

Reviews

ISLAM AND THE INTEGRATION OF SOCIETY, by W. Montgomery Watt; Routledge and Kegan Paul; 32s.

Dr Watt was accused by some critics of having explained the rise of Islam (in his books on Muhammad) in Marxist terms. In this present book he takes up the implied challenge (he is after all, an Episcopal priest) and studies the relation of ideas to economic and other social factors. He takes his material chiefly from the early and mediaeval history of Islam, although occasionally he glances across to Christian history. He reserves the word 'ideology' for Karl Mannheim's pejorative sense, to mean a system of ideas that conceals what is actually happening in society; he uses the word 'ideation' for a system of ideas considered neutrally. The only criticism, if it is a criticism, that I want to make of this important book on the sociology of religion is to regret that it promotes a technical vocabulary which discourages a reader who is not a sociologist.

In Muhammad's day the new Meccan commercial economy required a social system which would supersede the existing disputes and blood-feuds of the clans. This the Islamic system did, whether or not it was intended to do so; but it went much further, reacting on the economic position. It made possible the conversion of haphazard raiding into Iraq, at the expense of the weakening Persian state, into a permanent imperial conquest. Here the role of ideas is specially important, both directly, because the motive of fighting against the enemies of God kept the raiders at work when they would otherwise have tired, as soon as their immediate ambitions were satisfied; and indirectly, in establishing social unity and contributing to the formation of a much improved organization of society. Once economic factors have set social changes moving, a constant and complex series of further changes is set off, far more complex than a short review (or one book) can fully indicate. Among the other factors, the system of ideas is correlated to the new social forms, on which it acts and which act on it, though its precise functions are hard to define.

In an integrated society, the activity and the system of ideas will complement each other, and both will proceed from the psyche or movement of life within it. The system of ideas will limit the social response to a situation—as, until Islam, tribal ideas limited the Arab response to the new opportunities of commercial expansion—but can only survive so long as society desires or accepts the limitation. The system of ideas is conditioned, moreover, by the existing tradition of ideas; the Islamic system claimed to be traditional and did indeed harmonize with ideas already existing. Accident may help: it happened that the quite different social and political situations in Mecca and in Medina both called for (in the sense that they could be, and were, resolved by) the rule of a prophet. Dr Watt finds more useful evidence in the history of the Iranian

Ismaili movement of 1090–1250 A.D. (the Assassins). To cite his three examples: the ideas of the merchant princes of Mecca (which he defines as ‘materialistic individualism’ in his books on Muhammad) were in Mannheim’s sense ‘ideological’ and unsuccessful; those of Islam, in the same terminology, ‘utopian’ and successful (that is to say, they corresponded to and satisfied the social and political need); those of the Assassins were ‘utopian’ but unsuccessful. The only real idea of the Assassins was allegiance to a new charismatic leader, admirable for bringing a revolution about, but by itself ‘bankrupt when it came to the reorganization of society’. (In short, a revolution must have a programme, a fact which accounts for the relative success of Communists when they are in competition with other revolutionaries). The first function of a system of ideas is to express the purposes of a society; but it also provokes activity, because, when it is seen that an action fits the system, the decision to act will follow automatically.

Dr Watt makes some interesting points about three difficulties often put forward by opponents of revealed religion, both Marxists and others. One is that the sociologist must live a dual life. At the ‘experiential’ level (asking ‘is it true?’) he must use the same criteria as other people, although ‘observationally’ he sees sociological reasons why he or anyone adopts an idea as true. This, of course, applies to everyone who sees a sociological ‘explanation’ of an opinion. Another is that people in conflict—two parties in the State, for example, Muhammad and the pagans of Mecca, or two enemy societies—must attack any point among the ideas of their opponents, however, unimportant or remote from the real interests the actual point may be, if they see a chance to do so on grounds they suppose universally acceptable; to do so will seem to them to discredit the whole enemy system. That is why social movements and whole societies have attached such apparently disproportionate importance to fine theological points that might seem unlikely to attract even the passing interest of the man in the street.

The point of greatest interest is how far our ideas are socially determined. Much of the attack on religion during the past three centuries can be reduced to the assertion that our ideas and beliefs are delusions shaped by external circumstances. Dr Watt takes the example again of Muhammad, who warned the Meccan merchant princes of a resurrection and a judgment; and they, objecting to any restriction of their mercantile freedom, maintained that death is the end. Both assertions here, as in many other cases, seem to be so correlated to the social need as to imply causality. Dr Watt argues that we can think so and still accept objective criteria, maintain our beliefs in particular ideas or doctrines. First, the ideas are not created by the situation. They existed before it took shape, and they are simply applied because relevant. Secondly, where we are dealing with what cannot be demonstrated beyond argument (all societies, whatever their economics, agree that two and two make four) we need not doubt that social factors will incline a man or society to accept a view suited to their exterior needs. This may mean statistically that social factors do most

often determine beliefs, but not, of course, that beliefs that have been socially determined are untrue (or that they are true). As we have seen, sociological criteria are simply irrelevant to the views of the world that sociologists and others must have, and we need only say that social factors will tend to illuminate or obscure the truth of the beliefs we consider. From the 'observational' point of view, even, it only comes to this, that there is quite certainly a correlation between social factors and belief, but not so close a one that it can be reduced to a system. Indeed, Dr Watt maintains that thought and activity alike spring from the life of society and that either may precede the other, or seem to. At most, social factors determine the ultimate acceptance or rejection of ideas, never the ideas themselves. In Christian terms, the Church is always there and always the same, although society, in accepting or rejecting it wholly or in part, may be influenced or determined by historical circumstances. The great danger in this is to over-simplify; there are many qualifications to be made, but the basic fact remains as stated.

A great deal is concentrated into this relatively short book, and I cannot discuss, even inadequately, more than a small part of it. It will be interesting to historians of all religions, as well as to Islamicists, to sociologists of religion and to Jungian psychologists. The use of words in special senses requires a concentration in the reader which is, however, facilitated by the clarity of thought and gratified by the reflections it provokes.

I mention a few points I have no space to discuss. 'Ideological' attitudes, falsely justifying unhealthy social activities, are 'usually found in a group's conception of itself over against other groups'. Some twenty instructive pages are devoted to 'the attitude of Islam to Christianity', and this is followed by a shorter section on 'Islam's conception of itself'. Dr Watt personally accepts Islam as part of the Abrahamic tradition, while rejecting, of course, its revelation of historical events and its universal claim. There are points of tangential interest in the course of the book, as that Christianity has been more successful than Islam in satisfying the twin needs for a charismatic leader and a charismatic community—the Orthodox having the strongest and the Protestants the weakest sense of community, Dr Watt says, and Catholics a second, subsidiary charismatic leader in the Pope. Muslims are strong only in their sense of community.

Lastly, Dr Watt reminds us that the world is waiting for the 'marriage of social discontent with an appropriate set of ideas'. What will this world-religion be? 'Man's intellect cannot say before the event which ideas are going to appeal to men and release their energies'. We cannot conclude, because a religion is true, that the world will think it so. We cannot perceive the correlation of event and idea before it bears fruit. But we can be sure that the religion that responds to the felt need will be accepted.

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