

most blatant example is no doubt Iran, where the Peacock Throne occupied by the Pahlavis has been swept away by the liberating tide of Islam. More and more one is led to believe that what was true for Iran is also true for other countries, starting with Turkey. Trapped in this seemingly logical reasoning, one begins to speculate on the cloudy future of Saudi Arabia and, at the other end of the crescent, on that of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and so on, so that the effects of the "buzzword" are now combined with those of political generalization.

This is an absurd exercise which takes into account neither the true nature of Islam nor its internal differences. After minimizing this potential force for decades we are now trying to compensate by committing a second historical error. We were first guilty of default; now we are guilty of excess.

The truth is that Islam is not a monolithic religion, and that each of its sects has a cultural heritage distinctly different from the others — not to mention the fact that each ethnic and national entity endows its moral values with a specific set of aspirations and taboos.

To speak of Islam as an over-all common denominator is like speaking of Christianity as a monolithic whole. This would mean that the Huguenots and Catholics should never have been opposed for the simple reason that they belonged to the same religion.

Caught in a geopolitical situation where the search for national identity requires the rejection of Western objectives imposed by force or established through now-disgraced dictators, the masses are releasing a potential repressed for decades and, as is the case in Iran, are still in a state of general confusion. Through an understandable process of identification, they see the overthrown dictator as a Western presence, and by replacing a monarchy with a republic they believe they are rejecting Western-type government. In what way is a republic a less Western type of government, and in what way are parliamentary structures less Western than the overthrown empire and the government of one man? The opposite would no doubt be more true; otherwise history should be rewritten: the Sublime Porte and its government structure were Western inventions, the Ottoman Empire was a scheme of the Infidel, the caliphate following Mu'awiya was a heresy, and the history of Islam was a long succession of heresies until the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Rouhallah Khomeini.

In other words, what we should examine in the expression "Islamic Republic" is not the concept of "republic" but that of "Islamic". Thus, when we Westerners assume that every monarchy, such as the Wahhabite in Saudi Arabia, is necessarily threatened by the religious force released in Iran, we are like wide-eyed spectators watching an illusionist.

Islam has always been governed by men who

hold in their hands both secular political power and the religious moral authority suggested by their title, "commander of believers". Thus, if developments in Iran constitute a threat to pro-Western regimes, it is not with regard to their political structure. A regime is endangered insofar as it follows the Western example and sacrifices its Islamic character to its ambitions and objectives. In this respect, a republic is threatened just as much as a monarchy, especially since nothing resembles a monarchy more than an authoritarian "republic" ruled with an iron hand and without opposition by a faction which is usually military.

Although today, by a coincidence — such as the one that provided the basis for the homogenization implied in the term "crescent of crisis" — the objectives are confused and Arab is considered the equivalent of Islam, it is important that a distinction be made not only between the categories of Islam, but also between what is Arab and what is not Arab in the context of the internal diversity of the Arab world.

Thus it would be just as reasonable to argue that Iraq and Syria have strengthened their ties in defence against a threat resulting from the traumatic experience of Iran as it would be to place this rapprochement in the context of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. For even though Egypt, because of its pro-American policy and its decision to recognize Israel, seems to provide an ideal target, the Kurdish problem in Iraq and the resulting Sunnite-Shiite rivalry, and the minority Alid government in Syria, which is primarily Sunnite, make these two countries ideal breeding grounds for an Islamic crisis.

It should also be pointed out that the 40-odd countries that take part in Islamic assemblies are more concerned with the problem of Islamic holy places in Jerusalem than with the threat that President Sadat represents to so-called Arab "solidarity", and that Saudi Arabia owes its position as leader not so much to its wealth as to its status as guardian of the holy places at Mecca and Medina, and for this reason claims the right to defend the mosques of Al-Aqsa and Omar in Jerusalem.

Roughly speaking, the question is: which country wishes to remain faithful to Dar al-Islam and which country has given its allegiance to Dar al-Harb?

Sects and identities

Two errors mark our perception of the Islamic religion. First of all, we generally confuse Arab and Moslem, since we discovered one at the same time as we discovered the other. The confusion is all the more understandable since the Arabs themselves have propagated the belief that the only Moslems are Arabs. Secondly, our mental picture of Islam is that of a vague, indistinct whole which contains a reality. What we forget is that the reality has no internal unity.