



AP Photo

*The Ayatollah Khomeini is silent and alone aboard a chartered plane that flew him back to Iran from France on February 1 to end fourteen years of exile.*

The first error corrects itself when we realize that Indonesia and Pakistan alone account for more Moslems than all the Arab countries combined, or that some of the most devoutly religious Islamic communities are to be found among black African countries. It is not very flattering to Western Europeans, but some of the racist terms they employ are based on this misunderstanding. To state, therefore, that Arabs are Moslems, is to state a fact that serves as a basis for Arab nationalism itself, but to say a Moslem is of necessity an Arab is absurd.

At this point we encounter the weakness of the Islamic religion, which, integrating with amazing ease different cultures, languages and traditions, often envelops them superficially, adapting itself to local rituals and celebration, of which the Iranian Nowrouz is a good example.

Since Arabic is the language of the revealed book, one can understand how the Arab speaker should be considered a Moslem. But is the language of the revelation meant to be understood, or is it merely a ritual to be memorized? In other words, is this language a means of communication between non-Arab Moslems? It is interesting to note in this regard that Mustafa Kemal, wanting to secularize Turkey, instituted a Latin alphabet.

The point we are trying to make is that by calling themselves "Islamic", Moslems no doubt reinforce the Westerner's second error regarding Islam, but

also give rise to a second question: what kind of Islam? For although religion serves as a major unifying force in relations with the outside world, the world of the Infidel, or Dar al-Harb, the differences that divide it and the irresistible currents that run through it make it, in the longer term, a divisive element which surfaces at the political level.

True, in order for someone to call himself a Moslem he need only profess that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is his Prophet (La Ilaha illa Allah Mouhammad Rassoul Illah); accept the Kelem Allah, or Koran, as the undisputable word of God revealed to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel; recite the five daily prayers and participate in the special congregational prayer on Friday; fast at Ramadan; perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and give alms; celebrate the feasts of Islam (the Mawled, the Id as-Saghir and the Id al-Kabir, and the Achoura); and fight, when necessary, a holy war, or "Jihad". But here the differences begin.

For example, the teachings and works of Mohammed as witnessed by his first disciples were collected as a supplement to the Koran. These "hadith", which constitute the "Sunna", were rejected by the Shiites, but accepted by the Sunnites, who acquired their name from these writings.

Since this is not a course on Islam, I will limit myself to mentioning the four major schools of thought: the Maliki, Hanbali, Shafi and Hanafi.

As for the origin of the Shiite sedition (the word "shi'a" means "sedition") let us recall that after the death of Mohammed, Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, cousin and heir, had the caliphate taken away from him by Mu'awiya, the prefect of Damascus. The partisans of Ali, a martyr, went on to form three main dissenting branches, and agreed that the first three caliphs who had succeeded Mohammed, namely Abu Bakr, Omar and Uthman, were usurpers, since the quality of "imam" could only be found in the family of Ali. They moreover considered Ali equal to Mohammed in holiness. Lastly, they rejected the Sunna as a supplement to the Koran.

Although one should be wary of extreme generalizations, it should be noted that "Shiism" is a sort of poor cousin within Islam. In strictly political terms, this means that in a given Arab society, the middle class is of the Sunnite faith, while the poor masses are Shiite.

This is the case, for example, in the Moslem society of Lebanon, although in a predominantly Shiite society the situation would obviously be different. I would also point out that this insurmountable religious difference is also rooted in ethnic differences, and that in the case of Iran — which, though not an Arab society, does provide us with an example of Shiism which is typical in its Iranian form and zealous practice — it dramatizes the problem of Kurdish and Turkoman minorities.