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ISLAM AND ITS CLASS NATURE

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ISLAM AND ITS CLASS NATURE

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Following is the translation of an article entitled "Islam i ego klassovaya sushchnost'" (English version above) by N. A. Smirnov in Prepodavaniye Istorii v Shkole (The Teaching of History in School), No 5, Moscow, 1960, pages 48-56.7

In the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. the primitive communal system of the Arab nomad tribes (Bedouins) was in a stage of disintegration. The rising nomad nobility began to appropriate tribally owned land and individually owned livestock. The frequent conflicts among the various tribes developed into wars for the defense of their own land or the acquisition of foreign land. These wars led to the enslavement of foreign nomads, who were forced to work for the conquerors. Successful wars promoted the formation of a group of exploiters from the top ranks of the military leadership and from the tribal chiefs, who received the opportunity to enrich themselves. The process of class differentiation developed among the Arab nomad tribes.

In the ensuing stage of social development in the seventh century the nomad nobility entered into an alliance with the nobility of the neighboring tribes. As the weaker tribal groups became dependent on the stronger, tribal confederations and alliances were formed and presented a prototype of future states. This is the stage of social evolution which Engels called "military democracy".

The nomadic Bedouins were not the sole inhabitants of the territory of Arabia. In the western part of the peninsula (Hejaz), in the southern part (Yemen), and in some northern districts the Arab tribes lived a settled life in towns and engaged in agriculture (the cultivation of grapes and figs). By the seventh century small states existed, including independent city-states.

While studying the history and living conditions of oriental nomads, Karl Marx noticed an extremely important peculiarity of their economic life: "Among all oriental peoples, from the time when this process begins,

it is possible to determine a general mutual relationship between the settled life of one part of these tribes and the continuing nomadic life of the other part."

[See Note 7. This valuable observation of Marx makes it possible to bring to light the natural connection between Arab nomadic and settled tribes and to examine the evolution of their interrelation. These relations were based mainly on the needs of a settled population for the products of a livestock-breeding economy, including horses and camels for the transportation of commodities. Conversely, nomads always have need of cereal products and the products of urban crafts. (Note: 7 K. Marx and F. Engels, Sochineniya (Works), Vol XXI, page 488.)

Typical of the mutual dependency of the nomadic and settled Arab population were barter, trade, and the joint organization of caravan routes and protection of caravans, which often employed thousands of camels to transport wares across Arabia to adjacent countries. In such large trade centers as Mecca and Hejaz annual trade-fairs were organized, during which all wars and conflicts ceased, so that any tribe having an image of its deity in the town temple (Kaaba) could perform its prayers and sacrifices. In this way the Bedouins could satisfy their religious needs and the importance of Mecca as the economic and religious center of Arabia was enhanced.

At the same time hostile relations between the nomad and settled tribes continued. Armed conflicts between them often led to the strengthening of some tribes and the weakening of others. Eventually the settled and nomad tribes were compelled to cease hostilities in order to unite for defense against common enemies: the large but weak neighboring states of Byzantium in the north and Persia (The Sassanid state) to the east. The Byzantine Empire, which in addition to its European possessions ruled Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and other lands, presented an immediate threat to the Arab countries. An acute danger was the Byzantine war against Persia, which had invaded Yemen in the second decade of the seventh century after the expulsion of Ethiopian troops allied to Byzantium. Protracted warfare between the two rivals greatly harmed the Arabs of Mecca and of other towns, since the caravan routes extending from Yemen across Mecca to Syria were neglected and reverted to desert. The nomadic tribes subsisting on caravan trade also suffered exceedingly.

The situation demanded the unification of the Arab tribes for the defense of their land. The settled tribes, particularly those interested in the defense of their fields, dwellings, and towns, took the initiative. There was consequently nothing extraordinary about the part played by the towns of Hejaz, Mecca, and Yatrib during the seventh century in the formation of the Arab state, which later received the name of caliphate. The historical movement for unification acquired a religious coloration because of the economic, political and cultural backwardness of the tribes.

In the specific conditions of Arab society at that time, when a nomadic livestock-breeding economy obviously predominated, the disintegration of the primitive communal system and creation of a state embracing towns with relatively highly-developed social relations could lead to the formation of a slave-holding or feudal system. Many historians have come to the conclusion that the seventh-century Arab state began to take shape as a slave-holding state, but that due to a variety of reasons the slave-holding structure did not develop into the dominant mode of production. They believe that the arabs were rapidly drawn into the process of feudalization. The authors of this conception relate the beginning of feudalization of Arab society to the period after the great conquests of the first half of the seventh century. Slavery continued to be preserved among the Arabs, but only in structural form /See Note/.

/Note:/ Vsemirnaya istoriya (World History), Vol III, Moscow, State Publishing House for Political Literature, 1957, Page 104.)

The adherents of another point of view proceed from the fact that in central and northwest Arabia feudal relationships began to be formed after disintegration of the primitive communal system had set in. The development of feudalism in turn conditioned the formation of the state and the great expansion and rapid success of the Arab conquests. Even in the early stage of the Arab state the various categories of landownership characteristic of feudal society were strictly defined: state, communal and tribal land, land granted to feudal lords with rights of hereditary ownership (ikta), and privately-owned land. All Moslems had the right of private possession of movable and immovable property and a person who had legally acquired property or land was considered protected in his rights by religion. Assistance from Allah was promised those who after their "confirmation on earth" would perform a prayer, contribute a tax (zekyat), and fulfil other requirements of Islam.

It is difficult to coordinate the conception of the formation of slave-holding relations in Arab society, where a nomad economy prevailed, with some historical facts. As is well-known, a slave-holding state inevitably requires the constant importation of slaves from abroad, since in view of the predatory use of servile labor made it otherwise impossible to replace the slaves. But in the initial stage of the Arab state, before the beginning of foreign wars and conquests, there were no large purchases nor captures of slaves due to war. Without this condition the slave-holding mode of production could not develop. A livestock-raising economy did not need a large quantity of slaves, which had to be fed and clothed; their labor could not be justified and therefore could not be dominant in the life of Arab society.

We shall not pause for a detailed analysis of the concrete historical situation of sixth- and seventh-century Arabia which effected the transition from the disintegrating primitive communal system of the Arab tribes to feudalism, with its division of labor and the individual character of the production process. When we speak about the inception of feudalism in Arab society at the beginning of the seventh century, we should keep in mind that in oriental lands such as Arabia various structures, including the slavery and the remnants of the primitive communal mode of production and of patriarchal relationships, survived for many centuries within the framework of feudal society. The new feudal forms of exploitation were concealed by clan, tribal and family relationships and ancient customs and traditions.

The formation of tribal unions, which subsequently constituted the Arab state, inevitably caused the destruction of previous economic and political relations and their replacement by new ones. This process affected all sides of Arab life, including religion. In the communal system the Arab tribes had primitive religious cults. Since they were greatly dependent on natural conditions for their existence, the Arabs worshipped what they regarded as the mysterious forces of nature, including the heavenly bodies, which to their mind everywhere opposed man. Social forces and tribal life were also regarded as incomprehensible and inexplicable. When all power began to be concentrated in the hands of the military leaders of the tribal alliances a change occurred in the religious superstructure. The whole aggregation of mysterious forces in the form of tribal gods was centered now in one God. To him was attributed the highest degrees of perfection: he is al-

mighty, all-powerful, all-knowing and at the same time the most cunning of the cunning. Thus monotheism arose among the Arabs -- a religion which reflected a new form of man's relationship to the dominant forces of nature and of society.

Arab monotheism extensively utilized various beliefs of the well-known monotheistic religions of neighboring peoples, including those tribes professing Christianity and Judaism. As Friedrich Engels points out, "... every religion is nothing but a fantastic reflexion in the human mind of the exterior forces dominating men in their everyday life, -- a reflexion in which earthly forces assume the form of unearthly forces" /See Note/ This formulation provides a correct explanation of the way in which the new religious cult based on the worship of one God (Allah) was formed among the Arabs.

/Note:7 Friedrich Engels, Anti-Dyuring (Anti-Dühring), Moscow, State Publishing House for Political Literature, 1953, Page 299.)

The rise of the new religion, which was named Islam ("surrender of oneself to God") or Moslemism (from the Arabic word muslim -- "submissive, dedicated to God"), is inseparately connected with the city of Mecca. According to Arab tradition, in 610 Mohammed, a local citizen belonging to the ruling sect of Kureysh /transliterated from Russian/, began to preach about monotheism in the town. For a long time his sermons received no attention, and he himself was recognized as the preeminent prophet and founder of Islam only towards the end of his life. According to Islamic teaching, Mohammed claimed to be a preacher of the word of Allah, with whom he supposedly could communicate directly..

Mohammed's biography was composed over a century after his death, and included far-fetched descriptions of events in his life and career. The purpose of the biography was the exaltation and deification of the "prophet" and his teaching. All that has been written about Mohammed is in need of critical evaluation, which is made difficult by the opposition of religious circles and by the limited scope of the appropriate sources. Moreover, there have been no complete archeological investigations of the places where Mohammed lived. The fairly complete biography of Mohammed by Ibn-Iskhak (who died in 768), which was edited and revised by Ibn-Khisham (who died in 834) /both names transliterated from Russian/, contains many concrete details of the work and family life of the "prophet" until his death in 632. Although the historical reliability of many of

the events recorded is justifiably called into question and criticized, this material is nevertheless used by historians with a proper critical approach for the study of Islam as a religion. Mohammed, therefore, is recognized as an historical personage; he emerged alongside similar preachers of monotheism in Arabia. The most dangerous of his rivals was Moseylim /transliterated from Russian/, who preached in Yemam /transliterated from Russian/, in the eastern part of the peninsula and was liquidated by Mohammed's followers in a bitter struggle which broke out after the "prophet's" death.

Of course we cannot accept and reiterate the assertion of the biographers and preachers of Islam that Mohammed was a superman capable of performing miraculous deeds, of conversing with Allah, of journeying to heaven, etc. The idea of him as a perpetual intercessor for the faithful before Allah is alien to us.

Mohammed's original exhortation to submit to the one God and refutation of Meccan polytheism enjoyed no success; he even had to flee with a small group of his followers in 622 to the adjacent town of Yatrib, later renamed Medina "the city of the prophet". This event is considered an important landmark in Islamic history, for Mohammed's sermons, when applied to the new conditions, received an audience not only among the inhabitants of Medina, but also among the surrounding tribes. For this reason 622 was proclaimed the beginning of the new Moslem era, which bears the name hejira ("migration").

In Medina a community of believers, the nucleus of the future state's nobility, was created from Mohammed's adherents on a completely new basis. All who accepted the new religion were included in the community without consideration of their tribal affiliation. This did not mean, however, that tribal organization was definitively abolished. The tribes which adopted Islam and participated in the Arab campaigns of conquest preserved their traditions and organization. Tribal chiefs, transformed into feudal lords and military commanders, were concerned with the preservation of their tribal privileges, but were compelled to recognize also the new legal standards based on the laws of Islam.

Having started his career in Medina as head of a religious community, Mohammed soon was recognized as its ruler and military commander. After the stubborn resistance of the Medinan religious and political organization, which was greatly strengthened by the conversion of many Hejaz tribes, the Kureyshite rulers of Mecca were forced to enter into negotiations with Mohammed, to recognize his political authority and to accept Islam. Thus

Mohammed was the creator of the Arab state, whose capital became Mecca, "the mother of cities". The Kaaba temple was transformed into the principal religious center of Islam. In later times a special ceremony was worked out which obliged the faithful to make the hadj ("pilgrimage to Mecca"), which became one of the precepts of Islam. The old pre-Islamic cult of the Kaaba was thus incorporated into the new religion. Some authorities believe that the "black stone" (a fragment of a meteorite) set into one of the walls of the Kaaba and specially venerated by pilgrims to this day existed in pre-Islamic times.

The Kureyshites quickly adapted to the new order and made a great effort to ensure that the new religion with its commandments and precepts was put to the service of their class interests and the needs of the emerging feudal society. They began to play an increasingly prominent role in this incipient feudal society particularly after the death of Mohammed in 632. The unification of all Arabia around Mecca was by no means immediate and was accompanied by a bitter struggle among the tribes and tribal alliances.

In the time of Mohammed's successors, called caliphs or "deputies of the prophet" (the Arab state was named caliphate), the Arabs waged war against Byzantium and Persia for the territories bordering on Arabia. These wars, or, as they are usually called, conquests, played an outstanding part in the history of the Arabs and of the whole Near and Middle East (to use modern terminology).

They started in 633 and led to the formation of an extensive state, whose capital was transferred from Mecca to Damascus in Syria, where the dynasty of the Omayyad caliphs ruled for almost a century (661-750). The state was consequently named the Omayyad or Damascus caliphate. This feudal state significantly differed from the Meccan state. The absolute sovereign of the true believers, the caliph, was considered the shadow of God on earth. As emir he possessed absolute secular power and at the same time was supreme religious leader (imam). The caliph, his retainers, the provincial viceroys, and the higher military and civilian officials became great landowners. In their holdings, as in the whole state, the feudal systems of administration, exploitation and oppression of the popular masses prevalent in the subjugated countries were adopted and secured. A considerable portion of the Arab population settled in the conquered lands, and their military camps served

as the foundation of many towns: Fustat (the future Cairo) in Egypt, Kufa and Basra in Irak, Shiraz in Iran, Gyandzha (now Kirovobad) in Azerbaydzhan, and others.

In the period of Omayyad rule all the basic Arab conquests were accomplished. In 750, when the dynasty fell, the Omayyad state embraced the following areas outside Arabia: Syria, Palestine, Irak, Iran, the whole of Transcaucasia, the Middle East, part of modern Afganistan, and Sind. In the west the caliphate included Egypt and all Magrib (North Africa), and the peninsula of the Pyrenees. In 732 the Arab advance to the west was stopped by the Franks in Aquitaine at the battle of Poitiers; two decades later, in 751, the Chinese advance to the west was halted by the battle of the Talas River.

As a result of widespread popular movements and the aggravation of class warfare the Omayyad dynasty was overthrown and replaced by that of the Abbasids (750-1258), who transferred the capital to the newly constructed city of Bagdad in 762. For this reason the Abbasid caliphate is often called the Bagdad caliphate. The intensification of oppression and of taxation under the Abbasids led to the decline and gradual disintegration of the caliphate. The Arab rulers of the Iberian peninsula initiated the decline in 750, when they refused to recognize the authority of the Abbasid caliphs and formed an independent emirate. Later they founded their own caliphate at Cordova. The brilliant rise of culture associated with the spread of science and art was caused by the progress of the feudal mode of production. There was an extensive exchange of scientific achievements, and trade relations were established with virtually all the then-known countries of the world. However, this development could neither stop nor retard the political collapse of the caliphate in the ninth century or the secession of independent states from it. By the last year of the caliphate the possessions of the Abbasids were confined to the boundaries of Irak, and their actual power was recognized only in the region of Bagdad. They were considered only the supreme representatives of Islam. The invasions of the Seljuk Turks in the eleventh century and of the Mongols in the thirteenth accelerated the final ruin of the Abbasid state in 1258.

Any discussion of the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries should attempt to explain the reasons for the relatively easy and rapid victories of the Arabs, whose military art could hardly have been much better than that of the neighboring peoples exposed to their aggression. Of course we can never agree

with the bourgeois historians who explain the victories of the Arabs by the extreme fanaticism of their religion, which demanded the propagation of the faith by force of arms. The famous theory of the Italian author L. Caetani, that the drying up of the soil of Arabia was the main reason for the migration and rapid conquests of the Arabs, should be rejected, since it has been proved that the climatic and soil conditions of Arabia did not undergo any noteworthy changes over a very long period of time. It is also impossible to explain Arab military success by the warlike character of these supposedly natural conquerors.

The factors which motivated the foreign conquests of the Arab rulers and of the growing feudal class even before the establishment of their control over the whole of Arabia should be sought primarily in the field of political and economic relations. The rich agricultural countries - Syria, Irak, Egypt, etc. - bordering on Arabia had a higher culture and production technology and a better developed trade than the Arabs. These countries brought great advantages to their weakened masters (the Byzantine emperors and the Sassanid shah-in-shahs) and were easily accessible to the Arabs. The seizure of material goods and of affluent territories, the exploitation of subjugated peoples and utilization of their productive forces, and trade enriched the first caliphs and enabled them to consolidate their political position in Arabia and to create a sound basis for their state. The class interests of the caliphs and of the Arab feudal nobility, the consolidation of their rule over all the tribes, and the enrichment and strengthening of the new state's economic system were the causes of the initial Arab conquests. Victories, economic advantages, and rich spoils, only a portion of which was surrendered to the state, pushed the Arabs of all classes, both military commanders and simple warriors, on to further conquests. The political fragmentation, military weakness and general decline of many eastern countries in the seventh and eighth centuries and the struggle between the popular masses and ruling classes only facilitated the Arab conquest.

In this article we are interested primarily in the role of Islam in the Arab state and the development of its doctrine, dogma and ritual. It is important to trace how Mohammed's ideas, which by no means constituted a coherent religion, were transformed into a well-ordered religious system which became one of the forms of social consciousness and the ideological superstructure of Arab feudal society. Marx, Engels and Lenin ex-

posed the dependence of religion on the evolution of social relationships and on the class structure. They determined the interest of the exploiting classes in religion as a convenient means of enslaving the toiling masses.

In the expanding Arab state of the seventh century the class, material interests of the military-feudal leadership bore a religious stamp, insofar as it was convenient to conceal these interests and needs under a religious disguise. The primitiveness of the material and cultural basis of Arab society is illustrated by the prominent position assigned to military and political matters in the evolving doctrine of Islam. The emphasis on military and political affairs fully corresponded with the ideology of the conquerors of countries where different religious beliefs were widespread.

The dogmas, rites, commandments and legislation of Islam were formed in conditions of struggle against various peoples and their religions. Islam borrowed and imitated many features of these religions, and has many characteristics in common with them: genuine enthusiasm, practical precepts to instill new standards of community life in conformance with the feudal system, and, as in every religion, deception and distortion of historical facts.

The most important Islamic beliefs are presented in a book sacred to believers, the Koran (in Arabic - "reading") or Kitabillah ("divine book") /transliteration from Russian/. The Koran consists of 114 chapters (or suras), each one of which is divided into an uneven number of verses (ayats). The Koran contains ancient Arab religious and clan legends, which are successfully combined with new principles and appropriately modified for the rulers' new needs and interests. The ideology of the Koran is directed against everything associated with patriarchal social relations, with tribal strife, polytheism, cruel treatment of slaves, etc. The purpose of the Koran, as of Islam, is to surround the new feudal order with an aura of divine grace, to facilitate the complete subordination of the Arabs to Allah and the caliph, who was transformed into God's deputy on earth, the "shadow of Allah." The Koran preaches that there can be no religion without power and that religion is obliged to serve the powers that be and assist them with all its authority. The Koran and Islam convince the believer that the complete master of his life is Allah, who in the "book of fates" predetermined before birth every man's fate and actions. Since man cannot alter the conditions of life in opposition to

Allah's will, it is futile to fight for progress. Absolute obedience and faith in a happy future life replete with all kinds of pleasures are the lot of men who observe the Koran's precepts.

The original demands of Islam consisted in the profession of monotheism (shakhad), the recognition of Mohammed as the "prophet", obligatory prayer five times a day, at least one pilgrimage to Mecca, the observance of the annual fast (uraz or ruz), and the payment of a definite tax (zekyat). These were supplemented by numerous other duties, moral standards, penalties and prohibitions. Punishments included stoning to death and cutting off the hand. The ideology of war was expressed in the special demand or dogma concerning holy war (jihad) for the spread of Islam among infidels.

The question of the Koran's origin, history and teaching is central in the study of Islamic history. Many facts connected with the definitive edition of the Koran have never been sufficiently clarified. All modern editions are based on this source. Moslem tradition holds that the Koran is of divine origin. On the order of Allah the angel Gabriel supposedly dictated it to Mohammed. The prophet passed on its contents to his disciples and followers, who recorded them in a book.

In their research on the Koran bourgeois Islamic scholars proceed from the thesis that it is the work of Mohammed alone and represents a collection of his sermons. Even a general acquaintance with its diverse contents refutes this position. There is no systematization or thematic plan in the distribution of chapters, and the titles of the chapter headings are in no way related to the text. These facts do not indicate a single author. The first edition of the Koran is associated with caliph Osman (644-656), but there is no doubt that it was subsequently abridged and supplemented before receiving its present form. It is assumed that the present edition took shape in the eighth or even ninth century.

The Koran is an important historical document because it contains the principles characterizing the new structure of Arab life. It sanctifies private property and devotes much attention to family relations, in which the family, not the individual, occupied the basic position. The Koran speaks of the inequality of men, and men are regarded as superior to women in all respects. Women are placed in a dependent relationship to men. The share of a man's inheritance is equal to the share of two women, and the legal vote of a man equals the votes of two women. The passages of the

Koran about the structure of the universe and origin of vegetative, animal and human life are in obvious contradiction to reason. At the time of the book's composition such theories apparently could satisfy to a certain extent the Arabs' primitive ideas about the universe. The trouble is that these anti-scientific concepts are regarded as divine revelation to this day. The interpretation of these sections is severely restricted so that the contents will become vaguer and more incomprehensible.

Even in the first century of the caliphate two main branches of Islam were defined, which eventually were transformed into separate Moslem religions: Sunnism (from sunna -- "model of conduct," "collection of legends about the life of the prophet"), and Shiism (from shiyya -- "party," "sect"). Sunnism is considered more orthodox and has the allegiance of the majority of Moslems. Shiism originated among the adherents of Ali, the fourth caliph after Mohammed and the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who was killed in the struggle for supreme power in the caliphate. The Shiites advocated the hereditary succession to the caliphate of the family of Ali, Ali's son Hussein and his descendants perished at the hands of the Omayyad caliphs. Taking advantage of the discontent with the Omayyads in Irak and later in Iran, the Shiites propagated their doctrines and won many supporters, who under the banner of Shiism attempted to overthrow the Arab caliphs. The Shiites were inspired by the hope that under the rule of caliphs from the house of Ali their sect would triumph and changes in the social conditions of the masses would take place. According to Shiite teaching, Mohammed, the twelfth descendent of Ali, was not killed, as were all his predecessors, but vanished. The Shiites proclaimed him "the hidden imam" and believed that Allah would send him to earth at the necessary time so that Shiism might triumph and establish a kingdom of justice on earth. The doctrine of the hidden imam (mahdi) is an important dogma of Shiism. The Shiites accept only the Koran, while the Sunnites recognize the legends about the prophet's life contained in the Sunna as a second source of Moslem doctrine. The Shiites venerate Ali as the equal of Mohammed, and often as superior to the prophet himself. Shiism has its own religious centers, rites and traditions. It and various later sects have been responsible for powerful popular movements which shook the foundation of the caliphate and hastened its ruin.

Why did Islam spread only in oriental countries? Engels believes that the answer is to be found in the

specifically oriental ritual so characteristic of Islam. "... Islam, having preserved its specifically oriental ritual, by this same fact limited the area of its extension to the East and North Africa, which were conquered and colonized by Bedouins from Arabia. Here Islam could become the dominant religion, but in the West it could not" /See Note/

(/Note:/ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, O religii (Religion), Moscow, State Publishing House for Political Literature, 1955, page 157.)

The numerous rites and strict prohibitions of Islam actually do introduce a peculiar division among men. They include abstention from pork, a month-long fast, an ablution before prayer, offerings on definite feastdays and during the hadj. As Engels indicated, these practices prevented Islam from becoming a world religion, although they probably ensured its wide extension in the Orient, whose ancient religions were saturated with ritual. At the same time we should always remember that the rites and demands of any religion always and everywhere interfered with the creative life of the masses and retarded their political and cultural development. Lenin teaches: "The idea of God always hypnotized and dulled 'social feelings'; it replaced the living with the dead and was always the idea of slavery (the worst, most hopeless slavery). The idea of God never 'united the person with society', but always tied the oppressed classes by religious belief to the divineness of the oppressors" /See Note/.

(/Note/ V. I. Lenin, Sochineniya (Works), Vol 35, page 93.)