

THE LIFE OF MUHAMMAD AND  
THE SOCIOLOGICAL PROBLEM  
OF THE BEGINNINGS OF ISLAM

Much has been written on the life of Muhammad, prophet of Islam. ("Mohammed" and the French "Mahomet" are the result of a long-standing and now traditional deformation.) Aside from his picturesque and romantic character, sure to excite the interest of Occidentals drawn to active, impassioned lives of genius,<sup>1</sup> the importance of the Moslem achievement which he initiated has given rise to important works, the solid and honorable production of historians and specialists of Islam.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Along this line only the highly colorful biography of Émile Dermenghem (Paris: Charlot, 1929; 2d ed., 1950) will be mentioned.

2. A good critical bibliography will be found in J. Sauvaget's *Introduction à l'histoire de l'orient musulman* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1943), pp. 111-14. Since then have appeared notably a French translation of Tor Andrae's valuable little book, *Mahomet, sa vie et sa doctrine*, by J. Gaudefroy-Demombynes (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1945); a solid monograph (unfortunately shortened at publication) by R. Blachère, *Le Problème de Mahomet* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952); a quasi-exhaustive manual by Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *Mahomet* (Paris: A. Michel, 1957). For the works of Watt, written in a different spirit, see below. The essential Arabic source for the reader unfamiliar with the language is now available

We see, then, that many pages have been written on this astonishing man. Critical discussions, often heated ones, have been devoted to the least of his words or deeds. However, very few of these pages have been devoted to the fundamental problems raised by his life in the minds of those who reflect on the evolution and the destiny of societies.

What we are confronted with is a historical fact of considerable importance.<sup>3</sup> In A.D. 620 the Arabs were a rather backward people inhabiting an isolated peninsula on the periphery of the civilized world of the time. There was a confused mass of tribes, lacking unity and apparent power. Arabia offered colonial problems to neighboring world powers, the Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Persia, but she scarcely influenced their decisions. She was an object, not a subject, of history. Thirty years later, in 652, an Arabian empire spread from Libya to Iran, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Persia. The Sassanid Empire had been destroyed and the Byzantine Empire stripped of very important provinces. A hundred years more and, in 750, the Arabian empire extended from India and the borders of China to the south of France. I find it unnecessary to stress here the important role played today by Islam, a religion estimated to count 365,000,000 among its faithful, dominating the social life of a large number of countries covering a considerable area of the earth's surface.<sup>4</sup>

How shall we explain a historical phenomenon as important, as full of consequences, as this? What does "factual" history tell us? It hands us an ensemble of facts screened by its own criticism. While infinite discussion of the details is possible, no doubt is raised concerning the broad lines of development. At the base of the Arab conquest is the preaching of the prophet Muhammad.

Let us review rapidly the main events of the Prophet's life. Muhammad was born around 570 according to tradition (rather about 580 according to authors of highly developed critical mind) at Mecca, commercial and re-

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in English: Ibn Ishaq's *The Life of Muhammad, a Translation . . .* by A. Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1955). There is a scholarly translation of the Koran into French by R. Blachère, *Le Coran* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve, 1947-51), in three volumes, one of which serves as an introduction.

3. The ideas expressed here have already been developed in more summary fashion by the author in a series of lectures. Cf. M. Rodinson, "Comment est né l'Islam," *Le Courrier rationaliste* (Paris), September 23, 1956, pp. 136-41; "Considérations sociologiques sur les origines de l'Islam," delivered at the Institut Français de Sociologie, June 9, 1956 (5 mimeographed pages); "Mahomet et les empires de l'Islam," *Cahiers rationalistes*, No. 164 (June-August, 1957), pp. 173-83.

4. This may be pointed up by a casual examination of the valuable *Annuaire du monde musulman . . .*, ed. L. Massignon (4th ed.; Paris, 1955).

religious center of the Hejaz. Like the majority of Meccans, he was of the Quraysh tribe, more specifically of the Hâshim clan. He came from a family which had probably once been powerful but whose influence had diminished. He worked as a camel-driver for a rich widow, Khakîja, whom he later married. Around 610 his first revelation occurred: the archangel Gabriel appeared to him. About 613 he began his public preaching. God, in Arabic *Allâh*, revealed to him texts which he, as a passive transmitter, recited to his fellows. The body of these texts constitutes the Koran (Arabic *Qur'ân*, meaning approximately "recitation"), which for Moslems is quite literally the Word of God.<sup>5</sup>

Muhammad announced a teaching to which I shall return later. At first he met little opposition; his disciples were men of his family and friends, generally poor or in middling circumstances. The rich and the powerful remained outside. Then the opposition was unleashed. It seems that the Prophet attempted a compromise. The so-called Satanic verses (inspired, according to tradition, by the Devil, *Iblîs*), in which he admits the existence of certain pagan goddesses, bear witness to this. But he soon retracted them in favor of a clearly monotheistic doctrine. In 615 many of his persecuted disciples emigrated to Christian Ethiopia.

The situation at Mecca soon became untenable for Muhammad and the first Moslems. He entered into negotiations with the inhabitants of the city of Medina or Yathrib<sup>6</sup> about 300 miles to the north. In 622 he emigrated to Medina with a handful of partisans. The Hegira (*hidjra*, "emigration") marks the beginning of the Moslem era. At Medina, where a part of the population was Jewish, he made concessions to the Jews. He instituted a fast, closely modeled on their own expiatory fast, and prescribed turning toward Jerusalem during prayer. But the Jews, feeling themselves to be the

5. I apologize to Moslems who may read these lines for treating the Koran as an unconscious work of Muhammad (there is no question of its being a hoax). They will understand that, if one is not a Moslem, this is the only way to consider the text; to accept it as the Word of God would mean becoming an adherent of Islam. If they consent to read an article on the origins of Islam written by a non-Moslem, they must expect to find what they consider blasphemy. Certain eminent Orientalists (and not the least admirable among them) have felt that they must eliminate everything which might shock Moslems by employing equivocal terms. But what Moslem would be duped by words when the whole approach of these scholars reveals their real thought? Frankness seems to me the best policy. Either the Koran is the work of God or it is that of a man. There is no third solution.

6. It is often stated that Yathrib (a name mentioned in the second century in the form Iathrippa by Ptolemy) took, at the time of Muhammad's sojourn, the name *Madînat an-nabî*, "the city," from which we have derived "Medina." But the form *al-Madîna* is found in the Koran. The name, doubtless owed to the Jews, is really related to an Aramaic denomination. It is the Aramaic *medintâ*, first "juridical circumscription" (from *din*, "judgment"), thence "province" and "large city." Cf. the article of F. Buhl, "Al-Madîna" in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (French ed., 1936), III, 85.

chosen people, repulsed him. Equally disillusioned in regard to the Christians, he chose to become the Arab Prophet par excellence and at the same time the one who closed the series of prophets sent by God to various peoples throughout the years to call on them to repent. He would be the "prophets' seal" (*Khâtam al-anbiyâ*). Henceforth one would turn toward Mecca to pray. Pilgrimages to Mecca would be undertaken, and a fast was set for the month of *ramadân*.

At Medina, Muhammad organized his community. The recently vehement and impassioned preacher became a legislator. God revealed to him rules of social life. He was the arbiter of the tribes of Medina and soon became the true ruler of the city. He led campaigns against the Quraysh, his own tribe, still dominant at Mecca. He tasted both victory and defeat, but more and more the Arab tribes turned toward him, concluding treaties and adopting Islam. The Jews were expelled or massacred, and the Qurayshites were forced to repent. They signed a treaty with Muhammad, who, in 630, triumphantly re-entered the city of his birth. He undertook an expedition to the Byzantine frontier and died soon after, in 632. His death was followed almost immediately by the astonishing conquests which quickly brought Islam to Samarkand and to Poitiers.

Such are, in sum, the facts. But what of their interpretation?

The Arab conquest has traditionally been considered a purely religious phenomenon. Disciples of a new religion wish peoples who profess other faiths to adopt the new one. Not until the nineteenth century was the question asked whether religion was not rather the ideological veneer, the spiritual mask, the superficial covering of more profound needs. In particular, the Italian specialist on Arabic, Caetani, prince of Teano, and the great German specialist on Islam, C. H. Becker, expressed in the first years of the twentieth century the idea that this bursting of the Arabs beyond their native peninsula was, like earlier irruptions in which the religious element was totally lacking, due to economic necessities.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear, however, that the Arab expansion did not achieve its conquering and triumphant form on a world-wide scale until after the con-

7. See especially C. H. Becker, *Vom Werden und Wesen der islamischen Welt, Islamstudien* (Leipzig: Quidle & Meyer, 1924), I, 1-23; *Der Islam als Problem* (reprint of an article first published in *Der Islam*, I [1910], 1-21); L. Caetani, *Studi di storia orientale* (Milan: U. Hoepli, 1911), I, esp. 21 ff., 279 and 366-68; and *passim* in his *Annali dell'Islam* (Milan, 1905 ff.), Vols. I and II. G. H. Bousquet devoted a recent article to an exposition and a criticism (superficial in my opinion) of these ideas: "Quelques remarques critiques et sociologiques sur la conquête arabe et les théories émises à ce sujet," in *Studi orientalistici in onore di Giorgio Levi della Vida* (Rome, 1956), I, 52-60; see also below, p. 44.

version of Arabia to Islam by the action of Muhammad. But these authors see no link between the two facts. For them the message of Muhammad, determined by a purely religious evolution within the prophet, happened to be elaborated and then transmitted to provide by chance an ideological justification to the Arab expansionist drive—a drive with chiefly economic causes. That is indeed a curious coincidence.

In any case we must return to an at least chronological *primum mobile*: the action of the Prophet. Two explanations of it have been offered.

The only current conception is that of a purely religious revolution, accomplished entirely in the religious sphere without relation to other phenomena. The only forces brought into play are the impressions produced on the religious feeling of Muhammad by non-Arab religions, by his visions, his meditations, his mystical experiences, and his desire to bring to his people what he believed to be the truth. Numerous studies have been made in this direction on the influence of Judaism and of Christianity, respectively, on the Prophet.<sup>8</sup> His psychology has been the subject of detailed analyses, comparing it to that of the great mystics of all times. G. H. Bousquet seems to me to have summed up this point of view in a particularly terse and striking way: "It [Islam] was, then, almost uniquely based on the strong personality of Mohammed and on the foreign influences acting upon him, and very little or not at all on the milieu in which the movement began."<sup>9</sup>

Bousquet largely devotes the "sociological" article from which this sentence is taken to a demonstration that such religious movements are "normal"—that they happen continually. Nothing could be more correct, but the important question is why some of these movements (most of them) fail and why a religious movement like Islam is so prodigiously successful.

A second conception of the movement which considers it as having non-religious aims and motives has appeared much more rarely.

8. There is a whole literature on this subject. The thesis of an essentially Jewish origin, based on the fine work of Abraham Geiger, *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Bonn: Gedruckt bei F. Baaden, 1833) (this is a Wiesbaden rabbi's answer to a question asked by the philosophy faculty at Bonn) has been vigorously upheld by H. Lammens, S.J., whose ulterior motive was to place on Judaism the responsibility of the frightful deviation he considered Islam to be. One of the latest important essays to take up this theme is that of C. C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* (New York: Jewish Institute of Religion, 1933). The Christian sources have been considered particularly by K. Ahrens in his *Muhammad als Religionsstifter* (Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, 1935); "Christliches im Qoran," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, LXXXIV (1930), 15 ff. and 148 ff.; and by Tor Åndrae, *Der Ursprung des Islams und das Christentum* (Uppsala, 1926), recently translated into French by J. Roche (Paris, 1955).

9. G. H. Bousquet, "Observations sociologiques sur les origines de l'Islam," *Studia Islamica*, II (1954), 61-87, esp. 72.

Thus in the eighteenth century, Voltaire, in his *Essai sur les mœurs* and in his tragedy *Mahomet*, assigned to the activity of the Prophet of Islam an aim of personal and national ambition. This conformed well to the doctrine of *Aufklärung*, which saw in religion nothing but an imposture hiding aims of self-interest. Muhammad is supposed to have used myths, whose falsity he knew better than anyone else, to satisfy the ambition which he cherished for his nation and through which he hoped to satisfy his own desire for power. This is how Voltaire has Muhammad disclose his secret plans to the Meccan chieftain Zopir:

Wert thou not Zopir, I would answer thee  
As thou deservest, in thunder, by the voice  
Of that offended Being thou deridest:  
Armed with the hallowed Koran I would teach thee  
To tremble and obey in humble silence:  
And with the subject world to kneel before me;  
But I will talk to thee without disguise,  
As man to man should speak, and friend to friend:  
I have ambition, Zopir; where's the man  
Who has it not? but never citizen,  
Or chief, or priest, or king projected aught  
So noble as the plan of Mahomet;  
In acts or arms hath every nation shone  
Superior in its turn; Arabia now  
Steps forth; that generous people, long unknown  
And unrespected, saw her glories sunk,  
Her honors lost; but, lo! the hour is come  
When she shall rise to victory and renown;  
The world lies desolate from pole to pole;  
India's slaves, and bleeding Persia mourns  
Her slaughtered sons; whilst Egypt hangs the head  
Dejected; from the walls of Constantine  
Splendor is fled; the Roman Empire torn  
By discord, sees its scattered members spread  
On every side inglorious;—let us raise  
Arabia on the ruins of mankind:  
The blind and tottering universe demands  
Another worship, and another God.  
Crete had her Minos, Egypt her Osiris,  
To Asia Zoroaster gave his laws,  
And Numa was in Italy adored:  
O'er savage nations where nor monarchs ruled

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Nor manners softened, nor religion taught,  
Hath many a sage his fruitless maxims spread;  
Beneath a nobler yoke I mean to bend  
The prostrate world, and change their feeble laws,  
Abolish their false worship, pull down  
Their powerless gods, and on my purer faith  
Found universal empire:<sup>10</sup>

Not until the end of the nineteenth century do we find another original example of the same tendency. The German specialist on Arabic, Hubert Grimme, a most erudite scholar but well known for the often daring nature of his theories, tried to characterize Islam chiefly as an attempt at social reform. Living at the time of the great advance of the German Social-Democratic party, he saw Muhammad simply as a socialist who had conceived a plan of social reform. He wanted to "make the rich pay" and, to frighten them into submission to his plans, invented a religious system with the barest minimum of mythology.

It is not necessary either to attribute Islam in its most primitive form to a pre-existing religion or to explain its dogmas in terms of this religion. In fact, close examination shows it not to have arisen in any way as a religious system, but rather as a sort of socialist opposition to excessive earthly imperfections. . . . The social conditions in which history shows socialist movements to have expanded were present in Mecca at the time of Mohammed.<sup>11</sup>

The rich assumed power through usury. Muhammad proposed a peaceful solution to this social question through a tax on the rich which would be used to help the poor: "Since Muhammad must have realized that, to carry out his idea, his word and his influence were not enough, he added to them the spiritual support of a dogma on the Last Judgment."

The rich are the sinful class which will not dare confront the Judgment without purifying their souls by the payment of the poor tax, the *zakât*, a term which means "purification." For his dogma, which Grimme calls his "metaphysics," Muhammad called upon the common traits of monotheism already introduced into Arabia. "He took from it neither more nor less

10. Voltaire, *Mohamet* (1742), Act II, scene 5, in *The Works of Voltaire*, trans. W. H. Fleming (Paris, London, New York, Chicago: E. R. Dumont, 1901), Vol. XVI. He is more moderate in the *Essai sur les mœurs*, chap. vi: "It is to be believed that Mahomet, violently moved by his own ideas like all fanatics, first presented these ideas in good faith, fortified them with visions, deceived himself while deceiving others, and finally used necessary deceit to support a doctrine which he believed to be basically good."

11. H. Grimme, *Mohammed*, Vol. I: *Das Leben* (Münster i. W.: Aschendorff, 1892), p. 14.

than seemed necessary for the foundation and arrangement of his socialist system.”<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to find Grimme’s ideas today permeating a certain current of Moslem thought, in a very religious form to be sure. The Moslem brothers of the Near East, for example, consider Islam a perfect social system, ordained by God, a third way between capitalism and communism, a model for all humanity.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Islam is of divine origin does not prevent it from having among its principal characteristics extremely wise rules of social organization. It is well known that this is the official ideology of Pakistan and that, in discussions concerning precisely the official recognition of *zakât*, the echo of Grimme’s argument is found.<sup>14</sup>

Grimme’s ideas were also developed in a clearly improved manner, about 1928, by a Marxist of the Tartar community of Kazan, of Arab origin (he writes “we Arabs”), Bendelî Djawzî, professor at the University of Baku. His book, well informed and often penetrating, is devoted to the history of social movements in Islam, and its first chapter treats “the economic foundations of Islam.” Published in Arabic at Jerusalem,<sup>15</sup> it was virtually if not totally unnoticed. He opposes Grimme’s thesis on the “socialism” of Muhammad. Nevertheless, he sees in the Prophet primarily a social reformer. He finds contradictions concerning the depths of Muhammad’s religious motives. He stresses the insufficiency of the means employed by Muhammad for the cure of the social evils he had indeed discovered, but he finds an excuse for him in the conditions of the time.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

13. These tendencies are well defined in their broader aspects, in my opinion, by Michèle Duchet, “Islam et progrès,” *La Nouvelle critique*, No. 85 (May, 1957), pp. 44-69, esp. 58 ff.

14. Cf. *The Gazette of Pakistan* (Karachi), Extraordinary Issue, July 23, 1954, pp. 1481 ff. Here are some significant extracts from the report on the *zakât* commission: “The revolutionary doctrine of Islam wiped out the distinction between ‘lay’ and ‘religious’ and blended the two into an organic whole. In making *zakât farz*, i.e. an obligatory duty, it made it so fundamental to Islam that a refusal is equivalent to a manifestation of *kufr* (infidelity). In fact, the principal aim of the whole Mussulman doctrine is to inculcate purity of thought and to create the conditions of a healthy social life. Thus to fulfill his ‘lay’ duties including economic responsibilities, in conformity with divine commandments, is 100% religion, and has been classified in the category of *ibadât* (ritual and other prescriptions)” (p. 1484). (Italics mine.) Among innumerable examples in the same line are some pages of Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Hayât Muhammad* (“Life of Mohammad”) (5th ed.: Cairo, 1952), pp. 542 ff. (On “Mussulman socialism”).

15. Bendelî Djawzî, *Min ta’ rîkh al-harakât al-fikriya fi l-Islam* (“On the History of Ideological Movements in Islam”), Vol. I: *Min ta’ rîkh al-harakât al-idjtimâ’iya* (“On the History of Social Movements”) (Jerusalem, n.d. [Preface dated 1928]). I have found mention of this book only in the *Abstracta Islamica*, III, A. 124; in *Revue des études islamiques*, 1929, No. 3, which found it “most interesting”; and in a rather startled review by the distinguished president of the Arabic Academy of Damascus, Muhammad Kurd ‘Alf (*Revue de l’Académie arabe de Damas*, IX [1929], 125 [in Arabic]): “he suggests things which have never to this day occurred to any Mussulman.” Indeed.



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Unlike certain western European and Russian writers (he says), he refuses to see in Muhammad a rich exploiter accomplishing the ideological consolidation of the rich class, underscoring, on the contrary, his feeling for the poor; but he admits that, at Medina, Muhammad resorted to compromise so that only a small part of his initial projects was realized. And, thanks to this compromise, his death was followed by a rapid seizure of power on the part of his old Qurayshite enemies who united at the last moment, using Islam to fix and then extend their power. Soon it was as though the Prophet had never existed.

Grimme's ideas were coolly received in European scientific circles. The great Dutch Islamist Snouck Hurgronje wrote a brilliant article refuting them. He showed that the Prophet had been sincere in his religious zeal and that the charity he advocated was on the order of an act of piety rather than a regulation of the social order.<sup>16</sup> Most of his remarks were undoubtedly correct. Orientalists who found his demonstration pertinent have generally followed his lead and have since limited themselves, when rising to the level of general ideas, to considerations of Muhammad's religious psychology and of religious influences upon him.<sup>17</sup>

Recently a new approach to the problem has been attempted. I should describe it as a sort of third way which (even though details of interpretation may be debatable) seems to me to be placed in a fundamentally correct perspective and very scientifically superior to those represented by the two lines of thought described above. Four years ago the Scottish Episcopalian churchman and distinguished Arab specialist, W. Montgomery Watt, published a book on the Mecca period of Muhammad's life, followed three years later by a larger book on the Medina period.<sup>18</sup> It is particularly in his

16. "Une nouvelle biographie de Mohammed," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, XXX (1894), 48-70, 149-78. Reprinted in his *Verspreide Geschriften* (Bonn and Leipzig: K. Schroeder, 1923) I, 319-62.

17. Modern Moslem biographies of Muhammad, at least those I have examined, have virtually nothing to offer. They have become exercises in hagiography. They analyze the great qualities with which God endowed the Prophet to prepare him for his divine mission. It is true that the brilliant "essayist" 'Abbas Mahmūd al-Aqqad (*Abqariyat Muhammad* ["The Genius of Muhammad"]) [Cairo, n.d.] [in Arabic] adds that the world, his nation, his tribe, his family, awaited his coming. He is said to have come as a remedy for the prevailing material and moral disorder, most sketchily described. All this is scarcely above the level of traditional discussions of the *mawlid* (feast of the Prophet's birth). Nor, it should be added in all justice, does it surpass the ironies of Mr. Daniel-Rops on the "rather oversimplified reveries" of Loisy and other scholars seeking to explain "Jesus and the Gospel . . . through the Judaism of their time" (Introduction to the *Apocrypha*, ed. J. Bonsirven [Paris, 1953], pp. 22-23). In both cases, the temporal nature of the divine message is significant only as a reaction to then current evils.

18. *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953); *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

first work that an original theory of the origins of Islam is developed. The essential characteristic of this theory is that Watt, unlike Voltaire and Grimme, in no way denies the religious character of Muhammad's preaching or the sincerity of his religious feeling. But neither does he attempt to explain that preaching simply as the reaction of a single religious conscience, influenced by external religious currents, to a given religious situation. He attempts to understand it as a religious reaction to a total social situation. To arrive at this conclusion, he examines the social state of Mecca at the time of Muhammad and the nature of the latter's early preaching and shows how it met the fundamental social needs of that time. Essentially, he characterizes this social state as one of discord between the state of social relations as they had been recently modified by the economic evolution of Mecca and the Meccan ideology which corresponded to an earlier state of society.

This Meccan ideology at the time of Muhammad's activity (beginning of the seventh century) was still chiefly the nomad ideology. It rests on the ideal of the desert, on what is called *murûwa* (etymologically "virility"). This ideal is based on the necessary solidarity of the tribe maintained through blood vengeance, the only means whereby this society, lacking a state, can maintain relative peace and security. *Murûwa* includes generosity, hospitality, fidelity, and the idea of honor. There is no general notion of an abstract law imposed equally on all members of the society. Religion generally enjoys a very weak influence. Dominating all is a sort of humanism—but, as Watt says, a tribal humanism. Man (but man integrated into his tribe) is, for man, the supreme value. His strength is great, limited less by the action of gods and spirits, who are always susceptible to human control by means of magico-religious practices, than by inflexible laws operative in the domain reserved to fate: means of subsistence (*rizq*), the time limit on life (*adjal*), the sex of the infant about to be born, and good fortune or bad. We would speak here of the still uncontrollable domain of the laws of nature.<sup>19</sup>

Mecca, however, had recently become a center of caravaneers, a center of commercial expeditions with a definite financial organization. We know that many men were engaged in business there, financing such expeditions to their own considerable profit. There developed in Mecca, enriched by the new business conditions, an economic structure which Watt calls "capitalist."

19. I have given a résumé of the social state and the ideology of nomadic Arabs in my contribution on "L'Arabie avant l'Islam" to "L'Histoire universelle" of the *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade* (Paris, 1957), II, 21–26.

The old ideology no longer suited the conditions of this mercantile society where tribal holds were broken and where individual riches tended to become the supreme value. Individuals tended to group themselves more according to their own interest within the framework of the new economic structures than according to their tribal affiliation. Tribal solidarity tended to become blurred, leaving individuals more and more isolated and impotent in the face of the new economic forces.

Elements of a more individualist ideology made their appearance. The value of *murâwa*, openly trampled upon by successful Meccanites, was questioned. To be sure, the new values were questioned, but with the profound feeling that the tribal ideal in whose name they might be criticized was henceforth out of date. This would explain the influence of monotheistic religions in Arabia at that time. We know that Judaism and Christianity made deep inroads during the preceding century.

Watt closely examines the first message of Muhammad. It is known that the critical activity of European Orientalists (after that of Moslem scholars of the Middle Ages) subjected the Koran to very close analysis in an attempt to determine the age of its various parts.<sup>20</sup> There is general agreement on the dating of a certain number of verses representing the first preaching of the Prophet. Watt now shows that this first sermon consists precisely of an ideological adjustment to the new situation. Muhammad admits the idea of God (*Allâh*, "the divinity," in Arabic) as known. He does not insist on the oneness of God, a dogma destined to play such an important role in Islam. He stresses rather his goodness and his power. God will judge man on Judgment Day; he will reward or punish him. Man owes him thanks and the worship of a cult. As for Muhammad, his role is simply that of a "bearer of warnings" (*nadhîr*), someone who under divine inspiration puts his human brothers on their guard.

The Meccanites are criticized for the presumptuousness of their confidence in the all-powerfulness of man, less tempered by the idea of fate than the nomad Weltanschauung. They must gain the good will of God, who is all-powerful and on whom they closely depend despite their arrogance. To obtain this, they must make good use of their riches, give to the poor,

20. The classic work on this subject is the monumental *Geschichte des Qor'ans* of Th. Nöldeke and F. Schwally, second edition completed by G. Bergsträsser and O. Pretzl (3 vols.; Leipzig: J. Weicher, 1909-38). Blachère's translation of the Koran, cited above, has the advantage of incorporating the results of all these critical studies and presenting the texts not according to the purely artificial traditional order but chronologically. The ordinary reader desiring an elementary but sure and remarkably clear analysis of these questions of koranic criticism may refer to H. Masse's *L'Islam* (Paris, 1939), pp. 71-86. The book of A. Abel, *Le Coran* ("Collections Lebègue and nationale," No. 103 [Brussels: Office de publicité, 1951]) is also a good popularization.

and be generous. This generosity is no longer destined to satisfy the old tribal ideal, nor is it a manifestation of the sentiment of honor. Its aim is to obtain the individual salvation of the giver. Man will be judged individually, without any possibility of intercession—without consideration of family, for example. The individual, whose social value the economic evolution had stressed, thus acquires an ideological value, a meaning in himself as he has access to eternity.

Muhammad also brought a solution to the difficult problems of life at Medina—problems different from those of Mecca but equally related to the evolution of the Bedouin mode of life. In this oasis, largely covered by palm groves, lived a community of sedentary Bedouins and Jewish farmers whose clans were continually fighting little wars like those of the nomads, to the considerable detriment of their common prosperity. There was also discord between new forms of economic life, on the one hand, and social and political structures as well as an ideology, based on the old nomadic mode of life, on the other hand.

Muhammad came as an arbiter, without the power of a chief of state or administrative or police powers. He owed his only power to a unique gift distinguishing him from his compatriots: he brought with him the Word of God. On his own responsibility he waged wars at the head of groups of men following him of their own free will: Meccan emigrants who had come with him to Medina and volunteers from Medina and elsewhere. With these puny resources he constructed a new social, political, and economic community transcending ethnic boundaries. This community, the *umma* (community of believers), behaved like one of the ethnic groups, the only political units known in Arabia up to this time. But it was a new political unit of a type *sui generis*. Muhammad legislated for it in the name of God. In form, this effort toward social organization was rather incoherent. There was a series of day-to-day answers to questions posed by the life of the little community. But common traits may be discerned. Muhammad drew on already existing individualist tendencies which until then had played only a destructive role in the old structures. He sanctified these tendencies while maintaining community-like structures and so arrived at a new system.

To protect life and property, for example, he retained private vengeance as the only method of regulation but placed certain limits on it in order not to disturb the social peace too much or for too long a time. Punishment was not to surpass the offense; vengeance might be taken, but it would not open the door to countervengeance.

## *Life of Muhammad and the Sociological Beginnings of Islam*

In family relations, Muhammad made some effort to assure freedom of choice for women and to avoid male abuses of power. He wished to assure the real individual character of family lineage, particularly by removing all validity from adoption procedures. He wished to assure the personal situation of all Moslems by a stable marriage. This is Watt's explanation for the encouragement given in the Koran to polygamy.<sup>21</sup> For various reasons women far outnumbered men in the early Moslem community. Their unmarried state permitted the men an abusive power over them. In the same way, Muhammad encouraged monandry rather than the polyandrous marriages fairly numerous in the Arabia of his time. To the same end he regulated divorce and concubinage.

In the matter of inheritances, the Koran's regulations were aimed at avoiding the appropriation in the name of the community of previously undivided clan wealth by the strongest.

This is Watt's explanation of Muhammad's success first at Mecca and then at Medina, as well as of the factors explaining the broad directive lines of the social regulation he instigated. But we have seen how in a few years all of Arabia turned to the Prophet of Medina and united under his banner. Watt does not fully explain the reasons for this success. He explains that adherence to the *umma* assured peace and security as well as a livelihood through booty taken from the infidel. Unlike Christianity, it did not imply subjection to a distant potentate, a humiliating position repugnant to the freedom-loving Arabs. Muhammad acted as a Bedouin *sayyid* (chief), *primus inter pares*, always subject to recall and deriving his power entirely from his moral ascendancy. He treated his disciples as his equals, with courtesy and respect. The results of Arabia's entry into the *umma* of the Prophet were internal peace, a consequent increase in population, and an atmosphere of confidence in the possibilities of expansion, with a further increase in the birth rate as a result. Here must be noted the Koran's disapproval of *wa'd*, or the murder of newborn girls. However, the complete pacification of Arabia necessitated the finding of other sources of profit beyond the peninsula.

21. "Marry then such women as you may find pleasing, two, three, four of them, (but) if you fear that you may not be fair to all, (take) but one, or (take) concubines!" (*Koran* 4:3 [Blachère trans.]). Modernist Moslems, having adopted modern ideas on the superiority of monogamy, are troubled by this text. Generally, they interpret it as a restriction to a maximum of four of the number of wives permitted to one man, a number previously unlimited. They often add that it is basically a preaching of monogamy, for the fair treatment demanded for the various wives is an unrealizable condition! Cf. the argument recently employed for the abolition of polygamy in Tunisia. But the facts contradict these well-meant efforts toward interpretation. Nothing shows the existence of multiple-wife families in pre-Islamic Arabia. And the text of the Koran is an encouragement, not a limitation.

While Watt's ideas seem to me right and fruitful on the whole, it is clear that they embody shortcomings some of which have already been pointed out by critics.

Bousquet<sup>22</sup> has underscored the fact that "capitalism" is not a proper designation for the economic structure of Mecca at the time of the Prophet. This is a question of definition. Bousquet is certainly right if, like the Marxists, one defines capitalism as an economic system in which the dominant relations are those of an owner of instruments of production to a wage-earner selling his labor. But Bousquet's definition is another one, certainly questionable, in which double-entry bookkeeping figures as one of the criteria for capitalism. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that some residents of Mecca lived on profits acquired through long-distance international trade. Companies were formed to finance caravans, and stockholders received dividends of 50–100 per cent. All this had already been shown by the Belgian Jesuit, Henri Lammens,<sup>23</sup> and restated by Watt. The fact that this traffic was of small volume compared to the commerce of the capitalist era, as emphasized by Bousquet, is of little importance. There are parallel examples of "caravaneer cities" in a similar milieu: Palmyra, for example. It is clear that Mecca was a relatively important center unable to live on agriculture. It is situated in one of the most sterile of valleys. Nor does it appear that at that time pilgrimages in themselves could have assured its needs. It lived essentially on commerce. If one prefers, this type of economy may be called "mercantile" and not "capitalist." For Watt's demonstration it makes no difference, for the facts are there, and the results are the same. Let us not fall prey to refinements of terminology!

It would seem to me that a far more serious criticism that might be leveled at Watt is the insufficient development of his reasons for all of Arabia adhering to Muhammad's cause. But, had it not been for this phenomenon, the Moslem community, isolated at Medina, would have quickly weakened and disappeared with scarcely a trace on the surface of world history to show its existence. Of course many factors were operative. Let us mention only the coincidence of important political events. Southern Arabia, a region very different from the rest of the peninsula and a center of mountain agriculture and traders enjoying an exceptionally

22. G. H. Bousquet, "Une explication marxiste de l'Islam par un ecclésiastique épiscopalien," *Hesperis*, XLI (1954), 231–47.

23. See especially his "La République marchande de La Mecque vers l'an 600 de notre ère," *Bulletin de l'Institut égyptien*, 5th ser., IV (1910), 23–54, and "La Mecque à la veille de l'Hégire," *Mélanges de la Faculté Orientale de l'Université St.-Joseph* (Beirut), Vol. IX, Fasc. 4 (1923–24).

favorable situation, lost its independence at about this time. It was conquered by Ethiopia in 525 and by Sassanid Persia in 572. The great powers of the time (Ethiopia was religiously and diplomatically linked to Byzantium) wanted to insure control of the overland silk route in the north and of the maritime route of Indian and African products in the south.<sup>24</sup> Southern Arabia derived its wealth from its situation on the latter route as well as from the cultivation of aromatic plants used in enormous quantities by the Mediterranean world. It seems that the decline of southern Arabia gave more importance to the role of intermediaries or of (paid) protectors of caravans played by the Arabs of the north and the center. They were doubtless able to launch in their own behalf enterprises whose initiative had been the monopoly of the southern Arabs. This would (partially) explain the rapid growth of Meccan commerce in particular as well as a certain increase in the prosperity of the ensemble of northern and central Arabia—an increase in population, a spreading of monetary economy, a development of agriculture as at Medina, etc. An important role may have been played by the immigration of Jews persecuted in the Byzantine Empire. In any case, one is aware of an economic growth and the introduction of new structures going well beyond the tribal economy.<sup>25</sup>

There is, however, a certain contradiction in all this. The development of a fruitful commerce presupposes safe routes, a degree of internal peace. But plunder was one of the most normal and traditional modes of existence of the desert tribes. The economic growth to which we have referred was surely insufficient to touch all tribes and still less all elements of these tribes. Many were too poor to forego the resources of plunder. This situation was a hindrance to the general prosperity. External plunder was also a traditional resource avoiding these inconveniences. The Bedouin Arabs, living in a sterile land, were constantly attracted to the rich soil of the Fertile Crescent. The explanation of these facts requires no invocation of Caetani's progressive drying-up of Arabia, or of the Reverend Father Lammens' irresistible psychological penchant toward plunder, or even of Schumpeter's magic factor of an unreasoning aggressiveness, *deus ex machina* of a

24. See, e.g., the laborious and partially faulty article, rich in data, of N. V. Pigulevskaya, "Efiopiya i Khimyar v ikh vzaimootnojeniyakh s vostotchnorimskoy imperiei" ("Ethiopia and Himyar in Their Reciprocal Relations with the Roman Empire of the East"), in *Vestnik drevnei istorii* (1948), I, 87-97.

25. For some development and more precise remarks on this theme may I refer the reader to my essay on "L'Arabie avant l'Islam" mentioned above (esp. pp. 31-35).

prescientific psychology.<sup>26</sup> Nothing is more normal than this desire of poor peoples to seize the wealth of the rich. At all times and in all places, in the confines of China or in the Mediterranean world, for example, the same situation has produced the same results. This is a leitmotiv of history. Long before Islam, the Arabs had penetrated these rich lands which attracted them and had formed various states of sedentary nomads or of dominating nomads who exploited the sedentary population. Hence Palmyra, Hira, Ghassân, etc.

There is no historical situation susceptible of a single, unique solution. But the creation of a new state, of an Arab state, was a solution corresponding particularly well to the complex and contradictory situation of Arabia. The Bedouins were more or less ready to obey (considering, to be sure, their traditional lack of discipline) a state which would give them the possibility of organized and therefore fruitful plunders, of external expeditions allowing a consolidation of the search for plunder with the pursuit of an equally fruitful commerce. This new state was to provide a unifying ideology answering the needs of the Arab conscience and allowing the Arabs to acquire ideological standing comparable to that of the great neighboring empires.

The states of southern Arabia had, it is true, tried to unify Arabia—to subdue the Bedouins in order to facilitate their own commercial expansion. Recently discovered inscriptions seem to bear witness to these efforts. However, they provided no outlet for these Bedouins' need for plunder. They endured these efforts toward unification as colonial peoples reacting to masters who direct their mode of life. The ideology diffused in the period immediately preceding Islam was a foreign ideology: Jewish, Christian, or Mazdean. Muhammad brought unity not imposed from outside but consented to as a contract. Pacts rather than wars led to the Arab communities' submission to the law of Allah and his Prophet. The latter offered possibilities of rich booty at the expense of outside infidels and of the submission in Arabia itself of Jews and Christians to the benefit of the new community. Just out of tribal society himself, Muhammad was close to the Bedouins and likely to understand them and to provide them with acceptable solutions. He brought them a national ideology likely to satisfy Arab pride and an Arab religion equal to the great foreign religions, just-

26. Caetani, *op. cit.* H. Lammens, *Le Berceau de l'Islam*, Vol. I: *Le Climat, les Bédouins* ("Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici" [Rome, 1914]); J. Schumpeter, "Zur Soziologie der Imperialismen," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen), XLVI (1918-19), 1-39, 275-310; "Les Conquêtes de l'impérialisme arabe," Postface introduction and notes of G. H. Bousquet, in *Revue africaine*, XCIV (1950), 283-97.



fyng by a common faith and the idea of personal judgment of the individual the necessary widening, economic and political, of the tribal horizon.<sup>27</sup>

The reasons for the conquests remain to be explained. It is true that this theme did not enter the field of Watt's works. Bousquet devoted a recent article to this question<sup>28</sup>—an article which seems to me deceptive. He attempts a distinction between what he calls the "nature" and the "causes" of the conquest. A reading of the article makes clear that he wishes to speak of the causes of the conquerors' initiative and of the causes of their success. On the causes of the conquerors' initiative he engages in a polemic against the authors cited above (Caetani, Becker, etc.) who considered these causes essentially economic. It soon becomes evident that what Bousquet calls "causes" are the motivations of each individual conqueror. He easily finds evidence of the piety of many of them and concludes that the "causes" of the conquest were religious ones.

This is, first of all, reducing to a flat surface the rich intricacies, the complex interactions, which appear at all levels of the conscious, the subconscious, and the unconscious. In most cases, to distinguish abruptly between economic and religious motives is a serious oversimplification. This is true at the level of participants as well as at the level of chiefs—levels which must be carefully taken into account. Who can separate in Ferdinand and Isabella the place of greed, of zeal for the Faith, of desire for glory and power, and of Christian humility? The belief that a historical phenomenon can be explained by the sum of the motives of each participant is superficial. After all, Moslem faith might be explained in a thousand and one ways other than by the desire for conquest.<sup>29</sup> Reasons for the decision of the

27. In an article which I read after writing these lines ("Ideal Factors in the Origin of Islam," *Islamic Quarterly*, II [1955], 160-74), Watt attempts to counterbalance what he has elsewhere called "the economic and social factors" of the origins of Islam, and shows most forcefully the importance of the conceptions of *umma* and *rasūl* ("Messenger of God") introduced by Muhammad and unknown to earlier Arabs in this form, in leading to the unification of the Arabs. I shall by no means attempt to deny this. Watt, however, seems to consider these concepts as having sprung up without external ties, in their Islamic form, in the mind of Muhammad. But it is certainly not by chance that these conceptions, "ideal" though they be, corresponded so well to the needs of the total situation in Arabia. Watt explains both their roots in earlier conceptions and their partially original character by reference to the Jungian theory of archetypes. I shall refrain from a discussion of the value of this "framework," but others are surely possible, as I believe the above lines have shown.

28. The ideas of Bousquet outlined in the article cited above (n. 22) are developed in his "Observations sur la nature et les causes de la conquête arabe," *Studia Islamica*, VI (1956), 37-52.

29. As a matter of fact, there was no dogmatic reason pushing toward conquest, and there was serious reluctance to pursue a policy of expansion in the early years after the death of Muhammad. Facts (secondhand but real) are cited in support of this belief by A. Sharf, "Heraclius and Mahomet," *Past and Present*, IX (April, 1957), 1-16, esp. 10-11.

chiefs, reasons for the welcome of the decision, reasons for the success of the decision—all this is much more complex than may appear at first glance. And the level of a phenomenon on the social scale cannot simply be reduced to the psychological or microsociological level of debates within the conscience of the actors. Bousquet quotes texts proving the faith of certain conquerors. Other well-known texts prove the skepticism and avidity of certain others. The idea of conquest attracted believers and skeptics alike. The problems it resolved were socioeconomic, not religious.

In my opinion, Bousquet is on surer grounds when he speaks of the causes of success. He says that chance played an important role. This is true. It seems that successful conquests were primarily due to favorable external conditions. It is up to historians of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires to explain why these powers crumbled. There had always been large Arab *razzias* in these same directions. They had been stopped. This time the Arabs broke down one resistance after another. Coming nearer and nearer, they tested the weakness of the enemy states. They advanced farther and farther as advance proved possible.<sup>30</sup>

An equally important problem which seems to have passed unnoticed is the following: the monetary economy seems to have accentuated social differentiation in pre-Islamic Arabia, especially in the commercial cities and agricultural areas. There were rich and poor, masters and slaves, landowners and tenants, and, it seems, free wage-earners. Many tribes, however, must have kept a very pronounced community structure; only exceptionally was the body of productive labor performed by an enslaved class to the profit of a leisure class.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, Islam defended the poor and preached the humane treatment of slaves. It did not upset the social structure of its time, but neither has any other great religion. The social regulations of the Koran brought solutions to certain problems raised by that social structure, which was in full evolution. The very favorable reception of these solutions was due to the fact that they brought contradictory tendencies into a certain equilibrium. This is the basis of Watt's demon-

30. The Byzantine Empire's resistance after the first Arab conquests is also a problem (cf. *ibid.*).

31. The breadth and depth of this social differentiation seem to me to have been exaggerated by E. A. Beliaev in his "Formation of the Arab State and the Origin of Islam in the VIIth Century" ("Образование арабского государства и возникновение Ислама в VII веке"), *Editions of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR* (Moscow, 1954). ("Papers Presented by the Soviet Delegation at the XXIII International Congress of Orientalists: Islamic Studies" [in Russian and English].) For a recent résumé of the facts and a bibliography on slavery see the article "abd" by R. Brunschvig in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (2d ed.; Leiden and Paris, 1954), I, Book I, 25-41, esp. 25-26.

stration discussed above. However, this equilibrium was temporary, and not all contradictions could be resolved. The state of Medina (it was, in the end, a state) was a conglomeration of members of community-structured nomadic tribes, of poor and rich city dwellers, of landowners and exploited. Let us not forget that it extended to highly civilized Yemen, with its flourishing agriculture and prosperous cities. All these men, during the conquest, formed a class of exploiters of subject populations. The term "feudalism," at least in one of its senses, may be employed in this regard. There reigned among the groups a certain equality, at least partial, with increasing differentiations. Even freed Moslem slaves participated in this equality. The passage of the state of Medina to the "Arab kingdom" defined in the classic work of Wellhausen<sup>32</sup> deserves closer study than it has so far received. But it is an oversimplification to see the birth of Islam as merely the creation of a state to serve as the mold of a feudality aspiring to existence.

Renan's words on the privilege enjoyed by the history of the origins of Islam compared to that of other religions have often been repeated:

Instead of the mystery shrouding the origins of other religions, this one is born in full view of history; its roots are clearly visible. Its founder's life is as well known to us as that of any sixteenth-century reformer. We follow year by year the fluctuations of his thought, its contradictions, its weaknesses. Elsewhere religious origins are lost in the dream; the most exacting criticism is scarcely sufficient to discern what is real behind the deceptive appearances of myth and legend.<sup>33</sup>

This appreciation is highly exaggerated, as has often been remarked, and criticism has plenty of work to do on the origins of Islam. Nevertheless, it is true that these are better known than the origins of many other religions. If it is good scientific method to proceed from the known to the unknown, it would seem normal, consequently, to consult the conclusions drawn from a study of the origins of Islam for deductions on the whole body of the history of religions and on the history of ideologies generally.

The sort of explanation which consists of quite simply reducing a religious phenomenon to a non-religious motivation, that identification which summarily dismisses essential and irrefutable data of the real—and

32. J. Wellhausen, *Das arabische Reich und sein Sturz* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1902), English trans. by Gr. Weir, *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927). A good definition of what he calls the Arab "caste" by A. N. Poliak is "L'Arabisation de l'Orient sémitique," *Revue des études islamiques*, 1938, pp. 35-63.

33. E. Renan, "Mahomet et les origines de l'Islamisme," *Revue des deux mondes*, 4th quarter, 1851, pp. 1063-1101, esp. 1065.

religious conscience, faith, and mystical zeal are such data whether we like it or not—have been discredited in the eyes of every serious man of research

On the other hand, it is clear that explaining an ideology in general by purely ideological facts is insufficient. It is possible thus to arrive at an explanation of the formation of ideas in the mind of an individual or a group of individuals but not to explain their success, their expansion, and the reception they encounter among vast groups of men. The history of religions (and particularly of their origins) is too readily reduced to an analysis of “influences.” This is a necessary and useful study but insufficient and basically deceptive. In reaction, several authors have concentrated on showing the profound originality of Muhammad.<sup>34</sup>

Historical experience seems to show that an ideological upset attempted by an individual or a group can succeed only if it meets the needs of the society as a whole. The study of these needs is therefore indispensable to an understanding of the action and ideas of that individual or group.

When a given circumstance arises, when facts make their pressure felt in a certain direction to answer the deep needs of social reality, particularly to remedy fundamental discords born of evolutionary change, numerous developments similar in tendency appear. Historical situations favor one rather than others. The genius of a man who understands the circumstances better than others may be of decisive effect. What might be called “chance,” though there is no space to develop the idea here, may play its role. Broadly speaking, the most adaptable movement, the one which best responds to necessity, has the best chance to win out.

Numerous examples, especially in the field of religious history, might be listed. It is well known that Christianity struggled for a long time with other religions and sects. The recent Dead Sea discoveries have once more drawn attention to this point. In the early days of Islam there were also other prophets, contemporaries of Muhammad, such as the one Moslem authors call Musaylima, who may even have begun his preaching before the prophet of Mecca.<sup>35</sup> In Negro Africa, the situation today is in some ways

34. Cf. J. Fuck, “Die Originalität des arabischen Propheten,” *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, XC (1936), 509–25, and, more subtly, G. von Grunebaum, “Von Muhammads Wirkung und Originalität,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, XLIV (1937), 29–50.

35. In the article mentioned above, Beliaev follows V. V. Barthold in stressing the importance of this man. In western Europe similar ideas have been expressed by D. S. Margoliouth in *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), pp. 81 and 454, and by F. Buhl in the article “Musailima” in the *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (1st ed.; Leiden, 1936) (pp. 796–97 of the French edition).

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directly comparable to that of Arabia at the time of Muhammad. G. Balandier has shown how fully the Negroes feel the need to construct and adopt an ideology going beyond that of the tribe, doomed by social evolution in the "colonial situation," an ideology national in scope. Hence the success of various activities of prophets, bringing dignity to the Negroes as well as resolving to a certain degree their material problems; these movements lie halfway between the decrepit native cults and Christianity, a higher ideology taken as a model but unacceptable because of its foreign origin and its link to foreign interests.<sup>36</sup>

A parallel has often been drawn between Mormonism and Islam.<sup>37</sup> In both cases we are dealing with a theocracy prescribed by the originator of the religion: God, through his Prophet, legislates all areas of life for a community of faithful which is called upon to become a political and economic entity. In the New England of 1830 official Protestantism did not respond to all the ideological and other needs brought about by a changed situation. A great number of sects arose to provide remedies. That of Joseph Smith happened to enjoy conditions permitting it a greater degree of success than others attained. Mormonism provided an ideological and social framework for one of the communities leaving to colonize the West. After this initial success, unfavorable historical conditions prevented success on a larger scale.

This coexistence of numerous competing movements at one historical moment has led some to deny the role or even the existence of the personality of religious founders. So the long series of attempts to deny the historicity of Jesus, from old Dupuis, the solar-myth maniac, Bauer, and Drews, to Couchoud and P. Alfarcic. And those who from Sénart to my friend Paul Lévy have tried to deny the existence of Buddha. It was difficult to make a pure myth of Muhammad. But some authors have tried to prove their Marxist qualifications by minimizing his role, blending him, as it were, into a group of anonymous prophets. Thus the Soviet author L. I. Klimovitch sees in him just another of the numerous prophets collectively supposed to have played the role assigned in traditional history to Muhammad. It was not until the time of the Caliphate, under the influence of the development of the "cult of personality" in the interest of the feudal lords, that "the *processus* of the rise of Islam was made personal, reduced to

36. G. Balandier, *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1955), pp. 427-34.

37. Ed. Meyer, *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1912); G. H. Bousquet, *Les Mormons* (Paris, 1949).

the 'miraculous' activity of its 'founder,' the prophet Muhammad. This is why many acts of his life resemble the biographies of mythical founders of other religions."<sup>38</sup>

Naturally, the question of the historicity or the mythical character of religious founders' lives is not one to be discussed on the level of methodological principles or of general historical laws. It is justified in each case of a historical criticism of the currently most prevalent type, as historians are accustomed to apply it to a judgment on the reality of any given historical fact. The question, "Did Jesus exist?" is no more related to methodological problems than that of the identity of the Man in the Iron Mask. In both cases doubts, perhaps valid ones, may be raised which are then open to discussion on the level of judgments of fact. But pre-existing tendencies cannot be used as a basis for argument in denying the role of personalities. It is easy to show that all the elements necessary for the Reformation existed before Luther and Calvin, just as Marxist ideas were in the air at the time of Marx. In no way does it result that Luther, Calvin, or Marx are mythical personages.

The economic evolution with its subsequent modification of social relationships, through which central Arabia passed in the sixth and seventh centuries, could have ended in results entirely different from Islam. No historical event is caused by fate. But this one required changes of one sort or another, and through innumerable phenomena of detail it exerted pressure on men in the direction of an ideological revolution and a new realignment of social relationships. On the other hand, Islam could not have succeeded had this economic evolution not taken place. Even if the same spiritual evolution had occurred in the mind of Muhammad, his message would have enjoyed but limited interest because it would not have responded to the profound needs of the Arabs. These needs of the Arab conscience were determined by the general needs of their society—needs imposed on them as whole men and not merely as *homines religiosi*. And these general needs themselves flowed mainly from the economic and social situation in the country at that time.

G. H. Bousquet, as we have seen, has devoted an article to W. M.

38. L. I. Klimovitch, *Islam, ego proiskhojdenie i sotsial'naya sychtchnost'* ("Islam, Its Origin and Its Social Nature") ("Pan-Soviet Society for the Diffusion of Political and Scientific Knowledge," 2d ser., No. 6 [Moscow: Editions Znakié, 1956]), p. 10. Likewise E. A. Beliaev in the article previously mentioned suggests that the Koran is not the work of a single author and was partially compiled outside Arabia (cf. Klimovitch, *op. cit.*, p. 26). Klimovitch and Beliaev, unlike Bendeli Djawzi mentioned above and many Marxists from Moslem countries, attribute to Muhammad a "reactionary" rather than a "progressive" role.

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Watt's thesis, accusing it of being Marxist. Watt has defended himself.<sup>39</sup> He denies being a Marxist, holding that the correlation he establishes between economic change and the origins of Islam is "essentially different from the absolute dependence of religion and ideology on economic factors which is maintained by the Marxists." On the other hand, in his opinion, the doctrine of Islam could not be deduced automatically from the economic situation, and its victory was not inevitable. Other solutions to the same situation were possible, and the victory achieved was due to various contingencies. Finally, Moslem ideology was in no way an epiphenomenon but played its own important role. I shall be content to remark here (it would be very easy to show this in detail) that none of the theses rejected by Watt had been sustained in the classics of Marxism.

It is obviously essential that Watt's procedure be scientifically valid. But in my opinion the question posed by Bousquet is not without importance. His discussion, it seems to me, may facilitate the definition of an important tendency in present-day research on the evolution of ideologies—a tendency of increasing importance which strikes me as being essentially linked to the procedure proposed by Marx in different language, perhaps, and often misunderstood. This procedure seems to me discernible in a whole group of contemporary authors, whether it arises through the influence of Marxism or independently, as would seem to be the case for Watt.

Whatever one may wish to call this procedure, it seems to me to be defined much better than summary and basically equivocal formulas, such as the predominance of the economic factor, in the following way. It would be an attempt to understand ideological phenomena (here religious phenomena) as a function of a total social state rather than as a function of a simple part of the social or individual consciousness—in this case the religious consciousness. In this total social state it is clear that the structure of the relations between production and distribution plays an essential role. It is evident, on the other hand, that upsets of ideology, even if they are brought about by a more general upset of social relations, are formulated within the framework of previously established ideologies, with their language, their technique, and their traditions. Finally, this upset begins in one or in several individual consciences with their own psychological dispositions formed in the personal history of these individuals. It seems to me that Mr. W. M. Watt's attempt, in my opinion mainly successful, to un-

39. E.g., in his *Muhammad at Mecca*, p. 19, and in his article "Economic and Social Aspects of the Origin of Islam," *Islamic Quarterly*, I (1954), 90-103.

derstand the origins of Islam can be classified within this tendency. The previous attempt in the same direction by Bendelî Djawzî had not sufficiently stressed the purely religious character of Muhammad's consciousness and was much less solidly documented. It seems to me further that this line of research imposed on a growing number of investigators, whatever their philosophical convictions may be, is the most valid one scientifically and the one most likely to bring new light to the field of the history of ideas and, in particular, of the history of religions.