

REITH LECTURES 1952: The World and the West

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Lecture 2: Islam

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Last week, in the first talk in this series, I made two points about Russia's encounter with the west: the first was that Russia had managed to hold her own against the west by adopting western weapons; my second point is that one of these western weapons adopted by Russia has been a creed, and that, through her adoption of this western creed of Communism, Russia has been able to pass over from the defensive into the counter-offensive that is causing so much concern to us in the west today. This story of Russia's relations with our western society within our own lifetime is in some points a repetition of an older story, in which the modern western civilisation's part was played by its predecessor the Graeco-Roman civilisation, and Russia's part was played by Islam.

A Reforming Heresy

I have called Communism a Christian heresy, and the same description applies to Islam as well. Islam, like Communism, arose as a programme of reform for dealing with abuses in the contemporary practice of Christianity. And the success of Islam in its early days shows how powerful the appeal of a reforming heresy can be when the orthodoxy that this heresy is attacking is reluctant to mend its ways. In the seventh century of the Christian era the Moslem Arabs liberated from a Christian Graeco-Roman ascendancy a string of oriental countries— from Syria right across north Africa to Spain—which had been under Greek or Roman rule for nearly 1,000 years, ever since Alexander the Great had conquered the Persian Empire and the Romans had overthrown Carthage.

After that, between the eleventh century and the sixteenth, the Moslems went on to conquer, by stages, almost the whole of India, and their religion spread peacefully still further afield: into Indonesia and China on the east and into tropical Africa on the south-west. Russia, too, as we have seen, was temporarily subject, in the later Middle Ages, to Tatars who became converts to Islam, and all the rest of Eastern Orthodox Christendom, in Asia Minor and in south-eastern Europe, was conquered in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by the Moslem Ottoman Turks. Vienna was besieged by the Turks for the second time no longer ago than 1682-83; and, though the failure of that siege marked the beginning of a turn in the tide in favour of the west in the west's encounter with an aggressive Ottoman empire, I myself have seen the crescent flag still flying over the east coast of the Adriatic, opposite the heel of Italy, no longer ago than 1912.

Those tremendous military and political successes in the earlier chapters of the history of Islam explain why it was that the Turks and other Moslem peoples were so slow in following Peter the Great's policy of holding one's own against the west by adopting western weapons, tools, institutions, and ideas. The technological westernisation of

Russia by Peter the Great started less than 100 years after Russia had had the experience of seeing Moscow occupied by Polish western invaders in 1610-12. On the other hand, more than 100 years passed after the Turkish disaster at Vienna in 1683 before a Turkish sultan took the first step towards training Turkish troops on a western model, and 236 years passed before a Turkish statesman fired his countrymen to adopt the western way of life whole-heartedly and without any reservations.

The military reforms initiated by Sultan Selim III, who came to the throne in 1789, were prompted by the shock of Turkey's defeat by Russia in the great Russo-Turkish war of 1768-74. Till then, the Turks had thought of the Russians as country cousins of the Turks' own despised Eastern Orthodox Christian Greek and Bulgarian subjects; and now the Turks had suffered a crushing defeat at these rustic Russians' hands because the Russians had mastered the western military technique. 'As for the out-and-out westernising movement, which was launched by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in 1919, we may doubt whether even Ataturk's imaginative insight and demonic driving-power would have succeeded in jolting the Turks out of an age-old conservatism if, after the first world war, the Turks had not found themselves confronted with a stark and inescapable choice between whole-hearted westernisation and outright extinction.

The fact is that the western counter-attack on the Islamic world, which, after the Turks' failure at Vienna in 1683, was bound to come sooner or later, was delayed by long western memories of the Turks' and other Moslem peoples' historic military prowess. The western world's retort to the Turks' conquest of Eastern Orthodox Christendom in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had been not to make a fresh frontal attack on the Islamic world on the lines of the disastrously unsuccessful Crusades but to encircle Islam by conquering the ocean. The circumnavigation of Africa had brought Portuguese western seafarers to the west coast of India some years before the Moguls, who were the last wave of the Moslem invaders of India, came in by land from central Asia. The transit of the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, via Mexico, by the Spaniards, opened up in the Philippine Islands a new east-Asian frontier between a western Christendom and an Islam who had been neighbours, hitherto, only on the opposite side of the globe: in the Danube valley and in the western Mediterranean. Indeed, before the end of the sixteenth century, the west, thanks to its conquest of the ocean, had succeeded in throwing a lasso round Islam's neck; but it was not till the nineteenth century that the west ventured to pull the rope tight. Till as late as that, enduring memories, on both sides, of past Moslem military prowess kept the westerners cautious and the Moslems self-complacent. The experience that did slowly break the spell of this Moslem self-complacency was the repeated military defeat of the Ottoman Empire and other Moslem powers by adversaries equipped with western weapons and with the technology and the science that are the sinews of the' modern western art of war; and the Moslems' reaction to this experience was the same as the Russians'.

In Turkey from 1789 to 1919, as in Russia from 1699 to 1825, the typical revolutionary westerniser was a young military or naval officer; and to western minds this is surprising, because, in a western country, the corps of professional officers in the fighting services is apt to be not a hot-bed of revolution but a stronghold of conservatism. Yet the facts are indisputable. In Russia, the westernising Tsar Peter the Great's most effective agents for the execution of his revolutionary programme were

his young guards officers; and more than 100 years after Peter's day, the planners of the unsuccessful revolution of 1825 against the conservative Tsar Nicholas I were, once again, military officers who had been infected with the western political ideas of the day in 1814, when they had been serving in the international army of occupation in France. In the nineteenth century one of the typical careers of a Russian revolutionary prophet or leader was to be born the son of a well-to-do landowner, to enter the military or civil service, to publish philosophising articles in a literary magazine, to retire at an early age from the imperial service, and to spend the rest of his life living as a rentier and serving the cause of political and social reform in Russia on westernising lines. In Turkey it was in essence the same story. The unsuccessful pioneer-westerniser Sultan Selim III, and his more effective successor Mahmud II, both started by building up western-trained military units; and in the Turkish revolution of 1908, which was a successful counterpart of the unsuccessful Russian revolution of 1825, young military officers were the moving spirits.

The Turkish 'Window to the West'

In the Turkish case, the reason for the prominence of young officers in the westernising movement is obvious. The purpose of the Turkish revolution of 1908 was to re-establish the westernising parliamentary Turkish constitution of 1876, which had been almost immediately set on one side by the reactionary Sultan Abd-al-Hamid II. Abd-al-Hamid's political strategy, during his thirty years of absolute government, for making sure that western liberalism should never raise its head again in Turkey, had been 'to suppress all forms of 'dangerous thought'. Under his regime there was a severe censorship of books and control of education; but the one exception to Abd-al-Hamid's systematically obscurantist rule was the education of the cadets for the professional fighting services. Abd-al-Hamid was morbidly afraid of revolution, but at the same time he had the wit to realise that he would lose his empire in another way—through conquest by some militarily efficient foreign power—if he were to make it impossible for Turkish military cadets to keep abreast of the progress of western military science. He tried, of course, to keep these Turkish cadets' western education within the narrowest possible professional limits; but, when once these young Turks had been allowed to learn western languages in order to study western military textbooks, it proved impossible to keep their minds insulated from western political ideas. The military cadets were thus the one class in Hamidian Turkey that were able to keep a mental window open to influences from the west; and this is why in 1908, after thirty years of an obscurantist despotic regime, the spearhead of a fresh attack of western liberalism in Turkey was the younger generation in the corps of military officers.

A Minimum Dose for 'the Sick Man'

The necessity for westernising the Turkish army, which was thus admitted even by so extreme a reactionary as Sultan Abd-al-Hamid II, had been recognised, as I have mentioned, 100 years before this tyrant's time, by his unfortunate liberal-minded predecessor Selim III. But, in this first chapter of the story, even the convinced westernisers in Turkey had, at heart, no love for the alien western civilisation that they were deliberately introducing. Their intention was to take just the minimum dose of western culture that was calculated to keep 'the sick man of Europe' alive; and this grudging spirit caused one instalment of westernising reforms in Turkey after another

to miscarry. The verdict of history on this old school of Turkish westernisers is 'Every time too little and too late'. They hoped to make Turkey able to hold her own in wars with western powers like Austria or westernising powers like Russia just by putting western uniforms on Turkish soldiers' bodies and western weapons in their hands, and by giving Turkish officers a western professional training. They wanted to keep all the rest of Turkish life on its traditional Islamic basis. The reason why this policy of a minimum dose of westernisation failed, and was bound to fail, was because it flew in the face of a truth to which these early Turkish military reformers were blind—though Peter the Great had shown his genius by perceiving it. This truth was that any civilisation, any way of life, is an indivisible whole in which all the parts hang together and are interdependent.

For example, the secret of the west's superiority to the rest of the world in the art of war from the seventeenth century onwards is not to be found just in western weapons, drill, and military training. It is not even to be found just in the civilian technology that supplies the military equipment. It cannot be understood without also taking into account the whole mind and soul of the western society of the day; and the truth is that the western art of war has always been one facet of the western way of life. Hence, an alien society that tried to acquire the art without attempting to live the life was bound to fail to master the art; while, conversely, a Russian, Turkish, or other non-western military officer who did succeed in his profession up to the normal western standard could achieve this only by acquiring much more of the western civilisation than was to be found in the text-book or on the parade-ground. In fact, the long-sought minimum solution of Turkey's ever more insistent 'western question' was no solution at all, and there were two practical alternative endings to the story: in the end, the Turks would either pay for their mistake of taking minimum doses of the western civilisation by going under, or else save themselves from extinction by westernising with all their heart and mind and soul and strength. After they had brought themselves to the verge of destruction by taking the former of these two courses, they did just save themselves by plunging, before it was too late, into a course of unlimited westernisation under the leadership -of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

Mustafa Kemal as one of those young officers who had imbibed western ideas in the process of receiving a western professional military education in the last days of the Hamidian regime; and he had then taken an active part in the revolution of 1908. Mustafa Kemal's chance came when Turkey was down and out in consequence of having shared her ally Germany's defeat in the First World War. Kemal had the wit to see that half-measures of westernisation, which had always been disastrous for Turkey, would be fatal for her now; and he also had the character to move his countrymen to follow his lead. Mustafa Kemal's policy was to aim at nothing short of an out-and-out conversion of Turkey to the western way of life; and in the nineteen-twenties he put through in Turkey what was perhaps as revolutionary a programme as has ever been carried out in any country deliberately and systematically in so short a span of time. It was as if, in our western world, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the secularist scientific mental revolution at the end of the seventeenth century, the French Revolution and the industrial revolution had all been telescoped into a single life-time and had been made compulsory by law. In Turkey the emancipation of women, the disestablishment of the Islamic religion, and the substitution of the Latin alphabet for the Arabic alphabet as the script for conveying the Turkish language, were all enacted between 122 and 1928.

This revolution was carried out by a dictator working through a single party enjoying a monopoly of power, and probably so much could not have been done so quickly by any less high-handed method. In the nineteen-twenties Turkey had either to turn her life inside out or else to perish, and the Turkish people chose to survive at all costs. One of the costs was a period of submission to a regime of the fascist- Nazi- communist type—though, in Turkey, the dictatorial institution of single-party government was never carried to totalitarian extremes. The sequel, though, is impressive and promising. In the Turkish general election of 1950, Turkey moved from a one-party to a two-party regime by consent, without violence or bloodshed. The party that had for so long held a monopoly of office now accepted the will of the electors; first of all they let them vote freely, and then they took the adverse vote as a signal for the hitherto dominant party to retire from office and let the opposition take the government over. The opposition, on their side, showed the same constitutional spirit. When they found themselves in power, they did not abuse their power. They did not take any vindictive measures against opponents who had respected the results of a free election by voluntarily making way for the victors at the polls.

It looks as if in Turkey, whose statesmen had tried for so many generations to ‘make do’ with the western art of war alone, the western institution of parliamentary constitutional government, which is so much nearer than our art of war is to the heart of our western civilisation, had now genuinely taken root. If so, this is a notable triumph for a sense of fair play and moderation in politics which, we westerners believe, is one of the good gifts that the west is able to give to the world. Since 1917 we have seen many partially or nominally democratic peoples lapsing into divers forms of tyrannical government, and some of these peoples—for instance the Italians and the Germans—have been not recent proselytes to our western civilisation but native-born members of our western family. The victory of the western constitutional spirit in the Turkish elections of 1950 is thus a landmark which may perhaps even signify a turn of the political tide in the world as a whole.

There are, of course, other western ideas and institutions which are doubtful blessings, and one of these is our western nationalism. The Turks, and many other Islamic peoples with them, have become as strongly infected with nationalism as with other western notions, salutary or pernicious. And we have to ask ourselves what are going to be the consequences of the intrusion of this narrow-hearted western political ideal into an Islamic world whose own ancestral tradition is that all Moslems are brothers in virtue of their common religion, in spite of differences of race, language, and habitat. Now, in a world in which distance has been ‘annihilated’ by the progress of western technology, and in which the western way of life is having to compete with the Russian way of life for the allegiance of all mankind, the Islamic tradition of the brotherhood of man would seem to be a better ideal for meeting the social need of the times than the western tradition of sovereign independence for dozens of separate nationalities.

The Virus of Nationalism

In the new situation in which the western community finds itself since the second world war, its internal partition into about forty sovereign independent national states is threatening to bring about the fall of a house divided against itself. And yet the prestige of the west in the world is still high enough to make the western virus of

nationalism infectious. It is to be hoped that, in the Islamic world at any rate, the spread of this western political malady may be arrested by the strength of a traditional Islamic feeling for unity. A world-wide political and social unity is necessary for us men and for our salvation today far more urgently than it has been in the past. After all, we are now in an atomic age, and that means an age in which man is like a child armed with the most tremendous edged tools.

The Turkish people, under Ataturk's inspiration, have certainly done a service to the whole Islamic world in trying to solve a common 'western question' by adopting the modern western way of life without reservations—western nationalism and all. But the other Islamic countries need not necessarily follow precisely the trail that these Turkish pioneers have blazed. There are the Arabic-speaking Moslem countries, for instance, in which a common language is spoken in different dialects, but is written in one single standard literary language, from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the western borders of Persia, and from Aleppo and Mosul on the north to Khartum and Aden and Maskat and Zanzibar on the south. Books and newspapers published in Cairo and Damascus and Beyrout circulate all over this huge Arabic reading area and beyond it; for Arabic is the language of religion even in Islamic countries where it is not the language of everyday life. Is it really necessary that the Arabic-speaking world should break up, as the former Spanish Empire in the Americas has so unfortunately broken up, into about twenty mutually independent national states living in so many watertight compartments on the western pattern? This is the seamy side of our western civilisation, which it would surely be a pity for the Arabic-speaking peoples to copy exactly.

And then, on all the fringes of the Islamic world—in tropical Africa, India, China, and the Soviet Union—there are Moslem minorities, scattered abroad among non-Moslem majorities, who will never be able to gather all their members together into geographically compact blocks capable of forming so many sovereign independent states. These scattered Moslem communities, which amount to many millions of people all told, are not, as we shall see, the only communities of the kind; and, for all scattered communities like these, the gospel of western nationalism spells, as we shall find, not a call to a new life but a condemnation to death.

Take the case of the great Moslem community that is scattered over the face of the sub-continent of India. In 1947, when Great Britain withdrew from India, the western spirit of nationalism unfortunately did not follow the good example set by the human representatives of the particular western nation that had introduced this western ideology into India. Our western nationalism stayed on in India, after the former British administrators' departure, to split a previously united subcontinent into two bickering successor-states—a Hindu Indian Union and a Moslem Pakistan—and for both of them this split has surely been a misfortune. The Indian Union is something less than a united India; Pakistan is a country composed of two fragments divided from one another by the whole breadth of the Indian Union; and, even after this jigsaw work, millions of Hindus and Indian Moslems have found themselves living on the wrong side of the new frontiers and have been faced with the cruel choice of leaving their homes or else falling under the rule of a government that is not going to love them.

The Pakistanis do now possess a national state of their own, and it is a large and a populous one. But these Indian Moslems have had to pay a higher price for this than the Turks, and a much higher price than the Egyptians. They have discovered, from experience, both the cost of our western nationalism and its drawbacks. So the Pakistanis, as well as the Turks, have been learning political lessons that are going to be valuable not only for other Islamic peoples but also for the world as a whole.