

to be the test of the artist's truth, he can serve the Truth itself. In humbly acknowledging that the tradition, while it binds, yet sets him free, he can be that 'good and faithful servant' whom the Bishop of Nice praised in Matisse, at the end of his life turning to things divine creating the work by which he asked to be judged.

## ISLAM AND THE WEST

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THE attitude of Christendom towards Islam is part of a story much older than either of the two religions concerned; though Christianity being one of them gives the story certain important differences. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental, and also invigorating, factors of early civilizations was their habit of holding themselves superior to any other culture: of seeing themselves as the unique bearers of all that was best. This sense of superiority might be deemed essential to the process of advancing civilization at all: the process of wresting an area of order, and of grace, out of the mists of errant wildness. It was based on an obvious truth: one's own patch was cultivated; so far as could be seen, the rest was not. Moreover, the rest was inimical. The patch of enlightenment and perfection needed protection. For this it had its exclusive deities. In course of time, associated with the obvious superiority of the area of life they guarded, these deities became The Deity in the mind's of their protégés. When there was awareness of other patches of civilization, rivalling the one which had been thought unique, each considered its god the only True God, for now the gods were at war. Contests and comparisons between civilizations were contests between religions and, as the degree of polemic fervour in favour of the one civilization against the barbarisms without, of the one religion that is true against the others that are false, is indicative of the vitality of the polemicists's cause, in later ages the sterner Christian attitude to its rival may be taken to show a degree of advancement in Christianity absent from Islam. For Islam saw alien faiths from the beginning as sources to be borrowed from and imitated; as institutions to be temporized with; and, not very much later, as populations to furnish funds in a poll-tax; and then, in a more decadent phase, as hunting-grounds for slaves. Islam never saw other religions as the expression of an alien barbarism, to be fought

against and neutralized on a spiritual and intellectual, as well as physical, level, for the defence and extension of an area uniquely in the possession of the Truth. Islam was not a missionary religion until nineteenth-century reactions to Christian missionary effort: it spread for loot, and its Caliphs as early as the second dynasty of them were embarrassed by revenue decreases due to the number of those who accepted their faith rather than pay the tax by which they could buy tolerance of their own.

One of the reasons why Dr Daniel's book<sup>1</sup> (whose title may be misleading; one similar to it has been used for another, quite different, and still incomplete, historical study) makes uncomfortable reading is that he seems in perpetual danger, in his attempt to avoid being prejudiced, of going too far the other way. He wants to be objective, so he cannot start from the premiss to which most of the Christian writers he deals with could happily conceive no alternative. He ends by implying (only implying) that they were wrong in instances where they appear often to have been right; and by leaving the impression that he thinks Islam has been badly done by in Christendom. He suggests that ideas current in Europe about Islam in the fourteenth century need re-examination in the bright lights of the twentieth, so that relations of today between Europe and Muslim states may be improved; a suggestion which, while untenable for a variety of other reasons, is irrelevant in the context of Dr Daniel's book because he avoids the political and psychological considerations which would be necessary to make valid the suggestion that the phenomena he describes have the influence he supposes on contemporary attitudes.

In fact, while he is definite and honest about them, the limitations of this work are so constraining that they may go a long way to account for the book's unsatisfactoriness. He confines himself to the literate expression of opinion in Christendom about Islam from 1100 to 1350, with the result that most of the book is a meticulous examination of sources, and far too little judgment and analysis are offered. Those who want, for research purposes, to know what the clerk X wrote about Islam and how far he was indebted to what the clerk Y or Z had said on the same topic, will find a great deal of spade-work done for them. Others, seeking stimulating enlightenment on medieval attitudes, will be extremely frustrated by his sifting of sources and bibliographical material. The frustration will give way to disappointment when they discover that the minute examination of the trees leaves the wood as much obscured as ever it was.

<sup>1</sup> *Islam and the West*. By Norman Daniel (Edinburgh University Press; 63s.).

Perhaps the failure to delineate the wood can be ascribed to Dr Daniel's fear of seeming, were he to make judgments of any universal significance (not judgments about whence X and Y gained their wrong notions), to come down on one side or the other. Perhaps it can be ascribed to the desire for impartiality, which is, it appears, what he intends by objectivity, and which leads to obfuscation.

This makes his work dangerous. It will be read, no doubt by many with some eagerness, by all who want to know more about an important and little-known subject, and who are not in possession of the knowledge—that they will, in fact, seek from Dr Daniel—to enable them to avoid being led into error. For obviously Dr Daniel knows the European sources for Christian Europe's attitudes to Islam better than, I suppose, almost anybody else. Further, he knows something of the relevant Arabic sources. This sort of knowledge is very nearly unique. The responsibility that having it entails is therefore enormous. Any lack of sagacity in handling it is extremely serious and, unless the writer has some particularly illuminating use to put it to, silence beyond the recesses in which theses are made and conned is perhaps preferable.

In writing a thesis, the display of much careful reading and collating of sources which might have mouldered into dust, and the memory of which deserves restoring, is admirable. But in addressing the public on a subject which, as Dr Daniel clearly believes, is of general importance, besides discrimination in deriving material from those sources, oddly enough some sort of passion, or what to some would even go under the heading of prejudice, or to others seem more like principle, is necessary to make a book convincing. Again, where in preparation of a thesis limitations are essential, and often have to be imposed on the student's impulsiveness by the supervisor of the operation, in a book such limitations can halve the light the public want thrown onto the theme. Dr Daniel leaves us in the gloom of libraries without enough light for the image whose creation he is describing to stand out clearly for us to see it; while the human motives involved in the creation of this image are never lit because his work excludes the popular ideas about Islam which lent their colouring to the periodic European panics over this enemy, and (*pace* Aristotle) excludes politics, and the passions of medieval human beings. So perhaps even if there were more light, there would not be much of an image to see, after all.

The study, therefore, though it runs to 322 pages, 69 pages of notes and a 34-page bibliography, is incomplete, if only because it is mainly about manuscripts and hardly ever about people. Its conclusions about what the manuscripts have said seem to be influenced

by the one aspect of his work in which I suspect the author's passions to be involved. I have already hinted at it: his desire to exonerate Islam. I may be wrong in supposing this to have been the main purpose of this painstaking book; if I am, then I wonder whether a clearly defined, really sound purpose was ever envisaged. But my mistake, if it be a mistake, may be due again to the specious kind of objectivity which, in a manner by no means untypical of our fallacious age, the author seems so concerned to preserve; the kind of objectivity which really covers an elaborate process of dodging issues.

The dodging of issues in this work makes one enthusiastic for those monks and travellers who wrote unequivocally (and often with passion) of Islam as the most baneful religion ever to have afflicted a large portion of mankind, steeping it in darkness and making wretched masses the servitors of the Anti-Christ. Unless a writer, Dr Daniel's book has taught me, is conditioned and willing to take up the position towards all religions of a Voltaire, a Boulanger<sup>2</sup> or a Gibbon, then he had better decide before writing exactly which side he is on and subsequently, whatever his views may be on what constitutes 'science', courageously stick to it. Readers will like this: they are human, too. They will make the necessary corrections and allowances, after their own prejudices and positions, never fear; but they will detect and suspect at once positionlessness; and, however recondite the subject, they may even detect errors of a kind which special pleading cannot help but engender.

Now, I suppose, I must put myself out of court so far as that type of scholarship (in intention, I believe, benign and in its way sincere) is concerned, which is purveyed by the kind of school Dr Daniel seems to support, for I must show myself as 'narrow' as some of the harshest polemicists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries against Islam. But I am sufficiently antipathetic to the present century's efforts to have its bread buttered on both sides to say that I think the main fault in Dr Daniel's approach is the assumption (again not ever really explicitly stated, but throughout implied) that somehow Islam is as great, perhaps not quite as great but nearly as great, a religion as Christianity, so more's the pity that the adherents of the two faiths have misunderstood each other, and greater is the need for putting away for ever that 'deformed' Christian image of Islam.

What perhaps makes me quite the wrong person to review this book is my agreement with Christian sentiment that Muhammad *quae* Prophet was an impostor. My reluctant sympathy for this religious impostor is aroused by his laying himself open, in efforts to

<sup>2</sup> Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, author of *Despotisme Orientale; Oeuvres*, Paris, 1792-3.

strengthen his pseudo-prophecy, to much of the substance of Christian polemic against him by doing just what it accused him of: borrowing from established religions the garb of valid revelation to make his 'revelation' look respectable. A remarkable leader, trying to make the hitherto politically ineffective desert Arabs dispensers of the world's riches rather than the camel-herds whose hired-out beasts shipped them, or the brokers who, in their one metropolis, dealt in them, he used a religious appeal to a people highly susceptible to religious, or quasi-religious, motivation. This people's religious genius was, however, exceptionally strong, and the fruits religion bore them, owing to political, military and religious breakdowns of a very serious order in the countries round them, made the faith they had accepted under Muhammad, and so nearly forsook immediately on his demise, attractive enough for their continued adherence; an adherence strengthened by the fact that, when they became a large and complex society, it was the only Law they had to base their society on, for it was a Law as much as a religion. Christian polemicists and, I believe, though Dr Daniel rightly dissociates it from the excesses, the Church, knew the difference between a religion of this calibre and their own. And when Mark of Toledo describes the Qoran ('... sometimes he speaks like a crazy man . . .' etc., see page 59), his description (besides being that of a number of Muhammad's own contemporaries) seems quite accurate to an unregenerate *kāfir*<sup>3</sup> like me, and quite capable of surviving the remark, 'There seems as little appreciation here of the language of the Qur'an as understanding of the Arab admiration of it' (*ibid.*). Neither of these was what Mark of Toledo was concerned with; had he been, doubtless he could have remarked on the sorry state of people who, feckless and reckless without the light of reason, are misguided and moved by the sonorous quality of beautiful words, chanted to them in the squalid silences of their arid deserts.

On the same page Dr Daniel speaks of 'a clear lack of sympathy for the Arabic spirit', but does not tell us more about this spirit, so that we are left wondering what he means. Later, on page 193, he speaks of the conception of 'the strong character of the Qur'an' which, he says, must have resulted from reading it, but, he goes on, could not have to the expected degree, since the book's opponents continued criticizing it for its confusion, a word he places in single quotation marks. Why, I wonder; were the Christian polemicists wrong to consider the Qoran confused? Surely they were not, however strong the language may be of this hodge-podge of legal maxims (with abrogations to suit different occasions), ill-assimilated

<sup>3</sup> The Arabic for 'unbeliever'.

Judaic, Christian and even, I venture to say, Manichaeic cosmologies and legends; this scissors-and-paste revelation! I too have been deeply excited by hearing this book recited in Arab lands: moved by an art as I have been by the beauty of quotations from it ranged in mosaic round the arches of mosques of breath-taking loveliness, or worked in gold thread in the pall on a venerated tomb in Anatolia; but still I regard it as a confused book.

So another thing I have learnt from Dr Daniel's study of the writings of Christians on Islam is how right they generally were. For this I am grateful, for had I not read this book I might have continued half to accept the often-heard assertion that Christian critics of Islam (of several centuries ago, not, of course, of this present age, which knows so much) were wildly and maliciously inaccurate and shamefully prejudiced. Now I know that, despite much ignorance, of Arabic very often, of Muslims at first-hand it is assumed (an ignorance perhaps exaggerated), these critics were remarkably accurate. As I agree with Mark of Toledo, so too I agree with what Dr Daniel calls 'the more "Enlightened" Ages' which, he would have it, inherited 'the basic line established in the Middle Ages'; though in one sense it would have been strange had they not, and, in another, there is really no reason to suppose that they could not have arrived without the aid of inheritance at the view that 'Muhammad was . . . the inventor of a religion made up of bits and pieces from round about' (page 291). This was a view I arrived at, after very happy sojourns among Muslims and with some knowledge of their religion, without reading a word about their faith written in Europe in the Middle Ages; but perhaps it is a view that is in the air we breathe in Western Europe, for I remember no one telling me what to think of Islam.

Nor was I, at the time, as imbued with religion as were medieval men; nor did I feel myself threatened by a great political and military power of terrible predatoriness, who not only neighboured and threatened all that was this world to me, but beguiled as well as oppressed those of my co-religionists who paid its taxes and suffered its overweening pride (humbled when Napoleon defeated the Mamluks) and the rapacity of its Caliphs; that rapacity which destroyed the fairest provinces of Persia and made the collection of revenue the sole function of Government. These are, of course, matters not in the scope of Dr Daniel's work; except the beguilement of Christians within the pale of Islam. The fact that much polemic against Islam must have been stimulated by the dread of apostasy of those whose worldly position could be alleviated by it is a matter which merits far more attention than Dr Daniel has

given it. It would help to answer one of his own queries about the nature of this polemic, as not being meat for Muslim audiences. Christians must always be deeply concerned over the sheep that is lost, or in greatest danger of being lost.

There is another aspect to this question of Christians within Islam. When he says, somewhat arbitrarily, on page 3, 'but as the years passed, there was undoubtedly increasing bitterness', in discussing the relation to Muslim rulers of Christian and Jewish clients, Dr Daniel avoids this other aspect, which concerns Christians at the centre of the Muslim empire who were prone to effect a compromise with those they lived under, and who may have been embarrassed by the Latin Westerners' insistence on their spiritual integrity and religious welfare. But the flesh and blood of his theme is not Dr Daniel's business in this work, and while his readers must be reminded that whatever image he was perpetuating (surely not, in Gibbon's hands, that of Mark of Toledo!) Gibbon was nearer right than wrong when he wrote: 'From all sides the roving Arabs were allured by the standard of religion and plunder: the apostle sanctified the practice of embracing the female captives as their wives and concubines; and the enjoyment of wealth and beauty was a feeble type of the joys of paradise prepared for the valiant martyrs of the faith' (cited on page 291), they must still be grateful to Dr Daniel for the industry with which he has brought to light so much material, ready for a more lively treatment which he himself could surely better than most undertake, of his great theme.

Were Dr Daniel, or another, to treat the theme, to the sources of one side of which his present book is really a guide, then the factors which make it so important could be brought out and a real science applied to the task which would have no need of any apologies, being beyond questions of where not to hurt feelings; questions which seem to have influenced the author on this occasion so much. In the next book we should see the political milieu described in which the ancient Roman, and before that, Greek, attitude to the Middle East and Iran was continued by the West, and should learn more about that odd division which is, incidentally, the theme of Herodotus; we might even find that the Islamic religion *per se* had not very much to do with it. Be this as it may, the next book would be deficient without a description of the Persian heterodox Muslims' Salmān-i-Fārsī, compared to the West's Sergius in the role of that mysterious personage who, reasonable people have persisted in thinking, must have helped Muhammad to make his book.