

MOSLEM CULTURE TODAY

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THERE are certain subjects that seem fated rarely to be discussed for their own sake. The interests of the average man are strictly limited and it will, usually, be found that they can be included in certain well-defined circles, to overstep which is generally held to be a waste of time. The tyranny of convention is powerful: it decrees not only what a man ought to know, but also what he ought not to know and to disobey the decree is often to incur the name of a crank. But if certain subjects are unworthy of discussion and study, they are not, on that account, left to repose peacefully in decent obscurity since nobody troubles about them, they are common property and may be conveniently dragged from the lumber room, as useful red-herrings. They may be quoted, but only in a superficial way, and made to serve the needs of the orator and politician, who thereby, without fear of contradiction from the audience, gain, with the greatest ease, totally unmerited reputations for learning and originality.

It is the misfortune of Arab culture to be one of these subjects. When mentioned in debate, it has been unduly decreed or unreasonably exalted, according to the whim of the speaker and the exigencies of his brief. It is bad form to speak of Arab culture in society. One may speak of Homer or Dante with impunity and even with credit, but he who is rash enough to utter the name of Imrul Qais at a dinner table, is held guilty of "talking shop," a heinous crime. Adapting the famous remark of Robertson Smith, one may say that there have been periods in which Arab culture has been loved for its own sake and periods that have been indifferent to Arab culture for its own sake, but that it has been reserved for the present age to show itself sincerely hostile to Arab culture for its own sake. This can be proved from the theatre and no better method of proof need be sought, for the stage is a mirror of the mentality of society. Now, Tutankhamen is fashionable, because he was excavated by a nobleman, and the stage manager is therefore excessively careful to

be accurate when he wishes to treat of him. But in the last few years, when plays dealing with Islam have figured on the boards of London theatres, we have seen mummies introduced into Bagdad, as though they formed part of Moslem life under the Abbasids; we have been favored with well-known Arabic words, embroidered on curtains and printed on posters, unfortunately, in defiance of the rules of Arabic orthography, and we have heard a *Muezzin*, on the stage, recite the morning *Azan* (or call to prayer) just as the stage electricians were manipulating the limelight to turn day into evening. Flecker, who studied Islam, had to die before his play was produced.

Now the moral of this is plain. The public is proverbially sensitive in the matter of dramatic accuracy. Miss Snellicci and Nicholas Nickleby had to convince Mr. Curdle that the unities of the drama would be inviolate in their keeping before that zealous defender of the arts would risk half a crown on a French farce. In "Verdant Green," that classic tale of Oxford life, Mr. Foote, amid the excitement of a "Town and Gown," took occasion to vindicate the purity of the drama to the "Putney Pet." Now if the dramatic instinct of the public is stirred into action in the matter of a trivial French farce or a boxing bout, how will it tolerate the absurdities which disfigure the stage when the life of the Moslem is depicted? The answer is that Islam does not count, and anything will do, so long as plenty of local color, a la Cook, is splashed about and the word Bismillah employed as a gag at frequent intervals. An actor-manager who desires to produce "Julius Caesar" is said to devote infinite pains to preliminary research. He dare not misspell a Latin word on his program. He will haunt the museums, he will study text-books, he will pay handsome fees to archaeologists to revise his setting, so that the smallest details may be scrupulously accurate. But when "Othello" or an Eastern drama is to be played, is he equally zealous to attain precision?

There was a time in England, not so long ago, when Islam was held to be worthy of serious consideration. The Dukes of Northumberland and Sussex were generous patrons of Oriental research: they were able to appreciate and to understand. A century ago in England the study of the Orient was pursued not because it was fashionable and patronized by the nobility, but because thought was untrammelled by convention. Classical studies, too, were more general and the common standard of culture was less prone to the limits imposed by unscholarly specialization. Haileybury, before it became a public school, was an East Indian college that implanted the seeds of Oriental learning in the young men whom it sent out to govern

the East. Indian officials, such as Sir William Jones, were distinguished for their proficiency in the Arabic and Persian literatures. England was genuinely interested in Islam and its culture.

But many indications show the change in public sentiment that marked the middle of the last century. The study of Eastern languages gradually declined. Hebrew was ejected from the curriculum of the schools. To this day, a student at Oxford can obtain a theological degree without being able to read a single word of the Old Testament in its original tongue. Arabic and Persian were penalized and a knowledge of these tongues used to be a severe handicap in the examination for the I. C. S. A candidate could gain for an entire Eastern language and literature, about the same maximum of marks as was allocated to a Latin unseen. France and Russia had splendid academies devoted to Oriental research and to the study of living Eastern languages; England, with the greatest Oriental Empire in the world, starved the Oriental Departments of Oxford and Cambridge, with their special provisions for current Oriental vernaculars. Until the London School was established quite recently, England possessed no institute devoted to the study of spoken Arabic, Turkish and Persian.

Nowadays there is perhaps a growth of interest in Islamic culture, due to the course of political events. But it is to be regretted that there are few signs of a corresponding growth of serious study of the subject. Politicians, who wish to introduce into their speeches references to Islam, prefer, in many cases, to derive their authority from the *Daily Mail* or *Daily Express*, rather than from the standard words of scholars. So it happens that opponents of Turkey systematically decry this said culture, of which they know nothing; they coin such phrases as "the blight of Islam." On the other hand, the opponents of Greece, equally misinformed, put forward for Islamic culture claims that cannot be substantiated. They are blinded by their zeal; their catchword, equally meaningless, is "the glamour of the East." Sometimes these two inconsistent views may be heard from one politician on two different occasions. Thus there are certain members of Parliament who wish to exclude Indian Moslems from the highlands of Kenya; their exclusion is advocated on the ground that the Moslem belongs to an utterly debased civilization. Those who use this argument, however, cannot find terms in which to express their appreciation of this same Moslem civilization when the topic of conversation shifts to the Moslems of Palestine. A guinea spent on press cuttings would provide some striking illus-

trations of this phenomenon. No political party would escape scot-free.

Islam produced a great and noble culture, for which, however, absolute perfection can be claimed no more than for any other manifestation of human genius. It is worth while briefly to estimate this culture, to examine its decline and to speculate on its chances of revival.

Islam is a manifestation of the Semitic genius, and it may be observed that the ancestry of its culture is a distinguished one. Thus, it may be remarked that the Semites gave the world one of the greatest boons. The discovery of the alphabet, or rather the simplification of a highly complicated system of writing, brought man nearer to man and broke down the power of a limited class by rendering it possible for a far larger number to record ideas and facts and to communicate with distant parts. It is true that mankind required centuries of time before appreciating and making general use of this grand invention. The greater, then, is the credit of the inventors if they were so far in advance of their age. From the twenty-two signs of the Semitic alphabet, not only the characters used in Europe had their origin, but also the forty-six symbols of the *Brahma Lipi* in India. The high standard of culture attained by the ancient Semites is commonly recognized. The Arabs, pure Semites, inherited the potentiality of their ancestors and this statement receives confirmation if, as a large school of Orientalists hold, it be true that Arabia was the primeval home of the Semitic races. But whether the Arabs were indigenous in Arabia or immigrants there, the fact remains that for centuries they lived in undisturbed isolation. Central Arabia was an unknown land until the seventh century of this era. Few and far between were the attempts to pierce the obscurity that veiled the country and its people. The attempts were uniformly unsuccessful. For example, Aelius Gallus, during the reign of Augustus, led a Roman Army from the northern shores of the Red Sea into Arabia. He was forced to retreat. So little was the effect of the invasion felt that no vestige of the memories of this comparatively modern expedition survived in Arab traditions. The Arabs, therefore, may be said to have passed their existence completely withdrawn from the outside gaze for centuries, perfecting and intensifying their cultural instincts, so that when they burst upon an astonished world, the power of their civilization proved irresistible. The growth of the Arab Empire was phenomenal for two reasons, for the extent of its conquests and for the rapidity with which they were achieved. Muhammad was born in 570; he

died in 632. His successors carried his faith into Persia and India, over Africa into Spain, and exactly one century after the death of the prophet the tide of their conquering hosts was stayed by Charles Martels at Tours. "An issue momentous for Europe was decided . . . whether it was to be Christian or Mohammedan, whether the future Notre Dame was to be a church or a Mosque, perhaps even whether St. Paul's when it came to be built, should echo the chant of the Agnus Dei or the muttered prayers of Islam. Had the Saracens not been checked at Tours, there is no reason to suppose that they would have stopped at the English Channel."¹

Now these conquests, vast as they were, would not in themselves have entitled the Arabs to the great claims which are made on their behalf. Other nations have set up empires but in one respect supremacy of the Arabs differed from that of their predecessors and successors alike. Captive Greece overcame her savage conqueror. In the same way the Arabs, whether conquered or conquerors, overcame those with whom their arms and culture came into contact. They fostered indigenous Arabic civilizations wherever they came. The Arabic tongue and the Arabic literature spread and developed. While the Moors ruled Spain, art, science and literature flourished there and scarcely anywhere else in Europe. Rome also conquered Spain but the cultural influence exercised by the Romans was small. Only two Roman-Spaniards achieved distinction, Martial and Seneca of Cordova and the circumstances that Seneca's rise to fame was regarded as exceptional shows clearly how low must have been the common standard of learning in the Iberian peninsula. When one says that no good can come from Galilee, there is usually some valid reason for such a generalization. Judged by the same test, Anglo-Saxon genius too would suffer. The dominion of the British Empire has brought countless advantages to its somewhat unappreciative subject-races and colonies. But although the Union Jack has waved over Canada, South Africa and Australia for a considerable period, English literature has yet to be enriched by works that will survive as classical, from the pens of colonial authors. Even if the United States be included for this purpose in the Anglo-Saxon area, the result will hardly be changed appreciably, not overlooking the names of Walt Whitman and Longfellow and not forgetting the popularity of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Mrs. Eddy. And as for the progress of English literature in India, it need merely be observed that the literary world has not yet learned to value the English writings of the Babus of Bengal at their author's estimate.

¹ *Moors in Spain*. Lane Poole, p. 29.

Now the Arabs stimulated in their conquered lands a culture that proved virile and enduring. Naturally, neither the value of that culture nor its intensity was everywhere uniformly equal. Yet, within certain limits, the terms "Moslem" and "Arab" may not infrequently be interchanged when speaking of culture. But when the Turk outrages the conscience of Europe no less than the laws of his religion by act of brutal massacre, the guilt must be ascribed to a sporadic outburst of atavism; his Mongol ancestry not his Islamic culture is the cause.

The genius of the Semitic races has found its most potent expression in religion. Islam, the youngest of the three great Semitic faiths, is a worthy member of the group. Too often a prejudiced picture of Islam is drawn; it is unjust that the polemics of professed detractors, such as missionaries, should be regarded as independent estimates and cited as such, while the more impartial verdicts of objective scholars are ignored. Islam arose at a time and in a place where Judaism and Christianity were enfeebled. Muhammad's presentation of religion had certain defects but it raised immeasurably the spiritual outlook of the Arabs and to judge of its effect one must look at the hordes of savages who accepted Islam and one must consider how it improved their condition. Muhammad abolished idolatry and reaffirmed the sternest principles of monotheism. He put down infanticide, he checked gambling, he suppressed drunkenness. Among those who follow his system, suicide is unknown, although the hereafter is portrayed to the true believer in colors so attractive as to afford every inducement to terminate speedily any hopeless existence on this earth. He inculcated the fundamental principles of morality. He introduced equality. He improved the condition of slaves although, like the prophets and apostles, he did not dispute the legality of the institution of slavery. Wherever Islam spread, the general level of morality improved. This statement requires qualification, but, on the whole, it is true. Millions of proselytes and believers have lived godly, sober and righteous lives in the teaching of the Mosque. No one can gainsay this and it represents a great and valued achievement of Islam and its culture. That this faith has certain features which prevent its universal acceptance is obvious. But in view of the diversity of views prevailing with regard to theology, this circumstance reflects no more on Islam than on its sister faiths, which, also, have failed to secure the adhesion of all mankind. On the other hand, Moslems have no ground for complaint if objection be taken to the determinism of their faith, to the anthropomorphisms of the Quran, though these may

be explained on other grounds. A Christian or a Jew might perhaps hesitate to refer to his God as "the best of cheats" (*cheir ul-Maqirin*). But when, for example, the position of women under Islam is attacked, many unfair statements are made.

In pre-Islamic days, the Arab woman wandered free and untrammelled and rose to positions of eminence. In Moorish Andalusia, women were encouraged to study and at Cordova the lady doctor was not unknown. The Harem system at its best was and is by no means the scheme of wholesale and unrestricted concubinage which opponents assert it to be. There, unmarried aunts and cousins and sisters were supported and safeguarded from want and danger. The system had its faults but while it flourished at its best, street prostitution was almost unknown. Polygamy, though possibly conceded with restrictions, is rare, but whoever feels inclined to make sweeping statements about the sexual morality of the Moslem, should bear in mind the white slavery of Europe and the flagrant immorality of the large cities of the West.

Moslem culture manifested itself also in martial prowess. The armies of Islam, in the early days of the faith, swept over Mesopotamia and Persia. Egypt was conquered in three weeks. North Africa and Spain succumbed to their forces. Later, Mahmud of Ghazna, during the thirty-four years of his reign (996-1030) invaded India seventeen times. The Saracen commanders met and withstood the onslaught of the chivalry of Europe, in the Crusades. In 1258, the Caliphate at Bagdad was overthrown by the Mongols and Islam seemed doomed. The Mongols swept into Europe, leaving a train of massacre and pillage in their track, penetrating as far as Liegnitz by Breslau. Europe was powerless to arrest their path. Matthew Paris records that the Yarmouth fishermen were afraid to put to sea through dread of the Mongols. Yet although the very vitals of Islam had been pierced in 1258, its Caliph murdered, its capital razed, Islam saved the world from the Mongol scourge. Hulagus' host was beaten at Ain Jalut in 1260 by Kotuz, the ruler of Egypt, an erstwhile slave, and his general Beibars, who murdered the victor in the hour of victory. The valour of the Saracens was proverbial. Chivalry is said by Professor Browne and others to have originated from the model of the Moors in Spain and no better example of a knight than Saladin need be sought. The Barbary Corsairs preserved the martial reputation of the Moslems: their galleys roamed supreme over the Mediterranean, where heroes like Dragut defeated the Christian fleets and enjoyed an unchallenged naval domination. A testimony to this maritime supremacy is the survival

of the Arabic word Admiral (French *Amiral*), from the Arabic *Amir al-bahri*, or Sea Lord.

Here, too, the same phenomena may be noticed as in the sphere of literature. The Moslems trained native levies. Omar, already urged that the Arabs should be withdrawn from Persia, so as not to find a Capua amid the luxury of the Sassanians. Further, so potent was the charm of Islam that it conquered its conquerors. Scarcely fifty years elapsed after the destruction of Bagdad before its destroyers were zealous champions of Islam.

In the sphere of pure culture, that is to say, in the arts, letters and sciences, the pre-eminence of the Moslems up to the time of the Renaissance needs no demonstration. While Europe slept in the Dark Ages, the Moslems kept the torch of learning burning. They fostered the sciences and indeed, except for the Jews, retained a monopoly of them. Arab doctors were famous; the designs of Arab architects excite admiration today. Mediaeval Egypt and Spain outshone the contemporary Christian states of Europe in aesthetics. It is impossible, in a few brief sentences, to afford an adequate idea of the standard of artistic excellence attained by the Moslems. A contrast between the interiors of Moslem and Norman castles is suggestive. Both edifices were massively built and well planned. But the Norman nobleman's hall was covered with straw and rushes, that of the Moslem with priceless carpets and tapestry. The museums of Europe and Egypt preserve examples of the beautiful inlaid furniture and lamps and other articles used by the Moslems. Their homes were adorned in artistic luxury. The standard of life and comfort was higher. Until the time of the Crusades, spices, perfumes and other products of the East had been in Europe the luxury of the few. Kingsford cites the following interesting facts in this connection: Bede, on his death-bed divided his precious store of pepper amongst his friends: it was a treasure. But by the time of Piers Plowman even the wife of Beton the Brewster has "pepper and piony and a pound of garlike." From the East came dyeing, glass-blowing and silk-weaving. About 1150 King Roger introduced sugar-cane into Sicily from the East. Many further instances could be cited to show how the culture of Islam acted on the culture of Europe, to which it was superior.

In literature the contrast is still more striking. The pomp and chivalry of Europe went forth to the Crusades. How many kings and knights could read and write? About twelve accounts of the Crusades were written by Franks: the writers were in nearly every case, monks. The Saracens were not only able to read and write,

but they were a profoundly literary people. Literature was not confined to an ecclesiastical caste, it was the common property of every Moslem gentleman.

It is interesting to notice the Arabic words that have crept into the English language. In commerce there are words like tariff, magazine and average (of merchandise); in sport, chess (and its terminology), the *chukker* of polo and the racquet of tennis; in music, lute and rebeck (or roebuck); in science, zenith and nadir; in industry, damask, taffeta, muslin and atlas. Admiral, barge and bargee are Arabic words; so are arsenal (*Darsinale* in Italian) and Barbicane. The numerous words beginning with the Arabic article *al* are significant, words such as algebra and alchemy, alcove, almanach, alembic and alhali. The foregoing are but a few; they demonstrate the extent to which Arabic culture permeated Europe. And if beer be typically English, both in origin and etymology, at least booze² is Arabic.

The greatness of Moslem culture makes its decay the more surprising. Wherever Islam exists, it is decadent. In no sphere do the Muslims excel. Their religion has no message for the present age, it is still steeped in scholasticism. The young Turks are mostly atheists; agnosticism and materialism are eating into the vitals of Islam. There is a strong anti-Arab movement among the Turks. The attempt has been made to impose a Turkish *Quran*. The curtailment of the power and position of the Caliph is another instance of the present tendency to the secularization of Islam amongst the young Turks. In art, science and literature, the name of Islam counts for nothing. Whoever heard today of a contemporary Moslem distinguished as a doctor, engineer, scientist, mathematician, philosopher or historian, not merely of the first rank but even of average attainments? How many Moslems get first classes at Oxford and Cambridge? In warfare, the Moslem standard is equally low, since the Turks, who once thundered at the gates of Vienna, consider that they have gained an outstanding success when, armed by the French government with Creusot guns and aeroplanes, they have succeeded in routing no more formidable a foe than the Greeks. In every sphere of life, Islam is far below the standard of Europe; life in the towns and villages of Islamic states represents the level of culture that the Black Death swept out of Europe. The faults of Islam have become intensified, the virtues seem to have disappeared.

² Boozeh is a sort of cheap licorice beer, drunk in Egypt. The term was introduced into England by Thomas Atkins.

It was not the machine gun that laid Islam low. Islam has not now succumbed to force, indeed the year 1258 is abundant evidence that force is incapable of crushing Islam. Nor was it the steam engine that enabled the Franks to outstrip the Moslems; neither military force nor industrial or economic pressure have brought about the downfall of Islam. The cause is purely internal. Islam has decayed from within. The invention of the printing press sounded its knell. From the days of Caxton and Guttenberg, Islam has contracted. In the race for learning, Islam fell behind.

In the King's Library in the British Museum there are show-cases exhibiting *incunabula*, arranged according to the countries and languages in which the books were printed. The exhibition is extremely instructive. It contains no Arabic specimens. The printing press and the Renaissance mark the beginning of the end of Moslem culture.

Professor D. S. Margoliouth accounts for the decay by the theory that the Semites inhabit an enervating heat belt. He holds the Semitic genius recoups itself in periodical outbursts every five centuries. Is the time ripe for another revival? The future of Moslem culture rests with the Moslems themselves. By one means alone can they recover their lost position; the remedy is simple, it is education. Yet the disease has struck so deeply that drastic steps will be required to eradicate it. Islam is steeped in effete scholasticism. The once famous Azhar University of Cairo is still struggling with philosophy that Europe abandoned with the Dark Ages. The *Kuttabs*, or Mosque Schools, do not profess to teach even the three "R's." Moslems are doubly ignorant. From the point of view of Europe they are five centuries behind the times. They will have to assimilate the literary and scientific output of five hundred years before they can even be up-to-date, much less progress. They have to span the gap between Copernicus and Darwin. Before they can produce another ibn Khaldun or ibn Roshd, they must sit at the feet of the modern schoolboy, and yet in his day ibn Khaldun was to the Moslem world what Einstein is to us. Internally, the position of Islam is no better. The ignorance of the average Moslem is pathetic; he knows the barest elements of his faith, nothing of his history, nothing of his literature. Omar, Muawiya, the battle of Badr, the Muallaqat are empty names to him, whereas the most ignorant London errand boy could conceivably find something to say about Paul, Queen Elizabeth, the Battle of Waterloo and Shakespeare. The mind of the Moslem is filled with material thoughts, his religious teachers neglect him.

There are two classes of Moslems who are in a position to help their faith; first there are the rich landowners and the independent rulers of Egypt and India. These might introduce a proper system of elementary education, both in religion and in secular subjects. They could endow schools and foster literature. They could send learned Moslems to Oxford and Cambridge to represent Islam and watch over Moslem students. But a still more pressing duty lies on Moslem students at the universities. How many of them know anything of their faith, history and literature, how many of them care for these things? Their minds are steeped in foolish political talk, a ferment of passing shibboleths and dead catchwords. They go back to India and to Egypt without any attempt to diffuse the best of English culture in their native lands. The work to be done in Islamic states in the most elementary spheres of education, sanitation, medicine and philanthropy is prodigious. But all these calls fall on deaf ears. The young Moslems throw away the substance and grasp the shadow, and so Islam perishes.

In India, where the cultural level of the Moslems has been raised, it has been due to English endeavors; in Palestine, Jews in the colonies are raising the level of the Moslem neighbors, not only by building bridges and roads, by introducing better sanitation and a higher standard of living but by welcoming Arab children to their schools and sharing with them the benefit of universal education. But the chief impetus must come from the Moslems themselves, especially from the young men at English universities.

Twenty years ago there was in Cambridge a noble Moslem, Syed Ali Bilgrami. He gathered the Moslem undergraduates every Friday for the *Khutbah*, for study and for prayer. Many of these young Moslems have profited by his example. Men like Zia-ud-Din Ahmad, now head of Aligarh, have gone back to India and done great and abiding work. They are, alas, too few. Surely among the numerous Moslems in Oxford and Cambridge more will be found to devote themselves to the ennobling task of rehabilitating the past glories of the culture of Islam. If Islam is once again to play her part in the spiritual and cultural uplifting of humanity, it can only be by the unremitting efforts of her sons.