Determining Allah's Will
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In the name of Allah, millions of Moslems still faithfully observe the code of the Koran. They refuse to eat pork, do not gamble or drink and never overlook their five daily devotions, performed while facing in the direction of Mecca. Yet the same winds of modernity that have swept through Christianity are now beginning to affect the religion of Mohammed. Last week, at a conference in Kuala Lumpur, Islamic scholars and sages from 23 Moslem nations met to consider ways of accommodating the Prophet's teachings to a changing world.

The conference's host and organizer was Malaysia's Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. A British-educated, golf-playing Moslem, Rahman is convinced that the predominantly Islamic nations of Africa and Asia must take a fresh look at "illogical beliefs" that interfere with their economic and social progress. Like many sophisticated urban followers of Mohammed, he is appalled, for example, by the almost total ignorance of contemporary business and financial practices on the part of rural Moslems. Often picking up their misconceptions from local ulamas, or wise men, these villagers, among other things, refuse to buy life insurance on the ground that it is literally a guarantee against death, and therefore against God's law.

Against Usury. In part, this innocence of money matters is due to Islam's ancient strictures against usury. Although these prohibitions have not interfered with the prosperity of Lebanese bankers or Arab oil sheiks, many Moslems still feel duty-bound to refuse interest payments; they reject the idea of borrowing money and refrain from other business practices that might violate the precepts of the Koran. At the heart of such caution is a conviction that one of a Moslem's basic duties in life is not to compete with his fellow man but to prepare for his entry into heaven by strictly obeying Allah's will.

Nowadays, that will is not always easy to determine. What attitude, for example, should Islam take toward organ transplants? Although tradition forbids the desecration of the Moslem dead, the Kuala Lumpur conference decided that, since Islamic law also holds that life must be preserved if at all possible, human transplants are a legitimate life-saving tool. The meeting dealt similarly with a rather improbable dilemma involving dietary law. Lost in the desert and near starvation, a devout Moslem is suddenly confronted by two bits of unexpected sustenance: a stray piece of pork and some nonforbidden food in the hands of a traveler. Which should he take? He could not snatch the other man's food, the conference agreed, because that might cause the traveler's death. On the other hand, since it was the Moslem's religious duty to preserve his own life, he could eat the pork.

Self-Sacrifice. Taking up more substantial issues, the conference sanctioned birth control in special hardship cases, but refused otherwise to raise the lowly status of women in the Islamic world. Moslem husbands may still divest themselves of an unwanted wife by simply repeating "I divorce thee" three times. The conference also took a surprisingly moderate stand on the Middle East. It refused to consider the demand of the El Fatah guerrillas for a jihad (holy war) against Israel — and pointedly explained that the word jihad also meant sacrificing one's self for the good of mankind.

In some ways the conference was a milestone in Islamic history. Although their decisions do not have the weight of religious law, the delegates hoped that the discussions would persuade traditionalists to re-examine their faith in the light of the 20th century. For the first time in centuries, representatives of the two major Moslem sects — the Shiite and Sunnite — held a formal dialogue on their doctrine. To their surprise, they found themselves

more in accord than apart. One immediate byproduct of this harmony was a resolution to meet again and form an international Islamic research center.

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