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*Islam and the Modern Age*

The Middle Periods of Islam were, as Hodgson would argue, one of the most distinctive eras of world history. Seldom has such a vast geographic area, stretching from Mali to the Crimea to Indonesia, been knit together by an ideology that was malleable enough to encompass such a range of cultural diversity, yet strong enough to unite them under a common name. This was an era that transcended politics; dynasties and kingdoms came and went, yet Islam proved to be a far more organic and supple institution that could transform itself with the ever-changing circumstances of the present. During these centuries (from roughly 1000 to 1500), the geographic area of Islam tripled,<sup>1</sup> a plurality of Islamicate literary languages developed, and international trade was a primarily Muslim domain.<sup>2</sup>

In the early 1500s, however, this world movement began to break down and re-compartmentalize into regional spheres that were small enough to be ruled and regulated by individual political institutions. European influence also began to grow at this time, a development whose effects can be seen in the evolution of the “Gunpowder Empires” into proto-nation-states, very much modeled after the European model. Formerly a fully apolitical entity, or rather an entity that provided its own politics without any outside infrastructure, Islam was brought back under the thumb of these new powerful states to be used for specific political ends, and its former international cohesion started to weaken. In short, the entry of Islam into the “Modern Era” (to use a Eurocentric demarcation of time) was marked by a sharp re-politicization of the landscape, the rise of heavy military patronage and absolutism, and the disruption of Islam as a trans-political, international web.

Many of these developments can be traced back to the Late Middle Periods and the Mongol conquest of Asia. Although the Mongols who ruled the Middle East quickly converted to Islam and became its principal champions on the battlefield, their arrival introduced a number of policies that eventually led to the disintegration of Islam as the primary institution of political life. Many of these innovations were oriented around the military: they recentralized authority in dynastic hands, restructured the system of slave troops and similar ‘free agents’ that had until then been so powerful, and reformed the basis upon which land grants and administration (iqta’) had been distributed.

Of course, the politics of Islam had been largely military in the Middle Periods too, but they had been distinguished by a number of institutions that were challenged and modified in later years. The appanage system, and its corresponding network of princes and atabegs, is a prime example. Under this system, political power was widely diffused through a network of extended family and agents, who were more likely than not plotting against each other to seize power for themselves. Land administration and governance could change hands quickly and frequently, and government officials rarely had enough time to develop any kind of long-standing domestic policy. For the most part, the state remained largely aloof and left actual day-to-day affairs in the hands of the local nobility and

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgson, Marshall. *The Unity of Later Islamic History*, 173.

<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam II*, 532.

religious classes (the 'ayan-amir system), who held authority by virtue of their Islamic education and training. This decentralized, apolitical administration is quite unique in history and provides the basis for much of Hodgson's analysis of the Middle Periods.

With the arrival of the Mongols, the importance of the central commanding figure and his family was reemphasized in the Yasa, the Mongol code of law. In this model, legitimacy came both from personal power *and* the precedent of one's ancestors.<sup>3</sup> The ruler, the Khan, was the ultimate voice of authority on all counts – military, political, and religious – uniting the highly independent and disperse elements of power into a signal institution, headed by a single figure. In the older Islamic tradition, military leaders had no claim to authority in matters of theology, and attempts by caliphs or sultans to revolutionize Islam largely failed (consider the Mu'tazilism of al-Mu'min or the revelations of the Fatimid al-Hakim). This is not to say that the Mongols were successful in maintaining some monolithic empire simply through the reputation of Chingiz Khan – like many other Islamic dynasties, their states often broke down between sons and fierce inter-family rivalry. However, during the brief unity that the Mongols enjoyed under Chingiz and his sons, a new standard of powerful, autocratic rule through dynasty had been brought to the Middle East, and many later rulers, such as Timur, Ismai'l, Babur, and Mehmed II attempted to fashion their reign on his model. This theme of military patronage, as it developed, helped to relocate all levels of government in the military ('askeri) administration and laid the ground or a shift to a centralized, dynastic state.

Another important transformation that took place between these two periods is the structure and organization of the military itself. Many Islamic states in the Middle Periods were distinguished by their use of servile troops, such as the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria, the Seljuks in Iraq, the Ghurids in Hindustan, and the Samanids in Khorasan. While these troops could be fiercely loyal and excellent fighters, they were quick to forget their master if they did not receive pay and political power in proportion to what they felt they deserved, and the rulers of many medieval dynasties were crowned and deposed on the whim of their troops. By the 1500s, however, these bodies had largely been absorbed into the state apparatus,<sup>4</sup> where they could be more closely monitored and controlled. The ghazi warriors who founded the Ottoman Empire were converted into landed gentry,<sup>5</sup> and the Janissary Corps was tightly regulated by the state, more or less like modern armies are now. The disbursement of *iqta'*, which had formerly been a loosely managed and oft-abused system, often leading to the formation of quasi-dynastic, quasi-appanage governments within governments, depended on court service and royal patronage more than it had for centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The religious leadership was also incorporated into the state. In the case of the Ottomans, the previously independent imams became 'askeri, that is, part of the military bureaucracy,<sup>7</sup> headed by a state-appointed official, the shaykh al-Islam. The Safavids in Iran were themselves heads of a powerful Sufi tariqa, and under the radical leadership of Junayd (d. 1460) and Haydar (d. 1488), endorsed a specific branch of Isma'ili Shi'ism as the state religion of the dynasty. As a result, much of the rivalry

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 560.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 408.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 563.

between these two powers became wrapped up in the rhetoric of religion,<sup>8</sup> and Islam, for the first time, experienced what could be described as state-sponsored religious warfare on the European model.

A third development that profoundly affected the new political climate of the Islamic world was set in motion by important changes in the two regions of Eurasia that Islam had not yet come to dominate: China and Europe. For most of the Middle Periods, China had been ruled by the T'ang and later the Yuan (Mongol) dynasties, which were both highly supportive of international trade. In 1368, however, a new dynasty, the Ming, expelled the Mongols and ruled China for about three hundred years. The Ming were highly suspicious of outside influence and all but closed their borders to foreigners. Any trade that did take place had to be registered as 'tribute' to the Emperor. As a result, the famous Silk Road was largely abandoned. About a hundred and thirty years later, the Portuguese sailor Vasco da Gama arrived in Calcutta and set up the first line of direct India-Europe trade. Shortly after that, Spanish conquistadors arrived back from the New World, their ships groaning with plundered silver. Now that China had closed its borders and Europe had found a way to bypass Muslim-controlled trade routes, the Islamic world ceased to be an axis of massive east-west intercontinental trade, and more regional north-south routes began to spring up. While Hodgson argues that these changes did not have any immediate impact on Muslim hegemony in the Oikoumene,<sup>9</sup> I think it can be argued that the gradual shift of trade from a single east-west route to multiple regional routes encouraged this trend towards political regionalism at the expense of religious internationalism. That is, while no military leader could hope to control both ends of the Silk Road and everything in between, governments were now in competition for specific lines of trade (Tabriz to the Persian Gulf, for instance) that could seriously enrich the economy of one and impoverish the other.

The new powers of the 1500s, the Gunpowder Empires in Hodgson's language, thus succeeded in consolidating three elements of social order that had previously been quite independent from each other: the military, the civic aristocracy and bureaucracy, and the religious ulema' and shuyukh of Islam. In the Middle Periods, these three elements functioned completely independent of each other, which both stunted the growth and durability of political states and raised Islam as a system of international social order. Over time, the practices of military absolutism and heavy military patronage that the Mongols introduced destabilized this balance and brought all the elements of government into the hands of powerful military states. This change allowed for the existence of larger and longer-lived empires, but also signaled the end of an apolitical Islam as the primary administrator of law, justice, and society in the Muslim world.

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<sup>8</sup> See "Letters from Selim and Isma'il," in *The Ottomans: Chronicles and Correspondence* (Woods e-reserve), pages 30-35.

<sup>9</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, 574.