MATERIALS FOR THE STUDY OF THE WORK AND THOUGHT

OF ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE

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No. 497

(May 16th, 2025)

WRITINGS ON THE EMPIRES IN WORLD HISTORY, LIV

1923

Arnold J. Toynbee, *The Question of the Caliphate*, in «Contemporary Review», CXVII, February 1920, pp. 192-196.pp. 192-193.

THE QUESTION OF THE CALIPHATE

By Arnold J. Toynbee

The title of "Caliph", borne by the Sultan of Turkey, may prove one of the most difficult points in the long-delayed Turkish settlement, for the problem it raises, though intricate and technical, is by no means academic. The Ottoman Sultan's claim to be their Caliph, as well as his claim to be their sovereign in the ordinary sense of the term, was repudiated during the war by the majority of his Arabic-speaking subjects, and they felt so strongly on the question that they took up arms to make good their point of view. On the other hand, the adherents of the Sunni sect in India, who have never been Ottoman subjects and do not wish to be, are such warm supporters of the Ottoman Caliphate that they have been urging the British Government, ever since the armistice, to consent to nothing in the peace settlement which might weaken the Ottoman Sultan's claim to be also Caliph of Islam. Now the Indian Sunnis are our fellow-citizens and the ex-Ottoman Arab Moslems are our allies, and the question at issue between them interests the entire Moslem world. The British Government, and therefore the British public, are bound to take up a definite position towards it; the settlement of Turkey is perhaps at last approaching; and some discussion of the problem may be opportune here. Can either party speak for Islam as a whole? Can we discern, beneath their differences, any general Moslem point of view? And if we can, is it one with which we ought to identify ourselves?

The Indian Sunnis maintain that the Caliph is not a "spiritual" but a "temporal" or in other words a political authority, and that we shall accordingly be weakening the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph in so far as we weaken him as sovereign of the Turkish Empire. «Every province you detach from Turkey», as they might put it, «means a direct loss to our most cherished

religious institution», and their contention finds considerable support in history. "Caliph" simply means "successor" – the successor and representative of Mohammed; Islam, the community formed by Mohammed, was a political community first and foremost (at any rate, after the Prophet's migration to Medina in 622 A.D.) and only secondarily a social system or a religion; and the officer to whom Mohammed transmitted his own authority over the Moslems (that is, over the people who had submitted to his regulations) must therefore have been invested with political power. This was in fact the case, and the early Caliphs were undoubtedly political sovereigns, whether or no they were anything besides. But as we follow the history of the institution we come across two developments that considerably modify its original character: it becomes partitioned between rival claimants and it becomes divorced from the exercise of ordinary political authority.

Mohammed has never had an undisputed successor. The first three *de facto* Caliphs, though they are regarded as legitimate by the Sunni majority of the Moslem world, are rejected by the Shia minority, who begin with the fourth actual Caliph, Ali, recognise his descendants (who mostly lived as fugitives from Ali's *de facto* successors) as lawful Caliphs through twelve generations, and believe that the twelfth "Imam" disappeared mysteriously and, though now invisible, has never ceased to reign. Since his disappearance, no living man can be an orthodox Caliph in the eyes of the Shia, and the Shia denomination, though a minority in the Moslem world, is after all the state religion of Persia, and is followed by perhaps hardly less than 20 per cent. of the Moslems of India. The Imam Yahia of Sana'a, the most powerful prince in south-western Arabia, is a Shia, and has never acknowledged the Ottoman Sultan's Caliphate though he was compelled, before the war, to accept his political suzerainty. The Sultans of Morocco, who, like Yahia, trace their descent from the Prophet, have also never acknowledged a Caliph of Turkish descent, nor, again, have fanatical or reforming sects like the former Mahdists in the Egyptian Sudan, the Senussi in the Libyan desert, or the Wahhabis in Central Arabia. But the most significant dissent is that of the Arabs in the ex-Ottoman territories of Hejaz, Palestine, and Syria, which contain Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and the tomb of Abraham at Hebron, the greatest holy places of the Mohammedan religion. These Arabs are ordinary Sunnis, agreeing with the Turks on all past

questions of Moslem doctrine and law; but they have rejected the Ottoman Caliphate since their revolt against the Ottoman Sultanate in 1915, and to-day, throughout a territory stretching from Mecca to Aleppo, the Sultan's name has been replaced in the Friday liturgy in the mosques by that of Sherif Husein, the hereditary guardian of the Holy Cities of the Hejaz and an undoubted scion of the Prophet's clan. The title of Caliph has not been assumed by him, but he is referred to in the liturgy as "Commander of the Faithful", one of the regular attributes of the Caliphial office, and his descent and hereditary position at Mecca give him a religious prestige which no Turkish ruler of Christian Constantinople can ever attain.

Even this brief historical survey makes it evident that the title to the Caliphate is the most controversial question in the Moslem world, and if we grant that it is a political question, that only strengthens the case against its being taken into consideration by the British Government in the approaching settlement in the territories of the Ottoman Empire. The Indian Sunnis, as the largest section under any one government of the largest sect in Islam, are, of course, entitled to great consideration when they speak on Moslem affairs, but they are not co-extensive with Islam, even in India itself, and it would be a grave mistake to treat their view as if it represented a Moslem consensus on the Caliphate question, when, in fact, such a consensus has never existed. To take an illustration from the peace settlement in Europe, any action on our part in favour of Turkey with the deliberate object of backing up the Ottoman Caliphate for the sake of its supporters in India would be precisely parallel to action in support of the integrity of the Hapsburg Monarchy, the enlargement of Poland, or the revival of the temporal power of the Pope with a view to pleasing our Catholic fellow-citizens in Quebec and Ireland. The Catholics could argue with equal show of reason that the Papacy, like the Caliphate, is historically a political office, and that the Roman Church has a capital interest in the maintenance of Catholic "great powers", but we should not dream of letting such considerations influence our policy or delude ourselves into supposing that by favouring the Catholic interest we should do anything but offend the other sects of Christendom. The parallel between this hypothetical case and the actual demands of the Indian Sunnis is surely complete, and we can only re-affirm the policy repeatedly announced,

during the war, by the Foreign Office and the Government of India: that we regard the question of the Caliphate as one for Moslems to settle for themselves, and therefore rule any consideration of it out of our own political calculations.

So much for the rival claims to the office, but what about its mature? We have seen that the Indian Sunnis are justified historically in regarding it as political, but is it political now? If it is, how can Indian Sunnis distinguish, as they most emphatically do, between their duty to the Ottoman Caliph and their duty to the Government of India? How were they able to maintain their loyalty to that Government when the British Empire and Turkey went to war? And how could Indian soldiers fight the Turkish Sovereign as Sultan by day and pray for him as Caliph at nightfall – like those eleventh-century Norman warriors who took the Pope prisoner in battle and then fell in obeisance at his feet? Surely the whole position of the Indian Moslems, the whole moral claim upon us which their well-proved loyalty gives them, rests upon their maintaining a rigid distinction between the Ottoman Sultan as sovereign of Turkey and the same individual as Caliph of Islam, or, in other words, upon their regarding the Caliphate, at any rate nowadays, as a "spiritual" and not a "temporal" power. Indeed the Caliphate must be regarded as "spiritual" by any Moslems subject to a government, whether Christian or Islamic, which does not acknowledge their Caliph's political suzerainty. The case did not arise at the time when the office was founded, since all Moslems were then under the Caliph's Government, and many centuries passed before any considerable portion of the Moslem world passed under non-Moslem rule. But during the last four centuries the proportion has been steadily growing, and after the forthcoming settlement with Turkey a great majority of the existing Moslem population of the world is likely to be attached, in one form or another, to the British Empire, so that a "temporal" Caliphate will have become something exceptional.

But the purely "spiritual" Caliphate, in the sense of a Caliphate divested of political sovereignty, is far from being a novelty, as we can see by tracing the Ottoman Caliphate back to its origin. The Caliphate was acquired for the Osmanli dynasty in 1517 A.D. by Sultan Selim I, who caused the office to be invested in himself and his heirs by the contemporary Caliph of the Abbasid line. This Abbasid, and his ancestors before him since 1258 A.D., had

been residing as pensioners at the court of the Sultans of Egypt, and if they were not "spiritual" dignitaries during this period, it is difficult to see that they were anything at all, for they certainly did not possess a vestige of political power at Cairo. In 1517, then, the Osmanli dynasty, after overthrowing the Sultans of Egypt and annexing their dominions politically to the Turkish Empire, proceeded to acquire the "spiritual" dignity of the Egyptian Sultans' Abbasid *protégés*, and the Caliphate was once more united with the strongest political power in the Moslem world – but only with the strongest power, not with the only power. The Abbasids themselves, even in the days of their glory, when they ruled from Baghdad the biggest temporal empire of their time, were never either the political or the religious lords of the whole Moslem world. The Omeyyad Caliphs, whom they had supplanted in Asia and Africa, maintained themselves (in Spain) and the Osmanli claim, as we have seen, is more disputed and indeed far less firmly founded than that of the Abbasids. Some early Moslem authorities of great reputation have laid down that the Caliph must be a member of the of the Prophet's clan, the Koreish, or at least an Arab, and the Osmanli dynasty are neither the one nor the other. It is held, again, that the Caliph must be elected, or at any rate accepted, by a consensus of the Moslem world, and here the Ottoman title is equally doubtful. In fact, the title derived by the Osmanli Selim from his investiture by the last Abbasid in 1517, is about as good – or as bad – as the title to the Roman Empire obtained by Charlemagne when he was crowned by the Pope in St. Peter's and acclaimed as "Imperator" and "Augustus" by his Frankish followers and the notables of the Roman duchy.

Yet we may lose ourselves in these historical discussions without getting to the heart of the question as it exists to-day, for it is essentiallv a practical and not an academic problem. The Indian Sunni does not support the Osmanli title out of antiquarian zeal, but because he feels that it supplies, in some way, an essential need of the Moslem world. The Caliphate of the Ottoman Sultan means for him above all that the Ottoman Empire is a Moslem "great power" – a Moslem State, which in face of the growing ascendancy of Christendom, still holds its own in international politics and maintains its sovereignty over Christian subjects. And in this he does express an almost universal Moslem feeling, for many Moslems who do not acknowledge the Ottoman Sultan as Caliph look up to the Ottoman Empire as the

Moslem state which champions the Islamic cause in a hostile world. Now this is a natural and a very genuine point of view, and one can sympathise with the resentment of an Algerian or Punjabi Moslem soldier who has fought loyally for France or England in the war and now suspects that the victory he has helped to win is going to be used by his government to break up the last independent Moslem State and make the political subjection of Islam to Christendom complete. Presumably this is not the intention of the Allied peoples or their governments, but how are we to make that clear? For though we shall not take advantage of the Turkish settlement for anti-Moslem purposes (which we do not entertain) it is also out of the question that we should deliberately favour Moslems in this settlement in violation of our principles. It is not open to us, for instance, to soothe Moslem susceptibilities by leaving under Turkish government the Armenian or Greek Christians whom the Turks have maltreated, or non-Turkish Moslems like the Arabs, who have fought to liberate themselves from Turkish rule. Nor could we really provide the Moslem world with what it wants by bolstering up the Ottoman Empire, for Moslem sentiment about that Empire is largely a delusion. Turkey ceased to be a great power at least a century and a-half ago, and during the past century she has only preserved her existence by becoming the client of successive Christian powers. She is a sham, and Moslems beyond her frontiers would be bound, sooner or later, to see through it, as the Moslems inside her frontiers, who have suffered from it, have done long ago. Turkey has fallen by her own rottenness and cannot be resuscitated, but what substitute for her supposed services can we offer to our Moslem fellow-citizens, among whom may henceforth be numbered the major part of the Moslem world? The answer is clear. The sentiment of Moslems for Turkey is derived ultimately from a feeling that, in some form or other, the Islamic community ought to have political self-expression, and it is in our power to help them to find it in all those Moslem countries which will be directly or indirectly under British control. The void left in Islam by the collapse of Turkey will only be filled by the progress of self-government in India, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia.