

RELIGIONS

A PRELIMINARY HISTORICAL
AND THEOLOGICAL STUDY

BY

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resort to a convenient doctrine of abrogation, whereby it is held that God gave later *suras* to cancel earlier. This doctrine has sanction in the *Quran* itself:

Whatever verses we cancel, or cause thee to forget, we bring a better or its like. Knowest thou not that God hath power of all things?³¹

Muslims acknowledge that there are over two hundred such cancelled verses. A striking instance of this is to be seen in the *suras* referring to Jews and Christians. The earlier say that God will reward their virtue, and were obviously written when Muhammad was friendly disposed towards them. The later, however, dating from and after the time of his victory over his opponents, the Quraish and Jews of Mecca, proclaim that they will be punished along with the infidels. Similarly, the *sura* allowing prayer to be made in the direction of Jerusalem is cancelled by the enforcing prayer towards Mecca. Again, there was a later *sura* granting to the prophet extra wives after the death of Khadijah.

Jews and Christians

At first Muhammad was kindly in his regard towards Jews and Christians. The prophet had good reason to be grateful to them; for he was granted asylum by the Christian king of Ethiopia, and owed not a little to the strict monotheism of the Jews, who, he admitted, had preserved the faith of Abraham and the patriarchs and prophets. But partly because of the Jewish support given to the Quraish when he fought against Mecca and partly because at length success gave him an intolerant upper hand, he began to condemn both: the *Quran* itself reflects this change of attitude. As we have already noted, the prophet was neither scholar nor philosopher: his views, therefore, of other religions, particularly of Christianity, were based on hearsay and were often inaccurate.

The Sects

The orthodox majority of Muslims are known as *Sunnis*, because they follow the *sunna*, or custom, of the Prophet. There are,

however, a number of sects. One of the chief of these are the *Shiahs*, found mainly in Persia, who believe that the twelve leaders, or *imams*, successors of Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, ought to have been caliphs. The twelfth *imam* disappeared mysteriously in the ninth century; and the Shiahs look forward to his reappearance as the *Mahdi*, a Muslim messiah, before the Day of Judgment. There is also a similar sect, with the Aga Khan at its head, who believe there were only six historical imams, and that since his time there has always existed a hidden imam. They are also known as Ismailis.³²

Quite different was the mystical movement which grew up in Persia in the early Middle Ages. This was Sufism, the chief teacher of which was the great Al Ghazali (d. 1111). It shows the influence of Neo-platonism and Hinduism in that it is a thoroughgoing pantheism; and it is remarkable that it was tolerated at all in Islam. A similar movement occurred in the Kabbalah of mediaeval Judaism. The Sufis believe that in this life the soul is temporarily separated from God, but that hereafter it will be merged into God. One of the most famous expressions of Sufism is that of the tenth-century Persian martyr poet Hallaj, who declared: 'I am He whom I love; and He whom I love is I.'

Among the several other notable sects in the history of Islam have been the Qadarites and Mutazilites, modernists in their day, who objected to the literalism of the orthodox in their interpretation of the *Quran*, and who wanted to allow some room for human freewill in Muslim theology. On the other hand were the Kharijites who maintained an extreme literalism with respect to the *Quran*, and the Jabarites who held a thoroughgoing doctrine of divine predestination. During the eighteenth century the Wahhabis led a violent puritanical protest against the luxury of the day. They even engaged in iconoclastic violence in Mecca, but were eventually crushed by the Turks.

During the nineteenth century three influential movements took shape, which influence Islam to this day. One was Babism, which originated with a Persian, Mirza Ali Muhammad, who in 1844 claimed to be the *Bab*, or Door, who was preparing for the

appearance of the Imam, long expected by the Shiah. In 1850 the Bab was shot by order of the Shah, and the sect slowly died out. But another grew from it, through the teaching of one Mirza Husain Ali (d. 1892), who took the title 'Glory of God' and wrote several books which came to be the scriptures of this Bahai sect. Bahatism, however, has departed so far from orthodox Islam that it is no longer recognized as Muslim. It has adopted so much from other religions that it has become a kind of theosophy.³³

The most militant Muslim sect today is the Ahmadiyya movement, which engages in missionary work overseas. This began with the teaching of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) in the Punjab. He claimed to be the Mahdi, or Messiah, not only for Muslims but also for Christians, and an *avatar* of Vishnu for Hindus. The Ahmadiyyists are strongly anti-Christian, claiming that Christ did not die on the cross but only became unconscious. He later recovered, and went to India, where they claim that his tomb is that at Srinagar in Kashmir bearing the inscription *Yus Asaf*. They assert that this means 'Jesus the Gatherer' of the lost tribes, but philologically the translation is absurd: the tomb can be none other than that of some Muslim holy man. Their outlook is a reactionary one; but their methods show Islam trying to extend its boundaries to other lands.³⁴

The Five Pillars

The five fundamental duties of every Muslim enjoined by Muhammad are as follows. First there is confession of faith, at least in the *kalima*, the well-known words 'There is no God but Allah: Muhammad is the apostle of Allah'. This the *muezzin* calls from the minaret of the mosque at the appointed hours of prayer. Prayer is the second foundation. It must be preceded by purification, the worshipper using water or sand, and must be performed in the proper posture and with the proper gesture in the direction of Mecca. On Fridays, the Muslim holy-day, Muslims are expected to assemble at a mosque for corporate prayers and to hear the *Quran* read and expounded. There is no priesthood, and in the absence of the *imam* any responsible

Muslim may lead worship. The stern monotheism of Islam is reflected in the bareness of the mosque, where there must be no music and no images, even of a decorative kind.

The third obligatory duty is fasting during Ramadhan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. None save children, pregnant mothers, the sick and aged are excused. There must be abstinence from all food and drink, from the use of tobacco and perfumes, as well as from sexual intercourse, from sunrise to sunset throughout the month. Only when the colour of a thread is no longer distinguishable may food be taken. The fourth pillar is almsgiving, which covers both legal and voluntary taxes for the support of the religion and for charitable purposes. And the fifth duty is the pilgrimage to Mecca, the desire of every devout Muslim. It should be carried out with the proper attire during the twelfth month of the Muslim year, but the lesser pilgrimage made at any time is also regarded as meritorious. Formerly a sixth duty of religious warfare was sometimes added.

Muslim Monotheism

Of all religions Islam is outwardly the most monotheistic in that it stresses that the unity of God is an arithmetical oneness, as distinct from Christianity which, as in its doctrine of the Trinity, envisages a diversity within the oneness of God. In the *Quran* Muhammad attacks the Christian doctrine of God, but also shows he did not understand it.

Although there is just one hint at an hypostasis within the Godhead, when the *Quran* says that the 'Divine Command' makes known the power of God,³⁵ Islam always stresses that nothing finite must be associated with Allah; for to attribute anything finite to God is to commit one of the greatest sins. Yet a critical examination of Muslim theology shows certain inconsistencies. For example, Allah is thought of as having seven attributes — life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, sight and speech — the last three of which, if not all seven, are certainly anthropomorphic.

Again there is a strange contrast between the frequent description of Allah as 'the Compassionate, the Merciful' and the

721 B.C., we no longer speak of Israel, but only of Judah, Jewry and Judaism. 'Judaea' is the Greek version of the Hebrew 'Judah'.

¹⁰ Mattins and Evensong in *The Book of Common Prayer*, which consist of the reading of the Scriptures, the singing of the *Psalms* and the saying of prayers, are modelled on the mediaeval monastic 'hours' of Mattins, Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones and Vespers, which in turn grew out of early Christian devotions of synagogue pattern.

¹¹ *Daniel* is not a prophecy of future events written during the Exile, but a pseudonymous tract encouraging the Jews to remain faithful to their race and religion.

¹² *Matthew* xxii, 23 ff. Cf. *Psalms* cxv, 17.

¹³ The New Testament shows how the Jews despised the Samaritans: *John* iv, 9.

¹⁴ v. A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: a Preliminary Survey*, Oxford, 1952; Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, London, 1956; and T. H. Gaster (tr.), *The Scriptures of the Dead Sea Sect*, London, 1957.

¹⁵ *Matthew* xxiii, 15; *Acts* xiii, 43 and 50; xvii, 4.

¹⁶ The Greek *kanon* was borrowed from the Hebrew word meaning 'measuring rod'.

¹⁷ The order of the books in our English version is derived from that of the LXX and the Latin Vulgate.

¹⁸ *Yasna* xxxi, 8. An English translation of the *Gathas* is given in J. H. Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, London, 1913.

¹⁹ *Matthew* ii, 1 ff.

²⁰ J. H. Moulton, *The Treasure of the Magi*, Oxford, 1917, p. 24.

²¹ *Quran* lxxiv, 1-4.

²² A. H. = *anno hegirae*. *Hegira* is a latinized form of the Arabic *hijra*, flight.

²³ Mosque is derived from the Arabic *masjid*, a place of prostration. It is a mistake to suppose that polygamy is universal in Islam. It is permissible only if a man is able adequately to support more than one wife. Today, largely through western influence, polygamy is on the decline.

²⁴ *Quran* viii, 9.

²⁵ *Islam* = submission (to Allah). A follower of the religion is better called a *Muslim*, one who submits, than a Muhammadan. The Persian equivalent is *Mussulman*, the plural of which is, of course, *Mussulmans*.

²⁶ *Caliph* = successor (to the Prophet).

²⁷ 1453, the year of the flight of Christian scholars from Constantinople to Italy, is the conventional history-book date for the beginning of the Renaissance, which had in fact started before then.

²⁸ The most famous English translation is that of Sale (1734), another well-known one that of J. M. Rodwell (1861), available in the 'Everyman Library'. A good modern translation with a separate introductory volume is that by R. Bell, Edinburgh, 1937. A. J. Arberry's selections, London, 1953, is an experiment which aims at conveying in translation the peculiar exclamatory style of the book.

²⁹ *Quran* xiii, 37-39.

³⁰ *Quran* iv, 169 ff.

³¹ *Quran* ii, 100.

³² After the seventh *imam*, Ismail, c. 770. The main body of *Shi'ahs* is sometimes called 'Twelvers', and the Ismailis 'Seveners'.

³³ v. J. R. Richards, *The Religion of the Baha'is*, London, 1932.

³⁴ The mosques at Southfields, South London, and Woking, Surrey, are run by Ahmadiyyists.

³⁵ *Quran* lxxv, 12.

³⁶ *John* i, 1-14.

³⁷ *Acts* xv. Cf. *Colossians* iii, 11.

³⁸ An easily accessible English edition of this great but much neglected book is that by R. V. G. Tasker in the 'Everyman Library', 2 vols, London, 1945.

³⁹ Aquinas used the Greek philosophy of Aristotle; but his language was Latin and his background that of the Latin Church.

⁴⁰ The *Apocrypha*, though rated less highly, is acknowledged by Roman Catholics and Anglicans as part of the Bible; but Protestants, on the whole, have tended to ignore it.

⁴¹ From the *Catechism* in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

⁴² Strictly the words are the *ritual*: what is commonly spoken of as ritual is really ceremony.

⁴³ The word 'Catholic', from the Greek, means 'whole' or 'universal'. Strictly, there has been no one Catholic Church since the Great Schism between East and West in 1054.

⁴⁴ *Matthew* xxviii, 19.

⁴⁵ R. H. Thouless, *Authority and Freedom: Some Psychological Problems of Religious Belief*, London, 1954, is a particularly wise discussion of this subject.

⁴⁶ II *Corinthians* v, 19.

CHAPTER VII

¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, London, 1932, is more than a novel: it is an allegory warning of the trend in modern society.

² *Ecclesiastes* i, 9; xii, 13.

³ v. the 'Twelve Principles of Buddhism', set out in C. Humphreys, *Buddhism*, London, 1951, pp. 74 ff, which sum up contemporary intellectual Buddhism.

⁴ v. A. Farrer, *The Rebirth of Images*, London, 1949, is a refreshing study of the subject with particular reference to *The Revelation*.

⁵ *Literature and Dogma*, London, 1883, p. 16. R. B. Braithwaite, a representative modern British philosopher, quotes Arnold with approval in his Eddington Memorial Lecture, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Experience*, Cambridge, 1955, pp. 24 ff.

⁶ *Job* xxiii, 3.

⁷ *John* iii, 16.

⁸ *Romans* vii, 19.

⁹ Matthew Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ The poem *The Agony* in *The Temple*.

¹¹ *Hibbert Journal*, vol. li, no. 4, July 1953, p. 372.

¹² *Mark* viii, 25.