PART II

RELIGIONS OF THE ARABS
While Arabs trace their racial origins to the homogenous geneologies of three continents, they trace their religious ancestry back to one place and one man.

About two thousand years before Christ a man out of Ur of the Chaldees (Iraq) in the Mesopotamian Plain set out to make his way to the land of Canaan. His name was Abraham and with him was his Syrian wife, Sarai, and his clan of about three hundred people, among them his nephew Lot, son of Haran. They travelled through the Euphrates Valley to Aleppo and from Aleppo to the mountains of Anti-Lebanon. They passed through Damascus, crossed the Syrian Desert to the Jordan River, went into the Valley of Shechem, and into Hebron. In Canaan, Abraham and his people dug wells and erected altars to El, the Supreme Creator.

In a time of great famine, Abraham took his wife and family and went into Egypt where they were well received and prospered, becoming rich in livestock, silver and gold. While in Egypt, Sarai acquired a maid servant, Hagar. During the tenth year of their life in Canaan, Sarai, who was barren, in a moment of feminine generosity, offered her maid servant to Abraham to bear him sons. Abraham was quick to accept the offer.

Hagar's pregnancy made Abraham's household less than harmonious. Hagar, proud of an accomplishment denied to Sarai, looked upon her mistress "with disdain,"

"with disdain,"

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and Sarai, angered by Hagar's ingratitude and Abraham's indifference to the squabbling of women, abused Hagar, who then ran away.

We are told in the Old Testament, "The Lord's Messenger found her by a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur," and he asked her, "Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She answered, "I am running away from my mistress, Sarai." But the Lord's Messenger told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her abusive treatment." She was then told that the Lord would make her descendants so "numerous that they will be too many to count." "You shall bear a son," she was told, "and you shall name him, Ishmael."

When Ishmael was fourteen years of age and his father one hundred, Sarai, in her old age, bore Abraham a son. On the day of the child's weaning feast, Sarai noticed Ishmael, the son of the Egyptian, Hagar, playing with the small child, Isaac. She demanded of Abraham that he drive out the woman and her son, and Abraham, tired of the female bickering, capitulated to her wishes.

Thus, say the Arabs, it all began with Father Abraham. Of the Semites who dwelt in the land of Canaan, some embraced the God of Moses, and later followed Jesus throughout the cities and towns, the green fields and flowering hillsides of Palestine. Other Semites were those who were sent away by Father Abraham into the deserts which he, himself, had crossed long years before on his journey to Canaan. From these children of Ishmael, son of Abraham, came Muhamed, "the chosen of God."
Thus, all three of the major religions of the Middle East had a common origin. The teachings of the first, Judaism were assimilated with the teachings of the second, Christianity. The first Christians were those Semites of Abraham's seed who chose, over the old Judaism, the new concept of brotherly love and the Messiah's instructions to "Treat others the way you would have them treat you." They believed with Christ in giving Caesar his due, and the Lord His due, thus advocating for the first time in man's history, the separation of religion from the state. Among them were Mary, the Virgin, the first to follow the teachings of her son, and Elizabeth, her cousin, the Mother of John the Baptist who went before the Messiah heralding his coming. The Canaanite woman living in the locality of the Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon became a Christian when Jesus cured her daughter of being possessed by demons. Simon, the Son of Jonah, became Peter, the rock to whom Jesus entrusted the Keys to the Kingdom.

These Semites, converted by the Master Himself, were the first among the Christians, and they went into the land of Canaan, into Antioch, and throughout Asia Minor to spread the Christian word. Mark, the Apostle, carried the new religion into Egypt, and the Coptic Church of Egypt today descends in an unbroken line from the Church which St. Mark began. These Christians carried the Cross into Ethiopia, to Cyprus, Athens, Thessalonica, Corinth, and into the remote and hazardous wildernesses of Europe. They suffered persecution, torture and death for this new belief, and in Phoenicia, Palestine and Syria, they went to desperate lengths to worship in their new faith. From all the eastern countries which were then under the heel of the Caesars,
these early Christians went to Rome in chains, to martyrdom in the arenas, the amphitheatres and the Circus Maximus. They suffered, particularly in Palestine. At times, with their Jewish relatives, they were harrassed and interrogated by the Romans for their
Saint Takla built a monastery near the Mabula village, which is considered as the oldest convent in the world.

The Tomb of St. John the Baptist in the Ommayed Mosque

politics. At other times they suffered for their religion at the hands of the Sanhedrin, protectors of the Jewish law.

They preserved their religion through language. They clung to their customs, sang their songs, and worshiped in
the Semitic and Aramaic dialects. Indeed, much of the religious literature, not only of the Christians, but that of the Jews as well, was written in Aramaic, also known as Syriac, and hidden away from the Romans to tell their histories one day to future generations. Actually, Aramaic was the lingua franca of Western Asia from the period of the Persian conquest in the 6th century B.C. until the Moslem conquest in the 7th century A.D.

While some of these early Arab Christians went into other lands, taking Christianity to the world, others stayed in Palestine, Syria, The Lebanon and Mesopotamia. They established churches in secret underground catacombs, and, later in the first century, they constructed the first church above ground.

The saints of those early years are known throughout the world. For example, there is St. George, patron of England; the Martyr, Theodosia of Tyre; Pamphilus of Beirut; Augustine of Hippo; Anthony of Egypt, founder of Christian monasticism; John Chrysostom of Constantinople, author of eastern liturgies; and Maron of Syria. The newest saint of the Eastern Christian church is Charbel Mahklouf, a Maronite monk of Lebanon who died late in the nineteenth century and was canonized by Pope Paul in October of 1977.

Chapter 4
ISLAM - RELIGION AND LAW

Of the three great monotheistic religions of the seed of Abraham, it is Islam which is least understood by the West. To better understand the Arabs as a whole people, we must first know something about the code of ethics that once bound three quarters of the known world in religious fervor and civic law, a bonding accomplished within less than a century-and-a-half.

As the world is divided today between East and West, so it was in the early centuries. When the Western Empire collapsed in A.D. 475, it was left to Byzantium to support the cause of Europe against Asian Persia. A constant struggle for supremacy between the two powers created a frontier that ran from the Upper Euphrates to the Caucasus, placing the Arabs on the South in contact with both of the Great Empires. Following a desperate war of twenty-six years between these two powers which ended in A.D. 628, both states were devastated and bankrupt. This created the climate for the emergence of the Empire of the Arabs.

The Prophet Muhamed had been born in A.D. 570 in Mecca, a town which thrived on the trade caravans from India to the Mediterranean. It is alleged that at the age of forty, in 610 A.D., he saw the Archangle Gabriel in a vision and three years later he received an order to preach. Muhamed, known as a gentle man, did not preach a new religion but claimed that the true faith was that which had been practiced by the Patriarch Abraham. He proclaimed
that there was only one God and set about to convert pagan Arabia to this truth.

Muhamed concentrated his preaching on a small building in Mecca called the Kaaba, which housed three hundred sixty-five idols and was the place of worship for the townspeople. Denouncing the idols and idolaters, Muhamed determinedly preached the existence of the one God who would one day come to judge the world. For ten years, he attempted to turn the Meccans from their pagan ways, and, for his efforts, managed to get, in all that time, only sixty or seventy converts.

However, Muhamed did succeed in becoming a source of embarassment to the townspeople, since the Kaaba brought them revenue from the caravan tradesmen who left gifts of money to their favorite idols in return for good fortune.

Ordered to cease his foolish prattling about one God, and threatened with physical harm if he did not, Muhamed finally gave up his efforts in Mecca, and fled to Medina, a rival city. Here he found the inhabitants not only more receptive to his teachings but also willing to go out and make converts by conquest if necessary.

Between 622 and 630, numerous battles were fought between the followers of Muhamed, the Muslims, and other factions and tribes in the deserts and surrounding towns. Finally, in 630, Muhamed marched on Mecca, his native city, at the head of ten thousand followers.

The city was occupied without opposition, its leaders converted, and the Kaaba cleansed of its idols. Muhamed announced that this building was the House of God, and would remain a sacred shrine for all Muslims.\textsuperscript{15}
Mecca increased in fame and prospered with the triumph of Islam. Muhamed, becoming the greatest power in Arabia, moved his seat of authority to Medina where delegates from the Peninsula promised allegiance to the new faith and law. Enforcing the disciplines of the new religion, Muhamed drew his followers into a government, where there had been none before. He forbade them to make war on each other, proclaiming their duty was to fight only the heathen.

Muhamed’s friend and successor, Abu-Bekr, a frail old man who accepted the leadership after Muhamed’s death, succeeded in conquering all opposition in Arabia, subduing the most warlike of the tribes and stamping out revolution and resistance in Bahrain, Oman, and the Yemen.

When there were no longer non-Muslims to subdue in Arabia, it became inevitable that the martial spirit of the tribes would then turn toward the conquest of their non-Arab, non-Muslim neighbors.

Since the Byzantine-Persian Wars had exhausted these two powers, and with Persia in civil war and chaos after the massacre of its ruling family, the Sassanid, the Arabs were able to attack the Persian Frontier with impunity. While one army was massing on the Persian border, another was preparing to meet the Byzantines in Syria. On August 20, 636, the Battle of the Yarmouk resulted in the annihilation of the Byzantine Army. The Arabs re-occupied the whole of Syria and the Emperor Heraclitus abandoned Syria and Palestine forever.

In March, 637, a pitched battle at Quadasiya on the Euphrates, fought by the Arabs under Saad ibn Abi Waqqas against the Persians, gave complete victory to the Arabs, and
a year later the conquest of Medain, the capital of the Persian Empire, brought the whole valley of the Tigris and Euphrates again under Arab control.

The Roman Power, which had been based on the naval command of the Mediterranean had continued under Byzantium following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. While the Arabs had conquered Palestine and Syria on land, the Byzantine fleet continued to cruise the Mediterranean from its bases at Alexandria and Cyprus.

At the beginning of December, 639, thirty-five hundred Arabs crossed the Egyptian border at Al Arish and set off westward toward the Sinai.

It would appear insane that thirty-five hundred Bedouins, an under-equipped army of nomads, would attack a country as wealthy as Egypt was at that time, with its rich and walled cities, its granaries and strong Byzantine garrisons. But these thirty-five hundred formed a vanguard for an additional twelve thousand men who followed.

By the end of six months, Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo today, had fallen and Cyrus, the Orthodox Patriarch at Alexandria, surrendered Egypt to the Arabs who finally occupied Alexandria in 642.

From 644 to 656, the Arabs carried their arms and their new religion to Tripoli in North Africa, and had reached the snow covered barrier of the Caucasus. Persia had thus been occupied to the Indus on the frontiers of ancient India.

The Arabs then captured Cyprus, sailed through the Dardanelles unopposed and laid siege to the city of Constantinople. They conquered Rhodes and sailed the Mediterranean, until Mare Nostrum, the Roman Sea, was
their own lake. By 680, the Empire of these warriors from the Arabian Desert included the Persian Gulf, Arabia, North Africa, (El-Maghreb, the Arab West,) Syria and Palestine, (El-Mashraq, the Arab East,) and Egypt and Sudan, (the countries of the Nile.) Invasions gaining ground in Sicily, Portugal and Spain soon opened those countries to Arab occupation. For seven centuries, following the Arab occupation of Spain in 712, that country, like Portugal, Italy, France, Greece, Turkey and the small kingdoms of Europe would bear the mark and influence of the Arab Empire. Arab names like Andalus, Cordoba, Sardinia, Malta, Ceuta, Saragossa, Malaga, Gibraltar, Alcazar, Segosia and hundreds of other words would become part of western vocabularies.

While there had always been a link between the Nubian kings of antiquity with Egypt, the Arab invasions of the medieval years cemented the ties of Islam and Arabic culture with that of East and West Africa. The Bantu language of Swahili takes its name from the Arabic "sawahil," the people of the Coast, and many Bantu words still retain Arabic roots.

The university centers at Fez and Timbuktu were long the seats of learning for scholars of every race, color and religion, and both were also flourishing trade centers.

In the fourteenth century, the Arabs obtained gold coins from Abubahari, II, of Mali and circulated them in Europe. This first gold coinage since Roman times began a thriving gold trade that extended from Somalia to Mozambique. The trading throughout Africa continued heavily until the mid-nineteenth century when autonomous rule was lost in both Africa and some parts of the Middle East through foreign colonization.
In religion it is interesting to observe that Islam mixed with the animist rites of Africa and was absorbed in some form into the native religion and culture of the area.
Chapter 5

SHARI'A - THE WAY

In the seventh century, within a period of about twenty-five years, Islam brought the desert nations together in one religion. Where there had been no government save a loosely knit tribal society, a sophisticated civil society began to emerge. In the years following, Islamic law became the basis for government, and seats of rule based on the tenets set forth by Muhamed through the Koran were established in Damascus, Mecca, Basra, Jerusalem and Alexandria.

Today, there are seven hundred million Muslims in the world, several million of whom are in Europe, particularly in Russia, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Siberia.

In the past thirteen centuries, the Islamic rules of absolute justice and equality have linked societies and nations with different cultures and civilizations without inhibiting their own traditions except when they deviated from the basic Islamic laws of human equality. "Islam" in Arabic means peace, purity, obedience and submission, to the Will of God. It does not profess to be a new religion but sees itself as a continuation of the early religious principles decreed by God through all the Prophets, including Moses and Jesus. The religion preached by Muhamed has often been called by westerners, Muhammedanism, and its followers, Muhamedans. These labels are distasteful and unacceptable to Muslims since they are based on the misconception that Muslims worship Muhamed. Muhamed was merely a human being, chosen to be the prophet of the one Almighty God, whose Arabic name is Allah.
Islam demands faith in God, The Angels of God, The Books of God, The Apostles of God, and the Day of Judgement and Resurrection. Every Muslim must believe in God’s Oneness -- that He has no partner, that He is Omnipotent, Eternal and Ever-Qualified with the Attributes of Supreme Greatness.

Muslims believe that angels exist but they are not to be worshipped. The Angels are created free from carnal desires. With regard to the Testaments and Scriptures, Muslims believe that God, in different ages of the world revealed His Will to the Prophets. Every Muslim is enjoined to believe in not only the Holy Koran but also in the previous Scriptures.

They must believe that God at different times has sent messengers and Apostles to save man from infidelity, idolatry and superstition. There is no distinction in the Holy Koran between the Prophets of God. All must believe in them. Every Muslim must believe in the Day of Judgement, Paradise (Heaven) and Hell. The dead shall rise from their graves and every individual must account for his actions.

The devotions in Islam are divided into five articles of practice (the five Pillars). These are: reciting the Creed; praying to God five times a day (at dawn, mid-day, midafternoon, directly after sunset, and an hour-and-a-half later); paying the Zakat (a form of charitable tax); fasting during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar; and making a Pilgrimage to Mecca to pray at the Holy Kaaba once in a lifetime for those who can afford it.16

We quote from the Koran on the principles of Islam:
O you who believe, be maintainers of justice, bearers of witness for the sake of God, though it may be against your own selves, your parents, or near relatives.

And let not hatred of a people because they hindered you from the sacred Mosque seduce you to transgress, but help ye one another in goodness and piety, and do not help one another in sin and aggression.

And if one of the idolaters seeks your protection, grant to him protection so that he may hear the Word of God and then convey him to his place of safety; that is because they are a folk who know not.

Invite them into the way of the Lord by wisdom and mild exhortation, and dispute with them in the most kindly manner, and if you make reprisal, then make it proportionate to the injuries inflicted upon you. But if you patiently endure, it will be best for those who are patiently enduring. Endure, then, with patience, but your patient endurance must be sought in none but God, and do not be grieved about them, (the idolaters) nor be troubled for that which they subtly devise, for God is with those who fear Him and do good deeds.

God does not forbid you to be generous and to deal justly with those who have not on account of your religion waged war against you and have not driven you from your homes.17

Muslims are required to cultivate within themselves an international character and attitude, and to accept as friends and neighbors any and all human beings.

Similarities among the three religions and comparisons of the Old and New Testaments and the tenets of Islam, can be found in the Koran.

On the creation:

Lo, Your Lord is Allah who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then he established Himself upon the Throne, directing all
things. There is no intercessor save after His permission. That is Allah, your Lord, so worship Him. O, will ye not remind? 18

The Virgin Birth is described:

She said: 'Lo, I seek refuge in the Beneficent One from thee, if thou are God fearing.' He said: 'I am only a messenger of Thy Lord, that I may bestow on thee a faultless Son.' She
said: 'How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?' He said: 'So it will be. Thy Lord saith, It is easy for me, and it will be that we may make Him a revelation for mankind, and a mercy upon us, and it is a thing ordained.'

There is an allusion to the Eucharist:

When the disciples said: 'O Jesus, Son of Mary, is Thy Lord able to send down for us a table spread with food from Heaven?' He said: 'Observe your duty to Allah if ye are true believers.' They said: 'We wish to eat thereof, that we may satisfy our hearts and know Thou hast spoken Truth to us -- and that therefore we may be witnesses --.' Jesus, Son of Mary said: 'Oh, Allah -- Lord of us. Send down for us a table spread with food from heaven, that it may be a feast for us ... for the first of us, and the last of us, and a sign from Thee. Give us sustenance for Thou art the Best of Sustainers.'

On the Resurrection:

He asketh .. 'When will be this Day of Resurrection?'

But when sight is confounded .. and the moon is eclipsed .. and the sun and moon are united. On that day man will cry, 'Whither to flee!' Alas, no refuge! Unto thy Lord is the recourse that day.

The shares of inheritors are clearly defined: To sons, a percentage, to daughters, wives and husbands, brothers and sisters on the mother's side, and a widower is obliged to give
to his wife's brothers and sisters their rightful share. If a man divorces his wife, he must see that she is provided for.

On the status of women and their rights, the laws are explicit:

And covet not the thing in which Allah hath made some of you excel others.

Unto men, a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned. And if you fear a breach between them twain, (husband and wife) appoint an arbiter from his folk, and an arbiter from her folk. And give unto the women, (whom you marry) free gift of their marriage portions.

There is no deviation from these practices for the True Believer.
Chapter 6

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Islam was a liberating force for Arab women, freeing her from the possession and accessory status of Pre-Islamic conditions. In its earliest laws, Islam recognized women as an independent being with rights and responsibilities. It allowed her to keep her family name after marriage. She could own property and dispose of it at will without consultation or permission from husband or guardian.

The Muslim woman could become a guardian over minors. In some instances, she could enter law and politics and serve as a judge. The Muslim woman has equality with men in the conduct of business, trade or profession. She may sue others in court without her husband's permission, since she is considered an individual in her own right.

Misinformation concerning the veiling of women has created an image of suppression of women in the Arab world. Dr. Shwikar Elwan, in her paper on, "The Status of Women in the Arab World," says: "As far as the veil and seclusion are concerned, neither Islam, nor pre-Islamic Arabia are responsible for that. Women in Arabia were not segregated; in fact, they engaged in trade and even fought side by side with men. Islam did not put restrictions on women's participation in public life, nor did it deny them the right to work. Seclusion, the veil and the harem were customs borrowed from Byzantine and Persian societies at a much later date. In fact, when the conquering Arab tribes entered Syria, they encountered veiled Christian women."
A 13th century illustration of a lady lecturing in a Baghdad mosque.

Lecture given by a scholar in Baghdad (13th century. Illustration by al-Wasiti, 1237 A.D.)
The veil was a symbol of the upper class, aristocratic woman. It was adopted as a mark of distinction by well-to-do women. The Bedouin women in North Africa and the peasant women in Egypt have never worn the veil. The Qur'anic chapter, relating to "hijab," refers to the family of the prophet himself, suggesting privacy and withdrawal. In the early years of Islam, women enjoyed the freedom and equality guaranteed to them by their religion."

Dr. Elwan suggests that as Islamic culture and civilization declined, women were excluded from the education and community participation they had enjoyed at an earlier date. She adds that as the Arab world moved toward modernization, it was realized that real progress could not be achieved until nearly half the population, the women, were permitted once again the rights and liberty that were theirs in earlier centuries.

Emancipation of women in the modern Arab world began about the same time as cries for emancipation from women in the west became louder --late in the nineteenth century. Bahihat-el-Badiya, a woman writer in the nineteenth century fought for compulsory education for girls as well as boys. Women's magazines began to appear, and women began to participate in the struggle for independence in their countries. Still wearing the veil, the first suffragettes of Egypt, led by Hoda Sha'arawy, demonstrated in 1919 against British occupation forces. Facing the British guns, they challenged the British ultimatum to shoot at public protest meetings. In 1923, their organization became affiliated with the International Alliance of Suffragette Women.
In 1922, Egyptian girls, often supported by their fathers and brothers, won the right to education by all the means at their disposal – demonstrations, hunger strikes and defiance of the courts – paving the way for education of the generations who came after. In Egypt today, for example, at least one third of the university students are women, a large percentage of them enrolled in the schools of medicine and engineering.

Women have participated in revolutionary activity in a number of Arab countries in the twentieth century. In the fight for Lebanese independence in 1943, Lebanese women marched through the streets of Beirut protesting the arrest of political figures by the French Mandate government. During their Revolution, Algerian women with much anguish and self-sacrifice, stood behind their men and restored Algeria once again to her own people.

Changing social attitudes in a number of Arab countries today, including Libya, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Egypt and Lebanon, not only permit, but encourage women to work. In fields such as journalism we find that, in Egypt alone, two hundred and fifty women are enrolled as members of the Journalists' Union.

While Islam permits polygamy up to the taking of four wives, the religious and legal requirements are such that this life style has all but disappeared from modern Arab society.

Thus, in marriage as in most of their other activities, modern Arab women live as do their counterparts in other societies.