

## A SEPTUAGINTAL SEMINAR IN JERUSALEM, JULY, 1958

by ERIC F. F. BISHOP

**M**R. BISHOP, whose "Apostles of Palestine" is noticed elsewhere in this issue, maintains his lively interest in the well-being of the Holy Land and its inhabitants. In particular, he has exerted himself actively for the past ten years for the alleviation of the plight of the Arab refugees, especially in the Zerka area. The report which follows reveals him as a Christian intensely devoted to the Muslim world, yet remaining completely loyal to the Christian witness with its evangelistic emphasis which can never countenance a merely syncretistic rapprochement of the two faiths.

"SEVENTY" was roughly the number of missionaries and other Christian workers, who gathered in Jerusalem from countries outside Jordan for three weeks' study of Islamic Issues in relationship to the New Testament and the World Church. With Jordanians the number reached a hundred—at some sessions exceeded this number. The missionary contingent represented a cross-section of Christian endeavour in these times. French missionaries from Algeria, Norwegian from Tunis, Danish from Aden and Nebk (Syria) with American (overwhelmingly) and British from Istanbul and Ankara, Sudan, Muscat, Kuwait, Basrah, Baghdad, Beirut and Tripoli, Minya and Darau (Egypt) and a few other places perhaps less known in the western world. Both sides of the Jordan were represented; and on two occasions missionary visitors from "across the way" (Israel) were welcomed, one of whom gave the "Summer School" an account of his experiences and impressions during the last decade. If any society be mentioned, it would be the United Bible Societies with its American, Armenian and Lebanese personnel.

The group came spontaneously at the invitation of Canon Kenneth Cragg (now attached to St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem), who has been enabled to visit in these and other lands during the biennium that he has had a "roving" commission to seek new paths to understanding of the Islamic world and suggest fresh ways of meeting what can best be described as the challenge presented once more to the Church of Christ in this great connexion. To his leadership and genius must be chiefly attributed the conception of the Summer School and the unflagging interest of the participants right through the planned programme, though

the tense circumstances of the month in different parts of the area necessitated some of the members curtailing their stay. But the Pakistani Professor with his family came all the way by train and car from Turkey through Aleppo, Damascus and 'Amman. The outreach of *Jerusalem* was aptly similar to what was the case "when the Day of Pentecost was fully come". Despite the vicissitudes of the Near East, its people remain a constant feature in and out of "refugeedom" in the middle of kaleidoscopic changes in the realm of politics, in Northern Africa and the hinterland of Western Asia.

There seem to be different ways of making research into the vast subject of Muslim-Christian relationships in these days. The Colloquiums of Princeton and Lahore (the next is planned for Cairo) have been on the purely academic level, with Muslim and Christian participation; but the objective study has been of Islam in itself. There are a few concerned with a syncretistic endeavour, which promote the cause of comparative religion; and no one will lightly deny the common "monotheistic" rock from which Judaism, Christianity and Islam have alike been hewn. There have been the equally recent Convocations of Christians and Muslims, meeting in equal numbers and on equal terms, admitting their differences, affording each other better comprehension of how Muslims and Christians as such face the basic problems of the world as we all know it. Such convocations (with a Continuation Committee) have been held in Lebanon (twice), Egypt and Persia. Being made possible almost entirely through the liberality of the *American Friends of the Middle East* the promotion of friendship between people of the different creeds is naturally a paramount concern. It might therefore, with all this galaxy of "approaches", be asked pertinently what part the Christian Mission has to play. Perhaps it may be claimed that the Jerusalem Seminar has revealed the more distinctively Christian appreciation of the problems involved, historical, cultural and, in particular, religious. There is the Christian way, in addition to the academic and syncretistic, while in each approach the friendly counts for a great deal.

So we found in Jerusalem that Canon Cragg had outlined a very full three weeks—with three daily sessions (more often than not four) apart from the season of "Devotion and Prayer". On him lay the burden of administration and in large measure that of lecturing as well. This, however, in no way discounts the value of all associated with him whether as more "official" lecturers or those called on occasionally—to say nothing of the wealth of

material that was put at our disposal at the evening sessions, when all were free to speak.

The Professor from Ankara (Daud Rahbar), like his father a Cambridge Ph.D., has had experience of teaching in his own Pakistan and in Canada. It was appropriate that he should have reviewed Cragg's *The Call of the Minaret*;<sup>1</sup> and for any who had read this book there was enough incentive to journey to Jerusalem. Dr. Rahbar is a young Muslim scholar who is pioneering in a fresh and honest approach to "Quranic Exegesis". He has tackled words and phrases as perhaps this exercise has not been attempted by Muslim divines for centuries. He is familiar too with the work of leading Christian scholars, his father having been a pupil of the great Edward Browne, himself of a successor yet with us. It was good for us all to listen to a liberally-minded Muslim lecturer.

Almost as travelled as Dr. Cragg was Dr. Harry Dorman, now Secretary of the Near East Christian Council *au fait* with the history of the Muslim-Christian controversy. In both roles of scholarship and Christian leadership in oecumenical matters Dr. Dorman was equally at home. "The Contemporary Aspects of Spiritual Islam" and a share in the discussion on the "Meaning of Revelation and the Signs of God" culminating in the Incarnation with its extension in the Church were among the subjects entrusted to him, as was the closing service in the Church of the Redeemer in the heart of the Old City a stone's throw from the Church of the Resurrection itself.

The third of the Triumvirate associated with Dr. Cragg was Professor Jusif Shammas, now on the staff of the Near East School of Theology in Beirut.<sup>2</sup> The background of Oxford, Columbia, Cambridge and Lahore was enriched by that of a member of the old Syriac Church (using the language nearest to that our Lord used). Knowing both days of persecution, possessed in part of an Islamic education, called to ministry in North East Syria, with a doctorate dealing with the theology of al-Ghazali and an almost unrivalled knowledge of the Qur'an, with a ready tongue in four languages, Dr. Shammas gave us of what he has and is.

The first session every day was devoted to "Islamic Issues in New Testament Study", most of these being in the hands of Dr. Cragg. From a discussion of "islam" before "Islam" (was not the Prophet a "muslim" before becoming a "Muslim"?) we were brought to the ultimate confrontation of "The Cross and the

<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Since this paper was received Dr. Shammas has been appointed Professor of Arabic in the newly-constituted University of Libya.

Greatness of God"—something that Islam has met with stubborn refusal all through the centuries.

After prayers the second sessions in the mornings were more strenuous when the various aspects of contemporary Islam were considered; lectures were devoted to the life and work of some of the great Masters of Islamic thought, legal, theological, exegetical, poetic; or to a discussion of Islamic basic concepts in relationship to Christian thinking. The afternoon sessions every other day were more general and covered a wide area. The introductory lecture had been given by the genial Dean of the Theological Faculty at Achimota; who pleased the company by accepting the derivation of "Ghana" as from the Arabic root "to be rich"—hence the other name of Gold Coast. The other general lectures roamed history and geography and raised questions. Not often do we have first hand information about Muscat and Oman. The intimately related problem of the Ancient Churches was not overlooked. Another Muslim, the present Head of the Naqshbandi Order in Jerusalem, spoke on the Muslim path to mystical devotion. This was the only lecture by interpretation so that some of us had an instructive Arabic lesson into the bargain. Dr. Cragg's own lecture on "Recent Arab Muslim Writing on Christianity" contained material that was a surprise to some. It was good to know that his translation of a recent work in Cairo *Al Madina az-Zalima*<sup>3</sup>—a Muslim's study of the first Holy Week in Jerusalem—should be out by Christmas.

Then "The Forum" each evening, with no formal lectures but free and frank discussion of the multifarious problems of these days. There is the growingly insistent demand that Muslim and Christian terminology shall be mutually intelligible, but how difficult when one word may not mean the same thing in the two religious systems! Both the Islamic and the Christian worlds are faced with superstitious practices and ideas. What is the obligation of "faith" in view of this?

There was one evening given over to the pressing problem of how to deal with and present the message historically of the Old Testament in view of the radically altered status of "Palestine" a decade ago. This is a matter which cannot easily be brushed aside; for it is as relevant as the others vis a vis our relationship with the Islamic world. We had earnest discussion of how to present the central Christian doctrine of the Cross; how to overcome the prejudices of the generations, how to communicate the "things

<sup>3</sup> "The City of Wrong."