COMMUNISM AND ISLAM

BERNARD LEWIS

My purpose here is to try to see how far Islam and Communism are compatible—how far, that is, Islam predisposes those who have been brought up in it to accept or to reject the Communist teaching. I shall not attempt to examine Communist infiltration and propaganda in Islamic countries or the degree of their success or failure—that is a task calling for professional skills and sources of information other than those which are at my disposal. Rather shall I try to consider what qualities or tendencies exist in Islam, in Islamic civilization and society, which might either facilitate or impede the advance of Communism.

The obvious objection will no doubt at once be raised that Islam is after all a religion based on revelation, belief in which is clearly incompatible with Marxist ideology. That is undoubtedly true, and the same could be said with equal truth of Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant Christianity, of Judaism, or any other religion worthy of the name. Nevertheless, that doctrinal incompatibility has not prevented many former followers of these religions from becoming Communists. No doubt, the devout and pious Muslim theologian who has studied and understands the implications of dialectical materialism will reject that creed, but such a combination of circumstances is not of common occurrence, nor likely to be of far-reaching significance. The question before us should rather be put thus: in the present competition between the Western democracies and Soviet Communism for the support of the Islamic world, what factors or qualities are there in Islamic tradition, or in the present state of Islamic society and opinion, which might prepare the intellectually and politically active groups to embrace Communist principles and methods of government, and the rest to accept them?

Before proceeding any further I feel that a writer on a subject of this nature owes his reader some definition of his own political attitude. Let me confess right away that I lack one qualification which nowadays is generally accepted as conferring both authority and respectability—I am not an ex-Communist. I can however plead as an extenuating circumstance that I grew up in a generation which was deeply affected by what was happening in Russia, and which felt, generally speaking, that, with all the brutalities and crimes of the Russian revolution, it nevertheless represented something valuable and significant for humanity—'bliss was it in that dawn to be alive'—and I am therefore perhaps able to understand something of the attraction as well as of the repulsion of the Communist creed. Of my own political attitude let me say this, that I believe that
parliamentary democracy as practised in the West, with all its manifest faults, is still the best and most just form of government yet devised by man. But at the same time I believe it to be the most difficult to operate, requiring certain qualities of mind and habit, of institution and tradition, perhaps even of climate, for its effective working. It has taken firm root only among the peoples of the northern and north-western fringes of Europe, and in the territories colonized by their descendants overseas. It has maintained, or maintains, a precarious existence in a few other regions, and is showing signs of promising but still immature growth in a few more—but otherwise it is unknown to the rest of the human race, in most of the world, and through most of recorded history.

Knowing, then, that parliamentary democracy is far from being the common experience of mankind, I am, to my regret, by no means certain that it represents the common destiny of mankind, and I shall therefore try to avoid the too frequent practice, which has the fault of being both inaccurate and inexpedient, of representing the world's dilemma as a straight choice between Communism and parliamentary democracy; of making, therefore, an appearance of parliamentary government the universal test of political and even moral virtue—in other words, of making our own present way of life the sole pattern of goodness, all deviations from which are necessarily evil, all alternatives to which are lumped together in a mass of undifferentiated wickedness. This principle, not even consistently applied, leads us to such logical and political absurdities as simultaneously courting the favours of some slave-owning and polygamous autocrat on another continent, while snubbing the Government of Spain—because of their disregard of civil liberties. The unfortunate and unpalatable fact is that it is we who are the exception in both history and geography, and that authoritarian and not representative government approximates most closely to the common experience of mankind. In most of the world autocracy, if less attractive, is more familiar and more intelligible than democracy, and even the arbitrary and capricious dictatorship of Moscow is neither as strange nor therefore as repellant to much of Asia and Africa—even much of Europe—as it is to us. We should certainly do our best to encourage the growth of free institutions wherever possible; but at the same time, we would do well to recall that for a great part of the human race, parliamentary democracy remains something remote, alien, and incomprehensible, an object sometimes of wonderment, even envy, more often alas of mistrust and hatred, which we must concede is not entirely unjustified when we recall the examples of democracy by which alone they can judge it. If the peoples of Islam are forced to make a straight choice, to abandon their own traditions in favour of either Communism or parliamentarianism, then we are at a great disadvantage.

It is, however, fortunate, both for Islam and for the Western world, that the choice is not restricted to these two simple alternatives, for the possibility still remains for the Muslim peoples of restoring, perhaps in a
modified form, their own tradition; of evolving a form of government which, though authoritarian, and perhaps even autocratic, is nevertheless far removed from the cynical tyranny of European-style dictatorship. I do not wish to be misunderstood—I would much prefer to see all Islam enjoy the benefits of constitutional government, democratic liberty, and the free development of the individual, and I by no means exclude the possibility of this desirable consumption, which in a few favoured countries is already in sight—but I wish to make clear my view that in large areas of the Islamic world this consumption is not in prospect and, furthermore, that the present circumstances, and indeed the ancient traditions of Islam, do not wholly favour us but, on the contrary, contain much which might incline the Muslim individual, class, or nation, which is ready to abandon traditional values and beliefs, to accept the Communist rather than the democratic alternative.

I propose now to select and discuss a few of what seem to me to be the more important elements favouring the success of Communism in the Islamic world, and to deal with them under two headings: first, the accidentals, those that are part of the present historical situation, and then the essentials, those which are innate or inherent in the very quality of Islamic institutions and ideas.

The first and most important of the accidentals is the anti-Western motif. The Communists are against the West and for that reason can at once count on important elements of support in the Islamic world, just as the Nazis were able to do in their time—to a considerable extent the same elements of support and for the same reasons. Like the Nazis, the Communists are anti-Western in the double sense—they are against the Western Powers and they are also against the Western way of life, Western institutions and ideas. Under both headings they have a strong appeal. The present anti-Western reaction in the Islamic world is obvious and well known. After the period of admiration and imitation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is now a general and growing revulsion. Public attention has been focused in the main on a series of specific grievances of the Islamic world against the West—Morocco and Tunisia, Suez and the Sudan, Palestine, Abadan, and the rest, of which now one, now another, has been adduced as the main cause of anti-Western feeling. There are always those in the West who will seek to grind an axe or titillate a prejudice by attributing all troubles to the misdeeds of their favourite scapegoats—the French or the Jews, the Americans or the British—and they will always find enthusiastic agreement from somebody in the Orient. Muslims tend to stress the importance of any specific issue in the measure of their own involvement in it—Westerners, of their own freedom from involvement. In reality, all of them are symptoms or aspects of a fundamental and universal revulsion from all that is Western and, as we have seen of late, even the removal of one or
another grievance cannot bring more than a local and temporary alleviation. This movement is made up of various strains, of which I may mention the reaction against colonialism, which grows stronger as the latter is manifestly dying; against Western privilege and arrogance, economic, social, political; against the dislocations and upheavals resulting from the impact of the West, the changes brought about by Western influence and activities, by no means all of which are—as we like to flatter ourselves—beneficial.

The liberal and constitutional movements in the Islamic countries, which were launched with such high hopes in the nineteenth century, have, with few exceptions, ended in failure, disappointment, and frustration. The local leaders have all too often relapsed into a cynicism and opportunism that has outraged the moral sense of those whom they professed to lead, or else have sought comfort in a rabid and xenophobic fanaticism, damning indiscriminately all and everything that has come out of the West. They expressed the blind protest of the masses against the alien and powerful forces that had dislocated their traditional way of life, destroyed their traditional social equilibrium, and posed new problems for which they offered no effective answer. It is no doubt unjust of Muslims to blame the West for the exuberant and destructive haste of their own reformers and for the incompetence and selfishness of their own parliamentarians. But we must admit that the record of the West in its dealings with the Islamic world and for that matter in its own internal affairs does not furnish material for any very striking rebuttal.

Communist propaganda against the West can therefore always count on a ready response, especially when striking the anti-imperialist drum. It may seem strange to us that the Soviet empire, still audibly eructating after having bolted half of Europe, should be able to pose successfully as the champion of the rights of oppressed peoples against the imperialists—that the State which rules with no light hand over so many Muslim subject peoples, should nevertheless be able to carry off this pose among the other peoples of Islam. Yet so it is. For most Islamic peoples the notion of 'imperialist'—and I am speaking here of course of the popular image—is rather restricted and surprisingly precise. The imperialist is always Western—in fact, 'Western imperialist' is a natural and normal collocation of terms, like German measles or Spanish 'flu. The Arab who protests against imperialism does not think for one moment that his putative ancestors who conquered an empire from the Pyrenees to the Oxus were also imperialists, nor the Persian that the vaunted glories of Cyrus and Darius were also of an imperial quality. Even the modern Japanese, except of course among their immediate victims, are somehow regarded as different and as belonging fundamentally among the sheep rather than the goats—black sheep perhaps, but still sheep. The imperialist of the popular prototype, the stock figure of contemporary political demonology in the Orient, is Western, and is moreover always maritime and commercial.
The imperialist is a man who comes across the sea in a ship, lands on the coast, buys and sells, works his way inland, and finally, by various devices, mostly dishonest, establishes his rule.

This is of course a distillation and in some measure a distortion of the experience of most of Asia and Africa of Portuguese and Dutch, French and British expansion since the sixteenth century. It is in fact the sole direct experience of most of these countries, in the last few centuries, of the phenomenon of imperialism. The other kind, overland military expansion, is not really grasped, except again by those who have experienced it directly. Turkey, for example, has for centuries fought a defensive action against the successive stages of the Russian overland advance, first to the Black Sea, then down through the Balkans and the Caucasus. Turkey moreover is related by language and origin to the Tartar peoples who are now under Soviet yoke. Hence the greater degree of awareness among the Turks of the nature of Soviet imperialism, and the vastly different attitude adopted by Turkey to the present world problems. In the rest of the Islamic world Soviet imperialism may perhaps, in some circles, be apprehended intellectually, but it fails to evoke any real emotional response. It is remarkable how Islamic opinion generally refuses to accord to ancient Muslim centres of culture like Bukhara and Samarkand one hundredth of the interest and attention given to, say, Casablanca, Ismailia, and Abadan. Even those who are anti-Communist will often say—most of us must have heard it—'At least, the Russians are not imperialists'—and really believe that the Soviet régime, despite its other faults, is somehow free from that particular stigma which renders the Western Powers so odious. Here it must be stated that the Russians are greatly helped by Western racial and colour prejudice and by their own apparent freedom from it. This is an immense asset to them, both in Asia and Africa, and one that is wantonly presented to them.

The second accidental with which I shall deal is the present discontent of the Islamic world, and more specifically the social and economic discontent. The abject poverty of the masses and the callous irresponsibility of the possessing classes are often mentioned as sources of possible danger. Quite clearly, warnings of the threat to liberty and property are unlikely to move those who possess neither; on the contrary, Communist ideas and promises will have a ready attraction for important groups in a society which, as has often been pointed out, in many ways resembles that of Russia on the eve of the Revolution.

This point is self-evident and has often been made, and there is no need for me to dwell on it. I would, however, like to mention three facts which we might bear in mind when we speak of the immemorial poverty and irresponsibility of the Orient. The first is that this poverty, at any rate in its present form, is in fact not immemorial. Obviously, the gap between rich and poor has always existed, but as far as we can ascertain, it has not in earlier times been as wide and as unbridgeable as it is now.
In its present form, this gap is largely the result of the Western impact, the effect of which has been to make the rich richer, and the poor poorer than they were before. The economic effects of Westernization and of contact with the West are a complex problem; I propose here to mention only two aspects. One is the greater opportunity to amass wealth afforded by Western industrial, commercial, and financial techniques, and the consequent growth of fortunes on a scale unknown in earlier and simpler economies; the other is the rapid increase of population, made possible by Western hygiene and security, but unaccompanied by any corresponding increase in food supplies.

Moreover, the disparity between rich and poor is not only greater than before, but, what is perhaps more important, is more visible, thanks to the introduction of Western amenities and the flow of Western consumer goods, which afford vastly greater opportunities for the public display and enjoyment of wealth. These changes are not due to the villainy of the West or even in any great measure to the direct intervention of Westerners; they are rather the consequences of the process of Western contact, Western influence, and Westernization generally. The West is now doing something to remedy them, and can do very much more.

I have said that the poverty of the Orient was not, in its present form, immemorial. Nor for that matter is the irresponsibility of the Oriental ruling classes. Before the impact of Westernization from, say, the late eighteenth century onwards, the corporative structure of traditional Islamic society, though worm-eaten, was still standing, and the complex system of social and moral duties associated with it was still functioning. Then the old order was shattered, not by the wicked imperialists, but by native reformers, men of the stamp of Mahmud II in Turkey and Muhammad Ali in Egypt, who destroyed better than they built. Nothing has come to replace the old bonds. That is the cause of the social and political formlessness which has struck so many observers of modern Islamic societies, the absence of any but purely personal and family loyalties—since the family is the only surviving social unit with any real life or meaning. So that, we might remember, what we condemn as the vice of nepotism is, for those who practise it, the virtue of family loyalty, the only intelligible form of loyalty that remains. The disappearance of the old social ethos and the breakdown of the old social cohesion have left a dangerous gap which Western social ideals and institutions have failed to fill.

My third point is that the centre of danger is not the starving peasantry so often referred to, but rather the aspiring mechanics, who are the main recruits to the Communist cause. The peasantry are still, to a large extent, integrated in their traditional social units, and sustained by the loyalty and cohesion of the family and village group. It is the semi-skilled or unskilled labourers who are uprooted from their tribal and village communities, deprived of the support of their usual system of social relationships
and mutual aid, and placed in alien and unfamiliar surroundings. In the Communist cell the transplanted proletarian or mechanic may hope to find some substitute for his lost social armature, as well as encouragement in the ambitions and resentments that he acquires together with his new skills.

I turn now from the accidental to the essential factors, to those deriving from the very nature of Islamic society, tradition, and thought. The first of these is the authoritarianism, perhaps we may even say the totalitarianism, of the Islamic political tradition. It is by now lamentably clear that any totalitarian government, however anti-Communist its professed creed may be, does in fact provide the starting-point for a swift and easy transition to Communist dictatorship. The democratic Finns, isolated and abandoned to the mercies of Russia, have nevertheless succeeded in maintaining their democratic liberties through long and difficult years. The more or less Fascist régimes of Eastern and Central Europe, by a few simple adjustments, were soon transformed into Communist States, for which the machinery and personnel of repression, and the habit of acquiescence in it, were ready to hand. The political experience and traditions of Islam, though very different from those of Eastern Europe, do nevertheless contain elements which might, in certain circumstances, prepare the way for Communism.

Many attempts have been made to show that Islam and democracy are identical—attempts usually based on a misunderstanding of Islam or democracy or both. This sort of argument expresses a need of the uprooted Muslim intellectual who is no longer satisfied with or capable of understanding traditional Islamic values, and who tries to justify, or rather, re-state, his inherited faith in terms of the fashionable ideology of the day. It is an example of the romantic and apologetic presentation of Islam that is a recognized phase in the reaction of Muslim thought to the impact of the West. There are of course elements, even important elements, in Islam, especially in the early period, which we might not unjustly call democratic, but on the whole the tendency which is usually adduced in support of this thesis is equalitarian rather than democratic; a very different thing, and one that goes with authoritarian at least as well as with democratic institutions. In point of fact, except for the early caliphate, when the anarchic individualism of tribal Arabia was still effective, the political history of Islam is one of almost unrelieved autocracy. I say autocracy, not despotism, since the sovereign was bound by and subject to the Holy Law, and was accepted by the people as rightful ruler, maintaining and maintained by the authority of the Holy Law. But still, it was authoritarian, often arbitrary, sometimes tyrannical. There are no parliaments or representative assemblies of any kind, no councils or communes, no chambers of nobility or estates, no municipalities in the history of Islam; nothing but the sovereign power, to which the subject
owed complete and unwavering obedience as a religious duty imposed by the Holy Law. In the great days of classical Islam this duty was only owed to the lawfully appointed caliph, as God's vicegerent on earth and head of the theocratic community, and then only for as long as he upheld the law; but with the decline of the caliphate and the growth of military dictatorship, Muslim jurists and theologians accommodated their teachings to the changed situation and extended the religious duty of obedience to any effective authority, however impious, however barbarous. For the last thousand years, the political thinking of Islam has been dominated by such maxims as 'tyranny is better than anarchy' and 'whose power is established, obedience to him is incumbent'. The classical formulation of Islamic political quietism may be found in an often cited passage from the Syrian jurist Ibn Jamā'ā, who became Chief Qādi of Cairo and died in 1333:

Forced homage. This happens when a chief seizes power by force, in a time of civil disorders, and it becomes necessary to recognize him in order to avoid further troubles. That he may have none of the qualifications of sovereignty, that he be illiterate, unjust or vicious, that he be even a slave or a woman, is of no consequence. He is a sovereign in fact, until such time as another, stronger than he, drives him from the throne and seizes power. He will then be sovereign by the same title, and should be recognized in order not to increase strife. Whoever has effective power has the right to obedience, for a government, even the worst one, is better than anarchy, and of two evils one should choose the lesser.

It will be clear that these are not the words of a time-server or flatterer trying to make his career at an autocratic court. They are the words of a pious and devout believer, putting bluntly and sadly an unpalatable truth as he sees it. It will be remembered that the writer is a doctor of the Holy Law and speaking in terms of the Holy Law. When he prescribes recognition and obedience, he is laying down the duty of the believer under the Holy Law—that is to say, he is formulating a rule the violation of which is, in our terminology, a sin as well as a crime, involving hell-fire as well as such anticipatory chastisement as the sovereign might see fit to impose in this world. 'Even a slave or a woman' says Ibn Jamā'ā; only one thing worse can be imagined—an infidel, and that stage too was reached when, after the Norman conquest of Sicily from the Muslims, a Muslim jurist of Mazara laid down that even a Christian ruler must be accepted and obeyed, provided he accords religious toleration to the Muslims. A community brought up on such doctrines will not be shocked by Communist disregard of political liberty or human rights; it may even be attracted by a régime which offers ruthless strength and efficiency in the service of a cause—anyway in appearance—in place of the ineptitude, corruption, and cynicism which in their mind, one may even say in their experience, are inseparable from parliamentary government.

Even the Communist doctrine that the State must direct economic life is not as alien to the Muslim as might be thought—rather is he accustomed to look to the State for direction and control of certain central aspects of
economic life. The classical Islamic social order was evolved in Iraq and Egypt, and conformed to the ancient pattern of river-valley society. In those lands of little rainfall there was an intensive agriculture, based on artificial irrigation from the river. This required armies of engineers and officials, employed and controlled by a central authority, whose task it was to maintain the elaborate structure of dykes, dams, canals, and other irrigation works, by which alone the economic life of the country could be maintained. For this system a strong central authority was a paramount necessity, and one does not have to look far to find examples of the ruin and impoverishment which followed the breakdown of the central authority in times of political weakness and the consequent neglect of the irrigation works. In countries blessed with rain the farmer can look to God for his water and maintain a certain independence in other respects. In the river-valley societies he must look to the central authority to maintain the system and to supply the life-giving stream, and he knows himself to be at its mercy. It is in such communities that we find the type of social order that Wittfogel has called "the hydraulic society", where the régime and the ruling class are based on the supply of water for irrigation. Its characteristics are well known: a docile and helpless peasantry, at the mercy of a centralized and bureaucratic authority and a ruling class of officials and land-owners in unchallenged, and indeed unchallengeable, control of the sources of economic life and therefore of political power. The same basic type of society exists in Egypt and Iraq, in the river-valleys of India, in China, and, one may perhaps add, in the river-valleys of Russia. Whether the historic Russian society is "hydraulic" in this sense I would not pretend to say; there are, however, certain striking similarities. The traditional Islamic autocracy rests on three pillars: the bureaucracy, the army, and the religious hierarchy—and I may recall in passing the interesting suggestion recently made in this Journal by Mr Albert Hourani, that we may be witnessing a return to this pattern in the recent changes in Egypt. In this pattern, only the third, the religious hierarchy, need be changed in order to prepare the way for a Communist State.

That third, however, is by no means unimportant. Quite obviously, the 'Ulama of Islam are very different from the Communist Party. Nevertheless, on closer examination, we find certain uncomfortable resemblances. Both groups profess a totalitarian doctrine, with complete and final answers to all questions on heaven and earth; the answers are different in every respect, alike only in their finality and completeness, and in the contrast they offer with the eternal questioning of Western man. Both groups offer to their members and followers the agreeable sensation of belonging to a community of believers, who are always right, as against an outer world of unbelievers, who are always wrong. Both offer an exhilarating feeling of mission, of purpose, of being engaged in a collective adventure to accelerate the historically inevitable victory of the true faith over the infidel evil-doers. The traditional Islamic division of the world into the
House of Islam and the House of War, two necessarily opposed groups, of which the first has the collective obligation of perpetual struggle against the second, also has obvious parallels in the Communist view of world affairs. There again, the content of belief is utterly different, but the aggressive fanaticism of the believer is the same. The humorist who summed up the Communist creed as 'There is no God and Karl Marx is his Prophet' was laying his finger on a real affinity. The call to a Communist Jihad, a Holy War for the faith—a new faith, but against the self-same Western Christian enemy—might well strike a responsive note.

I have referred to collective obligations. Here too there is a possible point of contact between Communism and Islam, the collectivist tendencies of which have struck many observers. A good deal has been written about the innumerable religio-Communistic sects and movements that have arisen all over Islam, almost since its beginning. Let me quote from an almost contemporary Arabic chronicle, describing the activities of an agent of one such sect in Iraq, in the neighbourhood of Kufa, about the middle of the ninth century. This agent, we are told, having converted the inhabitants of some villages to his doctrine, imposed on them an ever-increasing series of taxes and levies and finally:

The duty of Ulfa . . .; this consisted of assembling all their goods in one place and enjoying them in common without any one retaining any personal property which might give him an advantage over the others. He assured them that they did not need to keep any property because all the land belonged to them and to no one else. That, he told them, is the test by which you are proved so that we may know how you will behave. He urged them to buy and prepare arms. The missionaries appointed in each village a trustworthy man to assemble all that the people of the village owned by way of cattle, sheep, jewellery, provisions, etc. He clothed the naked and met all their needs, leaving no poor man among them, nor any needy and infirm. Every man worked with diligence and emulation at his task in order to deserve high rank by the benefit he brought. The woman brought what she earned by weaving, the child brought his wages for scaring away birds. Nobody among them owned anything beyond his sword and his arms.

This is no doubt an exaggerated description of the proceedings of these groups, but it is not untypical. And this is but one of many such movements recorded in Islam, and in Persia also long before Islam. All of them failed and were duly condemned by the orthodox as heresy, but they reveal the recurring tendency in Islam to throw up such ideas and groups, and they also help to explain the otherwise mystifying connexions which are reported from time to time between certain extremist Islamic religious organizations and Communism. It was precisely in organizations of this sort, the popular, semi-secret, mystical brotherhoods, of dubious orthodoxy and mistrusted by the regular 'Ulama, that these religio-Communistic tendencies usually appeared. Nor is this collectivism limited to what one might call the 'popular sub-stratum' of Islam. It is also discernible in
many aspects of orthodox Islamic life and thought, in the attitude to society and government, which I have already mentioned, even in literature. The classical Arabic book is often presented not as an individual and personal creation of the author, but as a link in the chain of tradition, the author effacing his own personality behind the prestige of authority and the ranks of previous transmitters. Many of the great works of Arabic literature are as impersonal and as collective as a medieval cathedral. This collectivism is perhaps clearest in the Muslim idea of the Perfect Man and the Perfect State as given, immutable patterns externally applied, to which all must in theory attempt to conform by imitation, instead of, as in the Western ideal, by developing their own potentials from within.

But all this, it may be objected, could equally well be said of any other religion as of Islam, and amounts to no more than saying that Communism is itself a religion. I concede that some of the comparisons I have made, though by no means all, also apply to some other religions. I would add that had these religions retained the same formative and determinative power over their adherents as Islam still has, the observation might have some practical relevance. But I cannot accept the statement that Communism is a religion, and nothing, I would suggest, illustrates more clearly the decayed state of religion in our Western world, than that such a comparison can be made at all. Admittedly, the resemblances are at first sight striking. In Communism, as in most religions, we find ritual and hierarchy, revelation and prophecy, scripture and exegesis, orthodoxy and heresy, excommunication and persecution. Even some of the deeper spiritual strength of religious faith seems to fortify the true convinced Communist. Despite his professed materialism, he has objectives beyond his own self-interest, and beyond his own lifetime. He is filled with an evangelic fervour and a messianic faith. It is this quality which has given Communism its special strength—the dangerous fascination which it exercises in so many oriental countries. Fascism and Nazism, with their naked appeal to greed, hate, pride, and envy, could in the long run address themselves only to the evil instincts of man, and were correspondingly limited. Communism, while exploiting these to the full, has also perverted to its service some of the noblest aspirations of the human race—as peace, social justice, the brotherhood of man—and has used them with deadly effect. We shall fail to understand and meet the threat of Communism if we do not recognize its attraction for the best, though not the brightest, as well as for the worst spirits.

Communism thus has many features in common with religion, but those that are lacking are perhaps the most important. I would like to quote a passage from the Danish writer Vilhelm Grønbech, who says:

The trouble is that we confuse religiosity with religion. Just because people are so devout in their personal way, they are unable to conceive a religion which is the soul of society, the obverse of the practical, a living and real religion, the practical relationship of the people to God, soul and eternity, that manifests
itself in worship and works as a life-giving power in politics and economics, in crafts and commerce, in ethics as in law. In this sense the modern State has no religion.

In this sense, one may add, Communism is not and cannot be a religion, while Islam, for the great mass of believers, still is; and that is the core of the Islamic resistance to Communist ideas. Though their belief in liberty be too weak to sustain them, their belief in God may yet be strong enough. The Islamic peoples are still profoundly religious in the simplest and deepest meaning of the word. Islam as a religion is no more anti-Communist than Christianity; in fact, as I have suggested, rather less so. But it is more potent as a force affecting the lives and thoughts of its adherents. Pious Muslims—and most Muslims are pious—will not long tolerate an atheist creed, nor one that violates their traditional religious moral principles which, because they do not tally with our own, are too often overlooked by Western observers. The present revolt of the Muslims against the immorality and opportunism of their own and of some Western leaders may temporarily favour the Communists, with their appearance of selfless devotion to an ideal, but will work against Communism when Muslims come to see the realities behind the propaganda. Let us hope that they will not take too long over it.

In any case, there is not a great deal that we can do about it. Our own public and political morality is undoubtedly better than that of the Communists, but the difference is apparently not large enough or striking enough to make any notable impression on the rest of the world. The people who represent Western democracy in its dealings with Islam are certainly estimable men, doing important and meritorious work, but as promoters of moral and religious revival they are unlikely to carry conviction. We of the West can do much to promote the material well-being and raise the material standards of the lands of Islam. We can also perhaps do something to encourage—and that means to justify—a more positive attitude towards ourselves, our ideas, and our aspirations; but in the present crisis it is from within that Islam must find the moral strength and spiritual resources to resist the great secular heresy of our time. We can do no more than refrain from offering impediments.

Address at Chatham House
6 October 1953