

BOOK REVIEW: *The Legacy of Islam*, (Eds.) C.E. Bosworth & Joseph Schacht. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

As far as students of Asian or African Studies go, *The Legacy of Islam* has one major shortcoming as a potential sourcebook which might contribute to their understanding of Islam in these respective areas. This shortcoming is, in fact, apparent in the editor's opening paragraph to his Preface:

In this book the word legacy is used in its two senses, to mean the contribution of Islam to the achievements of mankind in all their aspects, the contacts of Islam with and its influences on the surrounding non-Islamic world. It is not concerned with the influences which the surrounding religions and civilizations may have had on Islam, nor with the different shades which Islamic civilization acquired in the several countries within its orbit, from Morocco to Afghanistan, from Turkey to the East Indies, however attractive such a comparative study might be. (p. vii)

To the Islamicist perhaps even more than to the Africanist, such an approach has to be considered absurd insofar as it is fundamentally ahistorical. Yet to understand the "legacy of Islam" in the sense of the impact it has had on surrounding religions and civilizations, one has to begin by recognizing that, where peoples have borrowed from Islam or actually have converted, and thus have allowed themselves to be influenced on such a fundamental plane as the religious, dialogues have existed between the Islamic and non-Islamic religions and civilizations. These dialogues have led to changes both within the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds and to ignore the contributions of non-Islamic ideas to Islamic logically implies an ignorance of these dialectical relationships and of their critical importance in understanding Islam itself and its character as a world religion. And in examining the character of these dialogues, recognition of the changing character of the relationships between respective civilizations and religions concerned is fundamental--hence the need for a historical component to such studies.

To get down to precise illustrations of this, how can one consider the contributions of a civilization which itself has evolved out of the vicissitudes of history, which was shaped by the dynamic interplay of basic tenets and the polychromatic ideas of subject peoples brought into a world empire within the first three centuries of its existence? In short, what is the Islamic civilization, which the editors of this book would consider as having left a legacy in the world, but a complex, varied and elusive rubric of ideas, peoples and traditions sharing minimally common tenets and allegiance to a prophet who lived 1300 years ago and whose image differs in the imaginations of peoples every bit to the degree that their life-styles are diverse. What ideational contributions, for example, should be considered or rejected as "Islamic"? Those of the Bedouin, the Persian, the Indian perhaps?...

Then if these, why not the African or the Indonesian? The point is that one cannot consider Islam as an exclusively Arab religion, and one must consider from the start the effects of non-Arab ideas in its character. One must treat Islam equally as a phenomenon in a process of continuous development as it spread and came into contact with "surrounding religions and civilizations". And if one is to do this, one must necessarily acknowledge and assess "the influences which the surrounding religions and civilizations might have exercised on Islam".

Islam, then, has to be considered as subsuming both the "little" tradition as well as the "great". In fact, this is implied in the development of the idea of an Islamic community (*umma*), whereby the grace of God is extended to the believer by virtue of his inclusion in His community of the elect, which one joins despite local practices, by simple declaration of faith: "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His prophet." In a subtle contradistinction to Schacht's position, one contributor to this volume, C.A.O. Van Nieuwenhuijze, stresses the critical importance of, "...conversion prior to indoctrination. The accent has not been on critical rethinking out of tenets and positions as much as on the quiet absorption of those elements of creed and practice which at a given time must have appeared compatible with the ongoing life-style, including any persistent elements of earlier religious, philosophical, and legal patterns." (p. 145) Taken in this sense, the editors of *The Legacy of Islam* have assumed a policy which is distinctly out of step with some recent approaches to Islam outside the Islamic "heartlands".¹ In these publications, for example, Islam has not been taken in terms of a (misleadingly) static conceptualization of a so-called "orthodox" Islam, but holistically as part of organic, functioning civilizations in which Islamic ideas play important roles in reinforcing (as opposed to conflicting with) a locally evolved new traditions incorporating what is useful both from the local, "old" traditions and from the wide range of new alternatives presented by Islam within a historical framework attuned to adaptation and change.

If one is to view Islam in this sense, then, special consideration should be made by the scholar of the flexibility of Islam and of the wide variety which it presents to the potential convert by way of adoption or, perhaps more important, by practice. As noted by Schacht himself, for example, as the "essence of Islam", law always has had a competitor in mysticism. Indeed, as far as the African case goes, case studies of the role of the *tariqas* in the expansion of Islamic ideas and in making conversions are many. However, only recently have some authors come to appreciate that even Islamic law and its application in African contexts by local *ʿulama* did present options by which local customs could be incorporated. The *Shariʿa* itself did allow for incorporating local usages and practices (*ʿurf* and *adah*) which could be utilized for practical applications of religious law as long as they did not conflict with tenets of the faith in obvious ways. Also, the *Shariʿa* did not merely declare certain acts to be either permitted or prohibited, but established gradations of

obligatory, recommended, indifferent, reprehensible, and forbidden acts. Obviously this arrangement could, and did, leave a lot of latitude between the extremes by which local customary practices were made admissible. From this base what became admissible became practice, what was practice became traditional, and tradition became law.

However, there were also social institutional channels built into the practice of the Holy Law which made dialogues between the written law and local customs possible. For example, the over-riding significance of the *umma* was mentioned above. Within the *umma* no official clergy was ever recognized, but the community itself was guaranteed its legitimacy at all times by virtue of a learned *elite* the *Culama*, through their understanding of and correct interpretation and application of God's Holy Law. Never have the *Culama* agreed unanimously on the *Shari'ah's* correct interpretation and application, this varying from region to region and incorporating from the start a certain amount of local practices. *Ijma'*, in fact, usually meant in practice, not the consensus of an international body of *Culama* which never existed, created to establish one standard of legal practice, but rather something corresponding more to regional consensus. The four schools of Sunni law, for example, developed out of regional differences. Also, outside of Sunni practice itself, there were numerous dissident Shi'ite and Khariji schools.

An important factor which contributed to this partial fragmentation of practice was the lack of uniformity in Islamic legal and theological education. While there were usually some men wealthy enough to afford the extensive travels necessary for the pursuit of an international education, most *Culama* were educated locally. As a result, conditions have always favored the existence, even within the major divisions of Islamic legal theory, of regional schools of practice which have incorporated regional customs. Therefore, conflicts sometimes existed between *Culama* of various schools when they came into contact, but one should not judge these conflicts in absolute terms of one tradition being "correct" *vis-a-vis* another "incorrect" tradition, as past European scholars and colonial administrators would have had it. Where Arabs, for instance, when coming to East Africa or Indonesia from Yemen or from the Hadramawt, disdained Indonesian or East African practices, one should understand "orthodoxy" which never existed in fact, but was that of their own "school" for which Indonesians and East Africans often felt an equal and reciprocal disdain (I.M. Lewis, significantly, notes that for Africans, Islam and Arabs were not equated, q.v. p. 106).

For a scholar to consider the incorporation of African traditions in African Islam, or to view African Islam as "inferior" to middle Eastern Islam is nothing less than prejudicial towards African intellectual, social and technical achievements as they have been incorporated in a form of Islam most suited for meeting the spiritual

and practical needs of African Muslims. And for the editors of an important symposium on Islam to take the attitude that dialogues created between Islamic ideas and non-Islamic traditions need not be considered smacks of the same biases and, in fact, ignores probably the most revealing facets of Islam's universal appeal and claims to being a world religion.

Finally, a few words must be directed at Professor Lewis's contribution dealing particularly with Islam south of the Sahara. First, his choice of treating sub-Saharan Islam separately from Maghribi Islam, again, indicates the persistent attitude of some Islamicists that there is a somehow "purer" or more "orthodox" Islam which can be associated with the "Arabs" (in this case the "Arabs" of North Africa), *vis-a-vis* Islam "down there" to the south, which, if were to be considered along with Maghribi Islam would imply a contamination of the latter. No doubt this represents another editorial shortcoming. Lewis stresses the unifying nature of Islam in Africa and, as a related phenomenon, its uniformity. But in doing so he presents Islam perhaps too much as an alternative to traditional Islam, which, in the hands of African clerics and marabouts, could make great inroads among local cults in favorable historical circumstances. In short, adoption of Islam for Africans presents different insights to the scholar viewing conversion as one involving historical evolution and process than the scholar working from a sociological base which treats conversion as situational and confrontational. This approach, for example, is implicit where he emphasizes the unifying influences of Islam (i.e. holding basic Islamic tenets) in Sudanic life crisis rituals. Where Islam plays a role in this, one must, again, be sensitive to the fact that one is speaking about an African Islam. In considering this, then one can question to what extent specifically Islamic ideas contributed to this uniformity and to what extent did Sudanic religious tendencies contribute to this? At least one has to take exception to Lewis's view that among African religions, "great differences occurred from one group to another" (p. 108). Also, he mentions the uniformity imposed on African Muslims by the sharing of a common calendar and common feast days. But what he fails to mention is the persistence of African feast days or the incorporation of these within an Islamic framework. Then, there is the matter of resistance of agriculturalists to conversion, or at least the persistence of ancestral worship alongside Islamic feast days. Certainly this should indicate the limitations to Professor Lewis's theme of unification and uniformity insofar that Islam has appealed largely only to certain elements of society who engage in certain socio-economic practices or, if within societies where agriculture is practiced, to certain classes, usually *elite*, who are presented with the best opportunities for international or inter-ethnic contacts. In these cases, then, one should ask which came first and, therefore, contributed more towards unification and uniformity: Islamic ideas or shared views, common educations, and class interests which made partaking in a common religious tradition attractive?