

ISLAM

Among Muslims during Ramadan in 2001

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It is the fateful year of **2001**. It is **Friday**, 16 November, just before sunset. **Ramadan**, the fasting month for Muslims, started already in Iraq, Afghanistan, judging from the TV footages from those countries, but not here in **Malaysia**. Actually, I am in East Malaysia, in **Kuching**, the capital of Sarawak, in the northern part of **Borneo**, the historic island that is shared by 3 **Muslim** countries, **Malaysia**, **Brunei**, and **Indonesia**. The dates for Ramadan are based on the lunar calendar, so they vary like our Easter, but the precise moment still needs to be determined by local clerics after seeing the phase of the moon. Sighting the moon is not as easy in this rainforest region as in the cloudless deserts of **Afghanistan**, where American airplanes are raining bombs in revenge for the **9/11** attacks by **Al Qaeda**, whose leader **Osama Bin Laden**, a rich Arab, is hiding there. **Everyone is on edge**.

I am at the historic Sarawak Club playing tennis, when I hear the bells for vespers at **St. Joseph Cathedral**.



There are also many Protestant churches and Christian missions, plus temples for Hindus, for Sikhs, for Chinese [*pic*], but **no synagogue**! Soon, as the sun is setting, the chanting from the loud megaphones of the nearby mosque [*pic*] permeates the air with the **muezzin** [*ψαλτης*] calling the faithful for the **canonical prayers** to **Allah** [*god in Arabic*]. During Ramadan, from 4:45 to 18:27, **14 daylight hours**, Muslims cannot eat, drink water [*cannot even swallow their saliva*], have sex, or smoke. Special **religious policemen** check restaurants and food outlets for any Muslims who break these rules; offenders are taken to the religious court [*Shariah*] for judgment.

Like the Jews, Muslims object to pigs on religious grounds. They are forbidden to eat pork, drink alcohol, or use cosmetics with alcohol content. Chinese eat every single part of the pig. Pork is essential in the daily diet of **Chinese** who make up 30% of the population. The autochthonous **Dayaks** constitute another 30%. They drink alcohol, and eat pork plus anything else they can catch in the vast rainforests of Borneo. Most of them are Christians proselytized by missionaries; it is strictly forbidden to proselytize Muslims [*the killing of Korean missionaries in Afghanistan, a case in point*]. It is boom time for Malaysia, which has resources treasured by the West: **Timber** and **OIL** [*Πετρελαιο*].

The **oil embargo** of the 1970s is imposed by Arab countries to punish America for helping Israel repulse the Arab armies in the 1973 October 6 war. With the major sources of petroleum being in Muslim countries, oil prices skyrocket from \$3 per barrel in 1973 to over \$70 nowadays and bring to the geopolitical chessboard [*chess was invented in Persia; called Iran since 1935*] a new player, **Islam**, to challenge the aeons-long hegemony of the **Christian West**.

From 1975 when the Vietnam War ends to when the Soviet Union collapses in 1989, major **economic, political,** and **religious transformations** begin. In SE Asia, there is the transformation of third world countries, including Vietnam, to **global economic powers** rivaling the dominance of the West. **Dictators** tolerated for decades as part of the **Cold War** tumble into oblivion. Formal Western political colonization of Muslim countries ends. In this period, **3** compelling, self-righteous religious leaders articulate **dogmatic fundamentalism**, which is impacting our lives and those of generations to come!

In America, at the height of the **“Iran Hostage Crisis of 1979”** [*American diplomats are held hostage in Tehran by radical militant students, using as an excuse the USA offer for asylum to the deposed and terminally ill Shah*], **Jerry Falwell** launches **Moral Majority**. His polarizing movement spawns a generation of politically active homologous **“evangelicals”** who galvanize Christian fundamentalists to elect homognomic [*ομογενωμωνους*]politicians, abandoning American neutrality by championing the cause of Jews against Arabs in the Middle East, and blurring the dichotomy of state and church in the USA. In Europe, a cardinal from **communist Poland**, **Karol J Wojtyla**, is elected in 1978 Pope of the **1-billion** Roman Catholics. He helps bring down the **Iron Curtain** to return atheist Russia to the Christian fold, but religious wars go unabated, overpopulation is burning our limited global resources, HIV is decimating continents.

In the Muslim world, a radical revolutionary, **Ayatollah R Khomeini**, exiled in Iraq by the Shah, returns to Iran in 1979, replaces monarchy with an **Islamic** republic. He institutes Shia fundamentalist governance, not as **draconian** as that of the **Wahhabi Sunni** clerics who in collaboration with the **Saudi** family take control of **Arabia** in 1925 [*banning the practice of any religion except Islam; forbidding **infidels** (kafirs) from entering their holy cities; segregating women, restricting their function to domesticity with no public role whatsoever, etc*]. **Khomeini’s** ideas are fundamental enough, however, to influence the **1-billion** strong Muslim world, and to poison the minds of young Muslims against the West in general and **America in particular**. In Afghanistan, the anachronistic **Taliban** take over the government in 1996 and establish harsh medieval **theocratic** governance, only to be overthrown by **Western Powers** with the cooperation of Iran and the other neighboring Muslim countries in the aftermath of 9/11.



The most obvious manifestation of the **Khomeini revolution** is the change in **women’s** attire, **headdress** being a way to show your religiosity in Islam, as is the crucifix for Christians. Iranian women are compelled by peer pressure and religious police to cover their head, arms and legs, a style that has spread to other countries. The **burqa** [*pic*], what fundamentalists are coercing women to wear, covers the entire body down to the feet; the only opening is a slit around the eyes but that

too has a net.

Ramadan is supposed to be a festive month; one of its purposes being to make people think about those who are hungry and poor. The money saved from fasting is to be given to the needy. In the evening, food stalls are set in many public places. Muslims flock to them to break the fast and recover their energy for the entertaining programs of the evening. The first thing they eat is high-energy sweets like **baklava**. Some go to the Mosque for prayers; men in the main hall; women in a designated place [*γυναικωνιτης*] on the second floor [*the way women were treated in Christian churches in olden times*]. The end of Ramadan fasting is celebrated for several days, like the **panegyric way** Easter is observed in villages in Greece, with family get-togethers, special foods, but no **ouzo**.

In the outskirts of Kuching, I note a huge complex of drab, monochromous hostels, a **“madrasah”**, a religious training school where students are taught Arabic so they can read and chant the **Quran** [*Κοραν*] in the original. The term became pejorative when it became known that the notorious **Taliban**, which means students, are the graduates of hundreds of unmonitored madrasah schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan during the 1980s when America was financing the **Jihadists** against the atheist Soviets. One of the popular television programs during Ramadan is the competition in **Koranic psalmody**, young men, and women chanting verses from the Quran. The Quran is **inimitable** and **untranslatable** to languages other than Arabic according to Islamists, which is the same claim made for the Latin Bible [*The first Bible in English was a clandestine publication made possible after the Gutenberg printing machine was invented, and after the **Lutheran Reformation**; those who tried before were declared **heretics** and were burned alive*]. As in Christianity, **“Hadith”** [*Tradition*] produced by revered sages is also a key part of the religious teachings and services.

Islam is founded by 50-year old **Mohammed** [or *Muhammad*] in **Mecca**, an oasis by the Red Sea of western Arabia, in **622**, at a time **Byzantium** is in the midst of a long war and religious convulsions that are created by the folly of a centurion by the name Phocas, who usurps the throne. With hubris, Phocas orders the **forced conversion of Jews**. Jews revolt and start butchering Christians and vice versa. The survivors escape to Persia. Persians invade Palestine, capture Jerusalem, which by now is devoid of live Christians, destroy all the churches, and take away the Holy Cross. The other factor creating the chaos is the **heretics**, whom the Church of Rome is persecuting with a network of religious police and salvation salesmen. In the East, however, heretics are deeply rooted in Syria and Palestine. These heretics, either iconoclasts who believe Jesus is God and as such **unimaginable**, or monophysites who believe that Jesus was not consubstantial [*ομοουσιος*] with the Father [*God*] as in the **Nicene Creed**, tend to side with homologous Islamists when persecuted.

Heraclius, 610-640, one of the ablest of the 88 Byzantine emperors, dethrones vulgar Phocas, designates **Greek** as the official imperial language, fights brilliantly the Persians, wins, recovers and installs the **Holy Cross** in the rebuilt Church of the Sepulcher carrying it himself along the **Via Dolorosa**. However, the war leaves **Byzantium** economically exhausted and religiously alienated, which make the empire vulnerable to Muslim warriors, the Bedouins nomads and tribesmen who being inured to desert warfare, and fired up by the promises of their new religion **burst out of Arabia**, a peninsula that remains a **black box** for the West until **petroleum** is discovered there in the 20th century.

Mohammed, before he dies from a fever in **632**, escapes to **Medina** where he marries [*polygamy is condoned*] daughters of major tribal chieftains and with them returns victorious to Mecca establishing monotheistic Islam in place of Arab **polytheism**. He declares himself **Caliph**, i.e., synchronously head of the **ummah** [*εκκλησια*], head of the political government, and chief of the military; thus his religion includes not only theology but also political, economic, and military goals and tactics. The first successor of Mohammed is his trusted aide Abu Bakr, but he dies 2 years later; adroit **Umar** becomes the new **Caliph**, i.e., holder of all 3 powerful posts, which allow him to propagate Islam.

By 636, Muslim warriors capture Damascus; by 639 Jerusalem; by 643 Armenia and Egypt; by 653 the former



Persian Empire. Within 100 years from the dawn of Islam, the caliphs of the **Umayyad Dynasty**, who move the capital to **Damascus**, extend their conquest from India in the East, to the Saharan Africa in the South, and cross the **Pillars of Hercules** in the West to occupy **Spain** for **9 centuries!** The next dynasty, which lasts for 5 centuries until 1258, is that of the **Abbasids** who move the capital from Damascus to Baghdad. **Baghdad** becomes the center of Islamic culture during which Islamic **poetry**, calligraphy, architecture, science, **algebra** [*Arab invention*], literature, history, philosophy, the art of exquisite carpet weaving [*mat for praying, and decoration*], and global trade, reach an apogee, a fusion of the East with the **Hellenic** world, the **Golden Age of Islamic Civilization**.

In the millennium year **1000 AD** [*488 in Islamic calendar*], **Cordoba** in Spain is the cosmopolitan **capital of the world**, where science, architecture, and philosophy reach their acme when Muslims, Jews, and Christians work and live in peace and

harmony rarely seen ever since. My favorite masterpieces of Islamic architecture are the **Taj Mahal** in India [*pic I took in 1966; Note that Quran verses are inscribed on the walls in Arabic; icons are forbidden*] and the **Alhambra** in Spain. The Arabs are expelled from Spain along with the Jews at the height of the religious **catharsis**

[*Inquisition*] in the years after **Columbus** discovers **America** in **1492**. By then, Muslims spread to China, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, to Turkic Asia from where they recruit **Seljuk Turks** as soldiers to protect the Abbasid Caliphate from the fierce rivalry between Sunni Arabs and **Shia Persians**. Seljuk Turks eventually become sufficiently powerful militarily to usurp the Abbasid caliphate. They become the founders of the **Ottoman Sultanate**, not caliphate, but remain defenders of Sunni Islam.

In the meantime, European Crusaders, [read article by **Kaldellis**], egged on by religious zeal, march through Byzantium, sacking cities and looting churches, and reach Jerusalem, which they occupy ephemerally. General **Saladin** expels them in 1187. **Saladin** is a **Kurd** [*Kurds are Sunni Muslims but they are not Arabs; they are the inhabitants of the rugged **Caucasus** Mountains from western Iran, through northern Iraq, to eastern Turkey; issue 5 of **GE**; Xenophon Anabasis through Kurdistan*] born in **Berea** [now, Aleppo, Syria] by the Euphrates River. Saladin revives the economic life of the region after the destruction caused by the Crusaders and establishes the Ayyubid Dynasty in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. All of which are eventually absorbed into the **Ottoman Empire**. The Ottoman Turks capture Greek **Anatolia** and occupy **Greece** for 4 centuries after capturing **Constantinople** on **Tuesday, 29 May 1453**. [Ever since, Greeks avoid starting anything important on **Tuesdays**, but more on that in the next issue of **GREEK ETHOS**].

By 1918, the Ottoman Empire is exhausted, falling prey to the **Western Powers**. Britain fails in its bid to capture **Constantinople**, but takes over Iraq, Palestine, Arabia, and Egypt, while France moves into Syria and Lebanon. Greece, too, moves into Anatolia, captures **Izmir** [**Smyrna**], whose population is Greek. However, when the Greek armies extend themselves beyond Smyrna toward Ankara, Kemal Ataturk and his resurgent young Turks drive the Greeks, armies, and civilians, into the Aegean Sea. At the end of WWI, the Turks are given **Anatolia** that has the most spectacular ruins of **Classical Greece**, which Turkey exploits to attract tourists [*shoplifting part of our cultural heritage*]. By the 1970s, formal **Western** political colonization of Muslim countries ends, but **peace** and **good will** among men in the Middle East remain elusive to this day.

Let us go back to the beginnings of Islam. **Khadijah**, Mohammed's first wife, a widow much older than him, a wealthy businesswoman uses young Mohammed to lead her camel merchant caravans to south eastern Byzantium, where he is exposed to **monotheism**. She dies along with his only son. Their daughter, **Fatima** marries **Ali**, a young cousin of Mohammed, expecting Ali to succeed her father. Abu Bakr is chosen instead. Eventually Ali becomes the 4th Caliph and moves the capital to **Mesopotamia**. But, Ali's reign is cut short. He is brutally assassinated in 661 and is buried in **Najaf** by the Euphrates River. His son Hussein is massacred in **Karbala** [*where 1 million Shia pilgrims congregated last August*]. The Shiites, or Shias, which in Arabic means "*partisans of Ali*", increase in numbers by the conversion to Shia of the traditional Arab antagonists, the Persians. More than 80% of the **1+ billion Muslims** are Sunnis; [*similar to the numerical ratio in the Christian Schism between the Western and Eastern Churches*]. The name Sunnis comes from "*followers of sunnah*", i.e., followers of the life, deeds, and sayings of the Prophet, who is considered a model human being. The wounds of that **schism** of 1370 years ago, inflamed by the invasion by **Western Powers** of Iraq in **2003**, are fueling the sectarian violence we watch daily on TV.

Eschatology is one of the tenets of Islam: i.e., a reward for the devout on judgment day; the punishment of sinners; the existence of hell and paradise. Islamic *Hadith* has it that Archangel **Gabriel**, [*the one that brought the news to **Mary** of her immaculate conception of Jesus*], comes to Mohammed during the month of Ramadan; brings Mohammed to **Jerusalem**, from where the angel raises him up to heaven to the presence of God, and reveals to him the **Logos of Allah**, the **Quran** [*Kopav*]. The first Islamic shrine, the **Dome on the Rock**, is built in 691 in Jerusalem on the mount of the destroyed by Roman legionnaires in 70 AD Jewish Temple, the hill on which **Abraham** [*Ibrahim in Islam; Abraam in Judaism; Αβρααμ in Greek*] was to sacrifice his son to God, but an angel substitutes a lamb [*pic; icon by our **Evangelia** for the www.dispatch.com*]. Jerusalem becomes, thus, **holy** for all 3 monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The pillars of Islam are: worship of NO other God but GOD [**Allah**] and proclaim that Mohammed is His Messenger; pray to Allah 5 times a day; tithe, that is alms giving and philanthropy for the poor; strict fast during Ramadan; pilgrimage to Mecca, the **Hajj**, once in the lifetime of those who can afford it.



Jihad is another pillar, whose meaning in English is **struggling in the path to God** [*ισραηλ in Greek; israel in English*] to the point of **paradigmatic martyrdom** to exhibit one's zeal for Allah in his personal behavior and/or in the defense of the Faith against enemies [*infidels =kafirs*] of the prophet; for Allah loves only those who love his prophet Mohammed [*not unlike the recent claim of the Pope of Rome that salvation comes through the Christian sect he heads*]. **Thucydides** said it 2500 years earlier in his history of the jihad of Athens for strategic resources against monarchic Sparta "*The use of religion to commit culpable deeds became acceptable*", **religious zeal being the easiest of human motives to fanaticize!**

The history of the **Hellenic Universe** is intertwined with the history of **Islam** from the moment of its founding 14 centuries ago; America is being impacted since the Arab oil embargo 44 years ago, and more directly since 1993, the year of the first bombing of the **Twin Towers**.

2500 years ago, **Greece** attains its **Golden Age** when governance is taken away from sacerdotal hierarchy and monarchs. **America**, too, becomes a **beacon of Renaissance** for the whole world 2276 years later, when our founders, weary of chimeric monarchs and of religion-based persecutions in Medieval Europe, enact **Platonic-Aristotelian nomocracy**, an inspirational anthropocentric **Constitution**, with full **freedom** and justice for all religions and ... **heresies thereof!**

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