

Isrā' and Mi^crāj

AS the youngest of the world religions, and as one born in the cradle of ancient civilizations, of Judaism and Christianity, Islam could not omit to relate itself to these religions. Its theory of prophecy already bound Islam to recognize the prophethood of the Hebrew prophets as well as of Jesus, whose memories were alive. The Qur'an mentions many of them, and pays particular attention to Abraham, Jacob, Shuayb, Moses, David, Solomon, Jonah, and Jesus. They and their followers it identifies as *ḥanīfs*, i.e., persons who were neither Jewish, nor Christian, nor adherents of Makkan religion, and yet were held in utmost respect for their moral uprightness, their religious vision and spirituality. Islam had therefore to specify its relation to them.

To begin with, it identified itself with the *ḥanīfs* whose head it identified with Abraham. The *ḥanīfs* were the Arab carriers of the whole legacy of Semitic religious consciousness, from Lipit-Ishtar to Sargon and Hammurabi, to Abraham and Moses and finally to Jesus. Undoubtedly their ranks were swelled by those refugees who ran away from persecution in Palestine, Jordan and Syria where the religious establishment was often in conflict over what was deemed to be orthodox Judaism and orthodox Christianity. The state religion of David, the post-exilic version canonized by Ezra and Nehemiah, the literal, legalistic version of the Pharisees, Maccabees and the Rabbinic

schools, all these did not become established without producing recurrent waves of dissidents some of whom found refuge among Arabs with some affinity to their own views. Likewise in Christianity, where the disagreements of the churches about Christology nearly always led to the banishment and/or persecution of some adherents. Mention should be made of Jewish refugees escaping the forced Hellenization of Alexander's heirs, and of the Christian refugees escaping Roman and Jewish persecution. This is also borne by the fact that "*hanīf*" is the Arabic form of the Aramaic *hanepai* which means heretic, rejected or separatist, which is exactly what such refugees would be from the religious establishment's point of view. But the *hanīfs* could not have all been such refugees. For it is impossible for any refugee of a different religion from the Arabs to choose to go to them for refuge, unless some Arabs were already of the same faith or sympathized therewith. The ranks of such native *hanīfs* may have been swelled by those emigrants who, in course of time, were naturalized and Arabized.

Islam's self-identification with the *hanīfs* was total. Ethnically, they regarded Abraham as their ancestor, and asserted him to be the first *hanīf*. The *hanīfs* had no known scripture, a fact which facilitated identification of Islam with them. With what was known of their religion among the Makkans, Islam agreed without reservations. This included monotheism, transcendence of the Godhead, universalism and a strict morality of chivalrous, pietistic and humanitarian values.

Judaism and Christianity were a different case. Each of them was a continuing establishment with its own scripture, its own *magisterium* and institutions. Something of their doctrines was perfectly true and genuine and hence agreeable to identify with. Other parts expressed views foreign to the whole Semitic tradition and were hence found to be in diametrical opposition to Islam. The Qur'anic criticism of these religions belonged to the Makkah period of revelation when Muslims had no relations with any people of different faith except the Makkans. Islam's criticism of the two religions is hence independent of the socio-political involvement of the Muslims with Jews and Christians. Islam was not shy to proclaim its continuity with both, its essential identity with both. It recognized them as legitimate religions whose ultimate source is God. But it criticized them mercilessly where their scriptures

had been tampered with so as to contain men's fabrications alongside genuine revelation, and where it found their adherents' observance of the injunctions of the two religions deficient or wanting. In so doing, Islam achieved two goals: It related itself to these religions as members of one family whose source is one and the same God; and it distinguished itself from their human distortions by inviting their own adherents to exercise their common sense and do some Old Testament and New Testament criticism.

The *Isrā'-Mi'rāj* celebrates this discovery by Islam of itself as one with Judaism and Christianity, represented by the story of Jerusalem which the Prophet has visited miraculously in a single night's journey, and by his discourse with the prophets of God when he was lifted from Jerusalem to heaven on that same night. Obviously, a night journey to any distant city would have been equally miraculous. Heaven could, on the other hand, be reached from any locality on earth. Why then was Jerusalem chosen? Evidently because that city was the religious capital of Judaism and Christianity, and the abode of the prophets, with which Islam sought to identify itself. Already, the Muslims were turning North to Jerusalem in prayer.

The tradition has brought down the details of the event as told by the Prophet. He was awakened at night by the angel who on many earlier occasions had brought down the revelation to him. The angel brought to him a special steed which he mounted. The steed then flew across space, not without enabling the Prophet to recognize the travelers on the road and their caravans. Once in Jerusalem, the Prophet tethered his steed to the "wailing wall" adjoining *al-Aqsa* and from the rock now under "the Dome of the Rock" ascended to heaven where he led all the prophets assembled to meet him, in prayer and praise to God. God instructed His Prophet to institute salah in Islam. He was then taken on a tour of heaven and hell, Muslim reports of which have become the source for many romantic and speculative accounts of Heaven in Islam and the West. We should note here that Dante's *Divina Comedia* was a Christian adaptation of this Muslim theme.

In celebrating *al-Isrā'* and *al-Mi'rāj* Muslims celebrate the great unity of all the prophets, and consequently, of all the religions, notably those associated with Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside. A

very special place among the prophets is accorded to Abraham, Moses and Jesus, founders of the three main streams of the Semitic family of religions.

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