abbāsids, as pointed out in an earlier chapter, had beheaded their chief missionary Abū Muslim Khurāsānī who had mobilized support for them in Khurāsān after coming to power. However, very soon the people of Persia felt the exploitative character of the 'Abbāsid rule, and Abū Muslim emerged as a hero in their eyes. Legends began to grow around his person and he became the symbol of the Iranian ambitions. Some of them even refused to believe that he had been killed. In several of the uprisings against the 'Abbāsids it was claimed that the 'Abbāsids had not been able to kill Abū Muslim and that another man was executed instead. They also believed that he would return one day. As the political situation deteriorated, this belief became more firmly rooted. Some people even transformed him into a divine being and successor to their saviour Zoroaster. It is interesting to note that though Islam had supplanted Zoroastrianism in Persia, many of the Persian people continued to believe in the return of either Zoroaster or someone appointed by him. Thus the distinctive feature of the uprising led by Ishaq al-Turk in Transoxania was the belief that Abū Muslim was a prophet sent by Zoroaster, who himself was alive and would come to restore his religion.[38]

What factors led Persia to adopt Islam? Was it economic change? If so, what economic change had taken place? Montgomery Watt has an interesting proposition, which has been discussed in an earlier chapter: "If it is further asked whether economic changes always lead to religious changes, a brief survey would suggest the following answer: Where the economic change is a change in the means of methods of production, then this usually has social repercussions and these in turn lead to a religious change. On the other hand, where the economic change is a change of ruler, the effects seem to depend on whether the new ruler is of the same type as the old ruler or of a different type. Feudal overlords in medieval Europe would belong to the same type in this sense, and a change of overlord would not normally lead to a religious change. The Muslim conquerors of Persia, however, belonged to a different social system from its Persian rulers, and in course of time the conquest led to religious change."[39]

37. ibid. p. 59.
38. Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, Vol. 1, p. 344 ff. See also Tabari III, p. 147.
39. Watt, op. cit., p. 33.

In the case of Persia, Prof. Watt's proposition seems to work, but we run into difficulty when we apply it to Spain. The Arab rulers of Spain, too, belonged to a different social system from that of its former rulers and the local populace. Yet the Arab influence in Spain did not spread beyond the city limits, and the Spanish peasantry was not converted to Islam. It was for this reason that, along with the overthrow of Arab rule, Islam also lost its foothold in Spain. The problem is thus far more complex than Prof. Watt's proposition seems to suggest. I think introducing one more element to Prof. Watt's proposition might answer our problem better: a change of a ruler belonging to a different social system would lead to a religious change provided the religion of the former ruler, in the eyes of the people, is closely identified with the oppressive state machinery. Now we see that the Zoroastrian faith, before the advent of Islam in Persia, was an instrument of oppression in the hands of the ruling class in Persia, whereas in Spain Christianity before the advent of Islam was not. In Persia, as we see, Islam became an instrument of oppression, and that too, in the hands of alien rulers. Thus Zoroastrianism and other local cults such as that of Mazdak started acquiring popularity again in Persia by way of reaction. We have already seen that Abū Muslim was also projected by various dissident movements as a prophet sent by Zoroaster.

We have described in brief some of the revolutionary insurrections or abortive revolts against the Umayyad and the 'Abbāsid rulers in which exploited and downtrodden masses participated. However, the upper classes of the non-Arab population, which had moved closer to the ruling class during 'Abbāsid rule, in keeping with their class character, did not participate in these insurrections or revolts, but evolved milder forms of protest. Thus they launched what was known as the *Shu'ūbiyya* movement. This was a sort of literary crusade to project their national feelings which were hurt by Arab domination. The *Shu'ūbiyya* movement became widespread and manifested itself in the entire cultural life of the non-Arab populace. It had penetrated the highest echelons of the non-Arab governing hierarchy. Goldziher in his *Muslim Studies* has made an excellent study of this cultural protest against Arab domination. Commenting on the most famous case of Afshin, a Sogdian general of the 'Abbāsids, he says: "None of the figures prominent in this history, however, shows more clearly than Afshin—otherwise known as Khaydhar bin Kawus—the superficial penetration of Islam in the educated non-Arab circles. This general of Al-Mu'tasim, who came

from Sogdiana and who had suppressed the revolution of Bābak, so dangerous for Islam, who had led the caliph's troops in the fight against the Christians, and who had played a prominent role in several of the religious wars of Islam, was so little a Muslim that he cruelly maltreated two propagandists of Islam who wished to transform a pagan temple into a mosque; he ridiculed Islamic laws and—as a compatriot who was converted to Islam witnessed against him—ate the meat of strangled animals (a horror to Muslims), and also induced others to do so by saying that such meat was fresher than that of animals killed according to the Islamic rite.... He ridiculed circumcision and other Muslim customs, and paid no attention to them. He did not cease, even as a Muslim, to read the religious books of his nation, and kept splendid copies of them, ornamented with gold and jewels, and, while he helped the caliph in his campaigns against the enemies of the Muslim states, he dreamt of the restoration of the Persian empire and the "white region", and mocked Arabs, Maghribites, and Muslim Turks. The first he called dogs to whom one throws bones in order then to beat their heads black and blue with a stick (Tabari, III, pp. 1309-1313).[40] The *Shu'ūbites*, in conformity with the Koran (*sūra* XLIX,13), contended that all Muslims were of equal standing, whether they were descended from Arabian tribes (Qabā'il) or belonged to other races and peoples. The most ardent champions of this universal equality under the banner of Islam came from the Persian intelligentsia, proud of their ancient civilization and learning. They found support for their stand in the rank of pious Arab Muslims for whom the word of the Koran was of fundamental importance in all aspects of life. The moderate section among the *Shu'ūbiyya* was satisfied with censuring the privileges of the Arabian aristocracy, but the more radical elements went much further. They emphasized their own achievements in the domain of higher civilization and claimed for themselves the title of superiority over the offspring of desert tribesmen, who in their eyes were uneducated, vulgar and overbearing upstarts not different from their primitive Bedouin ancestors. In some circles their feelings of hostility were so intense that a Persian author at the beginning of the 9th century, painstakingly extracted from the satires (*hijw*), that much-cultivated genre of pre-Islamic poetry, the colourful invective and insult exchanged between hostile tribes through the mouth of their poets, and used them to illustrate Arab self-characterization. The *Shu'ūbiyya* controversy was essentially a literary feud, but

40. Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (London, 1967), pp. 139–40.

fought from both sides with the utmost vehemence combined at times with various oppositional trends in the field of theology and even with a number of seditious activities and propagandistic arguments of a number of political adventurers and leaders of malcontents of various shades (*mawāli*, i.e., Muslims of foreign origin).[41]

It should also be noted that it was in Iraq that the *Shu'ūbite* tendencies found their strongest expression, mainly because of the involvement of the powerful secretary class, which was more articulate, more consciously assertive of its cultural values, and more capable of political manipulation .... When the *Shu'ūbiyya* emerged as a movement, the real problem was not so much one of the Arabs versus non-Arabs. It was the acceptability of the desert values of the Arabs, incorporated into Islam but regarded nevertheless by the *Shu'ūbiyya*), particularly by the secretary class, as outmoded.[42]

Thus we see that the upper-class gentry did not play a part in the various insurrectionary or revolutionary movements of the down-trodden masses, but confined themselves to asserting their cultural superiority over the uncouth Arabs, and deriving some kind of satisfaction, whereas the peasants, artisans, workers and slaves took up arms to fight against their cruel exploitation. We have spoken about these insurrectionary or revolutionary movements above. There was one more such movement which is called the Bābaki movement. The insurrection of Bābak (816-37), based on the peasantry, was most remarkable for its comprehensiveness and dynamism. Bābak's demands can well be compared with the demands of any peasant movement today in Asian or African countries. He advocated the break-up of the big estates and their distribution among the peasants. It will be quite in place to note that even Persian squires (*dihqans*), who by this time had shrunk to the level of peasants, supported Bābak, though they did so with some reservations, and maintaining their air of nobility. The centre of the movement was Adharbāyjān, whence it spread to southeast Persia, there receiving support from the mountain people known as Kurds*, and then moved on to the Caspian districts of the north and westward into Armenia. Bābak was an open heretic

41. See Stephen and Nandy Ronart, op. cit., pp. 493-4.
42. See Zohurul Bari, "Iran and Iraq Under Islam: Aspects of The Impact of Geo-Historical Factors on Ideation" in *Islam and Modern Age*, Delhi, Vol. XVI No. 3, August 1985, p. 157.

* The Kurds, even today, are a refractory people: their nationalistic demands are unacceptable to the regimes of Iran and Iraq, and they are in revolt against the revolutionary regime of Khomeini.

and a man of remarkable gifts and an organizing genius. To achieve his goal he even made an alliance with the Byzantine emperor who was the enemy of the 'Abbāsid empire. Bābak could hold out for seven years against four of the Māmūn's generals. It was only after Mu'tasim succeeded to the throne that Bābak's movement was confined to Adharbāyjān, and later crushed.

After this brief survey of early Islamic history, a few points are worth noting. Some Islamic thinkers and apologists have maintained that Islam, because of its doctrine of equality (both that of wealth and that of caste, creed and race) is the only religion capable of answering successfully modern socio-economic and political challenges. While this is ideologically true (the Koranic theology does emphasize equality of wealth and that of race and colour) it is not so historically. The Islamic societies have been as much inegalitarian as any other could be. Feudalism and feudal hierarchy soon became rooted in most of the Islamic societies. The distinction of Arab and *Ajam* also could not be wiped out. As already pointed out, many of the rebellions against the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid regimes were fuelled by resentment against the Arab domination.

It is not ideology alone which shapes history much as the ideologues desire, but empirical reality does assert itself strongly. A perceptive historian, whatever his ideological commitment, cannot ignore empirical facts. An ideology cannot be superimposed on an existing situation without distorting it. Even when an attempt is made to fundamentally change empirical reality by changing relations and forces of production, ideology gets influenced by the objective situation in the process of transformation. The Islamic concept of equality could not become a historical reality (except for a brief period) precisely because no serious attempt was made to change the underlying socio-economic structure in keeping with its ideological values. Even before Islam, movements like those of Mazdak totally failed for similar reasons. Islam did survive but only in a religious sense, completely losing its socio-economic radicalism. The equality preached by Islam could be practised (here too, there were some important conditions) only for a very limited period. It was a period when the followers of the new faith were locked in a life-and-death struggle with the people of Mecca on the one hand, and with the Medinese Jews, nearer home, on the other. Material means were scarce and hard to come by. Whatever was available had to be distributed equitably. However, during the last days of Muhammad, some surplus became available. In the distribution of the booty Muhammad had to show some preference to the politically important

people, who had to be given more than others for political reasons. The foreign conquests began from the time of Abū Bakr and henceforth a great deal of wealth started flowing into the coffers of the nascent Islamic states.

'Umar tried to enforce austerity and equality, but he was fighting against the powerful forces emerging in the society. The weak personality of 'Uthmān, the third caliph, was finally overwhelmed by the new historical forces and the Muslims were plunged into a civil war. 'Alī, the fourth and last caliph elected according to the tradition of the Arabs, made sincere efforts to rule according to the "principles of Islam", and failed, as the foreign conquests had completely changed the equation of forces. The first Islamic republic was turned into a monarchy and ever since there has been no return to the "good old days". Some idealists fervently believe in setting up an Islamic society on the model of the one that existed during the first thirty years of Islam. These idealists totally ignore historical forces, and do not understand that such a state or society cannot be set up without creating a similar historical situation, which is impossible. Moreover, it would be wrong to project that society as the "ideal" or "golden" society, for , as we have already seen in the earlier chapters, it was not free of conflicts and social tensions.

Another myth perpetuated by these idealists is that of the Islamic brotherhood. Islamic society, right from its inception, was divided into different classes and categories. There were masters and slaves, propertied classes and non-propertied classes, Arabs and non-Arabs, with sharp mutual antagonisms. Those who talk of Islamic brotherhood in our day are again being ignorant of social realities and mutual conflicts that exist between different sections and classes of society. So it would be sheer idealism to say that perfect brotherhood can exist merely on the basis of religion, which may be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to keep such a brotherhood going. The history of religion in general and that of Islam in particular clearly proves this. However, the apologists of Islam, even in the face of facts, have tried to maintain the myth of Islamic brotherhood. These apologists of Islam, in my opinion, are not doing any service to its cause. Only those who view Islam in the correct historical perspective and take various social forces into account can correctly analyse the situation being faced by the world of Islam today. The value system of Islam has much in common with the value system of socialism. A value system, whether of Islam or of socialism, is somewhat more lasting than other institutions, which lose their validity with the changing historical situation and concomitant socio-economic

formations. Values, in fact, provide a transcendental dimension to an ideology or a religion. The emphasis on these values, not in an idealistic way of course, but taking the modern historical forces into account, can lead to the working out of a creative synthesis between Islam and socialism. Most of the Muslim countries are industrially backward and victims of imperialism. Such a synthesis, if worked out successfully, can become acceptable to the poor and exploited masses of these countries who, on that basis, can be induced to side with the progressive and socialist forces and launch struggles to free themselves from the stranglehold of imperialism. I plead for such an approach in view of the strong hold that religion has on the minds of Muslims. The reactionary rulers in the Muslim countries do play with the religious sentiments of Muslims in order to perpetuate their exploitative rule. They hark back to the "golden age" of Islam to create illusions in the minds of those they rule. Socialism alone, in my humble opinion, whether on its own merit or deriving its legitimacy from the religious sanctions of Islam (on its own merit too, as far as my personal view is concerned), can help the Muslim world to stand on its own feet. Muslim intellectuals all over the world have shirked the onerous but necessary task of analysing early Islam in the light of the modern social sciences, although some Western orientalists have done so. If this book is regarded as the first step in that direction, my labour will be richly rewarded.

* (p. 63) It is necessary to make it clear here that the powerful Meccan merchants' initial opposition to Islam, to which Dr. Tāha Husayn also refers (vide page 42) does not mean that it was necessarily against their interests. More often than not, though not necessarily, ideas and ideologies represent mental confusion. In their mental representations, which constitute elements of an ideology, individuals group their reality 'upside down', as Marx very aptly says. Islam exhorted the merchants in Mecca to spend on the welfare of the poor and the destitutes, as this was the only way to stem the tide of social discontent and pave the way for the emergence of new socio-economic relations. Islam, as further analysis in this and the subsequent chapters will show, was never opposed to the interests of the mercantile class; in fact, in a way, it was the product of the desideratum of this class.

† (p. 65) This, however does not mean that there was no spiritual dimension to this movement. On the contrary, it was primarily a religious movement; we are here only trying to discover the social dynamics, as the spiritual motivation by itself cannot be a self-sufficient explanation of any complex social phenomenon. The desiderata of the dominant social groups play a decisive role in shaping an ideological movement, Islam being no exception to this rule.

** (p. 69) It would be quite relevant to note here that the radical Islamic organization of Iran known as Mujahidin-e-khalq-e-Islam interprets unity of God, *wahdaniyya*, as unity of mankind. Not only this, it stretches this concept a little further and advocates a classless society as the true mundane reflection of an eschatological concept of the unity of God. The true unity of God, according to it, is based on the unity of mankind; and the true unity of mankind is possible only in a classless society. Vide articles on "How to Study the Quran" in *Mojahed*, the official newspaper of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, February-April 1980.

†† (p. 74) According to Ahmed Salih 'Abbas, the author of *Al-Yamin wa al-Yasar fi al-Islam* (Beirut, 1973) there was much a much deeper conspiracy in the murder of the second Caliph 'Umar. He analyses events to show that the slave who murdered the Caliph was an instrument in the hands of those who resented 'Umar's shift leftwards. (See pages 53-62.)

*** (p. 81) However, the Shī'a Muslims in general, and the Isma'īlī Muslims in particular, believe that Abū Tālib had embraced Islam, though he did not profess it publicly.

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