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APRIL 6, 1995

## IN SEARCH OF HISTORY

In retrospect how little sense we can make of our past.

Nearing the end of my fourth score of years, I have been fortunate in numerous ways. For instance, I knew well all four of my grandparents, all of whom remembered the Civil War. My father's father told me of hearing heavy thunder while plowing a corn field in Todd County on a brilliant morning, only later to learn that he was hearing Grant's bombardment of Fort Donelson.

My maternal grandmother told me of embarking as a young woman on a trip on a river steamer in Clarksville, when that was the accepted mode of travel, and her description of the pleasant sensations of riding in a stage coach, the body of which swung on leather straps to minimize the shock of the rough roads.

I have known at least a couple of African-Americans who reminisced about my great grandmother.

Several of my grandparents' siblings whom I have known were born in the 1830's and they had known persons who remembered the days of the American Revolution.

As a boy scout, I helped with the parking when the Jefferson Davis Monument was dedicated in the 1920's.

Born, as I was, near the end of World War I, I have a few memories of the 20's and vivid recollections of the Great Depression in which I spent my teens.

I sold the LITERARY DIGEST for 5¢ when Mussolini was invading Ethiopia and the League of Nations proved its impotence. I remember the rise of Hitler and reading his book, MEIN KAMPF.

I was graduating from Vanderbilt when the Germans invaded the Rhine-

land and I well remember the newsreels of Chamberlain, grasping his tightly furled umbrella, returning from Munich after dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

History began to exert its fascination upon me early, when I was about 10 years old, through the boys' novels of G. A. Henty with such works as, **THE REIGN OF TERROR**, **WITH LEE IN VIRGINIA**, **BONNIE PRINCE CHARLIE**, and dozens more.

When recently a young African-American shot a young white man just south of Guthrie on US 41, I recalled that the first significant event of the Black Patch Wars had also occurred in the Guthrie vicinity, a natural site for that first great assembly of tobacco growers because of Guthrie's importance in the early 1900's as a rail center.

Now as the Russian Communist experiment is winding down, the United States emerges as the only surviving great military power.

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Empire, however, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the Muslim nations were assuming increasing importance, sitting as they do upon seas of oil, a resource upon which the U.S. economy has become increasingly dependent.

Coupled with this development, the Nation of Islam seems to be attracting the allegiance of quite a few African Americans.

Albert Hourani's recent best selling and highly regarded **A HISTORY OF THE ARAB PEOPLES** details how the Arabic Muslims had engaged actively in the slave trade and even indicated that the institution of slavery in Islam endured until 1914.

Despite this, the Nation of Islam apparently has appeal to some young black men, among them a brilliant writer, James Baldwin, once a youthful Baptist minister in Harlem where his father also preached.

Among Baldwin's numerous books, **GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN**, and **THE**

FIRE NEXT TIME, attracted considerable critical attention. When he spoke at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, some dozen years ago, I had an opportunity to talk to him. Suggesting to him that at that time it was commonly said that God was dead, I asked him about the health of Allah. Mr. Baldwin responded with asperity that Allah was indeed in excellent health, and he suggested V. S. Naipaul's book about travels in Asia entitled AMONG THE BELIEVERS, AN ISLAMIC JOURNEY. On the basis of Naipaul's seven month journey across the Asian continent, Naipaul, a native of the West Indies, explored the life, culture, and the current ferment inside four nations of Islam: Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. He described an Islamic World at odds with the modern world, fueled only by an implacable determination to believe.

Since there are nearly a billion Muslims on this planet, it seemed that this Muslim culture deserved examination, especially as it seems increasingly to be impinging upon the United States and its interests.

Early on, I turned to the 5th edition of the 1993 Columbia Encyclopedia for a brief description of Islam.

It identified Islam as an Arab word meaning submission to God and characterized Islam as a world religion founded in the 7th Century by the Prophet Mohammed. An adherent to Islam is a Muslim, another Arabic word which means "one who submits." The encyclopedia describes Islam as the youngest of the three monotheistic world religions (with Judaism and Christianity) and says it is the principal religion of much of Asia. In the Americas, the Islamic population has substantially increased in recent years, both from conversions and from the immigration of adherents from other parts of the world. Worldwide, fewer than one-fifth of the Muslims are Arab.

At the core of Islam is the Koran, believed by the faithful to be the final revelation by a transcendent Allah. The name Allah is of Arabic origin and means The God. The Koran was delivered to Mohammed, an illiterate genius, and was recited by him in Arabic and transcribed in that language which is the language used in Islamic religious practice worldwide.

The Muslims believe in final reward and punishment, and the unity of UMMA, the "Nation" of Islam. Muslims submit to Allah through the Arkan ad-din, the five basic requirements or "pillars:" SHAKADAKE, the affirmation that "there is no God but God, and Mohammed is the Messenger of God;" SALAH, the five daily ritual prayers; ZAKAT, the giving of alms, also known as a religious tax; SAWN, the dawn to dusk fast during the lunar month of Ramadan; and HAJJ, the pilgrimage to Mecca, the great annual pilgrimage which unites Islam.

Other Islamic obligations include the duty "to commend good and reprimand evil," "injunctions against usury and gambling," and "a prohibition of Alcohol and pork."

JIHAD, the effort for the cause of God is a duty satisfied at the communal and individual level. At the individual level, it denotes the personal struggle to be righteous and follow the path ordained by God.

The unitary nature of Islam, as a system of governing relations between a person and God, and a person and Society, helped the spread of Islam so that within a century of the Prophet's death, Islam extended from Spain to India.

The revealed word of Islam, the Koran, in a formal Arabic which became more archaic with time, required explication. A complement to the Koran (Quran) is the Sunna, the spoken and acted example of the Prophet, collected as Hadith. The Sunna is almost as important to Islam as the Koran, for in it lie the elaborations of the Koranic teaching essential to the firm

establishment of the world religion. There are serious disagreements on the Sadith, and interpretations of the Koran and the Sunna have varied so widely as to be contradictory. These situations are resolved by reference to one of the most important of the sayings attributed to the Prophet: "My community will never agree in an error."

In 1993 Karen Armstrong, a woman born and educated in the Catholic faith, and once a nun, published a remarkable book entitled: A HISTORY OF GOD, which has been on the national best seller list for over 30 weeks. It is subtitled, "The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam," which she describes as the three related monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Ms. Armstrong points out that the Arabic language is particularly difficult to translate and that even ordinary literature and mundane utterances of politicians sound stilted and alien when translated into English. Saying this is doubly true of the Koran, which is written in dense and highly allusive, elliptical speech, written in language designed to be recited aloud. The sound of the language is a most essential part of its effect.

The uses of the past include the recognition of the importance of perspective. It is important to remember that for centuries the Muslim faith has been one of the world's great religions, standing for piety, learning, moderation, charity and tolerance.

Mohammed never asked Jews or Christians to convert to his religion of Allah, unless they particularly wished to do so, because he believed they had received authentic revelations of their own. The Koran did not see such revelation as cancelling out the messages and insights of previous prophets, but instead it stressed the continuity of the religious

experience of mankind.

In recent years, the growth of Islamic fundamentalism has tended to over-shadow in Western eyes this image of Islam with a kind of fanatic barbarism. To some, this seems to pose a threat to the world comparable to Nazism and Communism. They view the penetration of Islam into the United States as a significant threat to the safety and stability of this country.

Terrorism, the threat or the use of violence, often against the Christian population, to achieve political ends, may involve activities such as assassination, bombings, random killings, hi-jacking and sky-jacking. It is used for political, not military, purposes and by groups too weak to mount open assaults. The use of terrorism dates from ancient Greece, but it remains a modern tool of the alienated and in recent times its psychological impact on the public has increased, because of overly extensive coverage by the media.

The concept of Pan-Arabism, a term for the movement toward political unification among the Arab nations of the Middle East, has endured since the 14th Century, when the Ottoman Turks rose to power. That these nations might unite in a holy war against the Western nations was long regarded as a serious danger, but the basic idea of such an effective cooperation among these Near Eastern powers seems to have been devastated by such developments as Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and then the war between Iran and Iraq.

According to the "Swiss Review of World Affairs," a respected journal published in Switzerland, the blanket labelling of Islam as a fundamentalist threat is dangerous, because it plays into the hands of the Islamists themselves. The Islamists, or Islamic Fundamentalists, constitute only a small group within a much larger Islamic world. In political

practice, Islamism is commonly directed primarily against a Muslim country's own government which the fundamentalists hope to topple and surplant. The arguments such terrorists use, however, are largely anti-Western in nature. Just as the late Shah of Iran was labelled as a "lackey of the Americans," an existing government may be stamped as a "lackey of the West." The difficulties now being endured in Egypt and Algeria seem to confirm the accuracy of this analysis.

George Santayana, the Spanish-born philosopher, in his essay on Classic Liberty, observed that truth is not to be found by guessing at it, as religious prophets and men of genius have done, and then damning everyone who does not agree. Human nature, he said, for all its substantial fixity, is a living thing with many varieties and variations.

Because slavery in Islam continued until well into this century, the acceptance of the Muslim religion by Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam is difficult to understand. One of the preeminent African-American intellectuals, Cornel West, a professor at Princeton, said in his book, RACE MATTERS, that it is no accident that the non-black persons Malcolm X encountered who helped change his mind about the capacity of white people to be human were outside of America and Europe, they were Muslims in the Middle East. Needless to say, for him the most striking feature of these Islamic regimes was not their undemocratic practices or their recent acceptance of slavery, but rather their acceptance of his black humanity. Mohammed X, this great prophet of black rage--with all his brilliance, courage and conviction--remained blind to basic structures of domination based on class, gender and sexual orientation in the Middle East.

As I. F. Stone reported, there is a special reason for the efficacy of the Black Muslims in reaching the Negro damned. The sickness of the

Negro in America is that he has been made to feel a nigger. The genocide is psychic . . . . with the rejection of the White Man's values goes rejection of the White Man's God. "We are worshipping a Jesus," Malcolm protested in one of his sermons, after he became a Black Muslim Minister, "who doesn't even look like us." "The white man," he declared, "has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze on a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus." "This Black Muslim doctrine may have been a blasphemous joke until one makes the effort to imagine how whites would feel if forced to worship a black God with thick African lips," says Stone. Men prefer to create a God in their own image. "The Ethiopians," one of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers observed a half a millennium before Christ, "assert that their Gods are snub-nosed and black, while the Nordic Thracians said theirs were blue-eyed and red-haired . . . . Just as Malcolm Little, in accordance with Black Muslim practice, rejected his "slave name" and became Malcolm X, so Malcolm X, son of a Baptist minister, rejected Christianity as a slave religion.

But what is the extent of the penetration of Islam into the African-Americans in the United States? According to Stephen Franklin, a "Chicago Tribune" reporter who has covered the Middle East, more people are familiar with Louis Farrakhan and his Nation of Islam than the seventeen different Muslim groups within the African-American communities, most of which, according to experts, are far larger (most traditional Muslims, meanwhile, do not accept the Nation of Islam). Nearly half of the Muslims in the U.S. are African-American.

A common denominator is the resurgence of fundamentalism all over the world, in the Christian West as much as in the Islamic East.

Many believed and hoped that with the end of the Cold War, and the beginning of a new century with a new millenium, mankind's attention would



be focussed on probing the future. Instead, the opposite is coming to pass, with more and more people seeking refuge in the past as a haven of security and stability and a source of identity.

In her impressive book, PRACTICING HISTORY, the historian, Barbara Tuchman, called for a change from the prevailing pessimism, and asked that we recall some of the positive and even admirable capacities of the human race . . . . A study of history reminds one that mankind has its ups and downs and during the ups has accomplished many brave and beautiful things, exerted stupendous endeavors, explored and conquered oceans and wildernesses, achieved marvels of beauty in the creative arts and marvels of science and social progress . . . . We cannot reckon on the better impulses predominating in the world, only that they will always appear. According to this wise woman, "We must keep a balance and I know of no better prescription than a phrase from Condorcets eulogy on the death of Benjamin Franklin: 'He pardoned the present for the sake of the future.'"

Franklin was one of the men who established the United States, who believed that they were trying something new under the sun. The idea that a democratic republic might endure ran against all the teachings of history. "The vindication of these ideas," said Washington in his first inaugural, "is an experiment intrusted to the hands of the American people."

The Founders were far from sure of the success of their experiment. Can we be certain, even today, that their experiment has succeeded? It has lasted for more than two centuries, and that indeed is something.