

Research Notes

Sūrah Quraysh

By Salim Rashid

*For the civilizing (taming) of the Quraysh For their civilizing We
have caused the caravans to move forth In Winter and in Summer
So let them worship the Lord of this House Who has fed them
against hunger And has made them safe from fear.*

*The Glorious Qur'ān (Sūrah 106)
(translated by M. Pickthall)*

The nature and scope of an Islamic economic system has been the subject of considerable discussion in recent years. While there is something of a consensus on the point that Islamic economics is neither Capitalism nor Socialism, there is considerably more debate on the prevalence and extent of state intervention in an Islamic economy. Perhaps a closer look at *Sūrah Quraysh* may be helpful in this context. The *sūrah* is one of the earliest *sūrahs* to be revealed and it belongs to a period when Islam was laying forth its general ideological outlines to the idolators of Makkah. It extracts a message from commercial life of Quraysh and it adumbrates a world view which can be helpful in guiding us to first principles.

The translation I am using is that of Pickthall and it is important that he tries to provide as literal an interpretation of the Holy Qur'ān as is feasible. The word "i-la-f," which Pickthall translates as "taming" civilizing" has been variously translated by other authors as "gathering," "security," and "union." Without claiming any expertise in Arabic etymology, it may be pointed out that neither "gathering" nor "union" is quite consistent with the subsequent text, which focuses on the commercial success of Quraysh due to the location of the *Ka'bah* at Makkah. It is not Quraysh who were "gathered" or "united", at the religious fairs, if one may so term the occasions. "Security," on the other hand, is not in direct opposition to the meaning of the next *sūrah* but the connotation, as relating to armed warfare, is inappropriate in this context.

I shall argue this at greater length below. Pickthall's rendering as "civilization" is therefore used in what follows.

The intent of *Sūrah Quraysh* is to persuade the *Quraysh* of their obligation to worship Allah. How is this obligation established? The *Quraysh* are told that Allah (SWT) provided them with both security and prosperity, *civilization* at the edge of a barren desert. In response to this bounty they are urged to be grateful and give thanks. This overarching theme of the bounty of Allah is strengthened when we remember that *Sūrah Quraysh* closely follows *Sūrah al Fil*, (the Elephant) in which *Quraysh* are reminded of Abraha's attempt to conquer the *Ka'bah* with elephants and how Allah (SWT) turned back this attack. Considered together, the two *sūrahs* serve to emphasize the kindness of Allah (SWT) in providing for both the physical safety and independence of *Quraysh* and their prosperity and well-being. It follows that the fundamental religious attitude towards Allah (SWT) is that of gratitude (*shukr*). This point receives added force when we recall that the Arabic word commonly used for unbelief, *kufr* does not refer to an intellectual state of mind but rather to ingratitude. H.A.R. Gibb has dealt at length with the sources of religious belief in his essay on *The Structure of Religious Thought in Islam*:

Taqwā meant originally the guarding of oneself against the wrath of the divinity by taking steps to propitiate it, and its verb *ittaqa* is still employed in the Qur'an in that sense. The prior evolution of these words as technical religious terms is still unknown; but the occurrence of *taqwā* as early as *Sūrah 96, v. 12*, suggests an established usage. Possibly, therefore, *taqwā* had already acquired the sense of religious awe. For Muhammad himself, its foundation was fear of the Judgment Day and of hell fire, and his insistence upon this as fundamental in the religious life is reflected in the dominant place which it held in the thought of later generations. But while *taqwā* never lost this association with fear of hell, by the later *sūrahs* of the Qur'an it has clearly come to mean also reverence in the wider sense, and in two particularly significant passages (5:3 and 58:10) it is conjoined with *birr* to denote that relationship to God, which issues in willing obedience and motivates all good works.

Gibb appears to have overlooked the import of the earlier *Sūrahs al Fil* and *Quraysh*, where gratitude, rather than fear, receives primary emphasis. It is scarcely possible to stress the importance, from a theological point of view, of the suggestion that gratitude is the primary feeling imposing on us our religious obligations. This naturally leads us back into considering more closely the nature of the temporal blessings conferred by Allah (SWT),

For the civilizing of *Quraysh*
 For their civilizing . . .

The emphasis given in the two opening lines clearly points to the fact that “civilizing” is a good—something to be desired and hence a boon one should be grateful to receive. Primitivism, or a life of backward solitude and ignorance, is not given any encouragement at all. However much the wandering Bedouin may conform to a stereotypical picture of the Muslim, they cannot be considered to be models of the Islamic ideal. This is to be interpreted in a dynamic and not just a static manner. For example, while the personal law of a benevolent despot is consistent with the transition from barbarism to civilization, the continuation of civilization requires the institution of impartial and impersonal laws. Hence the injunction to accept civilization is also an injunction to accept one of its necessary accompaniments—the rule of law. As Allah (SWT) has stressed how *Quraysh* have been provided with civilization as a good, so too must Islamic forces aim at providing for that complex seam of achievements collectively termed “civilization.” It is well known that the Muslim civilization, which subsequently arose, was both based on law and urban culture. My point, however, is to urge that perhaps these historical outcomes should be looked upon as the necessary consequences of the world view urged by the Holy Qur’ān in its using of gratitude and belief upon *Quraysh*.

The last lines of the *sūrah* return to the basic theme and remind us in concrete terms of the benefits of the “taming” of *Quraysh* by a bountiful Allah,

Who has fed them against hunger
 And who has made them safe from fear

This provision of basic needs is to be seen as one of the attributes of Allah (SWT) and serves to remind us of the importance of economic development. While the duty to develop economically has been generally considered as binding on Muslims so that we may feed and clothe and provide self-respect for those who already *are* Muslim, the context of *Sūrah Quraysh* would also appear to suggest that by succeeding in spreading economic prosperity we shall also help others to *become* Muslim. It is not just a question of self-preservation but also of conversion.

The intermediate lines of *Sūrah Quraysh* occupy a position of some importance for the student of the social sciences.

We have caused the caravans to move forth
 In winter and in summer

Is it not striking how Allah (SWT) accepts responsibility for the movement of the caravans? Any realistic observer would have made the obvious retort—"but it is greed which moves the caravans, greed for wealth". It would appear that, in seeking only to aggrandize themselves, *Quraysh* were working out the Will of Allah (SWT). There is a long and well established Christian tradition which explores how God works in our daily affairs through indirect means; a tradition which received its secular formulation in Adam Smith's famous use of the "Invisible Hand." In *Sūrah Quraysh* we have a clear indication of the workings of an "Invisible Hand." A number of Muslim scholars have rejected strongly any attempt to use "Invisible Hand" reasoning in Islamic economics. This would appear to be based on a misreading of the role played by such phrases. They are not meant to be blanket assertions of global harmony, whereby all potential ills are righted by the workings of some invisible hand. On the contrary, they are admissions of the fact that our limitations only permit us to see as through a glass darkly. As our knowledge does not enable us to assert that we will never come across untoward circumstances, we rely on the correctness of our first principles to guide us through such occasions. The use of the "Invisible Hand" is meant to remind us that those features of social life which are the most obvious need not be those which are most deeply effectual. The *Quraysh* in all their self-sufficient pride felt they were maximizing their own worldly wealth and position. All the while, in reality, their pursuit of self-interest was only a means used by Allah (SWT) to provide for the civilization of mankind—note how civilization arises out of self-interest—and to make the gratitude due to Allah (SWT) self-evident.

In terms of the long-standing discussion on whether Islam displays more capitalist or socialist attitudes, *Sūrah Quraysh*, as interpreted above, would appear to tilt the balance towards Capitalism. The redistributive emphasis of Islam is strong, as exemplified in the duty of *Zakah*, and the cooperative urge is well-attested, as in the multitude of pronouncements on *Sadaqah*. In this connection, the 20 percent *zakah* on natural resources has been taken as an example, with Middle East oil revenues in mind, how Islam can provide minimal standards of food and housing for all citizens and is seen to emphasize a sort of socialism inherent in Islam. The point, however, cannot have a general importance because it is of no relevance to those *muslims* who have not been blessed with a plentitude of natural resources, such as the people of Bangladesh. Not only in terms of its acquiescence of the privately-run economy of Arabia but also in terms of the theological nuances of such a system, *Sūrah Quraysh* appears to present Islam as a system which provides for equity and justice—within a framework of individualism.

While the variety of translations provided, as well as the seemingly descriptive style of *Sūrah Quraysh*, appears to have hidden some of the deeper significance of the *sūrah* from Muslims in general and from economists in

particular, the above interpretation, if acceptable, would indicate that *Sūrah Quraysh* not only appears to enjoin civilization upon mankind as a means of securing the faith of believers and gaining that of new converts, but also informs us that the self-interest of rightly-guided men is not a contradiction in terms but rather a fruitful way of achieving the Will of Allah (SWT).

REFERENCES

H.A.R. Gibb, *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Boston: Beacon, 1382 AH/1962 AC.), 190-191.

The factual basis of traditional views of the Makkan Trade has recently been challenged by Patricia Crone in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Blackwell: London, 1407 AH/1987 AC). Whether or not her thesis is eventually sustained, it does not bear directly on the religious interpretation of *Quraysh* hegemony, the topic of this note.

APPENDIX

Evangelical Christians have often looked upon the Roman Empire as a means employed by God to ensure the dissemination of Christianity. I hope it is permissible to engage in some similar thoughts regarding *Quraysh*, whose commercial prominence rested upon the fact that the direct trade route to India was temporarily blocked and therefore necessitated a detour through the Arabian desert. The superiority of *Quraysh* was based on their control of the *Kabah* referred to in *Sūrah al Fil*—and permitted their rise to economic superiority. They impressed everyone by their acquisition of leadership qualities of *Hilm*—“the diplomatic ability, the style of speaking, the ready rejoinders always apropos, the precision of their eloquence.” The rest of the story is best repeated in words of Henri Lammens (*Encyclopedia of Islam*: art. “Kuraish”):

Their cohesion and the prosperity of the capital, Makkah, (Mecca) depended entirely on commerce. Now in quite unexpected fashion, at least for the Beduins, the conquests of Islam upset all the economic conditions of Western Arabia. The direct route from India via Mesopotamia was opened up again by the reunion under one rule of the valley and mouth of the Euphrates, and international trade avoided the difficult detour by the Arabian desert Deserted by commerce, the barren valley of Makkah (Mecca), strangled

as in a vice between two ranges of bare hills, could not maintain its former inhabitants, all brokers, caravaners and traders for generations past. Gradually shops and offices closed and their owners came to Madinah, now the capital of the Caliphate, to rejoin their fellow-citizens who had made new positions for themselves here. The old "*Kuraish*" had foreseen this decline. They had talked of it to Muhammad when their ardent fellow-townsmen had urged them to adopt Islam. These shrewd conservatives were reluctant to upset the religious and social institutions to which they attributed the prosperity of their town. "Allah will not fail to provide," the Prophet replied, "He will furnish them ample compensation; He will enrich them of His abundance when He thinks the time has come." (Qur'ān (Kuran) ix. 28; xxviii, 57).

Nor was it a false promise. With the rise of Islam the tribe may have dispersed but Quraysh as individuals benefited greatly:

Henceforth they were to command armies, to govern provinces and for several centuries, to rule the whole Arab empire. One marvels at the number of remarkable men who sprang from this city of shop-keepers and tried their skill in careers hitherto unknown to them, such as governors and generals. What is no less surprising than the novelty of these roles is the aptitude and decision of character with which they filled them—and this prevents us from regarding the (*Kuraish*) founders of the caliphate as mere novices. The fact is that for them, commerce on a large scale as it has been practiced in (Mecca) before the (Hijrah) had been for them a long preparation for a political career.

According to such Western scholars as Lammens and Wellhausen, it is commerce that taught the *Quraysh* how to lead men. It is not curious how a rupture in a traditional trade route provided for the rise of an obscure tribe; and how commerce provided for their taming and civilization and likewise trained them in those qualities that would prepare them to create and govern empires after the Prophet (SAAS) had preached Islam to them? Muslims therefore can clearly discern a pattern, by Allah's (SWT) grace which prepared the *Quraysh* for their destiny.