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Muhammad or Christ?

BY THE REV. W. ST. CLAIR TISDALL, D.D.

THE religion founded by the Arabian "Prophet" is now professed by between 233,000,000 and 260,000,000 of our fellow-creatures. It extends over a very large portion of all three Continents of the Old World. In India alone its professors number 62,000,000—far more than the whole of the professing Christians in the British Empire. Commended to its adherents not less by its few half-truths and its apparent simplicity than by its warlike spirit and its lax moral code, Islâm has long exercised, and even now exercises, over the hearts and lives of many millions of Muhammadans an almost unparalleled influence, largely for evil.

Islâm is a corrupt form of later Judaism, mixed with ideas and ceremonies drawn from Arabian heathenism. There may be found in it also certain traditions and fables borrowed from Zoroastrianism and from the Apocryphal Gospels. But all these have been moulded into a not very harmonious union by the mind and character of Muhammad himself. In the religion of the Muslim the "Prophet" holds very nearly the same position as that of our Lord in the Christian. It is true that Muhammad is not considered to be Divine, yet he is entitled the "Seal of the Prophets," the "Chosen" of God, and Muslims believe, on their Prophet's authority, that God would not have created the world but for his sake. He represents God's ideal man, so to speak, and—except in certain of his matrimonial privileges, about which the less said the better—is the Divinely appointed model for humanity. Not only are his postures in worship and his habits in connection with personal cleanliness observed, in theory if not in practice, throughout the Muhammadan world, but men often dye their very beards the same colour as his to show their devotion to their Prophet. Every attempted revival of Muhammadanism results in the production of large numbers of fanatics, differing from him only in really

believing—as doubtless MuḤammad after his departure from Mecca in large measure ceased to believe,—that in their career of bloodshed and cruelty (as in the Sūdān not long since) they are really pleasing God. MuḤammad's spirit still, to an almost incredible degree, animates all who are sincere adherents of the faith which he founded more than thirteen hundred years ago.

MuḤammadanism owes its hold over those who profess it in part to the half-truths which it inculcates, in part to the ignorance of its votaries, but partly also to the terribly corrupt forms of Christianity which still exist in MuḤammadan lands. MuḤammad discovered not a single new truth, nor did he inculcate a single moral precept which had not been far more forcibly taught in the Old Testament. On the contrary, he fell far short of the moral code of the latter in his precepts. The Mosaic Law only tacitly permitted polygamy, and sanctioned divorce only temporarily to prevent worse evils. MuḤammad not only sanctioned both polygamy and divorce in so many words, both in the Qur'ān and in tradition, but also by his own example showed how completely he wished his followers to regard these practices as in accordance with God's revealed will for all time. Were MuḤammad's claim to be the greatest of the Prophets true, his system ought to be at least as far superior to that of Christ as the New Testament revelation is to that contained in the Old. Instead of this, we find that he has retrograded far behind the standard reached by the Prophets of Israel. Islām has cast away the Mosaic priesthood without substituting in its stead the High-Priesthood of Christ. It has no clearly defined moral code, like the Ten Commandments, nor anything remotely approaching the New Commandment given by our Lord. It holds out no hope of a coming Redeemer, but denies the atoning death of Christ, and knows no atonement for sin. The Qur'ān offers no glorious hope of a sinless future, but instead tells of a carnal Paradise. Yet, in spite of its many defects, Islām has retained a certain measure of truth. Its creed well illustrates the character of the religion, consisting, as Gibbon well says, “of an eternal truth and a necessary fiction”: “There

is no god but God ; Muḥammad is the Apostle of God." The grand and simple Monotheism of the first part of this "Kalimah" commends its acceptance to many minds, and not a few are led to accept the second clause because of the first. If they do, they cannot entertain any doubt about the other parts of the Islâmic faith, resting as they do simply and solely on the authority of Muḥammad. It is only in this sense that Muḥammadanism can be truly styled a simple faith. To represent it as devoid of miracles and mysteries is to show oneself ignorant alike of the Qur'ân and of the authoritative traditions of the Prophet. No religion which recognizes a Creator and a creation, heaven and hell, sin and righteousness, can possibly be free from the element of mystery. The later Muslim writings relate many absurd miracles as wrought by Muḥammad ; and though the Qur'ân attributes none to him, it does to the prophets who preceded him. Islâm is simple only in relation to its *evidences*, which consist solely in Muḥammad's unfounded *assertion* of his Divine mission.

The principal elements of truth which Islâm has retained from earlier religions are : (1) Belief in the unity of God, and in the great distinction between His nature and attributes and those of His creatures ; (2) belief in the fact that man is dependent upon his Creator, that he needs and has received a Divine revelation through inspired prophets and books, and that God can hear and answer prayer ; (3) belief in the fact of an after-life of rewards and punishments. The testimony which the "Faith" bears to these truths is clear and indisputable. Yet we must not fancy that Muslims themselves consider that these tenets are the fundamental doctrines of their religion. These may all be classed under the first of the two clauses of which their creed consists, but the *second* clause is that which, in the opinion of Muḥammadans, distinguishes it from the creeds of "Unbelievers" like us Christians. Hence no one can be recognized as worthy of the title of a Muḥammadan who believes the three great truths which we have stated above, but refuses to accept all the rest of Muḥammad's teaching. Muslims

define faith as the point upon which all kinds of good works turn, and say that its great support is "to believe in and trust with sincerity of heart to whatever things His Excellency Muḥammad asserted." Therefore the Muslim accepts as the chief doctrines of his religion the following five points, in which Muḥammad is said to have summed up the essence of his teaching: (1) The testifying that there is no god but God, and that Muḥammad is His servant and His apostle; (2) the offering of prayer; (3) the payment of *Zakât* (alms fixed by Divine law); (4) the pilgrimage to Mecca; and (5) fasting during Ramazân.

Even concerning the three great truths previously mentioned, Muḥammad's teaching is by no means free from very serious error. He had absolutely no conception whatever of a God of infinite holiness, of infinite justice, and of infinite love. God has ninety-nine "most excellent names," but among them we do not find that of "Father." Not only so, but the use of such a term with reference to God seems to a Muslim to be terrible blasphemy. Their theologians inform us that the difference between God and man is so immeasurable that no inference with regard to God's dealings with men can possibly be drawn by considering what our intuitions with regard to love or holiness may lead us to expect. "There is no creed the inner life of which has been so completely crushed under an inexorable weight of ritual. For that deep, impassable gulf which divides man from God empties all religious acts of spiritual life and meaning, and reduces them to rites and ceremonies."¹ A German writer² well says: "However much he" (Muḥammad) "discourses about God's righteousness, His wrath against sin, His grace and mercy, yet Allâh is not holy love, not the negation of all self-seeking and sensuality. Neither in holiness nor in love is He just. Towards the ungodly, love does not attain to its right. Allâh is quick and ready enough to punish them, to lead them astray, and to harden their hearts; His wrath is not free from passion. Towards believers, that

¹ Osburn, "Islâm under the Khâlifis of Baghdâd.

² Hauri, "Der Islâm," p. 45.

holiness which can love nothing impure is defective. Allâh can permit His Prophet to do things which would otherwise be objectionable ; to the rest of the believers also He can permit what is not of itself good. . . . The commandments which Allâh gives are not the expression of His nature : they are arbitrary, and can therefore be retracted and replaced by others. Thus the God of Muḥammad leaves upon us the impression of an arbitrary Oriental despot, who makes His enemies experience His wrath in a terrible manner, and loads His faithful servants with benefits, besides winking at their misdeeds."

To the Muslim mind, the one attribute of God which towers above and casts in the shadow all others is that of *Power*. There is some reason to believe that in all Semitic tongues the word for God (*Él, ʾĪlu, Elôah, Ilâh*) is derived from a root which primarily denoted *Strength*. Perhaps Muḥammadanism, in this as in many other points, follows very early Semitic ideas. Islâm may with reason be styled the Deification of Power. This power may be exercised in the most arbitrary manner, and is quite uncontrolled by any attribute of justice or mercy that may by theologians be in words acknowledged as existent in the Nature of God. Hence it is that Muslims are quite unable to see that the moral obliquity observable in so many of their Prophet's actions forms any argument against him. "If *we* were to do so-and-so," they say, "doubtless we should be guilty of murder or adultery, as the case may be. But Muḥammad was not guilty of any such crime in doing as he did, for he was God's chosen, and God *commanded* him to do so." If we reply that it is a moral impossibility for God to command distinct breaches of His own moral law, inasmuch as this law is inherent in the very being of God, they fail to see what we mean. Nay, more, they deem such an assertion blasphemous, for it appears to them contrary to their belief in the Divine Omnipotence. "God," they say, "can do as He will, and is answerable to no one. He can permit His Prophet also to do without guilt what it would be wrong for another to do ; in fact, He has rewarded Muḥammad, and shown His Divine favour to him

by making it right for him to indulge in practices forbidden to other men.”

It is well known that belief in an inexorable fate is one of the distinguishing characteristics of a true Muslim. In India recently a missionary succeeded in persuading most of the Hindūs in a certain village to guard against an approaching visitation of the plague by being inoculated in the proper manner, but the Musalmāns refused, because they said that, if it was their fate to die of the plague, nothing could save them, and, if not, they would be safe without any such precaution. Hence, when the disease came, most of them died, while the Hindūs nearly all escaped. Tradition declares that Muḥammad said that, before the creation of the world, God commanded the Pen which He had made to write down on the base of the Preserved Tablet in heaven everything that would ever occur in the world, even to the extent of the movement of the leaves of a tree when shaken by the breeze. Long before every man's birth his fate for time and for eternity was irrevocably fixed by Divine decree. In the Qur'ân God says, “Verily I will fill hell with men and genii,”¹ and declares that for this very purpose He had created them.² “God misleadeth whom He will, and guideth aright whom He will,”³ and He says of Himself in the Qur'ân, “As for every man, We have bound his fate”⁴ (*literally*, “his bird”) “about his neck.” The word “Islâm” denotes *resignation*, but it is resignation to such a Deity as this—the resignation, not of love and trust, but of impotence, of terror, of despair. The Muḥammadan theologians tell us that a true believer should remember that he is as helpless in God's hands as is a corpse in those of the washers of the dead. None but those who are personally acquainted with the Muḥammadan lands of the East can in any degree realize what the results of this soul-blighting doctrine have been.

It is true that Islâm teaches the necessity of prayer, and yet Muḥammadan writers altogether fail to apprehend its true

¹ Sûrah xi. 120, xxxii. 13.

³ *Ibid.* lxxiv. 34.

² *Ibid.* vii. 178, xi. 120.

⁴ *Ibid.* xvii. 14.

nature. They consider it as *homage* required by the Deity, not as a means of spiritual communion with the "Father of Spirits." This homage must be rendered precisely as it has been enjoined. Hence the stated prayers must be in Arabic, whether understood by the worshippers or not. He must observe the prescribed ritual in genuflexions and prostrations, and must worship at the five times each day Divinely appointed. The face must be turned towards Mecca, and the ablutions of hands and feet are as necessary as any other part of the ceremony, but pureness of heart is not prescribed as even to be sought. Certain places render the prayers there offered particularly meritorious. "A prayer in this mosque of mine,"¹ said Muḥammad, "is better than a thousand prayers anywhere else except in the sacred mosque at Mecca." On another occasion he declared: "A man's prayer in the congregation exceeds in value twenty-five times his prayer in his own house."² One of the most difficult things for a Muslim inquirer to learn is how to pray to God "in spirit and in truth," since all his previous training leads him rather to inquire what the prescribed ritual for worship is.

Islām, like all other false religions, has a very shallow concept of the enormity of sin. The general opinion among Muslims is that sin is a transgression of certain arbitrary commands of the Deity which happen to be in operation at the time. For instance, it was wrong in the Christian dispensation to spread one's religion by the sword, because Christ, who was then the Prophet of God, forbade it. But now it is the duty of a Muḥammadan to "fight in the way of God" at least when duly summoned to a holy war, because Muḥammad, the "Prophet with the Sword," has been Divinely commissioned to command this and to annul the command previously given by Christ Jesus. Or, again, many actions which are sinful in this world, because prohibited, will be sanctioned in the next world, and will then cease to be sinful. There are reasons to conclude, for example, that a *very* great excess of unchastity on earth is a sin, and yet the rewards promised in the Qur'ān and in the

¹ "Mishkat," p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Traditions to Muslims in Paradise include as their most attractive feature unlimited indulgence in this degrading vice. No one can tell why God should have seen fit to restrict such conduct here, but, if His temporary prohibition of excess be observed in this life, the true believer may indulge his lower appetites to the full in the endless life beyond. All sins, except that of "associating" partners with God (*shirk*), can obtain forgiveness if committed by a Muslim, provided only that he observes certain fixed regulations, such as fasting, making the pilgrimage to Mecca, giving alms, etc., for these things blot out sin, as does also the regular observance of the five daily times of prayer.

Nothing shows the real character of Islām, and the divorce which it makes between religion and morality, more clearly than the picture which it draws of the kind of bliss reserved for its professors in Paradise. What the Qur'ân says on this subject is unfit to be read aloud to a Christian assembly, but the details there given seemed to Muslim theologians too scanty, and they have eagerly gathered up every tradition in which Muḥammad represented these pleasures in still more glowing colours. The awful state of society in Muḥammadan lands is in very large measure the result of the sensual pictures thus presented to the imagination. Some theologians have tried to explain away the clear meaning of these promises, but the attempt is a manifest failure. Authoritative tradition represents Muḥammad as saying : "Verily the least of the inhabitants of Paradise in rank is he who shall behold his gardens, his wives, and his pleasures, and his servants, and his couches, extending over the space of 1,000 years' journey ; and the most acceptable unto God among them shall look upon His face night and day." Here we perceive that Muḥammad associates the beatific vision with an indulgence in sensual pleasures, and regards it as an *additional* reward given by God to His chief favourites in Paradise. Could any idea be more dishonouring to God and more fatal to the possibility of the growth of the very conception of purity in the minds of Muslims ?

We cannot now dwell upon the many other defects in the religion of Islâm—its innate intolerance, its unscientific cosmogony, its entire absence of proof. Strangely enough, the Qur'ân affirms the authority and inspiration of both the Old and the New Testament, while at the same time it abounds in statements which contradict them in both small and great matters. But some among us have failed to notice the essentially anti-Christian nature of the religion. Many passages from the Qur'ân might be adduced to prove this, but one will suffice. In a verse which is perhaps the Prophet's last pronouncement upon the great central truth of the Christian faith, he represents God as saying: "Verily they have blasphemed who say, 'God is truly the Messiah, Son of Mary.' Say thou, 'Then who would possess any claim upon God, if He wished to destroy the Messiah, Son of Mary, and His mother, and all that are in the earth?'"¹ This being so, how can Christian men proclaim a truce with Islâm? It is only in MuḤammadan lands to-day that the profession of faith in Christ renders the convert liable to death at the executioner's hands.

In spite of its half-truths borrowed from earlier religions, therefore, Islâm has preserved in the life and character of its founder an enduring principle of degradation. What Palgrave said of one MuḤammadan land is true of them all: "When the Qur'ân and Mecca shall have disappeared from Arabia, then, and then only, can we expect to see the Arab assume that place in the ranks of civilization from which MuḤammad and his book have, more than any other cause, long held him back."

¹ Sûrah v. 19.

