

# 1. Islam: The Civilization and Modern Times

*Basim Musallam*

I hope you are not under the impression that I will tell you a few things about Islam specific enough and meaningful enough to be of help in understanding and designing universities in the Middle East. I will not do that, not because I want to keep any secrets, but simply because I do not know what those things might be. Nor do I think anyone else does. Usually when people talk about Islam as a civilization what they have in mind is either some idea of a culture that existed before 1800 or some particular sectarian statement about what Islam was, or should be. When people talk about Western civilization, on the other hand, they usually talk about a culture they know and live in. If I say "Western culture," you might eventually come to think of fourteenth-century Paris or fifth-century Greece, but those are obviously not the first thoughts that come to your mind. When I say "Western culture," what occurs to you is New York now, Paris, the Common Market, Hollywood, whatever. The fact of the matter is that if you really want to deal seriously with the Middle East and with Islam you must first realize that they exist in the twentieth century, too. They have a reality today just as they did in the nineteenth, eighteenth, seventeenth, or sixteenth century. Part of that reality is, of course, the ideas that people have or had about what their culture is or ought to be like, but those are still only ideas existing in an ocean of other ideas and activities.

In approaching Islam the most important thing to realize is that its problems in modern times—in the nineteenth and twentieth century—have been very much like the problems of the rest of humanity. For brevity's sake we will take the coming of the Industrial Revolution as the major divide that separates the pre-modern from the modern world, because it was then that all kinds of things started happening. Governments began planning, for example, and the new technologies that formed the modern world we now live in were all introduced.

A major assumption that we all nurture is that because the Industrial Revolution, modernity, and the new technological age all started in the West, the West has been able to deal with them very well, and that because they were not native to the nations of the third world, including the world of Islam, not surprisingly those nations have had great difficulty dealing with them. But the fact of the matter is that the Industrial Revolution did not start in the West; it did not even start in Europe, or in England. It started in a particular, specific spot in England, and it spread from there in the normal way that these things spread—by borrowing when and where something is needed. Whenever someone invents something, others borrow it. That somebody invented the steam engine, and not that that somebody was an Englishman, is what is important. Why did the French not reinvent it for themselves? Because human beings do not behave that way. When the

Sumerians invented the wheel, others borrowed it from them; that is how technological civilization spreads.

Five thousand years ago the cultures in what is now lower Iraq had attained a level of organization and technological achievement that made them the strongest and most powerful societies in the world. They had armies, they had writing, they had ambassadors, they could organize. If they had been nearer to the Chinese, they would have crushed them, and Chinese civilization would not have existed because the Chinese would have borrowed their writing from the Sumerians. There is no point in reinventing writing if you can borrow it from next door. There is no point in reinventing your own architectural forms, if people are around with useful ones. When Solomon had to build the temple, what did he do? He borrowed architects from Sidon and Tyre. They had the wood, they had architects, they had the plans, they built the temple—that is how it is done.

But the point here is that, while China was then quite backward, it had time to resist because the Sumerians did not reach all the way to China. And the protection of time and distance remained in effect down through early-modern times. There were no developments in Europe before 1800 that in any serious way threatened China or the Middle East. Europeans came—you know about Marco Polo—and traded, but the Europeans could do nothing that would threaten the very structure of the Chinese or the Middle Eastern civilizations. They had time to consider, to accept or reject, and to learn. In the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, gunpowder weapons were developed by the Europeans. But the Ottomans were soon able to make the same, or even better, cannons, and so were the Chinese, the Persians, and the Moghuls in India, and no great change occurred. The ability of all these societies to deal with innovation was essentially equal.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century everything changed. The kind of social power that the Industrial Revolution provided first to England and then to the rest of Europe allowed them to influence the world in any way they wished, and rapidly. The Industrial Revolution affected Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, Japan, and China very soon after it began and in many cases long before it affected other parts of Europe. There are people in the Middle East who have been modern for six generations. There are people in England right this minute who have not been touched by modernity at all. The same is true of the United States—go to the Appalachian Mountains. It is extremely important to realize that modernity began in one particular place and from that moment touched humanity everywhere. This is the point of the matter—the experience Muslims have had with modernity is by this time a very long one, going all the way back to the origins of modernity itself. The only difference between it and the other earlier great advances in human culture is that this time

societies had no time to adjust — to defend themselves, if you wish.

That point is sometimes hidden from us by the burgeoning of the Middle East today, especially in its planning and building of huge projects. But most of this activity is in Arabia, and we must remember that until the twentieth century Arabia was really tangential to the history of the rest of the Middle East, which was based rather in Cairo or Beirut or Istanbul. Nowadays Arabia is far more active than Beirut for obvious reasons having to do with oil and money, but that need not mislead us into thinking that just because Arabia seems so new, so virginal, the rest of the area is too. There are parts of the Muslim world where the experience of modernity is very old, and that experience includes modern universities as well.

Take Cairo as an example. Cairo University was first established in 1872-73, but Cairo had technical colleges — schools of medicine, the polytechnic, and others — by the first half of the nineteenth century, and campuses that were built in the beginning of the twentieth. They were all modern schools teaching modern subjects. They first imported their professors from Paris and elsewhere, but at the same time they were sending Egyptian students to Europe to be trained so they could return and perform that function themselves. They produced tens, and later hundreds, of men educated in modern technologies, including architecture and planning, some of whom played extremely important roles.

One in particular — a man named Ali Mubarak — is the historical father of all Middle Eastern architects and planners, and his writing is precisely on the questions of architectural form and on the difference between what should exist in the Middle East and what does exist in Europe, and why they are different. His writing on these subjects is so important that it ought to be reintroduced into our consciousness and use. Mubarak was born in 1824; he died in 1893. He came from a peasant family in the Egyptian Delta, was trained in Muhammad Ali's state schools (in the first half of the nineteenth century there were already modern schools), was sent to Paris to be trained as a military engineer, came back to Egypt in 1850, and between 1850 and 1882 — that is, until the British occupation, he was the most important civil servant in Egypt. He was minister of education; he was minister of public works; he was minister of railroads (note that Egypt had a railroad in 1853, which is more than can be said for Sweden or Japan). The man who built the first passenger railroad in Egypt in 1853 was Eric Stephens, the very same man who built the first railroad in England in 1825.

Mubarak wrote about what tradition means, about what modernity means, about what architecture means, about what planning means, but he was not just an intellectual or a professor of architectural history sitting idly by. Between 1868 and 1872 the man planned and rebuilt new Cairo, and while he was rebuilding Cairo he wrote to tell us why he was doing it the way he was. Why he built streets the way he did. Why he knocked down old monuments. What the difference was between Cairo and Alexandria, on the one hand, and Marseilles and

Paris, on the other.

I am particularly fond of Ali Mubarak, and I could talk endlessly about him, but I will resist doing so now and instead make one more point. In 1882 Britain occupied Egypt. Before 1882 the people who made decisions in Egypt were Egyptians: the minister of public works was Egyptian — Ali Mubarak, the man I just mentioned — the minister of education was Egyptian. After 1882 all responsible positions in government and society in Egypt were occupied by Englishmen, and therefore after 1882 the rise of a man like Ali Mubarak was no longer possible because no Egyptian could occupy any position of responsibility. If a dam was built on the Nile it was not an Egyptian but an Englishman who made the decision, and it was not an Egyptian but an Englishman who built it. For a few critical generations, Egyptians were not allowed to rule or to assume any responsible role in their country. This was the price of imperialism in the Middle East: for a few generations no one in the Middle East played any part in the development of his own society.

A lot of people of course channeled their energies into trying to liberate their country. They worked very hard for independence, and they ended up either in jail, or in exile, or dead. Those who did not want to pay that price, but did want some share in the development and rule and the management of their society, had no choice but to collaborate with the colonial government. That meant two things: first, because he was subordinate to foreign rulers he was in no position to make any decisions; second, for his collaboration he paid a very high spiritual price.

A struggle for independence is essentially a negative activity. No one learns how to build dams or lay out new streets struggling for independence, so when independence comes neither does anyone have any experience in dealing with the challenges of modernity that luckier societies were collecting in the meantime. The failure of the nations of Africa and Asia and other places to deal successfully with these challenges is owing in large part to the gap that imperialism caused in the succession of responsibility for the affairs of their societies.

Now let me just back up a bit and say something about Islam as a culture. The territory from the Atlantic Ocean to the borders of China, where classical Islamic culture spread and developed, was, before the nineteenth century, the largest continuous territory where one general culture and one kind of cosmopolitan society prevailed, where a book written in one place was read in every other, where trade and life were shared. It was the closest thing in premodern times to the common culture that new systems of communication have bred today, whereby something produced in New York is immediately imitated, or at least known about, everywhere else. Architectural forms in Spain resembled forms in Persia or India, and that was true of books, of trade, and other things as well.

Modernity affected the Middle East in different places and in different ways, depending on what was already there, just as it did everywhere. We should not

approach the Middle East—or Islam—on the assumption that it is so exotic that the reactions of its peoples will be completely different from everyone else's. Of course it is important to discover and to preserve what its culture means, but, just as elsewhere, one must first find out what it means to the people living in it now. Any idea of what Islam is, or Islamic culture is, or the Islamic past is has the same relevance there that a comparable idea of civilization or culture would have in France or America. Given the task of redesigning Paris, some people might say that Parisian culture is Catholic, that by Catholic they mean a list of things, and that the new city ought to reflect that list. I have no quarrel with that kind of position, whether applied to Paris or to the Middle East; I only mean to point out that there is no major difference between those two applications. They are precisely the same and based on the same kinds of ideas. Once this is understood it becomes easier to deal with the relevance of the Islamic past and its traditions to Islamic life now.

In the final analysis, two hundred years from now what people will be calling "Islamic" are simply the architectural forms Islamic societies will have built willy-nilly, one way or the other, in the meantime. Where did a classical form of the fourteenth century come from? Did people sit around in the fourteenth century and say, "We ought to go back to our roots?" No, they produced something, and the kinds of influences that were on them when they produced it can only be guessed at.

Ali Mubarak exemplified the optimism that all engineers and planners had in the nineteenth century, whether they were in England or in Egypt. But he also represents another fact of life; when people are busy trying to deal with problems, they are not overly concerned with the preservation of tradition. A culture can, to be sure, reach a point where people say, Enough is enough!, part of our responsibility is also to preserve our past. But it has not yet reached that point even in the United States, or if it has it was reached just yesterday. America's responsibility to itself has been to build, to produce. It does not particularly concern Americans that New York is renewed every twenty-five years and no remnant of its past survives. We ought therefore to be very careful about criticizing people in the Middle East—and I do not mean just the Saudis, who can afford not only to make these decisions, but to make and unmake institutions and architectural firms.

Fez, a wonderful old city in Morocco, is often cited as an archetypical Muslim city. People who have studied it are now complaining because it is changing and rapidly being destroyed, as Moroccans from the countryside move into the quarter where rich urban Muslims used to live. The rich people had a very good idea of what the good life was, and they had taken care of the old houses. Now peasants have replaced them, and the huge old mansions are falling apart.

If there were a responsible government in Morocco with long-range plans for shelter, education, and medical care for its peasant population, then perhaps the old city of Fez, which is after all a small place, could

be set aside and kept as a museum. But that has not happened, and it probably will not because it would be extremely expensive to keep a whole city, even a small one, as a museum. But the point I am trying to make about Fez is that, since so many people are interested in it—UNESCO and others are putting in their money—it is not unlikely that the Moroccan army will be sent in to push the peasants out. These peasants have already left their land—one wonders why but that is a huge other issue—and they also happen to be Muslims. When people are angry about the destruction of old places, they talk as if the preservation of the Moroccans now living in Fez is not as important as—and certainly not more important than—the preservation of historic sites. I think that preserving the lives of these Moroccan people is more important, not only because I think that Muslims are more important than Islam, but because that is how history works. It will defeat our purposes if we try to behave otherwise, whether we are Muslims or not, whether we are in the Middle East or outside it.

Professionally I really have no interest in the future. My task is to deal with the past. Nor am I in any position to make any decisions. I cannot plan a building; I cannot influence the Saudis or AID. My responsibility is not to tell you about the future or how to influence either Middle Easterners or others. I can only tell you about the past. Since the past is such a vast area, I can really only raise questions as to whether the experience of modernity in the Middle East is any different in kind from the experience of modernity in the West. It is a question that ought to be asked. In my opinion the answer is definitely no. The West and the East both have had great difficulty in dealing with modern phenomena. There was a great deal of destruction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within the West itself—think of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the Bolshevik Revolution; think of Germany and France after the First World War and the Second World War. I assure you nothing has happened in the third world—nothing—that is equal in enormity of destruction or human price to what happened in the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Anybody who thinks or assumes the disruptions of modernization have been easy for the West, either internally in terms of each society or externally in terms of relations between them, has not thought about it at all, or has forgotten.

You are going to build a university. What is the most important thing about a university? What is it going to teach? Who is going to teach in it? How are these people going to be recruited? What are you going to be allowed to say or not to say? Who makes these decisions? Architects? If one talks seriously about an Islamic university one does not talk about what sign to hang on the front gate or what the immediately recognizable insignia are. It can be in the shape or configuration of the buildings, but it *must* be in some kind of living tradition, some kind of idea, or set of ideas. Therein lies the problem: you do not make those decisions. I do not make those decisions. Even the people in popular referendums do not make those decisions. Some particular individual makes them, and that has con-

---

sequences. I am not saying that we should not try. But we ought to realize the context within which we are working.

There will be many changes in the Middle East; it is a place ripe for changes. We still have monarchies in the Middle East – what other part of the world still has *real* kings! My advice to architects, Islamicists, and planners is that any regime will want things; the Program at MIT and Harvard will teach you how to plan those things; but the things you plan will be useful only if you plan them for people, and not for this regime, or the next one, or the next. If you really want to be responsible to your own profession, you must plan that way.