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## MOSLEM AND CHRISTIAN POLEMIC

HENRY PRESERVED SMITH

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

**A**T the outset of the modern missionary enterprise it was thought that the missionary's work was simply to preach the Gospel in the form in which it was accepted by the Protestant churches. The method had some successes, especially with the heathen who 'bowed down to wood and stone.' In contact with the more advanced religions the problem became more difficult. Moslem thinkers were ready to debate the claims of Christianity and controversy arose. The two religions had much in common. Each affirmed the divine unity, the fact of revelation, an inspired law. Because of this agreement, however, the controversy did not become less acute. And reviewing the course of history we may say that the debate lasted through twelve centuries. To the historian of human thought it may be of interest to sketch its main features.

The beginning was made by Muhammad himself. He was convinced that his revelation was in substance the same that was given to the earlier prophets, and recorded in Law and Gospel. His knowledge of the Bible was imperfect however, and when he came into closer contact with the Jews at Medina it was easy for them to point out the irreconcilability of his claim with the book in their hands. He retorted by saying that they had corrupted the revelation. This was the first specific charge which he made, and it has passed current among the Moslems to this day. The same charge was made against the Christians, though here the chief point of attack was the doctrine of the Trinity. Much of the

Gospel story appealed to Muhammad and he adopted it. The Qur'an gives an account of the Annunciation, and affirms that Jesus was the Messiah and the Word of God, as well as a spirit from him. Muhammad had no doubt of the miracles, but denied that Jesus had been crucified, alleging that he had been taken to heaven, to live in the presence of God until the last great day. Apparently when he adopted so much of Christian teaching he had no knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity. When he discovered that the Christians affirmed three persons in the Godhead it seemed to him to be a denial of the Unity on which he laid so much stress. Against this he reacted sharply. One of the fundamental texts of the Qur'an is: "Say! He is One God; He begets not and is not begotten, and there is none equal to Him." More direct against the Christians is: "People of the Book! Do not go beyond due bounds in your religion; say of God only what is true. Jesus is the Messiah; the son of Mary, an Apostle of God and his Word which he made to descend upon Mary, and a spirit from him. Believe in God therefore and his Apostles, and do not say: *Three*. God is one; far be it from him to have a son. To him belongs what is in heaven and what is on earth and God is all-sufficient as a Guardian. The Messiah did not disdain to be a servant of God, nor do the angels who come near the throne" (Qur'an 4, 169 f.). In another passage we are told that at the judgment Jesus will be asked whether he had commanded men to take him and his mother as Gods to which he replies with an emphatic negative.

Where Muhammad got his idea that Mary was the third member of the Trinity is a separate question, which we will not attempt to answer here. What I am trying to show is that Muhammad joined issue with the Christians on the doctrine of the Trinity, which he regarded as Tritheism, and so furnished the subject of debate for the following centuries. His conception is made more clear by his declaration that if there were more than one God there would be a struggle for the supreme power, which would result in the destruction of the universe (17, 44).

The earliest Christian writer to take up the challenge so far as we know was the well-known John of Damascus. Born in what was the seat of the early Caliphate, and son of an officer of the court, he was of course well acquainted with the new religion. Apparently he did not think the foe worthy of great effort. His refutation is a chapter of his book on heresies, and that book is only a part of his treatise on Christian doctrine. Islam is one of about a hundred heresies to which he gives attention. His temper is made clear by the sentence: "Now flourishes the seducer of the people, the superstition of the Ishmaelite, forerunner of the Antichrist." The cultivated citizen of Damascus, trained in Greek philosophy, looked upon the Arab invaders as barbarians and upon their alleged prophet as an impostor. He turns the Moslem tradition of the monk Bahira against its narrator, and affirms that the false prophet got his knowledge from an Arian (therefore heretical) monk. The subject in which John was most interested was the person of Christ, for this was the point on which discussion was most active among eastern Christians. Since Muhammad admits that Jesus was the Word of God and the Spirit of God he virtually admits the doctrine of the Trinity. Word and spirit of man are part of the man—Jesus as Word and Spirit of God must be in God and therefore divine. Such is the argument.

As to the claims of Muhammad that he was a prophet, John affirms that he brings no witnesses. This means that he did no miracles. Muhammad's own confession on this point is well known. Next we have Muhammad's moral character brought under inspection. Here it was easy to show that his conduct fell short of the highest standard. The instance quoted is his treatment of his adopted son Zeid—taking his wife, and then justifying himself by a special revelation. To the accusation that the Christians are idolaters because of the reverence they pay to the cross, John replies by a *Tu quoque*, meaning that the devotion to the sacred stone at Mecca is at least no better.

Among the works attributed to John is a dialogue between a Saracen and a Christian. It repeats the argument about

word and spirit. Its chief interest is the testimony it gives that theological questions were debated between adherents of the different faiths—in this period that is. Later the lines were more strictly drawn. The only other topic discussed in this document is the perennial question of predestination and free will. But into this we need not go.

Neither this essay nor John's discussion can have made much impression on Moslems. John's argument was in fact not intended to convert Moslems. Its purpose was to strengthen the faith of Christians. Certainly his attack on the character of Muhammad would arouse anger rather than produce conviction. The career of the Prophet seemed to his professed followers to show evident marks of the divine approval. How else could a poor unfriended preacher, obliged to flee his native city to escape assassination, have come to be the virtual ruler of all Arabia? And how else could his doctrine have spread so rapidly over some of the fairest regions of the earth? Such palpable arguments needed no training in metaphysics for their comprehension, and such arguments no doubt prevailed over many Jews and Christians and led them to embrace the new religion. If Muhammad's polygamy was held up to reprobation the ready answer was that David and Solomon—both of them saints according to Christian as well as Jewish authorities—had set the example. The assertion that Muhammad had received instruction from a Christian monk was met by the statement that the Christian monk had simply recognized in him the one for whom Christians were hoping. And the assaults on the character of their leader was met by the Moslems with a mass of traditions magnifying not only his moral qualities but ascribing to him more miracles than Moses or Jesus had performed.

If this part of the attack was effectively met, the same may be said of the objections urged against the Qur'an. We must remember the place which the alleged book of God has in the minds of believers. From the first it has been a book of the people. To recite some part of it in the five daily prayers is the duty of every Moslem; to read it through once a month and to have it recited on special

holidays is a meritorious act dear to the heart of the devout; it is the text-book of the schools from the primary grade up to the university. It is not only a classic for the literary man; it is sacred history, a book of devotion, a code of ethics and etiquette, the supreme law of the land in every Moslem community. In the view of the orthodox Moslem a learned man is one learned in this book. If the caviller points out its inconsistencies with the older revelations the answer is ready, alleging that as the Gospel abrogated the Torah so the revelation given to Muhammad superseded some parts of the Bible. Moreover Muhammad had declared that Jews and Christians had corrupted their sacred book and it was safer to assume that he knew.

If I may say so, the untrained observer would find it easier to discover the marks of divinity in the Qur'an than in the Bible. For one thing the Qur'an is all of a piece. The very monotony of the book which makes it so wearisome to us argues for its unity, whereas the Bible is made up of a great variety of documents, evidently by different authors. To this must be added that throughout the Qur'an Allah is *ex professo* the speaker, whereas he rarely takes the word himself in either Hebrew or Greek Scripture. To the unlearned reader the book commends itself by these obvious features, and the learned class by their whole training are the apologists for it. Muhammad himself claimed that the book was a miracle, and boldly challenged men and demons to produce a single verse that could be placed on a parallel with it. In the opinion of the orthodox this challenge has never been met. To allege that the language or the content is faulty simply provokes indignation at the bold blasphemer.

It was not the attack of the Christian theologians which caused discussion among Moslem inquirers, but the speculations of Greek philosophers. Their works translated into Arabic started the inquiry whether the Moslem doctrines were consistent with reason. The resulting discussion belongs in the history of Arabic thought. Suffice it to say that the rise of a school of free-thinkers only provoked a more rigid orthodoxy in the common people. The question most violently

debated concerned the Qur'an. The orthodox maintained that the original had existed from all eternity in the presence of Allah, written on a tablet of gold. The culmination was reached in the third century of the Moslem era, when the Caliph Al-Ma'mun took the liberal side, and decreed that no one should affirm the Qur'an to be uncreated. It is said that this Caliph presided at discussions between adherents of the different faiths, and that the participants agreed not to appeal to their sacred books but to argue on the ground of reason alone.

Ostensibly in this period is dated the so-called 'Apology of Al-Kindi,' translated by Sir William Muir under the title *The Beacon of Truth*. Whether the author hoped to give his work éclat by ascribing it to the philosopher Al-Kindi or whether there was a Christian of that name does not especially concern us. The work gives the Christian argument, and is in form a letter from a Christian to a Moslem friend who has invited him to change his faith. The author claims to be acquainted with the doctrines of the different Christian sects, having visited their convents and held discussions with their priests. Although he recognizes some good in them, especially in the Nestorians, he is convinced of the superiority of Islam. He therefore urges his friend to renounce the errors of his creed and embrace the faith of Abraham, their common ancestor. After describing the obligations imposed by the Muhammadan religion he promises the joys of heaven to the one who assumes those obligations, while the refusal will be punished by the pains of hell. Nor are the rewards wholly of the other world. In this life the believer will have the privilege of marrying four wives and of divorcing any that do not please him. Moreover, conversion will open the way to the court of the Caliph who has already formed a good opinion of the person addressed, and who will doubtless give him promotion.

The reply of the Christian is courteous in tone since he does not wish to give offence. In answer to the invitation to adopt the faith of Abraham he affirms that Abraham's first faith was idolatry, and that when he received the revel-

ation of the divine unity the promise was made not to Ishmael but to Isaac. The argument for the Trinity is in the conventional form and need not be quoted. New however is the particularity with which the life of Muhammad is treated. The alleged Prophet is held up as a freebooter who did not stop even at assassination when it suited his purpose. Examples of his weakness and hesitation are contrasted with the courage of Joshua and the divine help which rewarded it, as also with Moses' leadership at the Red Sea. The scandals of Muhammad's life are not spared, and the stories of his miracles are held up to ridicule. Criticism of the Qur'an follows, bolder than any we have yet met. The claim that it is unapproached in its perfection is denied. The story of a Nestorian monk who became the counselor of Muhammad and therefore the virtual author of the book, except such parts as were inserted by the Jews, is made much of. The Moslem's argument that conversion to Islam would bring worldly pleasure, honor, and emolument is turned against him, in that it is held to explain the success of the new religion. The Christian has never known a man turn from Christianity except from selfish motives. Here he might have quoted the testimony of Al-Ma'mun, who had openly declared that the converts in his own day were hypocrites, as were many in the time of Muhammad. As to the ceremonies obligatory in Islam the author finds them irrational and even idolatrous, and he quotes the saying attributed to Omar concerning the two sacred stones at Mecca: "I know that these stones can neither help nor harm; but I have seen the Prophet kiss them and so I do the same." The other rites of the pilgrimage are affirmed to be senseless, though defended by some as acts of worship. But the worship of God should be conducted not by foolish practices but by observances consonant with reason. Finally, as to the day of Judgment, our author looks forward to it with confidence, knowing that the judge will be the Lord Jesus, and that no one will need the intercession of Muhammad.

This work is a literary exercise rather than a copy of a letter really sent to a Moslem—at least one is inclined to



suspect so. But in any case it gives the arguments which have been used against Islam throughout the course of history. A similar work of about the same date is entitled: 'The Debate on Religion held before Abdur Rahman, Governor of Jerusalem.' We have already noted that such a debate was actually held before the Caliph, and it seems to be true that there was an Abdur Rahman governor of Jerusalem in this period. The persons who take part in the debate are the Governor himself, a Christian monk, a Jew, and a Moslem scholar. The Jew plays a very subordinate part, being introduced only to certify the genuineness of the Jewish Scriptures. The leading part is taken by the monk who has the testimony of the governor that he is a thorough master of the Arabic language. The verisimilitude of the scene is helped by the submissive language of the monk, who evidently fears the power of the governor. It takes repeated assurances of safe-conduct to induce him to enter on the argument. When at last he does this he shows thorough acquaintance, not only with his own Scriptures, but also with the Qur'an and with Muhammadan customs. The date of the document, which I know only from Vollers' translation (*Zeitschr. für Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 29) is thought to be the ninth century of our era—not far therefore from its ostensible date. The argument follows the lines now familiar to us. The Moslem accuses the Christian of worshipping three gods, and the Christian replies with a detailed argument for the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Moslem asserts and the Christian denies the authority of the Qur'an. He even attacks its integrity, intimating that it was interpolated after Muhammad's death by Othman and the notorious Haggag. Instead of Muhammad having brought about unity of religion he had made confusion, as is shown by the divisions among his followers. The Moslem brings up Muhammad's claim that he had been predicted by Jesus under the name of Ahmad. This gives occasion for the Christian to explain the work of the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete of the gospel passage). The Qur'an declaration that the Jews did not crucify Jesus is refuted, and the meaning of the death of Christ is explained.

The anthropomorphisms of the Bible are admitted, and paralleled by similar expressions in the Qur'an, and on the ground of declarations in his own book, the Moslem is forced to confess that Jesus is the only being that has been taken into the immediate presence of God, there to abide until the last day. Further, Jesus alone is sinless and the Moslem claim that this is true also of Muhammad is refuted by his own confession, that he was in need of forgiveness.

Evidence that this discussion is a work of the imagination is given by its concluding section. This tells that the monk when accused of worshipping the cross explains that the Christian reverence for the sacred symbol is parallel to the Moslem's devotion to the sacred stone at Mecca. The difference is that the Christian talisman is effective in defending those who depend upon it, whereas the Kaaba is powerless. To prove this a practical experiment is made. Learning that the governor has in prison a man condemned to death the monk asks to have him brought. He then takes a cup of poison and makes the sign of the cross over it, after which he drinks it and receives no harm. A similar cup has the name of the Moslem sacred object called over it and is handed to the criminal. No sooner does he drink it than he falls dead. To this demonstration another is added. The governor has a maid possessed by an evil spirit. The monk makes the sign of the cross on her forehead whereupon the demon cries out in pain, and when commanded in the name of Jesus he comes out of the woman, making his exit in the form of smoke from her toe. Similar stories are familiar to every reader of church history.

The examples I have given show the form which the Christian polemic took at a comparatively early date. And this form reappears down the whole course of history. Most of the treatises objurgate Muhammad and his book in the most violent manner. Fables about him were industriously circulated and apparently believed, whereas no terms were too bad to describe his 'filthy and obscene book.' It is unnecessary to quote these diatribes or to repeat the extravagant panegyrics which the Moslems opposed to them. The

most elaborate of the serious treatises on the Christian side is the *Refutatio Al-corani* published by Marracci in 1698, one which in the author's language 'lays the axe at the root of the Mohammedan superstition.' The work, which is one of genuine learning, is in two folio volumes, one containing the Qur'an in Arabic with a translation and quotations from Moslem authors, the other giving the refutation. It follows the general line which we have set forth in describing earlier treatises, but it is distinguished by more thorough discussion of Moslem theologians, among whom Ghazzali is chief. Ghazzali is the ablest defender of the doctrine, now thoroughly established among Moslems, that the Qur'an is eternal and uncreated. Marracci's reply is that if this were true it would destroy the divine unity on which Islam lays so much stress. To the Moslem statement that Christians base their doctrine of the Trinity on a single passage of Scripture Marracci opposes a large number of passages both from the Old Testament and the New. He naturally urges Apostolic tradition unanimously held by Christians. Taking the offensive he attacks the Moslem theory of abrogation. This theory, formulated by Muhammadan scholars, attempts to explain the discrepancies between various texts of the Qur'an. The book itself says: "Whatever verse We abrogate or cause thee to forget We will replace by another as good or better." The exigency which gave rise to this verse is easily imagined. The Prophet gave out his oracles at intervals through a period of more than twenty years. Since he trusted to memory, he did not always recall accurately what he had said on a particular occasion. The resulting discrepancies lie on the surface of the book, and give trouble to the commentators. Their inconsistency with the theory that the Book of Allah had existed from all eternity in a fixed text is lamely smoothed over by the theory of abrogation. The Moslem attempts to justify it by the abrogation of the Mosaic Law by Jesus. Marracci's reply is that while it is not unreasonable to suppose parts of an early revelation to be replaced by regulations issued some centuries later, the belief that abrogation took place within the limits of a single

volume, promulgated by the same man, is nothing less than absurd.

That there are mysteries in Christianity the author does not deny. The chief of these is the Trinity, to which he now returns. The Moslem has argued that Christians hypostatize the attributes of wisdom and life, and that to be consistent they should treat the other divine attributes in like manner. The question of the divine attributes had been warmly debated in the Moslem schools, and the danger of infringing on the divine unity by positing any attributes whatever had been emphasized. The Christian's reply is that we believe in the Unity just as firmly as do the Moslems. But we must see (he says) that as a man reflecting on himself forms an image of himself, so God in his knowledge of Himself forms an image of Himself which is the Word, the same that we call the Son. In like manner the Father and the Son by their mutual love produce the Holy Spirit which is the "*propensio seu inclinatio vitalis in essentiam amatam.*" As to the incarnation, it is not in itself absurd, since many Moslems have no difficulty in supposing that it took place in the case of Ali. The charge that Christians have mutilated the sacred text is thrown back upon those who make it, for some Moslems have gone so far as to change the reading of the verse: "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee", making it read: "Thou art my Prophet, this day art thou begotten."

This sketch has not nearly exhausted the subject, but it shows what I had in mind. The interest of the writers in all these cases is not to convert the adversaries but to confirm the faith of believers. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Muhammadan danger was a real one. The Turks were threatening central Europe and wherever they went they made converts either by persuasion or by force. Hence the desire on the part of theologians both Catholic and Protestant to confirm the faith of Christians—Luther is an outstanding example. Without going into their essays we may notice one publication which brought both sides of the debate to the attention of the English reader. This is the

book entitled: 'Controversial Tracts on Christianity and Mohammedanism, by the Reverend Henry Martyn, and some of the most eminent Writers of Persia, Cambridge, 1824.' The documents in Persian were brought to England by the well-known missionary, and published (with English translations) after his death by S. Lee.

The editor in a long preface gives some account of the earlier stages of the controversy. Of most interest in this part is the work of Guadagnoli, which is said to be in every large library. This may be true of Europe but hardly so of this country. The outline given by Lee shows that the topics of discussion are the same which were treated in earlier days. As given by Guadagnoli they are: The divinity of Christ; The Incarnation; The authority of Sacred Scripture, and Muhammad's Legislation in the Qur'an. Naturally the Christian writer begins with the authority of Holy Scripture which he compares with the Qur'an to the disadvantage of the latter. The arguments for the genuineness and authority of the Bible are the ones current at the time.

Coming now to Henry Martyn we discover that he had asked a Moslem scholar to give the reasons which led him to believe in Muhammad as a prophet. The reply affirms (what the missionary also believed) that a prophet should be attested by a miracle. After the definition of a miracle comes the statement that the miracle vouchsafed to the Prophet was, as he himself declared, the Qur'an. How he came to this conclusion is plain to the historical inquirer. Challenged by his hearers to give proofs of his commission, and puzzled by the fact that he could work no marvels such as tradition ascribed to the older prophets, convinced also that his revelations came from above, he thought it was self-evidencing. And this is the ground taken by his defender. According to him the superiority of Muhammad's miracle was just its self-evidencing power. The fact that no one had ever produced a single line that can be brought into comparison with the sacred book would always be attestation of this miracle, whereas the witnesses of the ordinary wonders of the saints have all passed away, and the question might

be raised whether they were truthful and competent. Not that the Moslem accepts Muhammad's confession that he was not allowed to present other proofs of his mission. Far from it! Tradition credits him with from one thousand to over four thousand. But on this we need not dwell.

It is easy to see what the missionary has to reply to this argument. He must attack the character of the Qur'an. But such an attack upon a book which has a unique position in the heart of the believer is not likely to produce conviction. And the same may be said of criticism of Muhammad's actions, from the point of view of Christian ethics. The fact is that the popular view fixes the affections of the believer on his great leader and exemplar. A recent observer says that such a verse as the following: "My heart inclines to thee, O Apostle of Allah, but my back is heavy-laden with sins," brings tears to the eyes of the hearer. Another scholar, familiar with the popular literature of the Moslem community, tells us that in it Muhammad is endowed with the purity of Adam, the benevolence of Noah, the fidelity of Abraham, the eloquence of Ishmael, the patience of Jacob, the beauty of Joseph, the musical voice of David, the frugality of John the Baptist, and the nobility of Jesus. It is clear that where the affections are engaged by the picture drawn along these lines, mere rational argument will have little effect; that the learned whose whole study has been fixed upon Qur'an and Tradition are not likely to be convinced is equally plain.