Ideaology, class and the origin of the Islamic State

Text reviewed:
Sulayman Bashir (1978) *Tawazun an-naqaid; muhadarat fil-jabiliyya wa sadr al-islam* (The Balance of Contradictions; lectures on the pre-Islamic period and early Islam), Jerusalem.

The Marxist conception of the state as an instrument of repression necessary for the maintenance and reproduction of class exploitation connects the historical appearance of the state with the emergence of class society. Sulayman Bashir's interesting book *The Balance of Contradictions* is an attempt by a Palestinian historian to apply this thesis to the emergence of the Islamic state and religion in seventh century Arabia.

The idea that the appearance of Islam was linked to the emergence of classes is as such not new. Many western orientalists have proposed something like this for a long time, although their writings are not addressed to the Marxist problematic of the state. A well-known example is Montgomery Watt's *Islam and the Integration of Society* which adopts a Mannheimian perspective to account for the rise of Islam as a utopian movement generated by the emergence of class privileges and the disintegration of egalitarian social structures and values. The work of Soviet orientalists on this subject is no doubt more directly informed by Marxist concepts, but unfortunately most of it is accessible only to those who read Russian. Belyaev's *Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate*, translated into English in 1969, puts forward, rather too confidently, the view that the rise of Islam accompanied the decay of a 'primitive-communal regime' in Arabia and the simultaneous emergence of slave relations of production: 'The epoch of polytheism was drawing to its end in Arabia. Elements of new class-relationships appeared in the decaying primitive-communal society [including the predominance of slave labour], so that the ideology was bound to change from polytheism to monotheism. In particular, the formation of tribal alliances expressed a striving toward the unification of Arabia, the rise of a central power which could be reflected and sanctified only by monotheism' (p. 94). However, this rather
vague notion of ‘a striving towards unification’ is hardly an adequate formulation of the Engels thesis concerning the state as an instrument necessary for the reproduction of class domination and exploitation. In spite of his disparaging references to the ‘historical idealist’ standpoint of other orientalists, Belyaev’s own position in this matter is not very different from that of ‘bourgeois’ scholars — as expressed, for instance, in this humanist statement by Bernard Lewis: ‘Muhammad did not so much create a new movement as revive and redirect currents that already existed among the Arabs of his time. The fact that his death was followed by a new burst of activity instead of by collapse shows that his career was the answer to a great political, social and moral need. The drive for unity and expansion had already found a preliminary and unsuccessful expansion in the short lived Empire of Kinda. The need for a higher form of religion had led to the spread of Judaism, Christianity and the still more significant movement of the Arabian Hanifs’ (1967: 48).

Bashir’s book is, to my knowledge, the first sustained attempt to relate the emergence of the Islamic state to the specific need to secure the political and ideological conditions necessary for the reproduction of class relations in seventh century Arabia. In what follows I shall argue that this attempt fails, but that in its failure it raises a number of important theoretical questions that need to be re-considered and re-formulated.

II

The book begins with a brief discussion of what Bashir considers to be the basic geo-political conditions that have determined the historical development of the Arab East. The overwhelmingly arid character of this region ensured that the first settled areas appeared in the scattered oases of the interior, and along the long narrow coastal strips of the Arabian peninsula and the Mediterranean. Save for certain restricted areas, such as the fertile highlands of Yemen, the region as a whole was inhospitable to agricultural expansion. Consequently most of the urban centres acquired their importance from their function as staging-posts for the caravan routes that traversed the peninsula. But as a vital corridor linking two sides of the ancient world, through which there passed major long-distance trade routes, its political control was always the objective of imperial ambitions. From earliest antiquity, the political entities in this region were bound together by complex, shifting networks of alliances and counter-alliances generated by the rivalry of great empires surrounding it. Bashir recounts the unsuccessful attempts by the agrarian kingdoms of South Arabia
to extend their hegemony over the tribes straddling important commercial routes to the north and north-east, and attributes their subsequent political collapse and disintegration, and the resurgence of tribalism, to the primary struggle between the great empires of the sixth century – Persia and Byzantium – for control over an area of great strategic and economic importance.

It is this broad context into which the idea is first introduced by Bashir that Islam must be seen primarily as a political reaction, on the part of the trading city of Mecca, to the threats posed to its commercial interests by external powers in the Middle East, as well as by internal tribal anarchy. The explicit assumption here is that the commercial activity of Quraysh required the direct control of trade routes, and that this could only be secured by setting up a centralised political entity – ‘the Islamic State’ – to curb the disruptive tendencies of the naturally violent beduin tribes. Thus after stressing the polycentric and warlike character of tribal society with its polytheistic religious ideology, Bashir argues that ‘it was in the interests of Mecca as a station on the long-distance caravan routes, to abandon its own tribal heritage and its continuous conflict with its tribal neighbours, and so to set in motion a call against tribalism and for the political unification of the tribes via the unification of their loyalty to a single god’ (p. 57). For this reason he maintains that the establishment of ‘the Islamic State’ in Medina, and the eventual subjection of Mecca by the Prophet was not a defeat for Quraysh at all, and as evidence for this view he refers to the way in which the Prophet did everything to conciliate the Quraysh leaders, politically as well as ideologically, as soon as Mecca yielded to his authority. In the chapter entitled ‘The Preservation of Balance and the Question of the Caliphate’ (pp. 98–111) the continuing importance of Quraysh leaders immediately after the Prophet’s death is emphasised and the point is made that the factional disputes and violent conflicts which emerged during this early period did not in any way undermine the dominant position of Quraysh within the new state, nor the inegalitarian, religious character of that state. Bashir insists that from its moment of origin, Islamic religious ideology and social organisation contained fundamental and irresolvable contradictions – between absolute authority and rational thought, between individual responsibility and kinship obligations, between the principles of tribalism and those of urban life. He suggests therefore that the primary political problem for Quraysh under Abu Bakr and Umar was to prevent the various contradictions from shattering the political order of the young Islamic State. The early Islamic conquests, beginning with the ridda wars, were thus a way of preserving some kind of internal balance through an enlargement of the arena of
conflict and contradiction. But the Islamic state that was formed in this context, according to Bashir, expressed two enduring features: the establishment of absolute political-religious authority (the ideological level), and the definition of conquered agricultural lands (the basic means of production) as collective — i.e. state — property. He concludes that the essentially authoritarian character of Islamic ideology, the largely military character of the Arab town's domination over its hinterland, and the mainly commercial and service character of the Middle Eastern urban economy, all served to distinguish 'the Arab mode of production' from European feudalism, and to explain the former's unprogressive character.

Most of the elements in this very persuasive account are by no means new to Western scholarship, but the overall argument concerning the class origins of Islam has not been put forward in quite this way before. The Islamic state is not seen as the response to a vague 'urge for unity', nor is the Islamic religion seen as the superstructure which merely reflects real relations. Bashir's position is that the Islamic state and religion together constituted the political-ideological institutions which were necessary to the reproduction of specific class interests. It is this origin, he goes on to suggest, that has formed the essential character of Islamic ideology. However, there are many difficulties with various elements in this argument, and with the argument as a whole.

First: how sound are the reasons for assuming that it was clearly in the interest of the Meccan merchants to subject the nomadic tribes through whose territory the caravans had to pass? Agreements could be made, and were made, between the merchants and the tribes, ensuring the relatively safe passage of caravans through tribal territory. The fact that centralised North Arabian states such as Hira attempted repeatedly to control these tribes by force need not be seen as evidence for the assumption that the direct political subordination of the tribes was essential to transit trade. The important point is that the relationship of a centralized political power to the trade that passes through its territory is quite different from the relationship of merchants to transit trade which they control. In theoretical terms the difference is this: a centralised political power acquires its income in the form of taxation and merchants acquire theirs in the form of commercial profit. This is not to imply, of course, that state officials never engage in commerce, but only that the conditions necessary for securing tax are not the same as those necessary for securing commercial profit — and furthermore, that sometimes these two sets of conditions
may even conflict with each other. For apart from the fact that tax may be deducted from commercial profit, the former requires the presence of institutions of force and of a continuous threat that it will be effectively used; the latter may require the very absence of such force — at least at certain crucial points in the process of economic development.

Consider now the position from the point of view of the Meccan merchants. It is well-known that one of the main reasons which made their city an attractive commercial centre for outsiders was the relative absence of the threat of force within it. This fact is usually connected with the religious institution of the *haram*.

But it should be connected more directly with something else — the absence of a levy on commercial dealings in Mecca. For unlike market-exchange activities in the Byzantine and Sassanid empires (and in the satellite kingdoms such as Hira) which were taxed by the state, Mecca's was a politically free market. In other words, the Meccan merchants benefited in this context as *merchants* from the fact that they did not possess, and were seen not to possess, institutions for the effective application of force against those with whom they traded.

These considerations that apply to Mecca as a commercial centre are relevant also to the tribal territories through which Meccan trade passed. But here other factors must also be taken into account. That the Meccans had agreements with various surrounding tribes ensuring safe passage for their caravans is of course well known. Not quite so well known is the fact that those agreements appear to have involved the tribes in the commercial profits made by the Meccan transit trade with the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. In other words the tribes acquired an income not only from the protection money that might be paid to them by the Meccans, but also and increasingly from a joint participation in the trade itself which was carried by the Meccan caravans. So not only was the direct forcible subjection of these tribes to a centralised political power not essential for Meccan trade profits, the absence of such a condition was not necessarily a drain on these profits. Furthermore, we must not forget that although Mecca was probably the most prosperous commercial centre in the politically de-centralised part of the Arabian peninsula at the time, it was not the only one. And precisely because its commercial prosperity rested on a series of special agreements with independent tribes, an 'anarchic' political situation was relatively advantageous to it.

In other words a centralised political system which established security and order unconditionally throughout the region would have made basic conditions of successful trading available equally to Meccan merchants and to their competitors. Of
course the Meccans could, in principle, have tried to maintain a monopoly of trading rights within the framework of a centralised political system, but in order to do so they would have had to create costly apparatuses for excluding competitors — an unnecessary burden for attaining something they already enjoyed.

Now my argument so far has been primarily theoretical. I have been merely concerned to spell out some of the conditions that favoured Meccan merchants as a group of long-distance traders who mediated exchange relations between politically independent social units. And I have suggested that contrary to what Bashir maintains, an attempt at the political centralisation of the Arabian peninsula was not clearly in their interests as a merchant class. It does not follow that such an attempt was impossible, but only that it cannot be represented as necessary to their mercantile interests.

From an historical point of view it is not at all insignificant that the process of political unification accompanying the rise of Islam was launched not from Mecca but from Medina, whose economic base was not commerce but cultivation and pastoralism. And while it is quite true that the conquest of Mecca by the Prophet did not spell the end of Quraysh importance, it did mean their end as a merchant class. In his concern to emphasise the continuing importance of Quraysh leaders before and after the Prophet’s death Bashir has missed this important structural transformation. From being an autonomous differentiated mercantile class which acquired its income from the existence of exchange relations between politically independent entities, the Quraysh leaders became warriors, administrators, estate-holders, and recipients of state allowances in an empire. In other words, within the space of a few decades after the incorporation of Mecca into the expanding umma, there was an almost total change in the dominant forms of property enjoyed by Quraysh. Because in general Bashir stresses superficial continuities at the expense of radical transformations, he also describes the relationship of religious ideology to social conditions in a way that is often extremely problematical. I shall take up his treatment of Islamic ideology later. Here I give two examples only in order to question the assumption of structural continuities.

Bashir says explicitly (on page 88) that the Prophet’s concessions to Quraysh after the conquest of Mecca ensured for them their class interests. He then goes on to argue by producing quotations from the Quran that Islam did not constitute any threat to the principle of social inequality. But he does not consider whether particular class interests are automatically secured by a general affirmation of social inequality. Nor does he appear to have considered the question: if Islam was essentially the ideology of the
pre-Islamic Meccan commercial class, how can one reconcile this supposition with the Prophet’s decree, which Bashir himself quotes from Baladhuri (on page 90), abolishing all debts and forms of wealth that had been accumulated by Quraysh up to that time — in addition to the Quranic prohibition on usury? Of course Quraysh leaders immediately acquired crucial material privileges in the early Islamic state, but this does not mean that their class position remained unaffected, or that Islamic ideology was merely the justification of their previous class interests. Another example: with regard to the conquest of Iraq, Syria and Egypt, Bashir writes that ‘the Islamic conquests were no more than a continuation of the raids previously carried out by [the tribes] on the margins of the peninsula, and Islam merely gave their raids the stamp of legality’ (p. 119). But the question we might ask here is why the Arab tribes now needed ‘the stamp of legality’ if they had engaged in this kind of military activity in the past without it. Here again Bashir’s explanation fails to take into account a major structural discontinuity — this time one between repeated tribal raids on the one hand and the process of imperial expansion and institutional re-organisation on the other. In other words Bashir confuses the structure of subjective motives with the structure of historical events, and because of this, he also oversimplifies the complex, shifting implications of Islamic ideology as modes of discourse in the political economic developments of the early empire.

IV

Throughout the book Bashir makes use of the well-known idea that there is a deep and enduring antagonism between settled life and nomadic life in the history of the Arab Middle East. The assumption here appears to be that pastoral nomads are naturally more violent and destructive than settled populations, and also that the principles of tribal social organisation are incompatible with those of settled life. This idea is emphasised in order to make two important points: (1) that independent tribalism was a serious threat to the class interests of Meccan merchants in the Jahiliyya, and (2) that incorporated tribalism was the real source of contradictions in Islamic ideology and social structure. I have already argued against the first point, and will argue against the second below. Here I merely wish to question the general idea of an inevitable opposition between pastoral tribalism and settled life. This is of course an old idea which goes back to the classical period of Islamic history, if not earlier. Its most famous expression was given by Ibn Khaldun whose distinction between *badara* and *badawa* has been taken up uncritically by a large number of modern
scholars writing on Middle Eastern society and history. It is worth noting, however, that our picture of beduin society as being naturally inimical to civilised life and peaceful commerce comes to us from authors writing from the point of view of organised states, for whom the very resistance of pastoral nomads to subjection by centralised power represented a threat to its authority. In itself, the existence of autonomous tribes is not an impossible obstacle to profitable long-distance trade or to flourishing urban centres — as the history of the Middle East amply demonstrates. The tendency of beduin tribes to engage in violence has been grossly exaggerated, and their ability to use violence was in any case far surpassed by that of centrally directed states and empires. Furthermore, settled centres in the Arabian peninsula were not at all opposed to the principles of beduin life, because as local markets and religious shrines they formed a necessary part of the tribal system. It is a mistake to suppose that the absence of political centralization must mean the presence of insurmountable antagonisms. The beduin tribes of the pre-Islamic period and the settled tribes were dependent on each other in various ways (cultural, political, economic) and there is no reason to assume that this interdependence was necessarily based on opposition. And where such oppositions did exist we must be very careful to identify precisely their character.

On page 42 Bashir writes: ‘Thus it is clear how settlement and mercantile activity, which led to the development of Meccan society as a class society, led also in time to a process in which the concepts and frameworks of political authority emerged and crystallized, as Quraysh gradually abandoned its tribal heritage’. Now if what is meant by this is that the principles of social stratification and of hereditary leadership were impossible within pastoral nomadic communities (and this is what in fact is proposed on pages 51—4) then clearly this is wrong. Some orientalists have suggested that even slavery was widespread in beduin society shortly before the rise of Islam, and although the extent to which slavery existed may well have been exaggerated in such suggestions, it is certainly a mistake to suppose that differential social status, wealth and power are principles incompatible with pastoral nomadic society. Now of course one might argue that the Meccan community was based on a class principle not merely because it was beginning to be internally differentiated by power, wealth and status, but because it was organized around a mercantile class with definite interests in trade. As such, the interests of Meccan merchants might be said to be of quite a different order from those of the beduin tribes. But note that this kind of opposition is not in the final analysis between ‘settled’ and ‘tribal’
communities, but between a variety of communities who produce, or organize the production of goods on the one hand, and communities who simply organize the exchange of commodities between producers on the other hand. In this sense the class basis of Meccan merchants was opposed not merely to the organizational basis of pastoral nomads, but also to that of settled agriculturalists and urban craftsmen.

This is a very important point to grasp because the conceptual opposition between ‘tribal’ and ‘settled’ forms of life is not very illuminating as neither category constitutes a homogeneous sociological unity. Nor is it valid to assume, as Bashir appears to do, that the principle of kinship obligations goes naturally with the egalitarian character of tribal life, and therefore conflicts profoundly with the complex requirements of class organization in urban society. In itself, ‘the principle of kinship’ is neither egalitarian nor inequitarian. 16 Certainly it is well known that kinship links have played an extremely important part in securing for mercantile communities the means for carrying on long-distance trade — and so for maintaining their class privileges. 17 There is no essential contradiction between kinship and class as some scholars have argued, even with reference to the special conditions surrounding the rise of Islam. 18 In all class societies certain crucial categories of property rights (in particular, rights of inheritance) are articulated in terms of kinship relations. The crucial distinction between class and classless formations should therefore not be made in terms of the absence or presence of kinship as ‘the organizing principle of society as a whole’ but in terms of the differences in the form and content of kinship categories as they relate to different property relations. 19 What is needed here, therefore, is an analysis of the different patterns of kinship that defined different property relations before and after Mecca’s subjection to the Prophet. 20 Blanket assertions about the ‘contradiction’ between the organizing principles of class and of kinship can only be misleading.

The point that might be made here is that much of the Arabian peninsula was in an important sense already a single social formation prior to the political centralization effected by the Prophet’s movement — the unity of that formation being determined by the political conditions that secured for the Meccan merchants their position as an economically dominant class (protection treaties, profit-sharing agreements, marriage-alliances, etc.). This class was dominant only in the sense that simple commodity production within that formation was governed and restrained by merchant capital, not of course in the sense that Quraysh possessed a power of command over surrounding tribes. The tribal communities who
produced and consumed some of the commodities carried by the Meccan traders may have been politically autonomous, but they were part of the same social formation. This means that property relations characteristic of the merchants and those of the tribal commodity producers (pastoralists, cultivators, craftsmen) were already articulated in terms of class principles within the social formation as a whole. To say this is not to claim, however, that petty commodity production was generalized in Arabia, or even that the economy of the Peninsula was centralized by Mecca, in pre-Islamic times. There is no evidence to sustain such a claim.\textsuperscript{21} In fact Meccan merchants were not the only ones who engaged in the carrying trade within the Peninsula, nor was Mecca the only important commercial centre.\textsuperscript{22} My point is simply that production and consumption in individual ‘tribal’ units were in some measure linked together through a system of commercial exchange, and that it was partly this linkage which sustained classes that cut across — but also utilized — agnatically defined political loyalties and territorial rights. Conceptualizing the Arabian Peninsula as a single social formation in this way, instead of as a collection of politically independent towns, villages and nomadic tribes, makes it possible to detect structures that partly defined the specific conditions of existence of the merchants in Mecca. To his credit it should be said that Bashir does attempt to set Mecca within the wider context of the Peninsula — but unfortunately the value of such a ‘setting within a wider context’ is vitiated because of the mutually exclusive concepts he employs here: those of class (for urban life) and kinship (for tribal life).

V

To the unacceptable assumption that the class interests of the Meccan merchants required the political subjection of the beduin tribes, Bashir adds the further assumption that this could only be done by suppressing the ideological conditions which defined the antagonistic character of beduin society. Kinship, which Bashir sees as the essential basis of an egalitarian, divided, and unruly society (‘the tribal heritage’), had to be transcended by a very different principle — the unifying absolutist class-ideology of Islam. The polytheistic beliefs of the pre-Islamic period, which Bashir argues corresponded to the polymorphous structure of tribal society, was replaced by an uncompromising monotheism which legitimated the centralised authority of the Islamic state.\textsuperscript{23} And although kinship as such was not completely eliminated, (whence an ‘unresolved contradiction’ at the heart of Islam) it was nevertheless subordinated to the divine authority of the new religion:
'As for Mecca, the message of political unity and security which Islam called for was based on a balance of contradictions with its politically fragmented pastoral tribal environment in the Arabian peninsula. Thus we see that whereas Islam stressed the duty of individual faith and loyalty with regard to the Muslim’s relationship to his Lord and his Prophet, it also retained consanguinity and urged Muslims to take care of relatives, not to deny kinship links, etc., ... a theme which is repeated in several Quranic verses in such a way as to sanctify the family and the tribe as important and vital social factors in Islamic society— not merely at the level of individual membership as such, but also with regard to the legal aspects of the individual’s social life, like marriage, inheritance, etc.’ (p. 85).

This functional explanation of the rise of Islam (i.e. that the religion of Islam emerged in response to a specific political need) seems very attractive, but it is not entirely free of serious difficulties. Consider first this question: why did the new centralised political structure have to be authorised by the concept of a sole God? Political unity is not guaranteed by the religious doctrine of monotheism, as the history of Islam itself demonstrates. Nor for that matter is polytheism incompatible with centralised political systems—witness the Roman empire. One may of course argue, as Bashir does in fact argue, that in spite of the conflict and disunity which mark the history of Islam almost since its inception, the primary motive behind the Islamic call was the political unification of the Arabian peninsula, and that if Islam failed to prevent subsequent discord (because of its ideological contradictions) it did at least succeed in this aim. But there are other difficulties with this argument too. One cannot logically deduce ‘the primary motive’ of a religious ideology from its major political consequence, nor can one reduce the complex implications of religious texts such as the Quran and Hadith to simple political meanings. It is certainly possible to say that Islam was formed within specific historical conditions, but it is no explanation to say that Islam emerged because it was the solution to a given political need24—especially if all the early doctrines and practices of Islam were neither politically essential nor politically consistent in relation to that ‘need’.

Bashir rejects, quite rightly, the attempt by certain modern Muslim writers to represent the rise of Islam as a kind of precocious socialist movement.25 But equally, the view that Islam was essentially the ideology of ‘a commercial society’, which he shares with some orientalists,26 is quite unacceptable. I have given a number of objections against this view above, and will provide others below. However before doing so, I want to consider a question which Bashir raises, and which seems to indicate that he
senses an inconsistency in the notion that Islam was the political ideology of a merchant class. ‘Why did the commercial society of Mecca’, he writes, ‘produce an absolutist, centralised, authoritarian ideology . . . ?’ (p. 82). Clearly such a political ideology does not correspond nicely with the commercial interests of a merchant class. For, although individual merchants might sometimes benefit from a political order which is ‘absolutist, centralised and authoritarian’, mercantile enterprise and merchant capital within such an order are invariably inhibited by it.

Yet there is a more important point to make about Bashir’s question. For although he asks ‘Why did the commercial society of Mecca produce an absolutist, centralised, authoritarian ideology’, he does not consider carefully enough whether, and if so in what sense Islam was ‘an absolutist, centralised, authoritarian ideology’. The point I want to make concerns the assumption that Islam was the ideology of the dominant class, in the sense that it was an instrument for imposing its authority on the consciousness of subordinate classes. For prior to the question ‘Whose ideology was Islam — that of a commercial class or of some other?’ there is another question that must first be answered: ‘Is it theoretically sound to represent Islamic ideology as a form of political conditioning?’ Bashir assumes that the answer to this question must be Yes, because of the special religious authority of the Prophet over his followers.

Thus in common with various Western scholars of Islam, Bashir maintains that ‘the source of the Prophet’s authority was absolute because it issued from the absolute will of the Creator, which thus limited all rational efforts . . . And since the authority of the Prophet issued from the absolute will of God, it too was absolute’ (p. 81). But was it? Muslim tradition has always distinguished between the authority of ‘the word of God’ (kalam allah) as recorded in the Quran, and the authority of ‘the word and practice of the Prophet’ (sunnat ar-rasul) as recorded in Hadith. This distinction is theoretically essential for understanding the nature of religious authority in Islam, because even if the non-believer wishes to assert that ‘the word of God’ was really ‘the word of the Prophet’, for the believer the two are not at all the same. And it is, after all, the believer’s concepts that we must first try to grasp here. Of course the Prophet’s own words, quite apart from the words of the Quran, carried a religious authority for believers. But exactly what the force of this personal authority was, and how it was connected to the authority of ‘the word of God’ is not an easy matter to determine. The historical sources that we do have with which to attempt some sort of answer make at least this clear — that the authority of the Quran (the word of
God) was not available for most of the important decisions and actions which the Prophet took as a political leader. These sources also tell of the Prophet’s consulting his companions in order to reach political decisions, and of his Muslim followers criticizing some of his decisions without their being branded as blasphemers because they did so. Equally important, ‘the word of God’ authorised very few social laws explicitly and when it did, it left the legal consequences of their infringement (punishment, responsibility, etc.) largely unspecified. In other words, that the Prophet was held to have religious authority by his followers is of course true by definition, but it does not follow that his political and legislative power was absolute — still less does it follow that the greater centralization of political and military decision-making which was brought about by the time he died was neatly effected by the religious authority of Islamic discourse. The Prophet’s religious authority is not to be thought of as a will which mesmerises the mind of the believer (i.e. as an external power which imposes itself on a passive object). Such a functionalist assumption, which is akin to the simple notion that religious authority is a combination of conspiracy and credulity, cannot account for the difference between believers and non-believers except in a tautological way by attributing to the latter a mysterious capacity for psychological resistance and to the former an equally mysterious incapacity. The authority of the Prophet should therefore be seen as constituting the individual as a believing subject — i.e. as someone whose reason and experience are actively grounded in that authority. The problem for analysis then becomes one of trying to understand the different ways in which that authority was articulated (in word and in deed) in specific historical circumstances. To do this it is necessary to look not at the supposedly hidden intentions of the utterer but at the manifest force of what is uttered — i.e. not to speculate about the inner mental states of the Prophet and his followers, but to trace the interpretation of (recorded) public discourse in the form of other (recorded) public discourse within specific historical situations.

It is a well-known fact that although the founding discourses of Islam — the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet — provided the essential medium for the articulation of religious authority, they were at the same time grounds for the contestation or repudiation of opposing power. The ideological reason for this should be obvious: Muslims held that the will of God possesses absolute authority (not the will of the Prophet), but God’s will had to be recognised as such, and proclaimed, by human beings, and so it was the authenticity of this human recognition and proclamation that could be and often was challenged. Where the authenticity of
an utterance as conveying God’s will was challenged, that utterance emerged as the proclamation not of divine authority but of human power: authoritative discourse was thus not the cloak of coercion but its antithesis. The political reaction of the Khawarij to Ali following the battle of Siffin was perhaps the first dramatic example of such a challenge, after the Prophet’s death, in which the authority of the Messenger of God was drawn on to undermine a particular claim to political power, and to authorize a dissident political order. And it is worth noting that these conditions of ideological contestation do not indicate the limitation of rational effort but its continuous exercise. Discourse does not cease to be rational because it has ‘limits’. On the contrary, it is the limits which partly define discursive rationality, and if we wish to understand the rationality of Islamic discourses, it is their authoritative limits that we must try to identify and delineate.

I have not of course attempted to prove that Islamic ideology was never absolutist, still less that it was never propounded as a justification for class privileges. What I have tried to suggest, very briefly, is that the question of the religious and political authority of Islam should not be posed in terms of an imprinting of ruling class interests on the minds of the ruled. In other words, I have argued that Islam cannot be reduced to the political ideology of any single class. Thus when Bashir asks the rhetorical question: ‘Whose ideology fashioned the Islamic religion?’ (p. 77), I have argued that the answer cannot be found by pointing to the special interests of the Meccan aristocracy or even to those of the ruling class within an absolutist Islamic state. Which is not, of course, equivalent to arguing that in its essence Islam expressed the common political interests of an entire community. I want to stress that my argument here is not based on any conception of the true meaning of Islam, or of the essential experience of all believing Muslims. I maintain that it is precisely assumptions about the essential, original character of Islamic ideology (i.e. about those words that truly represent authentic but wordless meanings) which prevent us from understanding and explaining the real political, economic and cultural struggles of Middle Eastern history. And this is precisely what seems to me the major weakness of Bashir’s book. For in spite of the wealth of historical evidence reproduced and the courageous arguments developed, the book’s basic concern is to describe the emergence and formation of Islamic ideology as being in origin class-linked and in essence mystificatory, absolutist and inequalitarian, and to attribute to this essential, original ideology the amazing (almost magical) power of determining the material development — or rather non-development — of Middle Eastern history from the seventh century until
this day. ('Thus it becomes clear how it was that Islam shaped religion and state and authority from the beginning' (p. 83).) This is an odd position for a materialist to take, although it must be said that Bashir is by no means the only materialist to have taken up such an idealist position in relation to Islam. But leaving the question of labels aside, the trouble with the concern to identify the 'real', trans-historical Islam at its moment of birth in seventh-century Arabia is that it does not explain what needs explaining. If the Khawarij, for example, repudiated the principle of hereditary succession to the caliphate, we want to know how it was possible for them to do so in terms of Islamic religious discourse, and assumptions about the essentially inegalitarian character of Islam do not help us here. If the early Islamic state defined and authorised the basic categories of land property, we want to understand how the legal processes of the Sharia made possible major shifts in the pattern of property rights to the basic means of production as political-economic conditions altered — and here again the assumption of an originally authoritarian Islam does not tell us what we need to know.

Let me elaborate a little with reference to Bashir's treatment of property and the state in early Islam. The discussion of kharaj and 'usbr, which Bashir renders respectively as 'state land' and 'private land', underlines the allegedly absolutist authority of 'the Islamic State'. Thus on page 130 Bashir writes that 'most of the conquered agricultural lands were considered lands of the state as a whole, a fact which explains the absence of individual landed property, and is also related indirectly to the problem of the absolute authority of the state in Islam'. As a matter of fact the overall land-tenure arrangements in the very early Islamic period appear not to have been fully systematized — as even the passages quoted in the book from Baladhuri, Maqrizi and al-Qurashi reveal. In any case, the distinction between kharaj and 'usbr cannot be made simply in terms of state v. private property, because at certain times and in certain places in the early period kharaj land could be bought and sold, just as 'usbr land was, and both legal categories of land articulated complex patterns of rights and duties. Strictly speaking these terms denoted mutually exclusive categories of land tax, and only by extension the lands on which they were imposed. One early theory was that 'usbr (tithe) was to be paid by Muslims and kharaj by non-Muslims, although practice never corresponded neatly to this theory. What we are basically confronted with therefore is the changing structure of the Islamic fiscal system, according to which different tax and rent arrangements, and legal-religious terminologies to describe and reason about them, were instituted in different times and places.
other words, the institutional arrangements and terminologies relating to landed property were part of the political, legal, religious conditions in which a continuing struggle over agricultural surplus was conducted. This is not to say, of course, that the 'essential meaning' of political, legal, or religious discourses is to be located in the struggles over surplus, but that when these struggles occurred they involved arguments which employed such discourses. In short, repeated reference to 'the absolute authority of the Islamic state' disguises more than it explains. For one must distinguish carefully, as unfortunately Bashir does not do, between the different social conditions in which spokesmen for 'the Islamic state' claimed authority in this very early period, and then between the formulation of such claims and the extent to which they were effectively realised. It is precisely the theological, legal, political struggles that take place in given historical situations, and the specific institutional arrangements which such struggles make possible or undermine, that determine the nature and force of Islamic authority, and not the arbitrary definitions of concepts chosen as authentically Islamic by the historian.

The implications of this particular view of ideology for understanding — and intervening in — contemporary politics in Muslim countries (as opposed to the view I have been criticising) should be obvious. Islamic religious, legal, political ideologies do not have an essential significance which moulds the minds of believers in a predictable way. They are part of changing institutions, and of discourses which can be, and often are, contested and re-constituted. To understand the authoritative limits of such contestation one must focus on religious discourses within specific historical situations, and not on a supposedly original Islamic ideology. Because it is the way in which 'the word of God' is reproduced, and the (political) situation to which it is addressed, which together determine its force, and not the lexical and syntactic forms of the sacred text considered in isolation.

VI

I conclude with a general point: The history of the early Islamic state should not be represented as the origin, growth and spread of an organizing idea, as Bashir, in common with many orientalists, has represented it, but as the gradual re-structuring of a vast social formation. 31 For with the early conquests in the seventh century, lands once part of the Sassanid empire, the Byzantine empire, and a number of satellite kingdoms were incorporated into a new political-economic entity — a fact which formed a basic condition for far-reaching social changes. But at first, it must be remembered, in
most of the regions the Arabs occupied the local patterns of landownership remained largely unchanged, and the task of collecting taxes and tribute was performed, as before, by non-Muslim notables and village heads. There was no change in the established modes of production. Except for the few places in which the Muslim Arabs were given conquered lands to cultivate, most of them subsisted on stipends received from local treasuries, and only a small proportion of the taxes and tribute collected was forwarded to the capital at Medina. And from the beginning, material conditions ensured that provincial governors and administrators retained a considerable measure of initiative and power, as their predecessors had done before the conquest. Thus the complex class structures of producing and non-producing classes within this new political entity were at first only very partially modified. We know that the beliefs and local institutions of the overwhelmingly non-Muslim subjects of the Arab empire were not immediately altered nor were the practices of the Muslim community (rulers and ruled) immediately codified and rationalised into the dominant religious law of the state. My point is that even when such transformations did occur, the resulting conditions did not constitute an integrated Islamic totality in which the commands of the ruling class were conveyed through a set of repressive and ideological state apparatuses to obedient subject classes. Indeed, the notion of an absolutist Islamic state, born out of the religious authority of the Arabian Prophet, is highly misleading — whether applied to the classical Arab empire or to the many states that have succeeded it in the Middle East. And it is misleading not primarily for empirical reasons, but because of the way in which the power of that state is conceptualised. For the changing administrative, legal, religious institutions of the various Islamic states must not be seen simply as instruments controlled by the ruling class, but as part of the common conditions in relation to which the historical struggle between classes (now silent, now open) was carried on. The point that needs to be stressed is that the political, economic and cultural conditions within which these classes lived their common and separate lives were not merely reproduced but also newly created, partly through struggle.

In short, the origin and development of ‘the Islamic state’ cannot be explained in terms of the Engels thesis which Beshir adopts — because ‘the Islamic state’ was neither a response to the specific needs of a particular class prior to the Prophet, nor an unambiguous instrument of the ruling class after his death. The basic reason for this explanatory failure can of course be traced to the functionalist manner in which economic class, political power, and religious-legal ideology are linked together. A more useful approach will have to
take a more complex view of the way in which discourses actually operate — not merely commanding, asserting and informing, but also contesting, exploring, elaborating, creating, etc. — in the developing material conditions of social life. In other words, if Marxists wish to understand the significance and effects of Islamic religious ideology (the unspoken assumptions as well as the explicit conceptualisations) in given political-economic conditions, they will have to take the language in which it is expressed far more seriously than they have hitherto done. But in doing so, they will also have to avoid the naive assumption of traditional orientalism: that the significance of Middle Eastern texts can be mastered without an adequate understanding of the social formations in which they are produced.

Notes

1. In a remarkable but little-known paper published in 1951, the anthropologist Eric Wolf put forward a similar thesis on the emergence of the Islamic state in Mecca. But unlike Bashir, Wolf concentrates largely on the internal structure of Meccan society, and ends his analysis with the subjection of Mecca by the Prophet. And unlike Wolf, Bashir draws directly and extensively on primary Arabic sources.

2. Although the ruling family of Hira, a vassal state of the Sassanid empire, engaged in some trade, most of its income seems to have come to it from taxes and raids against neighbouring tribes. See Kister (1968: 159).

3. Drawing on the authority of the orientalist Wellhausen, Wolf writes: 'The extension of the concept of an inviolable zone [i.e. of the *baram* around the Ka'ba] in which blood feuds were outlawed, and new fights could not develop, appears to have resulted from the development of trade and to have fostered a further development of it.' Wolf (1951: 338). This seems a plausible assumption at first sight, but there is no historical evidence for it, nor can it be demonstrated logically that there must have been a mutually re-enforcing connection between the religious principle of territorial inviolability and that of long distance trade. After all, this principle was never extended to the routes through which Meccan caravans passed, and it is surely the protection of caravans rather than the inviolability of Mecca itself that was crucial to Meccan *transit* trade. And such protection, as we know, was acquired primarily neither by force nor by religious authority, but by treaties of convenience and friendship. Belief in the sacred month of Rajab, during which the shedding of blood was forbidden, was certainly more significant in this context — see Watt (1956: 5—9) — but it is not clear how far this belief extended geographically.

4. A modern historian of Byzantine Egypt writes: 'A uniform tax on sales was imposed by Valentinian III [in the fifth century] over the whole Empire, but it is not mentioned in any Egyptian document. The customs dues were levied at ports of entry, apparently at a uniform rate of 12.5 per cent (octavo para).’ Johnson (1951: 130). See also Lammens who observes that in the matter of the state’s levies on trade 'The political economy of Persia was not
inspired by principles more liberal than those of Byzantium’ (1924: 139). So too Ghirshman (1951) in his history of pre-Islamic Iran claims that ‘On the whole, however, there was no marked expansion of foreign trade, the reason probably being the growth of state interference in business and the consequent restrictions on freedom of exchange’ (p. 343).

5. Thus a historian of sixth and seventh century Arabia observes: ‘It is evident that the trade of Mecca necessitated free traffic, free access to the markets of Mecca and free markets, without taxes.’ Kister (1972: 78).

6. ‘It is conceivable, that the tribal chiefs might have preferred to collaborate with the merchants of Mecca. In their co-operation with Quraysh their profits were more stable, they could establish closer relations with them and actually did so. They were welcomed in Mecca and could enter it without fear. In al-Hira they were submissive and servile, in Mecca they could negotiate as equals.’ Kister (1965: 121).

7. ‘The trade based on the facts of ilaf was a joint enterprise of the clans of Quraysh headed by the family of ‘Abd Manaf. The pacts concluded with the tribes were based on a hitherto unknown principle of trade interest. It was not an alliance (bilj) with obligations of mutual help and protection. It was not an obligation of the tribes to guard the caravans of Quraysh against payment practised by the tribes in their relations with the caravans of al-Hira. The ilaf agreements were set up on a base of share in profit for the heads of the tribes and apparently employment of the men of the tribes as escort of the caravans.’ Kister (1965: 120).

8. For example is was through their alliance with the important tribe of Banu Tamim, and not through direct political domination, that Quraysh acquired their influence over the market of ‘Ukaz and so prevented the latter from competing with Mecca. See Kister (1965: 146).

9. A judicious brief sketch of economic conditions in Medina is contained in an article by the American anthropologist Barbara Aswad (1970). For a more detailed account, but one which is sharply polemical also and therefore partial, see Lammens (1914).

10. The influential orientalist Lammens has expressed this classical view with characteristic romantic passion to explain the early conquests of Islam: ‘Passivity, violence: all of beduin destiny oscillates between these two extremes. “The passivity of a sensitive animal whose elegant, languid movements, whose supple stretching, we admire, and who gazes at the sun with flame-like eyes ... the passivity of a beautiful animal, which submits to the instinct that governs its life.” This fatalistic passivity, the absence of social traditions and organizations, the crumbling political order, the entire range of moral lacunae confirmed for the beduins, must have subjected the nomads to the mercy of men of their race who were capable of exploiting the hitherto unsuspected resources of this new people. These ambitious men did not reduce by a fraction the violent passion of the descendants of Ishmael’ (1914: 332–3).

11. See also Asad (1973).

12. For example Patai (1962) writes: ‘Nomadic herdsmen reside in every country of the Middle East. During all historic periods they were a constant menace to the settled communities within their reach; but being a threat they were also a stimulant’ (p. 76). ‘The relationship between the nomadic tribes and the sedentary population must have been very much the same for four thousand years ago, in the days of the roving Amorites, as it is today.’ (p. 80). ‘In spite of these movements from the sown into the desert and the much more significant counter movements from the desert to the sown, both the settled cultivator and the nomadic herdsman remain to this day the two basic polar types in the Middle East’ (p. 82). Perhaps it is this belief that also
underlies Gellner’s remark that ‘The history of the Islamic Middle East can, from its very beginnings, be written to a large extent in terms of the interaction between the nomads and the sedentary and urban populations.’ (1973: 1). At any rate, Gellner has explicitly drawn on Ibn Khaldun to present his view of the essential character of Middle Eastern history: ‘The paradigm of the traditional Muslim state seems to be something like this: a society in which urban life and tribal life coexist. Towns are garrisons, centres of trade and of Muslim learning; they are also the location of the central power. The central power however does not fully control the rest of society, either in a territorial or in a qualitative sense: for all that, the rest of the society nevertheless remains in some sense one political or at least moral unit. Just this is one of the significances of Islam. The territorial limitations on the effectiveness of central power are simple: there is a penumbra of tribal lands which effectively resist central authority, tolerating neither its administrative agents nor its tax collectors nor, if they can help it, periodic visits by a peripatetic court accompanied by the army. […] The dynamics of that kind of political system have been well schematized in the famous theory of Ibn Khaldun, which might be called the theory of the tribal circulation of elites. […] The general pattern remains unchanged: only its personnel rotate. […] Allowing for modifications and complications, this does seem to be the underlying pattern of the Muslim state’ (1969: 131–3). This clockwork model of the repetitive character of Islamic history is as open to question as are the very rash generalizations of Patai about the archaic structure of contemporary beduin life. In these texts, and in many others like them, the notion of an external conflict between two originating principles (tribal life v. settled life — equality v. domination) is taken to express the essence of an entire contradictory ‘civilization’. Historical evidence which goes against this notion can always be dismissed as accidental or inauthentic deviations, for an essence by definition cannot change — it can only give way to another essence ('modernity').

13. The complex problem of assessing the way in which later Arabic writers have used the pre-Islamic beduin as the embodiment of characteristic virtues and vices has been broached by some scholars — e.g. by Goldziher (1967), and by the Egyptian Taha Hussain (1927) — but it has rarely been informed by a sophisticated sociological understanding of pastoral nomadic life. On the specific question of an eternal conflict between beduin and settled populations, classical texts are often interpreted by reference to an a priori assumption of antagonism and then used to confirm that stereotype. For example when Lammens observes of the beduin and the urban Quraysh that 'Between them, as the Quran testifies, relations always lacked cordiality' (1924: 146 — my emphasis), the verses he refers to are made to yield a general meaning which they do not bear: reproaches against particular tribes who rejected or equivocated in the face of the Prophet's claim to authority are adduced by Lammens as evidence for an archetypal hostility between beduins and sedentaries. See, for example, Quran, 48, v.11.

14. For example Belyaev (1969: Chapter I). Evidence for the existence of a scattered population of domestic slaves among the tribes cannot be used to argue for an emerging 'slave mode of production'.

15. See, for example, Hammoudi (1974). (A translation of this article is published in Economy and Society Vol. 9 no. 3.)

16. Robertson Smith (1885), who first elaborated what has come to be known among anthropologists as segmentary lineage theory, was more aware of the ideological character of kinship than some recent scholars writing on the Middle East have been.
17. For example in his valuable study of socio-economic conditions in Fatimid Egypt (i.e. during the tenth and eleventh centuries), Goitein (1967) describes the way in which mercantile families in different parts of the Muslim world were frequently linked to one another by marriage ties, a condition that no doubt facilitated their long-distance trading activities.

18. For example Wolf (1951).

19. Thus in his valuable study of Ceylonese land tenure and kinship, Leach writes: 'I want to insist that kinship systems have no "reality" at all except in relation to land and property. What the social anthropologist calls kinship structure is just a way of talking about property relations which can also be talked about in other ways' (1961: 305). Although this statement unnecessarily reduces the significance of kinship discourse to an essential meaning (property relations), it stresses well the crucial link between certain modes of discourse and the social arrangements that gives the former their operative sense.

20. In particular, the significance of kinship rules for the growing importance of individual landed property. Relatively little work has been done by historians on this subject — see, for example, the extensive survey of orientalist literature on the pre-Islamic and the very early Islamic period by Rodinson (1963). In this context the article by Saleh El-Ali (1959) on landed property in the Hejaz during the first century of Islamic history is particularly interesting. But in general, existing accounts of socio-economic conditions in the Islamic empire during this period leave much to be desired. Thus a recent synthetic history by Ashtor (1976), from which one might have hoped to get a cautious, balanced discussion of property relations within a changing economy, instead devotes the chapters dealing with the first century A.H. to an extravagant polemic designed to prove the disastrous economic consequences of Arab rule. Somewhat incongruously (from a scholarly point of view, that is!) much detailed evidence is included from twentieth-century surveys of Palestine to establish the fact that the boundaries of cultivated land have shrunk in various places — and from there to suggest a more general historical conclusion.

21. Thus Wolf claims, rather rashly, that 'The Koreish [...] played an important part in centralizing the economy of the peninsula.' (1951: 332). We do not know (and it is hardly likely we shall ever know) what proportion of the total trade within the peninsula was actually controlled by Quaysh.

22. For example Medina, whose Jewish inhabitants appear to have controlled local trade. Also more important centres such as Dumat al-Jandal in Northern Arabia and Mushaqqar on the Persian Gulf.

23. The nineteenth-century orientalist Wellhausen expressed this idea thus: 'In the circumstances stated the power of religion appeared chiefly as a political force. It created a community, and over it an authority which was obeyed. Allah was the personification of state supremacy. [...] The idea of ruling authorities, till then absolutely foreign to the Arabs, was introduced through Allah.' (1963: 7–8). Following Wellhausen, Wolf (1951) goes on to suggest that in pre-Islamic Mecca the concept of a supreme deity, Allah, grew in importance at the expense of household and clan deities as 'non-kin' relationships became more important, eventually culminating in the establishment of Allah as the sole god with the establishment of the Islamic state. However, since we do not have direct historical evidence on this matter it it not very clear how we are to assess the validity of such a hypothesis, which seems suspiciously like a statement of the nineteenth-century view that monotheism is a higher stage in the development of religious belief than polytheism. The fact that there was a supreme deity together with lesser clan and household deities does not necessarily indicate that the former came later than the latter as the expression of a different social order (cf. Evans-Pritchard (1956)).
Besides, it must be remembered that Muhammed’s proclamation of Allah as the sole god occurred in Mecca, long before the establishment of what is usually represented as the Islamic state in Medina. A more elaborate version of the evolution of religious ideology in early Arabia from animism and polytheism to universalistic monotheism, following a parallel development in socio-political relations, is presented by Cheliod (1958) who quotes Wolf approvingly. But it is as well to be sceptical of such accounts, for as Watt rightly observes. ‘As our knowledge [about the pre-Islamic religion of Arabia] is fragmentary and, apart from inscriptions, comes from Islamic sources, there is ample scope for conjecture.’ (1953: 23). And the trouble with most conjectures by scholars writing in the orientalist tradition is that they are still rooted in rather dated nineteenth-century anthropological theories of religion. (See Evans-Pritchard (1965)).

24. As, for example, Rodinson proposes: ‘An Arab state, framed according to Arab ideals, tailored to the new conditions and yet still sufficiently close to the Beduin life that it had to incorporate, and able to take its place on an equal footing with the great empires — this was the great need of the times. The way was open for the man of genius who could respond to it better than any other. That man was about to be born.’ (1971: 37).

25. Bashir does not give any references, but he might have mentioned, in this context, the book by Abdel-Hameed Jawdah as-Sahhar (1943) and especially the interesting Introduction by Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brothers.

26. It was Torrey’s (1892) analysis of the commercial vocabulary in the Quran that seems to have given an impetus to the notion that Islam was the ideology of a mercantile society. Thus taking up Torrey’s work, Lammens argued at length that ‘The Prophet was to become a legislator, but his Weltanschauung remained basically commercial and Qurayshite’. (1942: 215). Rodinson (1974), in his useful but theoretically limited discussion of the connection between Islam and capitalism draws on Lammens to stress the commercial milieu of early Islam and the Quranic approval of mercantile activity. But since the primary object of this book is to argue the negative thesis that Islamic religious ideology was not an obstacle to the growth of capitalist rationality, Rodinson is concerned to emphasise the entire historical range of what he considers to be typical Islamic religious ideology and economic practice, and not just the early period.

27. Regarding the Prophet’s political authority, Wellhausen wrote: ‘[God’s] plenipotentiary who knows and carries out His will, is the Prophet. [...] The Prophet represents the rule of God upon earth; Allah and His Messenger are always bound up in each other, and stand together in the Creed.’ (1963: 8). Wolf, who has read Wellhausen, puts it this way: ‘Mohammed himself acted as judge [directly] in a few known cases only. Yet his every word, said to be the word of God, acted as law in the new state.’ (1951: 347). Rodinson is more cautious, as well as more explicit: ‘Medina was now a state: a state of a rather special kind, but indubitably a state. It was a theocratic state, that is to say the supreme power belonged to Allah himself. Allah made his will known through Muhammad and through him alone. If we consider that the Voice of Allah was in fact the voice of Muhammed’s unconscious, the inference is that what we have here is, in principle, an absolute monarchy. Who could moderate, bend or alter or contradict the will of Allah?’ (1971: 220). But Rodinson goes on to suggest that although in theory this identity was the origin of the Prophet’s absolute authority, in practice he had to make many concessions, and being the astute politician that he was, he used God’s word sparingly and acted pragmatically in order to establish eventually his total control over his followers. Thus in the end, Rodinson explains, the power of
the Prophet derived from the absolute authority of the ideology he created in which God and Prophet are fused: 'The stability of the regime came from the total hold of Muslim ideology over the minds of the people. [...] In the last resort therefore, if we insist on applying our own criteria, executive and judicial authority rested with Allah and Muhammed.' (1971: 227) my emphasis.) Yet Rosinson does not appear to have considered whether the only alternative to Allah as the origin of Islamic ideology (the alternative he rejects) has to be Muhammed's unconscious (to which, surely, Rosinson can have no reliable access?). Why must one insist on looking for the individual origin of a collective religious ideology? After all, 'the word of God' assumes and addresses beliefs and practices that were in force before the advent of Muhammed. Its authority did not originate from its utterer but from its author, and the author was not the speaker of the word but its ideological principle as expressed in public belief -- the eventual foundation of a distinctive religious discourse.

28. This made it possible to dissociate the two, as in the following remarkable case recorded in Yahya Bin Adam's Kitab al-kbaraj: 'A diqan came to 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud and said: Buy my land from me. And 'Abd Allah said: Provided the kharaj is paid by you! When the diqan consented, 'Abd Allah bought it from him.' In Ben Shemesh (1958: 49) Dihqans, who were members of the local Sassanian nobility, were generally allowed to retain control of their estates after the Arab conquest of Iraq. These lands continued to be worked, as before, by cultivators of serf or slave status, and kharaj was therefore paid out of the surplus produced by these non-owning cultivators even when they converted to Islam. However, the point that needs to be stressed in opposition to Bashir is that kharaj did not specify a distinctive production relation.

29. The legal significance of these categories (and in particular of kharaj) seems to have changed over time, as did the actual value of the tax liabilities. See the articles on KHARADJ, 'USHR, and DJIZYA in the Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam.

30. A valuable compilation of surrender treaties in the different areas conquered by the Arab armies during the twenty-odd years after the Prophet's death is Hill (1971). It contains details of tributes imposed, together with the different fiscal terms used. Shaban (1971) appears to be one of the best general accounts on this subject, making plausible sense of the way in which different patterns of property rights in land were related to particular tax arrangements in the various major provinces, and of how some of them changed in the very early period.

31. Thus typical 'Islamic histories' written by orientalists begin with conditions in pre-Islamic Arabia, recount the rise of Islam and the early conquests, and then describe developments in the Umayyad, Abbasid and late medieval epochs. (See, for example, the Cambridge History of Islam.) It is very rare for serious attention to be paid to the social, economic and cultural conditions prior to Islam in the countries that are after all the most important part (in almost every sense) of the Muslim world — except tangentially, to refer to the 'non-Islamic influences' on the growth of the Islamic social organism. Even Beik (1969), who includes a useful brief sketch of the socio-economic conditions in the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, devotes more space to a description of the geographical and climatic features of the Arabian peninsula than he does to the far more important topic of his Introduction, merely because the physical environment of Arabia has been an important element in Orientalist speculation about the origin of Islam.

32. See Schacht (1950).
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