



Islam and the Modern World

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In the advent of Western Ideals there was a greater and more important question. Islamic society was different from Western society. Could it be possible to effect an all-round Westernization without altering the very nature of Islamic society? The Muslim state might reform its army upon modern lines, it might adopt the mechanical side of civilization with regard to transport, it might open special schools for training in certain professions and arts; it might even proclaim the equality of Muslims and non-Muslims – Islam had already proclaimed the rights of man in other lines a thousand years ago. But was it possible to alter the nature of Islamic society without altering Islam in itself?

–Halide Edip Adivar (1930)
Turkish reformer, novelist, feminist, and politician

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Glossary for Islam and the Modern World

Abbasid Caliphate: The great dynastic state of the Islamic world (750-1258 C.E.), with its capital city at Baghdad. Collapsed with the invasion of the Mongols in 1258.

caliph: Literally the “successor” of the Prophet Muhammad for the Islamic umma (see umma).

caliphate: The reign of a particular caliph; or one of the two great dynastic states of classical Islam (see Umayyad Caliphate, Abbasid Caliphate).

Dar al-Harb: Literally the “House of War” (see jihad); a classical political ideal that described those areas where Islam was not yet fully “at home” (see Dar al-Islam) but which would eventually be brought into the Dar al-Islam.

Dar al-Islam: Literally the “House of Islam”; a classical political ideal that held that the world was divided between those areas where Islam was fully “at home” as opposed to those areas where this was not yet the case (see Dar al-Harb).

dhimmi: The “protected subjects” of the caliph, usually applied to the Jews and Christians in Islamic territories who were allowed to practice their religions in exchange for certain civil liabilities (e.g., increased taxation; see jizya).

hadith: Written collections of the “traditions” (sunna) of the Prophet Muhammad, containing his teachings and actions which offer the best model for living a righteous Muslim life. Although not scripture, the hadith are second in importance only to the Qur’an itself.

hijra: Muhammad’s migration from Makkah to Madinah in 622 C.E. This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar since it established the umma.

imam: The leader of the prayer (meaning specifically the communal mid-day prayer on Fridays in the mosque); chosen for his knowledge of the Qur’an but not an ordained cleric. Capitalized, it indicates a special Shi’ite understanding of religious authority (see Imamate).

Imamate: An office of special religious authority in Shi’a Islam. Shi’ites believe that Muhammad designated his son-in-law Ali as his rightful successor and endowed him with special authority; this authority was then passed down through Ali’s successors to the last Imam.

jihad: From the Arabic word meaning “to strive” or “to struggle,” jihad has multiple meanings. On an individual level, it means to strive to live a good Muslim life; on another level it can mean to engage in a righteous armed struggle to extend the Dar al-Islam.

jizyah: The special tax imposed upon dhimmis in exchange for religious toleration but also in part because they were exempted from military service.

Qur’an: In Muslim belief, the very Word of God as revealed through the Prophet Muhammad. For the teachings of Muhammad himself, see hadith.

Orientalism: Originally this term simply meant the western European study of Asian cultures, but eventually it became a term that described a specific way of representing these cultures – particularly Islamic cultures – in art and literature, or through the adaptation of Asian architectural styles. In a well regarded but still controversial thesis first published in 1978, the Palestinian American author Edward Said used the term to denote the process of “exoticizing” Islamic cultures as “Other” and therefore justifying their colonial conquest.

Rashidun: The “Rightly-Guided Caliphs” who immediately succeeded the prophet Muhammad as leaders of the Islamic umma (632-661 C.E.); Sunnis accept four legitimate successors (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) while Shi’ites assert that Ali was the only rightful successor.

shari’a: Although usually translated “law,” the word comes from the Arabic word meaning the “way to walk (towards water).” Thus it is better understood as a way of living in accordance with the divine will through (1) study of the Qur’an, (2) study of the hadith (see hadith); and (3) the application of analogical reasoning (ijtihād) as developed by scholarly reflection and precedence. A final element states that a properly considered decision receives the implicit consensus of the entire umma.

Shi’ites: Muslims who contend that Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law Ali was the only legitimate successor to Muhammad, and that the line of succession (of the Imamate) continued through his male heirs.

Sufis: Muslims who utilize various mystical and esoteric practices; both Sunnis and Shi’ites may also be Sufis. Although very conservative Muslims may reject Sufism as a legitimate form of Islam, Sufis have been very influential as missionaries into southeast Asia and formed very powerful religious communities under the Ottomans.

Sunnis: Muslims who accept the legitimacy of the first three caliphs, as opposed to those who contended for the succession of Ali (see Shi’ites). The word itself means “traditional” or “orthodox,” and by the modern period Sunnis encompassed a very wide variety of practice from strict “fundamentalism” to more liberal modernism.

ulema: “Men of knowledge”; denotes those who are specially trained in shari’a and its application to religious, political, and social life. The ulema might be termed the professional theologians in Sunni Islam, whereas in Shia Islam they assume more of a clerical (ministerial) position.

Umayyad Caliphate: The great dynastic state of the Islamic world (661-750 C.E.) with its capital at Damascus that succeeded the period of the Rashidun and was itself succeeded by the Abbasid Caliphate. The name comes from the family name of the third Rightly-Guided Caliph.

umma: The idealized community of all Muslims, reflecting the idea that since God is one, the faithful must similarly be united (one community worshipping the one God).

Ottoman Glossary

devshirme: The “youth levy” imposed upon Christians in Ottoman areas (c. 1390-1703) where young boys were given by their families to be raised as professional soldiers (see janissaries) or as bureaucrats in the service of the sultan.

janissaries: An elite corps of professional soldiers who served both as the personal bodyguard of the sultan and as guardians of the traditional order of the empire. Their opposition to reform led Sultan Mahmud II to use the new national army to massacre the janissaries in 1826.

millet: A community based on religious affiliation and subject to its own laws.

shaykh ul-Islam: A position created by the sultans to serve as the nominal head of religious affairs for the Ottoman state.

sultan: “Supreme ruler.” Not equivalent to caliph although many sultans claimed both titles.

Tanzimat: Literally the “reorganization,” especially as applied to the social and political reforms undertaken by the Ottoman sultans beginning in 1839. The Tanzimat attempted to remake the Ottoman Empire into a modern nation state along the lines of its European allies.