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Islam and European Christianity

A PAPER READ BY

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AT

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ISLAM AND EUROPEAN CHRISTIANITY.

At a time when Europe in contrast with Asia is in the van of progress, and her civilization stands for all that is true not only in the physical world but according to its supporters in the field of religion and morality, it will be interesting to study how far her claims in the latter can be borne out by facts. That the European nations have been successful in a marvellous degree in exploring the realms of Science, and have been singularly fortunate in applying its principles to their daily needs cannot be denied. When we behold that Yesterday's impossibilities are constantly being changed into to-day's commonplaces by their ever resourceful ingenuity, we are filled with wonder and admiration. It would certainly be futile on our part to attempt to disparage or underrate their astonishing achievements ; so far as the material aspect of their civilization is concerned ; history affords very few examples of such expansion, power and organisation. And the very fact that the East is ranging herself on the side of the West, is modelling her institutions on Western patterns, and adopting Occidental ideals in practical life, is a sufficient proof that the Oriental recognises the efficiency of European principles and methods. There is no doubt that Maxim guns, airships, and wireless telegraphy stagger his imagination ; and if they were all to make life, he would have found it

unnecessary to go deeper to know the real character of the civilization which he admires so much. But when he carries his researches into the field of morality and religion to pick up something new or superior to his own, he is invariably disappointed. He finds that the sepulchre is "whited" impressive and glorious, but inside there is a corps rotten to its very core. He is morally certain that the superstructure, built up on the shifting sands of ambition, hypocrisy, and unrighteous aggrandisement, and unsupported by the rigid principles of true humanity, cannot last long; he is also sure that all the gorgeous contrivances to hide the gangrene of corruption shall prove unavailing in the long run. Yet for the time being Europe is supreme; she has in her hand [the sceptre of Might, and the Oriental bows to *force majeure*.

However, let us analyse the essential causes that have placed Europe where we find her to-day—at the pinnacle of worldly splendour. According to the Europeans themselves, their civilization is the result of the combination of three elements, viz., white colour, European descent, and Christianity. Before the Russo-Japanese war the consensus of opinion throughout Europe was that for a nation to be civilized in the modern sense of the word those three elements were not only necessary, but without them it was almost impossible for any people to progress. The remarkable adaptability of the Japanese nation and their complete assimilation of the European conceptions have, however, exposed the superficial character of this opinion; for they have not only been able to accomplish the deeds that go to make a people civilized in the eyes of Europe, but they have done so without changing their creed, colour, descent, or even their characteristics as an Asiatic nation. What has been done may be done again. At least, it has been sufficiently vindicated that the East, with all its orthodoxy and "barbarism," can be radically

transformed into an active organism of civilization if it so chooses ; and the signs of such a transformation are not wanting at the present day, but why it has been so late in choosing is a question which involves matters of real and primary importance. The East is not yet convinced whether the ideals and methods for achieving those ideals which the European civilization represents, are worthy of its pursuit and imitation : whether the order of things it offers can truly be called civilization, or it is after all a storm in the sea of eternity, which will abate when the physical forces are at rest, and an atmosphere of moral calm prevails. There is no doubt that the East is changing, and will continue to change, but it will do so not from any deep-rooted conviction of the goodness or superiority of the Occidental ideals, or the belief that her own moral standards are inferior or defective, but it will do so simply to guard herself against the aggressive exploitation of her moral and natural resources by the so-called civilized peoples ; which can effectively be done only through employing Western modes and Western instruments.

Apart from the problem of material advancement, the Orient, in evolving those eternal truths which lie at the root of every civilization, and in shaping those great world-systems which have assumed a permanent place in the organisation of humanity, has thrown out three original suggestions in the personalities of Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad, who have left a lasting and indelible impression of their geniuses on the life and thought of mankind. It is, however, worthy of note that the European worshippers of Jesus, who base their advancement on his teaching, arrogate to themselves the right of interpreting an Oriental's subtlety of mind to the Orientals. To the Easterner, who has ever seriously observed this irony of fate, it must have been very amusing and at the same time instructive to watch an Occidental stand on the pulpit and discourse upon what a great Oriental, i.e.,

Jesus, said and meant. It is evident that the European exponents of Jesus can interpret his doctrines according to their own understanding and after their own mind—a mind of the European cast and as such unable to comprehend the mode of an Oriental's thought in its subtleties as is often admitted by the Europeans themselves. It follows therefore that the Christianity prevalent in Europe is not strictly what Jesus taught, but what the Occidentals according to their peculiar intelligence understood him to mean, or in a word it can be said that it is European and not Oriental Christianity. With the Westerners Jesus has become an essentially European conception, and the environment in which he lived is so completely Europeanised to-day that it has lost its Eastern softness and charm almost entirely. To show that this statement drawing a line of demarcation between the simple Jesus of Nazareth and the "Jesus of Europe" is based on an overwhelming evidence of facts observable in the daily life of Europe, recourse must be had to the well-known religious paintings depicting the important events of his life; as they record very faithfully the form which the European artists give to Jesus in their imagination. It is a striking fact that even such great masters as Leonardo-da-Vinci and Bazzi, etc., in spite of their remarkable powers of vivid imagination and faithfulness in execution of detail, could not portray Jesus as a true Oriental; they could not strip themselves of their European intuition and so naturally failed to impart to his person or surroundings that indescribable something which would have readily distinguished that it was Jesus of Nazareth and not Jesus made in Italy or France.

Putting aside the discussion of minute points, some very glaring incongruities are noticeable. For instance, he is nearly always represented a white man; the complexion of his face in many famous paintings will stand comparison favourably with the

portrait of any red-haired Teuton, whilst the fact is that he was a Syrian Jew, and as such belonged to the same class of people commonly called coloured men by Europeans. Then again, in the world-famous representation of the "Last Supper" by Leonardo da-Vinci a table is provided for him and his disciples, and the only successful attempt the artist has made at being faithful in reproducing the Eastern mode of eating is exhibited by the absence of forks and spoons. Besides these paintings and religious works of art, the mode of worship, altars, pews, organs, elaborate music, trained choirs for singing, and all the paraphernalia of a modern church or chapel, are things that were unknown to Jesus, and undreamt of by his disciples. They are all innovations of European origin, and the outward signs of their comprehension of Jesus.

The morality and religion taught by him have undergone similar changes under European influence, and as a direct result of European surroundings. And it is in transforming the Christianity of Jerusalem into the Christianity of Europe that the modern civilization, having Christianity as its basis, is found wanting, and has been unable to fulfil the mission of goodwill on earth, and therefore cannot appeal to any sober-minded Oriental. But what the civilization of the West, having all the uncommon advantages of power, organisation, and prosperity, has signally failed to achieve, is reserved for the system of Islam to attain. Islam in this respect is a perfect contrast of Christianity. It has still retained the primitive character of the faith and all the pristine virtues which made it the truly civilizing power, have not lost their dynamics. Although to-day it finds itself surrounded by dangerous and relentless enemies; the forces of reaction are also at work, and on all sides the prospects are extremely gloomy and discouraging, yet the very fact that in spite of many and varied disasters it has thus far kept its own is

symptomatic of its inherent vitality and youthful vigour. Even its most ardent opponents like the English clergy recognise the hopelessness of their struggle against Islam, for experience has taught them that neither can the glitter of European civilization nor the prestige of political domination overshadow the true lustre of Islam. Accordingly, speaking at a meeting of farewell to missionaries at the Albert Hall on the 27th of September, 1911,* the Bishop of London admitted that "Moslemism was the only faith which had made progress against Christianity in different parts of the world. They must throw breakwater after breakwater across the path of this religion, which was the most difficult and dangerous foe that the Christian Church had in the world to-day."

The secret of its success lies in the fact that Islam is an instrument of civilization invented by its founder for the benefit of the whole world and not of particular continents or hemispheres. Its morals and ethical doctrines are of universal application, and it has always been the glory of the Islamic faith that it establishes a true, honest and unshifting brotherhood of man. European Christianity—I shall not say the true Oriental Christianity—has given rise to several black churches in America and South Africa, European Christianity has looked on the burning of living Negro Christians in the present "refined" age with calm indifference, European Christianity has shut the door of mercy, equality of treatment, and legality of civil rights in the face of nearly all dark-skinned races, European Christianity has allowed and even favoured the systematic extermination of the whole races of mankind from off the earth, European Christianity has stamped flourishing civilizations of Mexico and elsewhere out of existence, and in short European Christianity has done deeds in the name of humanity which have darkened many a home and

*Per *The Daily News*, Sept. 28th, 1911.

destroyed the peace of the world oftener than any other religion. Jesus has said "The tree is known by its fruits," so we know the Christianity of Europe by what it has accomplished. The net result of its two thousand years' existence has been the accentuation of racial antipathy among its own followers, and the social ostracism for the so-called coloured races.

Islam, on the other hand, is held responsible by its detractors for fanatic deeds of individuals, barbaric methods of persecuting the infidels, low morals and semi-savage ideals; but it is a matter of grave doubt whether the longest stretch of the calumniators' imagination can make its record come up to anything which stands to the credit of European Christianity. Let it be granted for a moment that there were only two alternatives for a non-believer in dealing with a Moslem—the sword or the Koran—*but* when once the man had accepted the Koran, was there any distinction, be it of caste, colour, birth, or otherwise, ever observed between him, even if he were the lowest type of the negro born in the swamps of central Africa, and an Arab of the noblest blood? Had he or rather has he not the right of saying his prayers standing side by side with the highest Sultan? Did not many Indian villagers of the humblest origin and of dark skin say their prayers of "Id-udduha" standing by the fair skinned Amir of Afghanistan in the grand Mosque of Delhi? Was ever a Muhammadan Negro burnt alive; because he was a Negro, or even despised because his skin was dark? Do not the Moslems hold Bilal in honour and respect, although he was but a Negro slave? Was there ever justice denied to a black Muslim and extreme favour shown to a White Moslem, or statutory barriers placed between the Moslem races of the opposite colour? The answers to these questions alone would place Islam far above the Christianity of Europe in the moral scale. But this is not all. Islam has not only not done those things which disgrace the

modern "refined" age, but it has accomplished those things which are yet only on the lips of the European world, and have not been realised in practical life, even though they belong to the rudiments of culture. It has given to the world that conception of human brotherhood which is at once ideal and practical, and contains the germs of a universal civilisation. The European "humanitarians," who are very fond of associating the Koran with the sword, have yet to prove whether it was more in the interests of humanity at large that the Koran was presented as the refuge from the sword, or the gospel of their new-fangled humanity which makes the white skin the only condition of safety, and black skin the sure sign of torture, burning alive, and extermination. If life was dear to the individual, religion could be changed, and the Koran always guaranteed his social, political, and moral equality, but can a coloured man change the pigment of his skin? It must be a very poor consolation, indeed, to the Negro Christian in America or South Africa that the only begotten son of God died for him; especially when he has to die for his own black skin and even the "word of God"—the Bible—cannot save him from the ruthless treatment at the hands of his brother Christians—the Whites.

It is not meant here to defend Islam against all the baseless attacks of the Europeans; for all the charges have been historically refuted by the educated Moslems; but it will not be out of place to expose the absurdity of the prevalent idea among the Occidental Christians that Islam was spread by the sword. What was the force that converted those persons who could use the sword with such remarkable effect? Muhammad was alone when the revelation came to him and the only support he received at first was the feeble support of a woman—Khudaija. Did he then begin to wield his sword and threaten every Arab who would not believe in him with immediate death? What was that sword which was used to convert a man of Umar's stamina? Was it

made of the earthly steel? Was it not the steel of his truth? It is indeed a painful thing to see how completely religious prejudice has blinded the European Christians to the obvious facts of history, and placed them in a ridiculously untenable position. They are loud in condemning the Moslems because the latter are supposed to be fettered by the teaching of the Koran, which dominates their lives so much that they are believed to be incapable of assimilating the modern ideas; and in the same breath they are accused of having used compulsion in spreading Islam. This is plainly unreasonable; for the Koran lays down in explicit terms: "Let there be no constraint in religion" (Koran, Surat 2, verse 257). So if the Moslems acted upon the Koran, they could not have used force in proselytising, and the charge is false from the very outset. Conversely, if they used compulsion, they acted neither on the letter nor the spirit of the Koran. But we are no apologist for Islam, we are ready to meet the calumniator on his own ground. Supposing the inevitable sword was employed for the propagation of the Mussalman faith, we maintain that it was used for a right purpose and therefore the use was perfectly justified. All morality and all ethics agree that when an individual fights and lays down his life for what he sincerely believes right, and has no other motive but that the right should be vindicated, he is a martyr in the cause of righteousness. Thus when the Mussalmans saw that corruption, infidelity, and polytheism were rampant all around, and they took up the sword to drive away ignorance and darkness, and bring eternal salvation within the reach of debased humanity, they did only what was right and their duty, and so added lustre to their glory.

But on the contrary the octopus of European Christianity spreads its tentacles into distant lands, and establishes its centres of propagation, not that the people of those lands may be benefited by the teaching of the Gospel, but that its own interests

should be served. Every European nation under the guise of a Christian mission gains a foothold in such countries, so that in exploiting their natural resources it should come in for a lion's share. It is an open secret in the East that every movement of the Europeans, which ostensibly aims at the moral or spiritual up-lifting of the native populations is only a subterfuge for some deep, selfish design, and material benefit to themselves. This feeling of distrust has become prevalent ; because the evidence to support it has been simply enormous. Time after time the plea of humanity has been put forward to appropriate the lands of the helpless and inoffensive nations of the East, and always the undertakings to bring the indigenous peoples to the fold of the good shepherd have proved lucrative besides being the means of power and authority to the Europeans. Justice and fairness are not taxed, and it rests with the European Christians themselves to see in point of fairness whether the methods of the Moslems were more straightforward, more moral, more humane than their systematic operations for achieving personal or in other words national ends, and widening the circle of their influence and power under the garb of religion and make-believe humanity. Where the Moslems perhaps shed one man's blood in the zeal and earnestness of their convictions, the European followers of Jesus have sucked the life-blood of a whole race through the recognised channels of the modern civilization.

When one strains one's eyes to look out for help in the stormy sea of this age, over which racial prejudices and extreme selfishness have thrown a pall of darkness, there stands out in the distance but one haven of bliss, away from the fury of the wild waves and full of heavenly light, inviting all, black, white, yellow, brown and red to take shelter there and be comforted ; this is the haven of Islam the only place of refuge for the burning Negro, the despised Jew, and all who are weary and friendless,

There is only one oasis in the desert of European civilization, and that is the faith of the Arabian prophet. For he has not only taught us to love the black or yellow or white Moslem, but what is far more important has made us love him as brother.

The Islam, which fused the wild and ever quarrelling tribes of Arabia into one nation, and made the sandy deserts the fertile spots of civilization, is pledged to convert the dark continent of Africa, now inhabited by the rudiments of mankind, into a flourishing and civilized continent. The Moors, who carried the torch of knowledge into Europe, were only barbarians like the rest of Africans, but Islam imparted to them a genius unsurpassed by their contemporaries, and all their grandeur they owed to their exalted faith. But apart from the instances of history, even to-day the signs of a great future for the Islamic faith are promising in Africa. The creed of the Arabian Prophet is making such immense strides in that dark continent that it has become a matter of serious concern to European Christianity, which is apprehensive of far reaching developments in the future. The Europeans know very well that the Muhammadanisation of Africa will mean its civilization, and ultimately will put an effective check to their policy of aggression and extermination. They also fully realise the vitality of Islam, and the organising genius that its adoption by a primitive people magically infuses in them. As soon as an African Negro embraces Islam, he finds that he is treated on an equal footing with the best and the highest of his co-religionists, and no artificial barriers of inferiority of race or colour are put in his way. This equality of treatment naturally produces in him a keen sense of self-respect which is the foundation of all character and morals. The whole atmosphere of Islam has a civilizing influence over his mode of thought and conduct. He begins to consider himself a responsible being, and for the first time in his life becomes conscious of the

eternal truth that in the eyes of the MASTER all men are equal. Then the spontaneous zeal of a new convert characterises his dealings with piety, and religious fervour makes him a determined and virtuous man. In a word, as soon as he sincerely utters the Muslim creed, he turns from the barbarian Afric into a Muslim gentleman, conscious of his duties towards God, his parents, children, wife, friends, and fellow-beings. A new era begins in his life, which opens up vistas of material advancement in this world and eternal bliss in the world to come. His career becomes full of hope and promise, and the endeavour to make his life beautiful before God and man realizes in him the ideal of perfect manhood. Also, he becomes the centre of light for others who are yet in darkness and are groping their way to salvation. He sets about the work of his people's amelioration in right earnest, and makes it the one goal of his whole life.

This sudden transformation of the Negro's life is so significant that even European Christians cannot suppress their feelings of astonishment and admiration, and have to recognise, however unwillingly, that the Koran is the real source of civilization. A quotation from the "Times" (London) of the 31st of August, 1911, will substantiate what has been said above. In the leader headed "The problem of Nigeria" the editor, after remarking that the Nigerian negroes are equal to the Hindus in the art of agriculture, and taking Gibbon to task, because he had catalogued the Nigerians as barbarians, goes on to say about the country: "There were extensive plans of government and conquest. That there were large cities of Sun-dried mud is not much. A mere barbarian little above pure savagery can build. What he cannot do is to speculate rationally and produce literature, create a highly developed system of agriculture, good manufactures, codes of laws and an effective fiscal system. Now the dominant races of the upland of Nigeria have done all

this with the help, no doubt, of the Koran and the foreign example." These words were written by a European editor, who will be the last person to show partiality to the Koran, but who would have fain underrated the civilizing effect of our Blessed Book, if he could have helped it. They are eloquent in themselves and need no comments.

It is also evident that Islam has been able to make its headway in Africa without any systematised effort or up-to-date organisation on the part of the Moslems; and notwithstanding the tremendous opposition of the Christian missionaries supported by the whole prestige of Europe. The defeat of European Christianity appears all the more crushing when we reflect that it has hopelessly failed in the task of Christianising Africa, although it can boast of all the modern machinery for proselytisation. But the causes are not far to seek. When a negro embraces Christianity, he becomes, so to speak, a Europeanised African, and the parental obligations and tribal customs are no longer binding on him. Besides, he begins to imitate European ways and manners which mean the "advent of a life of wild license," and extreme indulgence in drinking intoxicants, and to crown it all he imbibes a rooted hatred and disgust of his own people. The laws in West Africa and other parts, formulated by the European Christians, permit the Europeanised Africans to disregard their social and tribal laws with impunity. Thus a converted Negro naturally becomes an undesirable from the tribe's point of view and alienates all sympathy and affection of kinship with his people. On the other side, the prominent characteristic of European Christianity, viz.: segregation and aversion to colour, keeps him at an arm's length from his white co-religionists. By abrogating his ancient religion and adopting Christianity he does not acquire any social status nor even the elementary right of being considered at least a human being, but

the only boon, his acceptance of Christ's godhood confers on him, is perhaps the European dress and a dislike of his fellow-natives. But he is very soon disillusioned ; for the sense of any real brotherhood between a black and a white Christian is utterly foreign to the European mind.

On the question of the West African Negroes a very interesting paper was contributed by Pastor Mojola Agbebi, D.D., Lagos, director of the Niger Delta Mission, to the First Universal Races Congress, held in London, and is published in the volume "Inter-Racial Problems," edited by G. Spiller. The importance of this paper lies in the fact that the contributor is a West African gentleman himself, and the director of a Christian mission. His views on Islam in Africa are unique and extremely valuable, considering that their holder is not an ordinary man but a recognised Christian leader. They are pregnant with hope and good cheer for the Islamic world, and are all the more welcome because they are the unsolicited testimony of the marvels of Islam, and are both instructive and authoritative. In order to let the world see what a genuine antagonist thinks of Islam an extensive quotation is given below :—

“*“ Islam in Africa is a demonstrative and attractive faith. It is the only religion which, besides Christianity, boasts of a literature that lays claim to Divine inspiration. Both the Christian and Moslem scriptures promise material joys to the faithful after death—‘golden streets,’ ‘pearly gates,’ beauteous maidens.’ Christianity and Islam have many things in common, and many of our own relatives and friends are followers of the prophet of Mecca, as some of us are followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Islam is a permanent faith in Africa. Its calls to prayer, its manner of praying, its annual feasts, which are all

*“ Inter-Racial Problems,” page 347.

subject to ocular demonstration, appeal to high and low alike from day to day. Its adaptation to the social laws, domestic arrangements, religious aspiration, political ambition, intellectual aptitude, mental energy, and racial instincts of the people, is *no longer a matter of dispute*. The African is no big child, no child race, according to the current expression of some Europeans ; but a full-fledged man in the “ eternal providence ” of the world. He may be child in respect of European greed and aggrandisement, European subtlety and guile, European trespasses and sins : but he is not a child to his creation or to the law of his being.

“ Five times a day from the turrets and minarets Islam’s call to prayer startles Africa, demanding attention from dawn to dark, and Christianity in its best form, whatever that may be, has not presented a formula more arousing than

“ Rise, ye believers !
 Prayer is better than sleep, “
 Prayer is better than sleep ! ”

