

SEVENTH CENTURY: THE RISE OF ISLAM

by John McKeefery

In the arts of peace man is a bungler. . . There is nothing in man's industrial machinery but his greed and his sloth; his heart is in his weapons . . . [The people] egg their governments on to spend hundreds of millions of money in the slaughter, while the strongest ministers dare not spend an extra penny in the pound against the poverty and the pestilence through which they themselves daily walk."

G.B.Shaw

THE ANCIENT BACKGROUND

Around 1200 BC, a dark age descended on the Ancient Near East and a civilization was destroyed. Before that date, clay pottery had been invented, and the walled city of Jericho had supported an extensive settlement through the domestication of barley and sheep. The Sumerians had learned to write, and would go on to create the epics and love poems that constitute the world's first known literature. The Babylonians under Hammurabi had developed the world's first legal code.

The invaders who destroyed this relatively prosperous civilization came by land and sea. In the late thirteenth century, the sea peoples began invading the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean. They destroyed the Hittite Empire and cities in Syria, but were repelled by Egypt. During the next centuries, the Greeks, Israelites, and other hordes of invaders swept over the Middle East. The destruction of Troy around 1230 eliminated a significant barrier to a barbarian domination of the whole of the Middle East apart from Egypt.

Between 1150 and 750 BC, civilization would be rebuilt. This would be done by slowly civilizing the barbaric conquerors, much as would later have to be done in the dark ages of medieval Europe. The Greek marauders became Athenians, just as the barbaric Franks would become haughty Parisians. Even the art of writing was lost, but in the eighth century, alphabetic writing was revived in Greece, and the Homeric epics reached their final form. Socrates could not write, and had ambivalent feelings about the development of writing. Plato wrote for him, and we are not sure how Socrates would have graded his pupil's efforts.

Following the Dark ages, the ancient Near East was dominated by the empires of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. Evident as always is that it was far easier to conquer an empire than to maintain and administer one. Despots soon discover that there is no such thing as unlimited power. Any imperialist must secure the compliance of the subject peoples; the Assyrian solution was cruelty and terror. It didn't work. In the end, it seldom does.

It is true, as Machiavelli taught us, that a Prince must be feared; but he

must also be legitimized. Yielding to superior force is generally regarded as humiliating and ignoble and it is really very hard to truly break a person's will. Perhaps most victims of personal and political oppression never really do submit, but remain on the lookout for some means of resistance, and ultimate rebellion. Human beings tend to display heroic refusals to be mastered by brute force. The only way to obtain full submission is to become an object of veneration, rewarding worship with approval and a display of love. We resist being beaten down, but we do have what Bertrand Russell called a "cruel thirst for worship."

From the ninth to the seventh centuries BC, the Assyrians achieved hegemony in the Middle East. They resorted to the wholesale deportation of conquered peoples and the use of a strong standing army to maintain order. However, although Assyria fully lived up to its reputation for repressive cruelty, it was still not able to solve the problem of rebellion. Wholesale slaughter of prisoners of war was common. Defeated nobles had their noses, ears, hands and feet sliced off, saw their children beheaded, and might be flayed alive or roasted over a fire. But these atrocities seem mostly to have stiffened the resistance of enemies, rather than pacify the population. "Not only did subject provinces repeatedly revolt, but within the royal palace or family itself, violence again and again attempted to upset what violence had established and maintained. [They seemed to prefer] violent uprisings to corrupt elections, and their form of recall was assassination."¹ Nevertheless, the Assyrian government achieved a larger measure of order and prosperity than the region had ever previously experienced. Persia alone would equal it before the coming of Alexander.

At the end of the seventh century, the mighty Assyrian kingdom was brought down by Babylonia. There, the arts flourished and, in the capital city of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 BC) constructed the famous hanging gardens and provided inspiration for Verdi's opera *Nabucco*. By the middle of the sixth century BC, rebellion within the kingdom had weakened the power of Nebuchadnezzar's dynasty, leaving Babylonia and all of Mesopotamia open to conquest by the Medes and Persians who had been gathering strength in (what is now) Iran.

In 612 BC, the Medes briefly cooperated with Babylonia to bring down the hated empire of the Assyrians. Cyrus of Persia destroyed Babylon in 538 and allowed the captive Hebrews to return to Jerusalem. He then attacked the Medes and began to build the great Persian Empire that would surpass the empires of the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians. Cyrus' son conquered Egypt. He was succeeded by Darius who continued to expand the empire and whose conquest of Macedonia would later be avenged by Alexander the Great.

The Persians, like the later Romans, viewed their empire as an

1 Durant, Vol. I, p. 272f)

integrated whole and strove to gradually efface the distinction between ruling country and conquered peoples. They introduced a uniform coinage and created an effective system of communication and transportation through the construction of great military roads. This too would be replicated by the later Romans. Again, like the Romans, the Persians were tolerant rulers who displayed great sensitivity to the customs of the diverse peoples whose territories they controlled. For instance, in Egypt the early Persian kings ruled as Pharaohs and adopted Egyptian names. They not only allowed rebuilding of the Jewish temple at Jerusalem, but even subsidized its construction. This cultural tolerance made it possible for the Anatolian Greeks to develop their own culture, while there was also a notable advance in Jewish literature at the same time.

In Persia, Darius introduced Zoroastrianism, the monotheism of Zarathustra. When he died in 486 BC, he was succeeded by Xerxes who took Persia to war in quest of territory and security. His efforts were foiled by the Greeks at Salamis. In the next century, Philip of Macedon defeated an Athenian-Theban alliance and spared Athens a military occupation on condition that she ally herself with Macedon against Persia. When Philip was assassinated in 336, his son, Alexander, came to the throne at age twenty, and within five years destroyed the Persian army. He swept through Syria to Egypt where he founded the city that bears his name. He occupied the Persian capital, Persepolis where his soldiers murdered, looted and raped on an horrendous scale. Alexander burned the great city of Persepolis itself avenging the Persian burning of the Acropolis 150 years earlier. He thus earned the epithet "Alexander the Accursed" that is preserved in memory by the still living descendants of the ancient Persians.

Michael Wood (*In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*) tells us that the "Zoroastrians have not forgotten: they have kept the flame burning – literally. For, amazingly, the sacred flame of the Persian kings, which was worshipped at Persepolis, has never been snuffed out. During the Middle Ages, the priests carried it from place to place, often in secret, to avoid destruction. Sometimes, they were even forced to divide the embers. Eventually, it came to rest in the Yazd plain and finally, early this century, in a little village north of Yazd – where it still burns today. Here, each morning, the hereditary custodians of the Belivani family, still tend the fire – chanting the ancient hymns which Darius and Xerxes knew."

After Persepolis was sacked and burned, Alexander continued his conquests until he reached the Punjab in India. He then turned back because his army would go no further. Alexander returned to Babylon where he died in 323 BC – ten years after he had left Macedonia. He was thirty-two years old.

Alexander's death precipitated a prolonged power struggle among his leading generals, and his empire was divided. The new states shared a

single culture, usually called Hellenistic to distinguish it from the earlier Hellenic civilization of the Greek city-state. While this new culture was self-consciously Greek, it differed from the Hellenic culture of the classical period in very important ways. This was not a culture of city-states, but of big monarchies, ruled from cosmopolitan cities. These were a new phenomenon in the ancient world. Man was no longer *an animal who lived in a polis* (as Aristotle had thought).

Still, the cities usually looked Greek and had theaters and gymnasia, centers for games and festivals, whose architecture was in a Greek style. This culture was no longer limited to some small city-states in Greece, but was extended over much of the vast domain that Alexander had conquered. Parochial differences that once seemed so important, say between Athenians and Spartans, seemed far less significant when compared to the differences between the Greeks and non-Greek subject populations. Greeks differed from the latter in costume, language and technology, and in their Greek habit of analytic thought.

In the Hellenistic monarchies, the administration and the armies were run by professionals. Actually, this increase in professionalism pervaded all fields of activity in the Hellenistic world. Both its commercial and its cultural products displayed increased technical proficiency, but had less originality than had been true in the classical period. This era was noted less for individual creativity than for the collection and systemization of previous knowledge – a time for scholars, librarians and curators more than for artistic and literary genius. The Hellenistic world did produce a new ethical philosophy, Stoicism (once described by Charles Frankel as “the administrator’s philosophy”). The Stoics believed that virtue involved obeying the natural laws which ruled the universe and all men, not just the Greeks. It was an attempt to provide a moral philosophy that could embrace the diverse peoples of the Hellenistic monarchies.

The Alexandrian and Hellenistic intrusions into Persia were relatively brief hegemonies; but like an igneous intrusion of molten lava into a geological formation, the Greek visitation appears to have become a permanent feature of the structure of Persian and Islamic culture. What has been called the Great Debate is not merely a debate between Islam and Western society, but also a perennial tension within Persian and Islamic societies that dates back to Alexander who, in some sense, remains a living presence in Iran today. We have already noted the Zoroastrians who still preserve the sacred flame of ancient Persepolis which had been destroyed and pillaged by Alexander. Alexander is still known in Persia as “the accursed” and, under the name of Ishkander is still used to frighten children. Michael Wood tells of speaking to a young Shiite scholar who recounted that as a child his mother would say “If you don’t do your homework, Ishkander will get you.” Michael Wood continues “Under the fundamentalist regime of the Ayatollahs you might have thought the Greek

legacy is long gone. But travel through today's Iran and you can still see Alexander in Shiite folk-plays wearing a pith helmet and jodhpurs; he still struts on the floats at Ashura in dark glasses, sipping whisky with other earthly tyrants like the last Shah, the wicked caliphs and the Great Satan, Uncle Sam himself. His tale is still taught in Muslim primary schools; Zoroastrians still remember him as the accursed. Learned Ayatollahs still write editorials about him in the newspapers." We must never ignore the tenacity of historical memory in the Middle East – one that offers a real chance at immortality for Bush and Cheney.

The current struggle in Iran to define a stable identity and construct a viable society in the twenty-first century pivots on the question of the extent to which Greek influences – from the past, and in their current incarnation in Western science and technology – will be accommodated or rejected. These cultural struggles have been violent in the past and will continue to be so as long as both sides maintain that the virtues of their value systems are absolute. Is the alienation of freedom always and everywhere to be preferred to the consolation of piety and comfort of submission?

For Iranians, the matter seems complicated by the need to digest alien cultural influences that have been imposed through imperial aggression, but which ultimately define the conditions for prosperity. Iran's problem is perhaps similar to that of many oppressed cultures. It needs to find its own way, not ours, to accommodate the reality of its history – a reality that includes a long nurturing of Greek culture, especially in its own Aristotelian scholarship. It is quite startling to learn that one of the greatest authorities on Aristotle in the twentieth century was the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Persia threw off Hellenistic rule around the middle of the third century BC. Its culture was reborn with enough strength that it was able to resist Roman conquest and remain the successful rival to Rome for many centuries. It finally fell to the forces of Islam in the Seventh century AD.

THE SEVENTH CENTURY

At the dawn of the Christian era, the empires of Rome and Persia were the two great powers in the Middle East, battling for centuries over the trade routes to India and China. For the most part, they chose the path of triumphalism over detente and, by the seventh century, they had finally battered one another to mutual exhaustion. This left them both at the mercy of fierce, fanatical, nomadic barbarians, inspired to kill for Allah, who came from nowhere to destroy what was left of Western European civilization. The Muslims would later build a civilization of great splendor to rival the Christian civilization of Western Europe and supplant the old Persian civilization entirely. However, in this early period, they did

nothing of the sort; nor did they have the humility to adopt the superior civilizations they were to loot and destroy.

But why didn't the two imperial superpowers combine to oppose the emerging Arab threat that was destined to destroy one, cripple the other, and plunge Western Europe into the Dark Ages? How could they have been so blind? The answer is that, then as now, it's a big world and a short day. They didn't see it coming.

It's not that they were blind. But the events in the Arabian peninsula were just not 'on the radar screen' of anyone in authority. The sudden threat of Islam came from nowhere, which is what Arabia had been until it made its devastating entrance onto the stage of history. It was a mouse that not only roared but metamorphosed into a ferocious predator.

No, the authorities couldn't reasonably have known about the danger from Arabia. However, perhaps they might have been constrained by knowledge that any action has unforeseen consequences; and might have realized also that chronic warfare was having disastrous consequences for both of their empires. Beyond that, they could have noted the widespread dissatisfaction of those over whom they ruled, and understood that every ruler is considered responsible as a kind of fiduciary trustee for the security and well being of his subjects. Failure in this responsibility inevitably brings eventual retribution – often from a surprising source.

Little seems to be known about the Arabs before Muhammad. They were organized into tribes to which they were fiercely loyal, and they took immense pride in their ability to defend themselves and their dependents. They also prized getting the better of people in other tribes by taking their camels, abducting their women, killing their men, or slitting the noses of their defenseless slaves. It was ignominy to submit to the will of another. Thus, they were viewed as unable to maintain a large-scale political organization. They were not nearly so alarming to the superpowers as the Huns, Turks, Avars, and other tribesmen from central Asia, who had well-known histories of political organization and conquest. The Arabs were only raiders. By the seventh century, they had been in Arabia for some 1,600 years without staging a major conquest. It was a reasonable assumption that they never would.

During the first six centuries of the Christian era the rivalry between the Persian and Roman empires was, as we've seen, the dominating political fact in the history of this area. Rome and Persia were at peace from 384 to 502. After that, the two powers fought inconclusively until 532 when Justinian made peace with Persia to enable him to begin his campaign to reunite the Western Roman Empire. In 572, Justinian's successor renewed the war with Persia.

The wars between Persia and Rome appear, like almost all wars, to have been economic disasters. They forced commerce with India and China to pass through the long, expensive and hazardous trade routes of

the Arabian deserts rather than the far easier water routes of peacetime. During the hundred years when there was no war, trade had been safer and more economical. Had the peace been maintained, the Arabian desert would have remained an economic wasteland that could not have supported an Islamic uprising.

Mohammad was born in Mecca between 570 and 580. It has been suggested in another context that the only worry about a young man's earnest search for his personal truth is the danger that he might find it. This danger is particularly acute when what he encounters is a vision of human salvation. In Muhammad's case, he didn't even have the excuse of youth, as he was about forty years old in 611 when he first experienced his monotheistic revelation. He initially thought of it as insanity. What if he had just left it at that?

Mohammad was well acquainted with the monotheistic faiths of both Christians and Jews. His attacks on the prevailing paganism in his native city provoked opposition and persecution. After his message was rejected in Mecca, he was invited to Medina and made his famous migration (*Hijra*) to Medina in 622. There, he was the leader of a community as well as a spiritual leader; and he immediately resorted to military action against internal and external enemies. The internal enemies were mostly Jewish. Initially, Muhammad had been allied with the Jews. After breaking with them, he destroyed the last Jewish tribe in Medina; massacring the men and enslaving the women and children. Mohammed entered Mecca as a conqueror and took possession of the Kaaba and the other holy places. By the time of his death in 632, Islam dominated almost the entire Arabian peninsula. A solitary spiritual vision was on its way to inspiring a new empire, which continued to expand. By 643, both Egypt and the Persian Empire were in Arabian hands. The Arabs also overwhelmed the Byzantine empire, but Byzantium (present-day Istanbul) was able to survive for another seven hundred years, until 1453 when it was finally captured by the Ottoman Turks.

Henri Pirenne writes in the first volume of his *A History of Europe* that in "the whole history of the world there has been nothing comparable, in the universal and immediate nature of its consequences, with the expansion of Islam in the 7th century. The overwhelming rapidity of its propagation was no less surprising than the immensity of its conquests. It took only seventy years from the death of Mohammed (632) to spread from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic. Nothing could stand before it. At the first blow it overthrew the Persian Empire (637-644); then it deprived the Byzantine Empire, one by one, of each of the provinces which it attacked; Syria (634-636), Egypt (640-642), Africa (698), and Spain (711). The onward march of the invaders would be checked only at the beginning of the 8th century, when the great movement by which they were threatening Europe from both sides at once was halted beneath the walls of

Constantinople (717) and by the soldiers of Charles Martel on the plain of Poitiers (732)."

"From the 7th to the 11th centuries, Islam was incontestably the master of the Mediterranean. The navigation of the Christian peoples was restricted to a timid coastwise trade along the shores of the Adriatic and Southern Italy, and among the islands of the archipelago. The East and West were suddenly separated. Venice alone kept in touch with Byzantium, and found, in her role of intermediary between East and West, the beginning of her future greatness. For the first time since the formation of the Roman Empire, Western Europe was isolated from the rest of the world." Trade came to a halt throughout France and the merchant class disappeared. The loss of taxes to the Royal treasury ruined the monarchy, devolving control to the feudal aristocracy. But that story is for the next paper in this series.

Meanwhile, Islam continued to expand. It elaborated a high civilization while Western Europe rapidly descended into illiterate barbarism. It is true that the advance would be halted in the eighth century at the walls of Constantinople and at Poitiers. However, the crusading effort of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to recapture the holy lands for Christendom were ultimately military failures. After the leadership of Islam was assumed by the Ottoman Turks, Constantinople itself fell in 1453 and the Turks had to be repulsed as they sought to capture Vienna in the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent in 1525 – eight years after the beginning of the Reformation and two years before the sack of Rome by the forces of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain. Suleyman's reign was to mark the apex of Ottoman power. A jihad begun by insignificant Arabian tribesmen had achieved an awesome success.

Speaking of jihad, it has become fashionable in some circles to assert that this word refers to some sort of individual or collective spiritual struggle – a striving for virtue – and is thus not an aggressive threat to others. Like the Roman Catholic Vatican II document on Religious Liberty, this is a re-interpretation of traditional doctrine to allow believers to function in a pluralistic society. It seems doubtful that these interpretations are consistent with the original meanings of either Christian or Muslim traditions. Fundamentalist Christians still believe in their hearts that error has no rights; and, similarly, it is hard to read the history of Islamic jihad except as an obligation to wage unremitting holy war aimed at political subjugation of the infidel. This is not to say that realistic political accommodation, trading relationships and even military alliance with the infidel are not possible. When expedient, they have always been so – though always regarded theologically as no more than temporary truces. However, Bernard Lewis notes that these *truces* tended to be quite as durable as the various *treaties of perpetual peace* negotiated among the powers of Christendom.

Modernism – viewed as a frank acceptance of the implications of secularism and modern science in a pluralist society – is a heresy for both faiths, and for fundamentalists everywhere. It is indeed a Satanic seduction.

Thus, it is important to remember that when the Ayatollah Khomeini spoke of The United States as *the Great Satan*; he was not referring to Satan as an imperialist, but as a tempter. Satan does not conquer; he seduces. The battle is still going on between those who hate and fear the seductive power of the Western way of life, and those who see it as a new opportunity in a continuing and fruitful interchange of cultures and civilizations. It is not clear how that struggle will turn out.

What should be clear is that attempts by the Central Intelligence Agency and the American military to control the destiny of Middle Eastern peoples can only result in disastrous failures that will reinforce the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. We must not try to dictate an outcome that will only be determined over a long period of time by the peoples of the Middle East themselves. However, the Ayatollah has offered us a hint: A crusading zeal will not succeed; but Satanic seduction can. The danger posed by the West (to fundamentalists of all stripes) lies precisely in the appeal of its self-indulgent impiety whether reflected in political freedom, especially for women, its material well being, its sensual indulgence and materialistic consumption – in what has been called our decadence and immorality. Immorality is always appealing even to the respectable. One is reminded of the proper matron who commended Dr. Johnson for excluding obscene words from his dictionary only to be disconcerted by his rejoinder: “Ah, madam, you looked!” In short, we need to stop playing the ugly American and joyfully don the garb of "Great Satan" that Khomeini would thrust upon us.