

Religion and Tribal Society

At the beginning of the seventh century, Arab society was a tribal society. Most tribes worshipped various gods and spirits. There were also tribes of Christian or Jewish faith living in Arabia. Then the prophet Mohammed appeared. He had a vision of a new monotheistic religion in which all people would be equal before God, as with the Jews and Christians. Mohamed had learned some of the teachings of the Christians and Jews. At first, he even hoped to convert Jewish tribes to his new religion, but he failed.

If as many people as possible are to make the new religion theirs, this religion must start from the ideas of the people. The people must be "picked up where they are". The new religion could not ignore the conditions of a tribal society. In tribal society, women are not equal to men. In the new religion, daughters inherited only half as much as their brothers. In legal disputes, two women are worth as much as one man as witnesses. Muslims claim that in pre-Islamic times women did not inherit anything and were not eligible as witnesses. Thus, the provisions of the new religion are to be seen as a compromise. Before God, women are worth as much as men. But in the civil life of the tribes, full equality for women would have been too much of a good thing.

No proper Muslim will accept what I am telling here about the origin of his religion. For him, the new religion, the Islam, was transmitted to the Prophet Mohammed word for word by God through an archangel. What was transmitted was written down in the holy book of Islam, the Koran. What is written in the Koran is valid for all times. In any case, an Afghan or a Saudi would be outraged if an outsider claimed that much in his religion was due to human calculation and that it had to be understood from a certain constellation. But there were and there are Islamic scholars who also doubt that everything in the Koran is of purely divine origin and that all statements there should apply to all times and all human communities. The individual chapters of the Koran are called suras. Some of the suras, which were written late, contain instructions that refer to a concrete event. For example, believers are instructed to distance themselves from unbelievers and to fight them with all means. Such suras are easy to understand if one knows that the community of the Prophet Muhammad developed into a state that was at war with those of other faiths. The instructions are then to be seen as specific orders to the Prophet's people in a particular historical situation. They were valid for a specific point in time and not for all eternity. This was the view of some scholars who had analyzed other historical events too. Such scholars lived in cultural centers of Islam like Baghdad, Cairo or Damascus or in the courts of powerful princes. They advocated not taking parts of the Koran literally.

In the tribal societies of Arabia or Afghanistan, people do not analyze or question. Here, believers have no doubt that the entire Koran is God's word. The calls to violence against unbelievers are not inventions of radical Islamists. They are in the Koran.

But then the people in Afghanistan, in Arabia or also in Turkey or in Algeria would have to act just as murderously against people of other faiths as the Islamist terrorists. But this does not even happen in the mentioned states, in which – unlike in Afghanistan – there are larger minorities of other denominations and religions.

The war of annihilation against all false believers was not part of the reality of people's lives either in the time of the prophet or before or after. There were always wars between tribes or clans. That is part of tribal society. But people assumed that most neighboring tribes or neighboring clans would still be their neighbors in a few centuries. It was far less costly to get along with them to some extent, even if you didn't exactly agree on religious issues, than to exterminate them. There was plenty of contact between people of different tribes and also different faiths. Nomadic tribes had to move with

their herds from one pasture to another. To do this, they had to constantly negotiate and come to an agreement with local farmers. They also wanted to trade and visit distant holy places of their own religion. In order to do this, it was necessary to be able to travel outside one's own settlement area in a reasonably safe manner. Even in pre-Islamic times, rules of hospitality had developed that guaranteed peaceful freedom of movement for many people to the general benefit. Islam cultivated and strengthened these guest rights in particular. In short, people usually got along with each other. The parts of the Koran from which the Islamist terrorists take their instructions for action play no role in people's daily lives. They were simply overlooked.



Conversely, this means that the Prophet's martial instructions did not actually refer to people's normal lives, but to special situations.

Most Afghans are convinced that the coexistence of people should be regulated by Sharia law. Sharia law is a set of legal rules for living together, derived from the Koran and the traditions of Islam. A good 200 years after the death of the Prophet, it was summarized. This was done by educated scribes in the flourishing centers of Islamic culture. A lot of ideas of the people in the big cities came in. So, the Sharia did not only reflect what was considered right by the tribes of Arabia or Afghanistan. Many compromises had to be made in order to create a common law for the now vast area of the Islamic world. Many legal rules could be set aside if this served the peace in a region. Sharia law is therefore very flexible. This led people to consider whether it would be possible to interpret Sharia law in a way that would be consistent with all the UN human rights conventions. The Iranian Shirin Ebadi made many suggestions on how this could be achieved. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – and forced by the Mullahs to leave her home country.

It has already been mentioned that according to Sharia law, no one may be forced to marry a certain person against his will. This rule is sovereignly ignored in Afghanistan, although it is not unknown there. Thus, it happens that damage inflicted by one clan on another clan is compensated by the fact that the clan of the perpetrators must hand over a number of girls to the clan of the injured party for marriage.

Roughly speaking, Islam is lived in Afghanistan as it was originally revealed for a tribal society. For a believing Afghan, the Koran is the word of God. However, he does not take it literally in all its parts. The Afghan describes Sharia law as an important part of his religion. However, he leaves out the parts of this law that do not fit his tribal society.

In the beginning, Islam was tailored to tribal societies such as those in Arabia or Afghanistan. The territory of Islam then expanded rapidly. The religion contributed greatly to the flourishing of culture in many areas. Islam took many ideas from its newly acquired territories and developed them further. In Afghanistan, too, highly developed cultural centers were established in Ghazni, in Herat and in Balkh. But they perished again in the turmoil of war. The pre-Islamic tribal society remained dominant. However, the old rules of living together within the tribe were now considered Islamic. Any innovations that had been incorporated into the religion were ignored if they were not compatible with the tribal traditions. The interpretation of Islam was pragmatic.

In Saudi Arabia, an interpretation of Islam became a state religion that deviated sharply from the Pre-Islamic traditions. It is called Wahabism. It demands that all Muslims live together as the Prophet and his followers supposedly did.

Saudi Arabia is rich thanks to its oil revenues. It uses its resources to spread Wahabism with missionary zeal in other countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia. In Shiite-dominated countries, Saudi Arabia supports anti-government movements.

Some influential Saudis and even members of the royal family appear to promote the "Islamic State." The goal of this movement is to create a large Islamic empire and to take literally and apply certain injunctions in the Koran that are aggressively directed against those of other faiths.