

A Tale of Two Cities

Helping the heirs of Mecca to transform Medina

Kenneth Cragg

Appalled at the events of September 11, we can rightly say, “That was *not* Islam.” It was not the Islam of the poet Hafiz with his lyrics of humility, not the Islam that built the Sulymaniyyah Mosque in Istanbul or erected the Taj Mahal. To deem this ‘not Islam’ is true as well as prudent.

Yet, tragically, September 11th *was* Islam, the other Islam. We indulge in idle fantasy to persuade ourselves otherwise and quite fail to help the heirs of the first Islam to repudiate or transform the second. It is entirely clear that Islam was and is a story of two cities, Mecca and Medina. In the former the prophet Muhammad was repeatedly enjoined: “Your sole task, your only duty, is the message” of the unity of God and the sin of idolatry. He was only “the messenger with the word” in trust, insistently confined to persuasion, exposed to suffering on its behalf. After 13 years (by some directive that does not appear in the Qur’an) came the decision to emigrate to Medina, which steadily became a base for armed action against Mecca. After eight more years Mecca surrendered and the message “prevailed” through power wielded.

From the date of that emigration (622 A.H.) the Islamic calendar begins. From 632, when Muhammad died, the wide expansion of Islam as far as western Europe and eastward beyond Sind and the Punjab confirmed the perception of a powered legitimacy. Islam achieved what the Qur’an calls “great and manifest victory,” and always has seen itself as a faith that governs and everywhere seeks to do so as the necessary concomitant of the faith.

Hence the necessary conclusion of the two Islams—two at least, ignoring sub-sects and nuances. However, there can be no denying the abiding priority of Mecca. It is the Meccan message that the *Shahadah* (or confession)

affirms: “Muhammad is the *Rasul* (messenger) of Allah,” i.e. not the “generalissimo”, but the one who conveys the message. It is to Mecca that Muslims make the ritual pilgrimage. It is toward Mecca that every mosque worldwide meticulously fronts. Historically, it was for the sake of the Meccan witness (not wild brigandage) that the Medinan campaigns were designed and fought.

Therefore, as we ask “which Islam is paramount?”, one clear clue now is to recognize that world Islam today can be, and needs to be, seen primarily in its Meccan orientation—not, to be sure the *persecution* part, which largely does not apply—but the *vocation* to be only and essentially a religious witness that neither enjoys power to impose itself, nor covets it, still less turns it to sheer brutality.

It is true that Medinan Islam finds the Meccan emphasis on “being essentially religious only” highly uncongenial, indeed a contradiction since *Din* and *Dawlah*, belief and state-power, must never be divorced. Islam cannot but be ruling—and ruling on its own terms, and deciding what minorities it will allow and how. Yet Meccan priority, in terms of the twenty-first century, *must* emphasize an Islam that prays, fasts, makes pilgrimage, cares for social justice, witnesses and, with all these, tolerates diversity in constructive hope.

Why must this emphasis prevail? One reason is that some 25% of the world’s total Muslims are now without Islamic power—in India, the West and elsewhere. Short of fond dreams of Islamicizing these areas through sheer power, they are Meccans because of accepted non-Islamic citizenships in which they can play a full *religious* part. Further, there are Arab and African states, like Egypt or Nigeria, with sizable Muslim and non-Muslim populations sharing common statehood where the common good calls for the concept of a state that “holds a neutral ring” for the constituent faiths and that imposes none of these faiths. Such “secular” statehood (if we call it such), in its “indifference” to the citizens’ creeds while maintaining public order, need not mean “secularization,” i.e., repudiation of all worship. A faith that has been historically primary can well remain so amidst such tolerance.

Finally, the world urgently needs state sovereignties

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that recognize “the right of human rights” to cross their sacred borders and assert a global conscience, not to be denied by claims that only national power prevails inside those borders. (Movements for women’s rights are a vital factor in this regard.) We are facing the need to transcend the nation-state. Religions that have long claimed and wielded its power have to revise their perceptions accordingly.

All of this stresses that Meccan-style witness has always been, and now should essentially become, the quality of the Islam needed in our contemporary world. One duty, surely, of the adherents of all other belief systems is to serve, as wisdom may allow, in helping Muslims to think so.

But, it will be said, the Medinan dimension of Islam is explicit in the *Sirah*, or life-course, of the prophet. It is also embedded inextricably in the fabric of the Qur’an, with its Meccan and Medinan chapters identified as such. How then can Islam ever be other than *both* Meccan and Medinan, with all the familiar consequences of *Din* and *Dawlah* never to be divorced?

This is indeed a formidable issue—one that has to be in Muslim hands. But, given the situation outlined earlier, there is a discernible solution at hand. By all means the Medinan Qur’an will remain, but it can be reasonably argued that the exercise of Medinan power, though right and urgent *then*, can no longer be so now. There was a reasonable case for armed power in seventh-century Arabia, where tribal feuds were impeding wider peace and where patron deities sanctioned the warring tribes. That society was an *ad hoc* case for the pacification Islam did in fact aim to provide. Furthermore, accents may sometimes remain in a holy book even when faith believes it has overtaken the times to which those accents refer. (Is it not so for Christians with the imprecatory psalms, e.g., Psalm 137?) Muslims hold that Islam is a final “mercy to the worlds.” What is “final” has to be abreast of how times change, and Allah, as the Qur’an says, is “not to be overtaken” by the development of centuries.

So, for all that Medina remains in the Qur’an, the priority of Meccan Islam emerges more evident still. Moreover, there has always been “abrogation” (nullification, or *naskh*) in the Qur’an, whereby one thing abrogated another when they seemed to contradict. *Naskh* has favored the later against the earlier. What is urgent now

could be understood as “abrogation” the other way round.

Where, though, may this train of thought take the Christian mission?

The task to which Christians are commissioned is “the preaching of the Word,” a calling we can never renounce. Yet as well as seeking the personal hearer and finding “disciples,” is there not also an aspect of our calling that includes ministry to other faith-systems? Is not part of our debt to seek whatever bearing we can sensitively have on how other faith-systems respond to the times confronting them, to what they do about revision or mending of themselves? For what they become in such responses, in such mending of their self-perception, will have vast

consequences for human good, for religious liberation from bigotry and oppression, for social amelioration of poverties both of body and mind.

Despite far-reaching secularization, the great faith-systems retain enormous capacity for good or ill. They will not disappear from the scene, and Christian witnesses must relate



to them not only in the familiar outreach to individuals and families but also to the set of mind and the evolution of ideology inside the faith-systems themselves. This is not to say that the onus of “disciple-making” is ever abandoned or that personal faith is not the prime requisite of soul-conversion in, and into, Christ.

Any such ministry to Islam in the whole can only be gentle, discreet, and patient. For Islam has always been a very self-sufficient religion, little inclined to think it needs to listen outside itself or to cultivate a mind ready for new theological perceptions. Yet no intelligent Muslim can deny that Islam has urgent business with itself or that its obligations for such business with itself are massive in the world of chronic poverty and deprivation.

Whatever assisting relationships from outside Islam may be possible will hinge on the ability to identify the Islamic reasons for such relationships. These reasons are undoubtedly present in the core convictions of the Qur’an about humanity’s common stewardship of the created order and about divine sovereignty to which all are accountable. What the Gospel has in trust concerning “God in Christ” still speaks tellingly to the people round “God according to Islam.” That trust means patient interpretation of the one into the active mind of the other. 🌐