

## Islam's New Look

In few departments of its activity has the Legion made more striking advance than in its approach to Islam. It has been cordially received everywhere by Moslems and has been able to enter into discussion with them on the subject of our respective religions. This is of major importance in as much as Islam was universally presumed to be unapproachable. It would not be proper that this should continue to be the case having regard to the fact that Islam is now suggesting that its numbers exceed Catholicism and that in Africa there are two Moslems for every Catholic.

The Legion contacts with them have been of such a friendly and useful character as to suggest that the divine help is being granted to the legionaries. But of course it has to be borne in mind that the approach has been very respectfully made and along lines which have their appeal to the Moslems.

### **Jesus and Mary Claimed as Moslems**

Our method has been to propose to them the strange position of Jesus and Mary in the Koran. I say 'strange'

because their lives are sketched out with considerable approximation to accuracy, much in fact as they are in the apocryphal gospels, and yet they are not of a piece with the body of the Koran, seeming to have no connection with it. A statement of mine to this effect and my query as to what that holy pair are doing in the Koran was replied to by the Dublin Islamic Society as follows: 'Because they were devout Moslems.'

This answer, while it proves the suitability of the Legion approach to them, is startling to us. Because few, if any, among us will ever have heard the assertion that Jesus and Mary were zealous Moslems! How could this be, we ask ourselves, considering that Mahomet was not born until AD 570 and that it was not until forty years later that he had his visions which inaugurated Islam?

But now we find that we are called upon to adjust very radically our ideas on the subject of Islam. The Dublin Islamic Society further declares to us that Mahomet was *not* the founder of Islam and that they regarded the term 'Mohammedanism' as opprobrious. They insist that Mahomet was only a prophet, and that their religion went back through Jesus Christ, whom likewise they venerate as a prophet, and through the whole Jewish genealogical tree to Abraham.

## Two Lines of Descent

The Islamic Society of South Africa asserts the very same, and discussions with a Pakistani Group have been to the same effect: all of these maintain that Islam did not originate with Mahomet but with Abraham and came down not only through Ishmael but also through the Jewish Patriarchs and Prophets and through Jesus Christ to Mahomet. Apparently, therefore, this is now a general

point of view among Moslems so that we must modify the ideas universally held among us that the line of descent of Islam was indeed from Abraham but that it came down through Ishmael, the eldest son of Abraham by Hagar, and through the Arab people.

### **Abraham rejoins the Banished Hagar. He and Ishmael build the Kaaba**

An article in the November 1978 number of the *American Geographical Magazine* by Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, Director of the Islamic Centre, Washington D.C., introduces a new note and adds a new dimension to the situation: Abraham after abandoning Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert of Zamzam, is declared to have returned to them. Later on he and Ishmael built there the original Kaaba or House of God for the worship of the one true God. Though initially false to that trust, the Kaaba was restored to it by Mahomet. Around it would grow up the town of Mecca, and the Kaaba would become the centre of Islam.

In Chapter VI – 84 the Koran speaks of God as giving Isaac and Jacob to Abraham as son and grandson, but quite evidently not in the biblical sense of constituting them as the forbears of the Chosen People, that is the Jews, because it was on Ishmael that Islam was founded. From the beginning Mahomet viewed his descent as through Ishmael and the Arab people. But this leaves the problem as to how Ishmael's descendants can claim a joint possession with the Jews and the Christians of the Old and New Testaments.

### **Jesus and Mary Present but without Function**

Moreover why are Jesus and Mary assigned such a unique place in the genealogy of Islam? The Koran does not

limit itself to specifying their names, as in the case of the other Jewish personages. Jesus is exhibited as greater than Mahomet and Mary as the most blessed among women – why is this? We are driven to suppose that not only did Mahomet regard them as outshining all the other figures but as being somehow necessary to religion in general and to Islam in particular. Yet they are definitely out of context in the Koran. They have no function. Nevertheless they capture the stage.

It would seem therefore as if we must take seriously this new version of Islam presented to us. But one must ask whether all the Islamic world accepts that version. Do all Arab Moslems receive the Bible inclusive of the Gospel? If they do, the Islamic problem is simplified for us to an immense extent. Because then, without laying ourselves open to any counterattack that we are seeking to convert them, we can explain that our purpose is to help them to appreciate fully a vital portion of Islam which at present they are only seeing dimly, that is the Christian part.

No doubt the cause of this is that though the references to Jesus and Mary are numerous and highly significant, they are small in proportion to the ordinary material of the Koran and have therefore been obscured in the mind of the Moslem reader. So it is imperative that attention be directed towards them. It should be emphasised that they are really like diamonds lying half-hidden in the great mass of surrounding material. Their significance is such as to carry with it some obligation, just as the other items of the Koran do. This could take the shape of meditation on them or acts of devotion to them. Moslems have never been instructed to that effect.

Moreover it is not a case of simple references. The entire lives of Jesus and Mary are recounted in the Koran with

an approximation to the vividness of the gospel. When these things are pointed out to the Moslems, they are most intrigued.

### Pointing to Christian Roots

No, it is not because Jesus and Mary were merely zealous Moslems that they are so proclaimed in the Koran. The explanation must lie in some sort of inner association with Christianity by Mahomet in his pre-Islamic days. It has always been recognised that both Judaism and Christianity played moulding parts in connection with the Koran. It is certain that Mahomet was acquainted with both of these religions and affected by them. It is probable that the Syriac Apocryphal Gospel was used by the Nestorian Christians at the time of Mahomet and was well known to him. These things had their influence on the Koran. Mahomet's statement that it was the Archangel Gabriel who appeared to him in his trances and communicated to him the Koranic revelation, cannot be viewed by us as anything but a throw-back to the origin of Christianity.

The *National Geographical* article, already mentioned, advances far beyond that and speaks of 'the Moslem as being conscious of a common religious heritage with Judaism and Christianity, the other great monotheistic faiths that rose amid the deserts of the Middle East. For to a Moslem, Islam is God's revelation made to Adam and Noah, the religion of David and the Prophets of Israel, and of Jesus and the Twelve Apostles. For the final time, in its purity, the true religion was revealed to the Prophet Mahomet.'

No more comprehensive claim than this could be made. Islam proclaims itself to be the culminating point of World-Religion. As the Old Law was the foundation of

the New Law, so Islam is the superstructure of the Old and New Laws! They existed for Islam, and Islam purified them!

Before proceeding to analyse this, I add another item which is too related to be omitted and which has decisive bearing. Among the Christians of at least one of the Middle East Arab countries, the firm tradition exists that when Mahomet first turned to religion it was to become a Christian, and that then he began to preach that religion. This he did with such success that his horizons widened. He began to think in terms of a new religion more applicable to his surroundings and which would carry on from Christianity, which had been expelled from Arabia in 570 by the Persians. Incidentally that year was the date of the birth of Mahomet.

Still more strange is the story, widely accepted in the Middle Ages and referred to in Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England* (Vol. 1, p. 316) that Mahomet was a cardinal and that it was out of disappointment at not having been made Pope that he started Islam. It is hard to believe that even a legend could take such a form unless Mahomet had some very close association with Catholicism. It is to be mentioned that the term 'cardinal' was already coming into use at that time.

For another account of a very different kind I turn to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; (9th Edition, Vol. 16). I summarise:

That Mahomet did not independently produce his ideas is indisputable. Nor is it to be doubted that he derived them from the Hanifs with whom he came in touch through a cousin of his wife, Khadija who

was herself a Hanif. A profound influence was exercised on the Hanifs and on the Prophet himself by the Christian monks in the desert.

### Mahomet a Baptised Christian?

The early origins of Islam are ascribed generally to Jewish sources, common among Arabs, including almost all the stories of the Koran and a great part of its laws. The theological language of Islam is full of Jewish words. But all the foregoing was only the leaven added later to the primitive impulses. Neither in truth can Christianity be viewed as the proper source of Islam, but it can hardly be wrong to conclude that the nameless witnesses to the Gospel, unmentioned in Church history, that is the Christian monks, scattered the seed from which sprang the germ of Islam. The Hanifs stood nearer to Christianity than to Judaism, and were sometimes called by the same name as the Christian monks.

When the situation of the Moslems in Mecca became intolerable, Mahomet advised them to fly to Abyssinia; the Abyssinian Christians being quite looked upon as their religious kinsmen. Furthermore it is stated that for a considerable time Mahomet retained a feeling of solidarity with the Christians and even set aside a portion of the mosque for them to perform their ceremonies.

It cannot be denied that the foregoing appears to establish at least a very close association between Mahomet and Christianity. It tends towards confirming that story that he was at one time a Baptised Christian. Actually the Moslems admit that a veil of silence covers Mahomet's life for fifteen years; that is from twenty-five to forty years of age.

Although much of his system was adopted from the Jews, Mahomet soon broke away from any friendship with them. As part of this he altered the original Islamic practice of turning towards Jerusalem in prayer, substituting the direction to Mecca and making the Kaaba the centre-point of Moslem worship. Also he changed the principal day of public worship from the Sabbath to Friday at midday. From the Jews he had incorporated the idea of an animal sacrifice but limited it to the time of the Meccan Festival. The Moslems were to fulfil this sacrifice as much as possible even if they could not be actually present on the spot. This is still maintained during the annual festival to Mecca when most Moslems arrange for an animal sacrifice. Large herds of sheep are available to the pilgrims who can wield the knife themselves or employ a butcher.

This adoption from the Jewish system of an animal sacrifice was a step backward. Because Islam declares that it accepts the Bible, the whole theme of which is that animal sacrifice only prefigured the Sacrifice of Christ and would lose its meaning at his death.

### Problem of Redemption

Islam believes in the Fall and in Original Sin, and that at birth every child of Adam is tainted by that sin except Jesus and Mary. But it does not teach the Redemption. So in what way is mankind freed from Original Sin and the other effects of the Fall?

Moreover, as more primitive ideas become outmoded, the notion of sacrificing animals becomes repugnant and is rejected. How will Islam explain away its inevitable pushing aside of the practice which is commanded by the Koran? The Koran cannot be altered.

The special practices of Islam are five in number, styled the Five Pillars of Islam: (1) Profession of the unity of God; (2) Prayer five times a day in which the Kaaba must be faced; (3) The giving of alms; (4) Fasting during Ramadan; (5) Observance of the festival of Mecca.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is probably excessively severe in its appraisal of the early days of Islam when it declares that: 'No God but the one God' was the entire sum of its theology, and that as Islam expanded into an Arab Confederation it lost its religious character and became to a very large extent a rallying ground and a drill system for the community. But of course some colour is lent to this by the fact that conversion to Islam was made a condition of surrender for all the tribes conquered in battle by the Moslems. They were anti-Islam before the battle and after their submission they were Moslems!

In the latest edition of that encyclopaedia the note of criticism is more lightly struck, but one would feel, too lightly with consequent hurt to the value of the article.

### Ishmael not Isaac?

The Koran is specific that it was Ishmael, and not Isaac, whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice, the other details of the biblical account being the same, such as the substitution of the ram for the human victim. It is told that it was at this very spot that the Kaaba was raised. The annual pilgrimage to it instituted by Abraham and Ishmael was continued by succeeding Arab generations. But pagan practices were gradually introduced and at the time of Mahomet, Arabian heathenism had become the traditional form of worship. The gods were many. Idols were in every home and homage was paid to them as the people went out and in. There was a manufacture of idols

and a busy trade in them. But above them all stood Allah, the highest and universal god. These lesser gods are said to have been regarded as children of Allah.

Mahomet stripped all those gods of divinity, reducing them to the level of subordinate spirits or devils. He abolished all idols and images both in the homes and outside them. Each tribe and section in Arabia had its own deity in honour of whom it had installed an idol. To each was directed a ceremonial and the sum-total was a formidable heathenish worship with its heavy grip on the people. It is easy to understand that when Mahomet proceeded to introduce Islam about 612, he encountered opposition. As the Meccans saw things, he was hitting at their livelihood. Gradually he made converts and soon a bitter persecution broke out against them. In 622, which is called the year of the Hegira, he and a group of his followers fled to Medina, 200 miles to the North.

## Medina and Mecca

Mahomet was kindly received in Medina and listened to. He gained many recruits. In 630 he assembled an army of 10,000 and attacked Mecca. After vicissitudes he took the town and from that day Mecca has remained the pinnacle of the Moslem world which boasts of adherents in unexpected places, for example forty million in Russia, seventeen million in China.

In Mecca his first act was to proceed to the Kaaba and make the seven prescribed circuits. Then he went inside the edifice and looked around. What met his eye was of course painfully familiar to him: the bewildering array of religious objects, each standing for one of the multitudinous creeds of the country. It was what he had come to abolish.

## Mahomet Displays an Attitude which would be Typical of a Catholic

Among them an image of a quite different type had somehow inserted itself. It was a picture of the Virgin Mary with her child. We know of it through an Arab historian El Araqi. He writes as follows on the subject: 'It was on the nearest column of the gateway of the Kaaba and represented Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus, Son of Mary) on her knees and leaning against her breast. On both of them be blessing! The picture, probably of Syrian origin, was surrounded by fetishes and pictures of pagan images which turned the Kaaba into a pandemonium. Each tribe placed there its own special deity and these amounted to a total of three hundred and sixty idols. When Mahomet captured Mecca in the year eight of the Hegira, that is AD 630, he had all those figures destroyed, making a single exception – that of Jesus. The apostle of Allah had water brought from Zamzam. At his order a linen cloth was then drenched with it. Then placing the palm of his hand over the representations of Isa ibn Maryam and of his mother – on both of whom be salvation! – he said: "Obliterate every picture in this place with the exception of these which my hands are protecting".'

Thus is recounted a happening which is not merely picturesque but of extreme importance. Why did Mahomet, at a moment when an iconoclastic fervour filled him, make a drastic exception in favour of an image of Our Lady and her son? Unquestionably it meant that he did not regard the image as an idol or objectionable object but as something to which veneration was due. How could this be except that he had the outlook of a Catholic upon it? Remember that he did not indulge in any scrutiny of the medley of images with a view to

a selection. He intended to destroy them all with the exception of that one picture well known to him from his previous intimate knowledge of the Kaaba. A Protestant Reformer would have destroyed it. Mahomet on the contrary not only showed it public respect but retained it in the Kaaba. The lesson of this is evident: Mahomet not only understood the role of the Virgin Mary and the legitimacy of an image of her, but also agreed with it. How could he think thus except that he had been a Catholic?

### The Big Question

Now let us endeavour to put all that miscellaneous mass of evidence into an answer to the question: How is it possible for Islam to present the claim that it inherits Judaism and Christianity in a real, genuine way? Merely to incorporate into Islam a number of items from those other religions would not represent a true inheriting. The supernatural heritage from Abraham was intended to follow the natural order. Isaac received it from Abraham and transmitted it down to the Chosen People. Christianity in turn was a true inheritance from Judaism. But in what sense can Islam claim to have either Judaism or Christianity in its family tree?

I think that the most that can be said of any association of Mahomet with the Jews was that he may have known many of them. Nowhere is there any suggestion of a closer relationship. Then how is it that he could claim that Islam through him is the heir to the Covenant which came down through Isaac and the Jewish line of descent? And he does make that association, claiming the Old Testament, the Patriarchs and Prophets, terminating with Jesus Christ, then on to the New Testament which he likewise claims as true part of Islam.

I repeat that it is through this very channel of heredity that Islam claims to possess descent from Abraham. It is the case that Islam places Ishmael as the first link between Abraham and that chain, but how this could be so is not explained, for Ishmael and his descendants had nothing to do with the Jewish line of descent. The racial line of descent was from Ishmael down through the Arabs to Mahomet, an independent line altogether. No Islamic document which I have ever seen attempts to solve this anomaly, nor even makes reference to it.

### A Sensational Answer

Here I am going to propound a solution which at first sight is sensational but which would give a legitimacy to Islam's claim and which would impart substance to Mahomet's assertion that he was a true heir to Judaism and Christianity; it being understood that we are looking at the entire transaction from the point of view of Mahomet, that is accepting his revelations for the purposes of argument.

My proposition is that Mahomet did in fact become a Christian during his pre-Islamic life; and that the various evidences already quoted to that effect are justified.

In that case, Mahomet, believing that St Gabriel was making to him a new annunciation that he was to purify and develop religion, would consider himself to be in an analogous position to that of Our Lady herself at the time of her Annunciation. As she was a Jew and true heir to Judaism, so was he as a Christian, heir to both Christianity and Judaism. In no other way could Mahomet make claim to an inheritance from Judaism. But if he judged himself to be a Christian, he could logically make that claim.

As a Christian, he would have received with Jesus Christ all that Jesus was heir to and all that Jesus promulgated. Speaking as a new Prophet appointed by the Angel Gabriel, Mahomet could reasonably believe that he was the heir to all the Judaeo-Christian history and revelations, and divinely commissioned to carry it on and reform it through Islam.

### In This Way Might Justify Claim

Only in this way could Islam claim inheritance from Isaac. It is no use for Islam to protest that Mahomet received it from Ishmael. The Covenant was categorically declared by God as *not* descending through Ishmael. The passage of Genesis declaring this is as follows: 'God said to Abraham: Sara thy wife shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name Isaac, and I will establish my covenant with him for a perpetual covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have also heard thee. Behold, I will bless him and increase and multiply him exceedingly; he shall beget twelve chiefs, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sara will bring forth to thee at this time in the next year' (17:19-21).

You will shrink from the very suggestion that Mahomet was entitled to regard himself as being placed in the same position as the Blessed Virgin and similarly honoured by an annunciation of the Angel Gabriel. But my point here is that *if* Mahomet was then a Christian and *if* he believed that he was divinely commissioned to reform existing religion, then it would be legitimate for him to regard himself as heir through Jesus and Mary to Christianity and Judaism back to Isaac and Abraham. I repeat: in what other way could he, a descendant of Ishmael, rationally claim to be the descendant of Isaac and heir to the Covenant?

## The Compiling of the Koran

Islam teaches that it was in the grotto of Mount Hara that the angel came to Mahomet bringing the Koran which had been written on a table in the seventh heaven. Gabriel had received it in one volume but he only communicated it to Mahomet bit by bit and over a period of twenty-three years. Mahomet did not write any of it down. It was recorded haphazardly by listeners. When he died, the Koran existed only in scattered fragments. The Caliph laid the duty of collection on Zayd a former slave of Mahomet, then twenty-three years old. Zayd says that he brought together the revelation from pieces written on flat stones or on scraps of paper or parchment or leaves of palm trees, but mostly from the recollections of men. From all this miscellaneous assortment he compiled a fair copy. It had no sort of approval and quarrels broke out over it. In AD 650 the matter reached a climax and the task was entrusted to Zayd and three others to prepare a canonical edition. They accumulated as much material as possible and made a selection. This was approved; then every likely rival to that version was destroyed. It may be wondered how the original form of the Koran managed to survive such a dispersion into small fragments and such a drastic re-assembling of them, all depending on a sanction given by Caliph Uthman about twenty years after Mahomet's death, and on a technical revision about AD 682. That final result is the present Koran, which St Gabriel described as a single volume in his hands, and which Islam declares to be divine.

Considering that those original fragments were not numbered, how was it possible to fix the order in which they were to be placed? And if a thousand of the pieces were the same, did they stand for a thousand different

statements by the Prophet, or did they represent duplicates of what he said on a single occasion? If some of them were inaccurate reporting's of what the Prophet had said, how was this to be determined?

### Puzzling Aspects

Except as regards length (about 80,000 words), there is no comparing of the Koran with the New Testament. The never-ending theme of the Koran is that God knows all things; that he is indulgent and merciful, and that torments await the infidel and the unjust. There is much about warring down one's enemies, much about booty and about the vengeances of God; this is indeed what we might call the tone of the Koran. Maledictions are directed against the Jews but not against the Christians. In fact it is insisted that the nearest in love to the Believers are the Christians.

The idea of a spiritual life and growth in it is missing. Its inspirational quality is definitely weak. I do not see in it anything which could be classed as original thinking. Much of it is just stereotyped words and phrases.

There is much 'awkwardness' in the Koran which is certain to cause trouble in the future, and it is to be borne in mind that the Koran cannot be altered.

1. It specifically encourages religious war, insisting: 'When you encounter the infidels, strike off their heads until you have made a great slaughter of them.' There are too many 'blood pages' as if war not peace is to be the aim of life.
2. The animal sacrifice already referred to.
3. Mahomet's establishment of a limited polygamy.
4. The episode called the Nocturnal Adventure will create dissent at a future more sophisticated time. One night

St Gabriel called for Mahomet, bringing with him a flying steed which transported the Prophet to the seven heavens. In these Mahomet encountered and chatted familiarly with God, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Joseph and John. Also he prayed with them. God himself declared that a Moslem was to pray one hundred times a day. When Moses heard this, he told Mahomet to go back and point out to God that people would not pray to that extent. So Mahomet made his petition for less and God reduced it to forty times a day. Still Moses thought this too much and in successive interviews Mahomet secured progressive reductions ending in the present statutory five times a day. Whereupon Mahomet returned to earth. All this paints a heaven brought down to a child's level of thought. It possesses the fantastic quality of a dream; it certainly does not come up to one's idea of a vision.

Mahomet was born in Mecca in AD 570 and died in Medina in 632.

### **Towards a Happy Outcome**

Fr Malik OP makes the observation that Islam has only been permitted by God to continue on in history because one day it will come under the sweet obedience of Christ.