
The Hijrah

IMPORTANT as the Prophet's birthday may be, it was not deemed by the Muslims to be the proper beginning for the Islamic calendar. It must be kept in mind that Muhammad was not the first prophet. Before him, a countless number of prophets have come and delivered the same message. True, they regard him to be the last, according to the divine description of him in the Qur'an as the "seal" or last of the prophets (Qur'an 33:40). The revelation he brought, like the preceding revelations, contains the same and whole content of the divine will. The *verbum dei* it conveyed is preserved intact and whole and its continued presence obviates the need for a new revelation. God's will is immutable in its substance, it is not subject to the vicissitudes of change. This substance is the body of principles and values expressed in the Qur'an. Not only do Muslims amply fulfill the obligation to preserve the Qur'an in its totality, committed to memory, written in the most sublime calligraphy in the best specimens ever produced by the arts of book-making which it alone engendered, and daily recited from cover to cover by thousands and millions of people publicly around the globe, but God Himself promised to preserve it intact forever.

The advent of the Prophet is hence indicative of a contact with divinity which brought to mankind knowledge of His will. It also

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indicates the preparation of this will for implementation through exemplification by the Prophet. As such, the whole significance of the advent is a matter for the divine economy, not the human. It does not necessarily include the commencement of the Islamic movement in history. The Islamic calendar had therefore to have another beginning.

It was 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph (12-22 AH/634-644 CE) who established the Islamic calendar as beginning on the day of the Prophet's hijrah (July 16, 622 CE), i.e., his emigration to Madinah. The reasoning was precise and clear. Islam was not only a divine dispensation, nor one to be observed merely by man as an individual person, but one to constitute total guidance for the community, the state and world order. It is meant to be an ideology for a comprehensive movement issuing from Makkah and enveloping the earth and mankind. When did it launch itself on this cosmic career? Not on Muhammad's birthday! Nor on the first day of revelation when the Prophet himself was not yet quite sure of what was happening! Nor on the emigration of some of the Prophet's companions to Ethiopia, for their flight was one of refugees! But it launched itself on the emigration of the Prophet, or really the day after, when he proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic state and launched Islam as a world movement and a cosmic mission.

Was such a launching necessary for the religion itself? Was it not an accident of history, or a deliberate pursuit of men and hence a human *desideratum*?

No, answers the Muslim. Involvement in history was essential to Islam and its ultimate end. Islam taught that piety, spirituality, and religious felicity are vain and empty if they are meant for the subject alone. The point is clearly discernible in the realm of morals. It is possible to think of an ethic of intention where the good, or value, is defined in terms of the psychic states of the subject, i.e., of the determinants of his will in its personal moment. Such would be a subjective ethic whose ultimate judge on earth is the subject's own conscience, since only conscience penetrates to those inner layers of personal consciousness where the ultimate motives rest. Such, for instance, would be the opposite of an ethic of consequences, of a utilitarianism which defines the good, and hence the ethical merit of the deed, in terms of the

external, obvious, measurable advantages in space and time which it engenders.

So with religion as such, in its totality, Islam is not a personalist, subjective religion like Christianity had been understood to be in the majority of cases over most of its twenty centuries of history. It is, rather, a mobilization of man to enter history, to interfere in its processes, to reorient its forces and therewith, men and nature, toward rekneading the cosmos and remolding it after the pattern God has revealed. The Muslim sees his vocation precisely in this: to enter history and therein to reshape the world.

Since nothing in creation is sacred, the sacred being alone God who is outside of creation, everything in creation is equally necessary, valuable and pertinent to the task once that is defined in terms of *Khilāfah* or vicegerency, of God. Those religions which bifurcated the world into sacred and profane, end up by dividing man's life accordingly. Under their view, religion is relevant on one day but not on the other; at worship in church or temple but not outside; during old age but not in youth; for personal acts but not for general economic and social behavior; for neighbor to neighbor conduct but not decisions and deeds of state.

All this is implicit in the Muslim's celebration of the hijrah. It is a reminder to him of another year past and another to begin. It is a moment of stocktaking, not in the domain of personal life, but in that of public life where the subject is Islam as world movement, as world state. How close is the world movement the Prophet had launched in Madinah to realizing its God-given objective? How far is it from including and mobilizing humanity? From transforming that humanity into monuments of genius, heroism and saintliness? From transforming nature into paradise?