

ISLAMISM AND ECONOMISM AS HISTORICAL CONTRADICTION

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ABSTRACT

There are many ways to contemplate an Islamic economics or a program of Islamic assimilation into the global economy. But in doing so it is important to examine some of the less obvious implications of such a combination of ideas. To do this, it is useful to go to the original source of both these terms—Islamic and economic--as they came to be widely used in the same approximate historical context. That is, return to the Roman Empire of two thousand years ago, when it was established as an Imperium, an overarching military regimen in which tribes and kingdoms were allowed to live according to their own inherited custom. That structure began to be replaced around 300AD and more completely by about 550AD when a re-founded empire imposed a uniform legal regulation over all persons in every region. In fact, two empires were established almost exactly simultaneously during this period and on very similar principles. In the east was the Persian (Sassanian) and in the west the Roman (Byzantine). Their strength was not in the martial values of familial and tribal loyalty, but in the aggregation of wealth. Both empires were founded on a highly centralized adjudicative authority backed by equally centralized educative authorities. The latter took the form of two imperial religions, Zoroastrian and Christian. This new method of centralized rule was called in Latin, *Dominium*, and was based on the direct legal oversight of all persons and things. In the Greek language it was called the *Oikoumene* (*Ecumene*). It differed from the original Roman model of military oversight where traditional life was encouraged to exist--from the bottom up. Instead, the ecumenical method imposed judicial regulation over every household--from the top down. Under the new regimes all tribal and traditional custom was suppressed, as the common population of both empires came to comprise two vast peasantries, laboring to increase the aggregations of wealth by which the empires were sustained. This paper will examine how, in historical terms, the rise of Islam can be understood as a revolt against this economic ordering of life. It sought to effectively re-establish armed protection by which local custom and self-sufficiency could once again exist undisturbed.

Keywords: Islam, Economics, Ecumene, Rome

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In the age of globalization when all lands and peoples are being brought under a single regimen of governance, it is not uncommon to talk of an Islamic Economics. That is, in confronting the realities of the global age, there is an attempt to reconcile the historic practices of the Moslem tradition with the requirements of modern finance and trade, technical advance, and the immersive atmosphere of the information age. On an immediate practical level this reconciliation seems possible to accomplish, only requiring willingness among the parties involved and the ingenuity of corporate and political leaders. (Domingo 2013) (Joerges 2005)

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However, a closer look at a convergence of Islamic practices with the values and methods of what is called the global economy raises profound questions, including legal questions. Those questions go far beyond matters of facilitating a commerce in goods and services, of regulating capital flows and currency exchange. In fact, it raises questions concerning the compatibility of two very different ways of living life and two very different mentalities. But to confront these questions in the turmoil and confusion of public politics and international affairs occurring in the world today is difficult. It is more useful to bring these questions into view by examining two traditions at the time of their historical beginning, more than a thousand years ago. (Slobodian 2018)

Remarkably the two terms, Islamic and Economic, are both derived from common usage during the same general period of late antiquity. Viewed in strictly legal terms they referred specifically to two different ways of ordering relations of persons and things across a broad territory. Not only were the underlying methods and purposes of each dramatically different it would not be an exaggeration to say that the phenomenon of Islam came into being as a challenge against economism. One way to understand this is to return to the founding of the original Roman Empire two thousand years ago. Doing so can provide an extra level of insight into some less obvious hazards of assimilating, of attempting to fully integrate the practices Islam, into the economic regimen of the global age. (Amanat 2007)

There are many ways to understand the Roman Empire and, over centuries, like many other large-scale episodes of history, there can be found in it the whole spectrum of human behavior. There was duplicity, cruelty, cowardice, just as there was loyalty, courage, and wisdom. But it can also be viewed in terms of what was basic to its nature. That is, what elements, if removed, would make it no longer characteristically the Roman Empire. Reduced to these most basic elements there would probably be three. First would be the old Roman families, descendants of tribes that from the beginning provided an anchor of stability. As epitomized by the story of Cincinnatus, they were notable for the simplicity of their agrarian existence, their high thinking, and their courage in battle. They were represented in the councils of Empire by their tribal prelates, the Tribunes. (Riggsby 2010)

Coupled with that familial tradition was a second element, the Stoic philosophy that so perfectly suited the Roman temperament. Descended from the teachings of Socrates through Antisthenes and then Zeno. Stoicism was not a philosophy of abstract speculation, but rather a philosophy of practice; it set forth a way of life. From emperor and senator to rustic and slave, to men and women equally, it taught harmony with nature, with the self, and among differing peoples. Stoicism as an ethos for living life could be compared to the wisdom of Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, or even Islam. To this philosophical aspect of the Roman world could be added a third part. (Inwood 1985)

The Roman Empire, traditionally founded in 27BC, was from the beginning established as an imperium. That is, it was essentially a militaristic structure in which the emperor was primarily commander of the military legions. There was virtually no imperial bureaucracy, only a small revenue office. The purpose of the Empire was to protect the borders from invasion and to maintain peace between the many tribes and peoples within its boundaries. Nor was there an imperial legal system in the modern sense. Although there was an informal law of trade, the *jus gentium*, that operated among merchants across the Mediterranean. it had no official Roman status. (Tellegen-Couperus 1990)

The Romans did have their own traditional law, the *Mos Maiorum*, that all citizens memorized from childhood. Originating in tribal times it required no paid advocates, was conciliatory in nature, and operated with no fixed judicial hierarchy. In a dispute, the parties would agree upon a third private citizen to act as judge. Decisions were based on *sensus communis*, common sense principles, with the intent to right wrongs and restore harmony between families. Decisions generally descended down to the oldest living male of the

household, the pater familias, who resolved the issue on behalf of, or within the family. (Lesaffer 2010)

The Romans also had the famous *jus civile*, a municipal law that applied to all inhabitants within the City of Rome, including non-citizens. This law was established in every major Roman city founded throughout the Empire. One crucial aspect of Roman legal culture was, that because there was no imperial law reaching across the Empire, the tribes and peoples who lived within the provinces—the vast majority of the population--were allowed to live according to their own customs and practices. There was one exception: the infliction of capital punishment was restricted to Roman authorities exclusively. (Riggsby 2010)

However, around 200AD, this imperial system began to be attacked and undermined by a combination of difficulties, including invasions from the North and, especially, the growing influence of commercial interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Mercenary armies were formed in Syria and Egypt, as the Empire descended into a century of chaos and conflict, a virtual civil war lasting until about 300AD. The breakdown was exacerbated by the fact that the Empire had been governed in two languages, Latin in the West and Greek in the East. After 300AD the Latin West had become so weakened that the actual center of power had gravitated to the East, and a new capital city was founded around 300AD, at Constantinople, (Modern Istanbul.). With this geographic transition the old imperium died and a different form of empire, the dominium, was born. (Chuvin 1990) (Cameron 1993)

Actually, this century of upheaval had affected not only the Roman world but the Persian world as well. That empire was also re-founded in a parallel development as the new imperial leaders thought of their two realms as Two Eyes of the World--in the West, the Roman (Byzantine) Empire, in the East, the Persian (Sassanian) Empire. Each was founded (in the Latin language) as a dominium, which was also called (in the Greek language) an oikumene (Ecumene). The word imperium (related to modern words: impact, impose, impart) had to do with martial power. The word dominium (related to modern words: domestic, domicile) had to do with persons and things, down to the household level. The important difference was that, under the imperium, tribes and kingdoms had been allowed to live by their own custom. But under the Dominate, or Ecumene, the entire population lived under a centralized legal order imposed on every family member. (Fowden 1993)

Most importantly, this legal culture was comprised of two parts, the adjudicative and the educative. Such a judicial system might impose itself temporarily by brute force, in *terrorem*. But to establish a legal order with permanence and stability it was necessary to have the public understand the legal regimen in terms of the benefit it conferred. They needed to be instilled with the habit of compliance. Hence, there was not only a judicial stratum extended across both empires, there was also imposed an imperial religion. In the Roman (Byzantine) Empire it was Christianity. In the Persian (Sassanian) Empire it was Zoroastrianism. It is important to note that both religions, Zoroastrianism and Christianity, were constructed as part of a ruling hierarchy and were far removed from the original teachings of either Zoroaster or Jesus. (Dodgeon 1991) (Jenkins 1995)

In fact, the religion centered on the personage of Jesus, was not the first choice of the imperial priests, several cults and brotherhoods had first been attempted. But there were many followers of Jesus in the Eastern provinces. As a means of quieting popular resistance to imperial authority the attempt was made to adapt that movement as an officially administered cultus. By its ceremony and doctrine it would lend credence to the imperial method of rule. Most of all, when the parallel authorities of universal law and universal religion were imposed, all tribal and traditional custom--including its way of life--would be suppressed. This made possible a completely uniform kind of legal oversight. (Chuvin 2021)(Wilken 2003)

When viewed in terms of its basic nature, the Byzantine Empire was not founded on the martial virtues of loyalty and courage, or a philosophy of wisdom. Instead, the power of

the new empire was built on oratory and wealth. There grew up a ruling class distinguished by highly cultivated manner and speech. For military purposes, both empires could rely on professional soldiers or mercenaries, they could also sponsor surrogate wars among their neighbors. To maintain the inward flow of wealth that was the basis of imperial strength, the entire population of commoners was reduced to a peasantry of servile labor. This was in contrast with the old model Roman system where the vast majority of the population was comprised of traditional peoples who were self-supporting in their way of life. In fact, unlike the original City of Rome, that had never been an important commercial center, Constantinople, became, literally, the most important center of finance and trade in the entire world. (Chitwood 2021)

The importance of commerce as the foundation of the Byzantine structure is related to another aspect, of its composition. The Christianizing of the new Empire is often celebrated by historians as ending the practice of slavery, a practice that was endemic to the former Roman system. However, the abolition of slavery had a particular significance at the time. Most of all, the Romans, like all traditional or tribal peoples had no prisons. Instead, for offenses such as petty crimes, default of debt, and most often with captives of war, an offender, a debtor, a soldier was held in bondage, and lived domestically with a family. In a situation where all members of a household necessarily worked, they worked as well. This practice, that is often erroneously conflated with modern Negro Slavery, for example, was not necessarily cruel or inhuman. There were strict laws about the treatment of slaves and almost always a provision for ransom or emancipation. In the new model empire, the benefits of slavery were irrelevant, especially after prison incarceration became widely used as punishment. Most of all, the entire common population had become legally harnessed in a system of labor for the aggregation of wealth. (Joshel 2010)

It was into this ecumenical world where the two empires came together that the birth of Islam took place. The prophet Mohammed is usually thought of as the founder of the Moslem religion. But he was also a man who lived in a world shaped by tectonic events; it is also possible to understand him as a man representative of his time. The Arabic tribes comprised one of the most distinct and ancient cultural enclaves existing in the world. The land they inhabited, mostly impassable desert and mountain, had long been avoided by imperial armies, because the price of conquest outweighed any material benefit it would offer. But this attitude was changing as both empires looked upon the Arabian Peninsula as being, if not valuable in material ways, extremely valuable for strategic military reasons. To understand Mohammed, it is helpful to understand him in a tribal world located at the strategic point at which two massive empires shared an often-disputed border. (Ayoub 2005)(Dodgeon 1991)

The Arabs are generally portrayed as having been warlike, worshipers of pagan gods, disorganized, and endlessly disputatious among themselves. There is truth to this representation, but it is incomplete. The larger picture is more complex and much more interesting. To understand the character of the Bedouin peoples who inhabited the Arabian Peninsula it is enough to consider them in contrast with the vast population of domesticated laborers who inhabited the imperial world. It is equally useful to compare them with the stratum of nobility who presided in affairs of law and religion across two empires. (Jenkins 1995)(Ong 2003)

The first obvious fact was that the Arab tribesmen were not ruled over. They lived instead, by their own custom. Nor were the Arab peoples reduced to the level of simple believers of an official religion. Neither did their way of life require imposing their own tribal deities and customs on others. Such an idea would have made no sense to them. Instead, as traders and travelers between the great empires of East and West they carried both merchandise and ideas. They were frequently wealthy and nearly always informed in the ways of the larger world. Finally, although they had the nobility natural to humankind, they did not speak with

the cultivated eloquence and manner calculated to charm and persuade the unsophisticated. Instead, they spoke the plain and poetic speech shaped by a topography that was at once terrifying and magnificent. (Cardini 2001)

Mohammed did not preach tribalism, nor did he necessarily teach systems and forms of government, he did not have to. Living among relations connected by family was the natural way of existence. In the Empires the close preservation of hereditary connection only existed within the ruling hierarchy. The common population was divided and scattered to suit the needs of production. But in Islam the fundamental connections remained in place. Similarly, intricate discussions over systems of rule were not necessary. It was assumed that if a people were properly allowed opportunity for cultivation and learning, they could essentially govern themselves. Mechanisms of law and authority would only be necessary as supplement. (Haleem 2005)(Al-Azmeh 2001)

Viewed from a military and strategic perspective the movement led by Mohammed did two important things. First while not disturbing the foundation of tribal existence—the tie of blood relations, the strongest bond in human existence—he set forth obligations that had the effect of universalizing the humane principles that underlay all tribal life. In doing so he overcame the one primary weakness of tribal peoples when confronting an imperial power: their invariably small size that made them easy victims. Along with that, he overcame the single great defect of tribal life, its tendency to insularity and internecine conflict. In fact, it might be said that the first great principle of Islam was knowledge, and the obligation to pursue knowledge. (Rosen 1989)(Griffel 2007)

In short, the phenomenon of Islam represented the antithesis of the ecumenical construction. Maintaining a regimen of judicial authority and religious indoctrination produced a different type of person. The fact that a small circle of believers came to overrun much of two large empires, is not however, merely a testament to the warlike abilities of the tribesmen. In fact, the regions they invaded were populated by many who despised their existence of meaningless toil and what they considered an enforced blasphemy. The Arabs were often welcomed as liberators, and from the beginning, attracted both Christian and Zoroastrian warriors to their ranks. It is not surprising that following on an astonishing conquest, there developed in the Moslem world one of the great outpourings of cultivation and learning in human history. (Abu-Lughod 1989)(Coulson 2003)

In the global project to include all peoples and all regions of the earth in one unified economic realm, there is a great deal of effort being expended, to bring the Moslem people into that system. It is often assumed that the project of globalization represents the new and the future while the tradition of Islam--although appealing in a nostalgic way--must be set aside as representing the old and the past. But whether, or not the project of a global economy is an inevitability, it is useful to step outside these assumptions, and consider the matter in a holistic way. That is, to view both an Islamic realm and a global economy—not as past versus future--but as representing two ways of life that operate on very different principles for very different purposes. (Cutler 2013)

One of the main difficulties in challenging the conventional perspective is not so much an overclose familiarity with the topics, but rather, the sources of understanding. Another difficulty is the vocabulary employed to describe them, and habits by which discussions about them have come to be framed. It is difficult to find in the twenty-first century a perspective from which to evaluate or compare impartially the substance of what these alternatives actually represent. To resolve such questions, a continuous flow of journalistic interpretation may be as misleading as it is illuminating. Even the ambitious academic programs of great prominence and undertaken at great expense are shaped by a very specific technique and professional ethic. Much of their contribution takes place within institutions that are integral to the economic

system and operate according to its requirements of knowledge production and dissemination. (Al-Azmeh 2009)

For these reasons, as well as others, there is value in stepping into the past, to examine the artifacts, as a way to find distance from personal preferences and freedom from habitual patterns of thought. That is, to see two ways of life in their nascent forms, when they were both relatively localized, when their differences were clearly marked by territorial boundary, by language, costume, and nearly every other outward habiliment. By such an approach, it is possible to see at least three fundamental ways in which they were so unlike as to be inimical to one another: One rested on the strongest natural bond in human existence, the tie of biological descent. The other assumed the individuation of persons, determined by law, and based on the needs of material production. One arose, as it were, from the bottom up, relying for its cohesion on the cultivation and learning of its followers. The other required a structure of governance, or rule, from the top down, by which relations of persons and things took place according to an imposed order. Finally, one rested on a unity of knowledge among of its inhabitants and on their collective self-sufficiency. The other relied on a fundamental division of knowledge and on deliberately concentrated wealth to maintain an authority of legal rule. (Slobodian 2018)

The relationship of Islam to the global economy is a vexing topic. There are material incentives to approach the discussion in a conventional way, including the reward of accolades, and respectability. Nonetheless, for the most complete understanding it is important that each way of life be stood to the same holistic test. As a way to forestall or avoid the emotion and tumult of world affairs, it is useful to step into the landscape of the past. There we can more easily examine the elements impartially and discover with clarity the basic nature of each. Beyond even that, such an approach may help explain the wholly improbable and astonishingly rapid spread of Islam through the ecumenical world of late antiquity. (Kennedy 2016)(Ahmed 2007)(Moyn 2018)

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