

THE CROSS AND CRESCENT

CLEMENT BURNS, O.P.



IGH ON THE SLOPES of Washington's fashionable Northwest, along stately Massachusetts Avenue, with its rows of glittering embassies, the partially completed shell of an arabesque edifice is rising to share the sky with the ornate Gothic buttresses of the nearby National Cathedral. It is the first mosque in the New World, replete with minarets, prayer niches, domes, and all the trappings of Islamic art and architecture. Adjoining the mosque will be an educational center, where students of Mohammedan religion and culture may obtain information and instruction. The mosque is the joint project of several Moslem governments which maintain legations in the nation's capital; it will provide a place of worship for Washington's relatively large colony of Moslems residing here on diplomatic missions, besides being part of a Mohammedan cultural and educational program for the benefit of Americans.

Most Washingtonians regard their new mosque with pleasant interest: such a distinctively curious thing to have, quaint, romantic, and really beautiful. The shades of our Christian ancestors shudder at the sight! This is the first mosque in all of history to spring up in any Western city which does not have its foundations soaked in Christian blood. Washington's new mosque hardly constitutes a menace to Christianity or Occidental Civilization, but it is a grim reminder that the ominous power and influence of Islam is neither dead nor dormant. The structure will be finished in 1953, in time to commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of the decisively tragic fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, when the Byzantine Empire crumbled, and the whole of Europe was threatened for two centuries by the dread Mohammedan hordes. It is an abhorrent perversion for a Christian to see charm or romance in the pernicious enterprises of Islam. Christians must be mindful of their hard-won heritage: the Western World would be Moslem today were it not for the blood spilt by our forebears at Tours, Lepanto, and Vienna! We shall sketch briefly the story of Islam to see the background against which Washington's new mosque will stand.

CHRISTENDOM AND ISLAM

Wherever Roman roads went, Christianity followed. Christian missionaries leaving the Church of Jerusalem went north into Syria or south along the sea-road into Egypt or west across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Rome. In the southeast Christian sees were founded along the Persian Gulf and farther east along the Malabar coast of India. But to the east, outside the Roman dominion, were the deserts of Arabia. This barren land was left to the Bedouins while the missionaries hastened to more populous and promising fields. When this wild desert folk was converted from their native paganism in 630, it was through the generalship of the heresiarch Mohammed with his monotheistic El-Islam which he compounded from the primitive Arabian and Sabaeen religions, Judaism, and Monophysite and other heretical Christianity.

As can now be seen, the loss of Arabia was more disastrous in its effects than the loss of northern Europe in the Reformation. For the Protestants, by their revolt against the authority of the Pope, planted within their creed a seed of contradiction which is leading to their destruction. Precisely because they kept the Scriptures but rejected any organ of interpretation of these Scriptures, their rule of faith must cause division after division. On the other hand, Mohammed founded a religion which has an internal logic when he rejected both the Bible and the priesthood. Because of the structural simplicity of Islam, it will remain a potent force while Protestantism fades away.

Once again we are approaching a period of history similar to that which existed before the sixteenth century when these two forces, Christendom and Islam, faced each other. Islam is the only real opponent of Christianity. Communism and the Asiatic religions are only momentary opponents comparable to Celtic and Gothic paganism, which loomed large for a time but whose only devotees today are historians and antiquaries.

ISLAM'S VICTORY

The stature of Islam grows duly impressive when we consider that it is the only religion which has permanently converted a Christian people; it is the only religion which has caused national apostasy from the Christian Faith. In 553, the year of the Second Council of Constantinople, who would have thought that this was the last evening of Christian life in the Near East?

Yet less than eighty-five years later Syria and Egypt were in the hands of the infidels and the religion of Christ began, slowly but surely, to lose its followers. Add sixty more years and the Latin Church in Africa is swept away. A little less than a hundred years after Mohammed's death, Spain is occupied and France invaded. Here and there small national groups kept the old Faith, but by and large it was abandoned as something unclean. This revulsion for the ancient Faith is less understandable than the attitude which inspired the new Protestants of England or Germany to revolt against the Church. This change of heart is found in the very cradle of Christianity. The new converts to Islam were the descendants of martyrs, the subjects of apostolic sees. In the East the people themselves were Christians long before their rulers; in the West it was quite different: the rulers were usually converted first and the people followed them into the Church.

This horrible dereliction of Christianity can be explained only if we agree that it was not really Christianity that the people of the Eastern Churches surrendered, but something which had only the appearances of Christianity. First of all, when we take into account the ravages of heresy in the East, we find that the loyal adherents to the Catholic Faith were a distinct minority, and even this Catholic minority was often in schism. There was not enough time between each new division from the See of Peter for their religion to gather strength. It was a weak and withered branch hanging loosely upon the Christian vine. Moreover, the Byzantine Empire was politically ripe for defeat. A strong national hatred for their Greek masters was present in every province; when the Arabian horsemen appeared outside the cities of the Empire, they were welcomed as liberators by the populace. The Near East found that their choice lay between the turban and the Byzantine crown. Although they were Christians, they chose the turban — a weird choice indeed — but it shows that Christianity was weighed and found wanting. At the time of the Crusades the Greeks themselves would face the same choice between the turban and the tiara.

There can be no doubt that political unrest, together with the attraction of the lax moral code of the new religion, the power of the sword and of fanaticism, the hope of plunder and the love of conquest, the genius of the caliphs—all combined in the conquest in less than a century of Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa and the Levant only to a degree; beyond this point our attempts at explanation all terminate in mystery. Questions arise which will not be explained away. Why did the Balkan peoples tenaciously

hold to the Christian Faith? They were in schism as often as those who fell beneath the Prophet's spell, and the Christian churches of these regions were tied just as firmly to the "apron strings" of their Caesars. Why did these churches withstand the Turks even after their rulers had perished? One modern theory views the Mohammedan invasion of Syria and its neighboring countries as a revolt against Hellenism which had been introduced into the East by the conquests of Alexander the Great. In the light of this theory, Islam is a native power which cast off the yoke of a foreign influence. But correspondently, since Islam is the antithesis of Christianity, this would place Christianity as a foreign element. Yet Christianity was the development and fulfillment of the Old Testament; it arose in the East and was fundamentally oriental in character. At the time of the Moslem invasion, Christianity was much more deeply rooted in the East than in the West. It came to the West only by way of importation. Only after the Mohammedan conquest was the Western man identified with the Christian man.

The loss of the older part of Christendom is of such gigantic proportions that it is difficult to comprehend fully its effects. It is a negative concept which lies beyond the mind's grasp. The loss involves possibilities known only to God: millions of souls never baptized; thousands of potential saints who knew only the mysticism of Allah; Masses never celebrated; prayers unsaid; churches not built. We stand in the awe of conjecture, and wonder what might have been. The effects of the Christian age of mechanization in modern times upon Islam is insignificant in comparison with the inroads the Moslem have made upon Christianity. The Christian commonwealth still throbs from the sting of its blood-stained dismemberment at the hands of the shepherd folk from Arabia.

ISLAM'S INFLUENCE

Whatever Islam has touched she has turned to ashes, and whatever she breathes upon she burns. Any true display of culture, any really civilizing influence, which emerges from beneath the shadow of the crescent, is sure to be foreign in origin and character. When historians compare the brilliancy of the caliphates of Bagdad or Moslem Spain to its contemporary civilization in Western Europe, they forget that the culture found in these Moslem states was Grecian and Chinese. The rude horsemen of the Arabian desert could teach their subjects only more refined modes of cruelty and barbarism. When Christianity had spread centuries earlier, it found no such

civilization among its new converts, but whatever civilization came to exist was due solely and entirely to the Church. It is true that Moslem Spain passed on the heritage of Greece to Christendom, yet even this was tainted by their hands.

One notorious example is the incomparably significant philosophy of Aristotle which came to the West thoroughly polluted by its passage through Islam. The clerics of Toledo who were the instruments of this transfer on the Christian side introduced an unsatisfactory Latin translation of the Arabian translation of Aristotle. At the same time, these men also published translations of Aristotle's Greek and Jewish commentators. It was unfortunate, therefore, that Aristotle should enter the intellectual circles of the West as an anti-Christian philosopher, for the Jews and Moslems used Aristotle to defend their religions. Aristotle himself was not as well studied as these polemicists who distorted his teaching. The most formidable of these commentators was Averroes, and against him were directed some of the most strenuous labors of St. Thomas and St. Albert the Great. Nevertheless, the doctors of theology at Paris identified the teaching of St. Thomas with Averroes because both of them insisted on a realistic intellectualistic approach in their thought. On the other hand, if the faculty at Paris found anything sympathetic in the new movement, it was to be found in Avicenna's interpretation of Aristotle. The methods of this commentator were more in accord with the Platonic persuasions of the older Catholic theologians. This is the crucial point of the problem, since the Platonic system of thought was held to be absolutely necessary for the interpretation of certain articles of Faith. Within three years of his death, accusations of unorthodoxy were made publicly against St. Thomas. In that year the Bishop of Paris published a condemnation of certain errors of Aristotle and his commentators, and in this denunciation the enemies of St. Thomas inserted some of his fundamental theses. This was the first movement in that theory which would place a contradiction between faith and reason. It was a breach that would widen until Luther would step forth in his tragic rôle in the drama of Christianity. A few weeks later, Robert Kilwardby, the Dominican Archbishop of Canterbury, repeated this condemnation at Oxford. Ockham was a product of Oxford and Luther a product of Ockham. In spite of St. Albert's defense of his illustrious student, and the subsequent canonization of St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomism was so discredited that it remained a weak influence when it was most needed in the important years preceding the Reformation. In our day when the Church has endorsed the doctrine of the Angelic Doctor so unreservedly, it seems shock-

ing to think that the influence of St. Thomas upon the theologians of the Church became all-powerful only through the untiring efforts of Leo XIII.

Although Islam had only an indirect prevalence in this battle between Christian theologians, the result, the Reformation, is more important than any effect directly caused by Islam in Christian theology. An example of direct influence Islam's theology has had upon the Christian Faith is the heresy of Iconoclasm. This was a practical heresy, one that attacked a corollary of Christian belief, the veneration of images. It was a surface attack which lacked the penetration contained in an argument over an intimate interpretation of the Faith itself such as is found in the dispute over the use of Aristotle.

Christianity has not produced any influence similar to Iconoclasm upon Mohammedanism, nor has it given any philosophy to Islam. Once Mohammed organized his religion—an eclectic assortment of Christian and Jewish beliefs—Christian influence upon Islam's theology has been woefully negligible. Not the least ray of the brilliance of Christian thought has seeped into the Moslem blackness. The Prophet's barbicans are armed powerfully and vigilantly ready to cut down any Christian intellectual offensive at the first approach.

CHRISTIAN COUNTERATTACKS

In the way of practical influence, Islam has been affected like the rest of the world by the Industrial Revolution. But this cannot be called Christian except in its geographical origin. In the last 150 years, the West has accomplished what the Crusades failed to do: we have subjugated the Moslem world beneath the political control of Christendom. Yet this tenuous sway is rapidly losing hold because it is nothing more than political domination based upon material strength without any spiritual foundation. As soon as the East learned methods of modern science, it was inevitable that the Moslems would become the equals of the Europeans. The case with the Crusaders was quite the opposite. They possessed the firm intention of liberating the Sepulchre of our Lord and restoring these once Christian lands to the Faith. But they were not victorious because of material considerations. They were few in numbers, divided in leadership, and much too far from their base for the poor communications of their time to be effective. In battle after battle these Europeans proved they could defeat their enemy at odds of five to one. There can be no doubt about the individual superiority of the Christian knight; in the last battle of the Holy Land, where numbers were against them ten to

one, they were magnificent. The Moslem line broke on the first assault. If the foot soldiers had protected these knights as they regrouped, Acre would have been a Christian victory rather than the last battle in the East. But it is the sad tale of history that the communications and the politics of that day were not on a par with the faith and zeal of Catholicism.

Significantly, the only successful counterattacks against Islam were launched by the Spanish nation, the same people who converted the South American continent to Christianity, the same people who alone among all the nations of the earth has decisively defeated communism in this century. In all these adventures the Spaniard was no stronger than his opponent except in the matter of a vital Catholicism. Neither the French nor the English colonists left the imprint of their culture upon the natives of North America. In the Spanish Crusade of the fifteenth century, Moslems who had occupied Iberia for seven hundred years as conquerers, were themselves conquered at Granada. And in the recent tragic Civil War while the Nationalists were aided by Italy and Germany, the Loyalists had the active help of Russia and of communists all over the world. Only the inner spirit of the Spanish people can explain their victories over Islam, paganism, and communism, where others who were far superior materially have failed.

ISLAM'S FUTURE

The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 consolidated the gains the Musselmen had already made in Europe and foreshadowed their future conquests. It signified the confinement of Christian power within two-thirds of the European continent. There was only one way for Christians to move to avoid suffocation—westward. They were forced to push out into and beyond the Atlantic. Succeeding centuries proved that this was far from a misfortune. The nations which turned to the sea have become the most powerful the world has ever seen. Defeated on the continent with the enemy firmly entrenched behind them, they found that with their naval strength they could outflank the entire Mohammedan Empire and gain the wealth of the Indies. Afterwards, by means of this wealth and with the ascendancy of the Industrial Revolution which was generated by commerce, Europe forced Islam back to Asia and defeated her there and in Africa.

But now sea power is no longer the basis of political power and Islam's geographical position is as important as it ever was. On land,

the crescent dominates the eastern approaches to Africa and Europe. For the airplane, it provides a heart-land flying field to all corners of the world as the military leaders of the Western nations well know. The illusion of impotence which has beset Islam since the unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683 is being steadily transformed. The parched deserts of Arabia have become oases of oil and reservoirs of untapped mineral wealth which is the envy of the world. The Moslems themselves are inspired by a faith which is fundamentally military in spirit. Since World War I, Islam has come to know her strength in the modern industrial age, and has ignored no opportunity to cast off Western domination. As long as Mohammed stands as the Prophet of his people, his followers loom alarmingly as the gravest of all threats to Europe and the Christian Empire.

ISLAM'S CONVERSION

In the light of present circumstances, Islam seems well nigh unconvertible. No other people in the world is more impervious to conversion. Conversion for the Moslem means social ostracism and often persecution. Islam itself is a great missionary power, in an unorganized and indirect way. In Africa, its advance among pagans is continuous. In the last century, Catholicism gained many converts in Africa; yet this increase is found chiefly below a line which could be drawn a little above the Belgian Congo. This means that practically all of Catholicism on that continent is outside Mohammedan Africa. Where Christianity and Islam meet, our missionaries are struggling against time because a native who becomes a Mohammedan rarely can be converted. This same situation is found in the missions of China and India and in the Catholic country of the Philippines where there are Moslem minorities.

For nearly twelve centuries, the sustained ferocity of Moslem attempts to invade the European Christian strongholds was so fearful and formidable that the Church and the Christian nations could regard the Moslems only as ruinous foes who must be destroyed. Thought was directed primarily to their destruction, and only remotely to their conversion. In her liturgy the Church still prays against the infidel "that the heathen nations who trust in the fierceness of their own might, may be crushed by the power of Thine Arm." Now that the deadly peril has passed, in a less ruffled and defensive atmosphere, Catholics look toward and hope for the conversion of Islam. Many Catholics see a sign of hope for Islam in our Lady when she opened to the world the graces of heaven at Fátima,

Portugal, in 1917. Is it without significance that Mary, the chosen daughter of God, should appear at a place called Fátima, when Fatima was the name of Mohammed's dearly loved daughter, the only one of his six children to survive infancy, through whom great numbers of Moslems trace their descent to the Prophet?

When God allows men a part in the divine plan, he gives them graces to prepare them for their task by gifts which are not for their own good but for the good of others. Graces of this type are called *gratiae gratis datae*. A most spectacular bestowal of these graces was manifest in the primitive Church. Such miraculous powers are not seen as frequently in our own time, yet whenever God gives a missionary vocation, He also gives a special fittingness to the missionary to equal the task at hand. It seems safe to say that, in general, the West has never, in the providence of God, received a missionary vocation for the conversion of Islam. To the Western world other fields were given: the Americas, India, China, Africa, and the islands of the Pacific; but Islam has been kept for another. It may well be that the Moslem world has been kept for the African Christian, working from the south, and the Asiatic, working from the east. Moslems do not feel the natural enmity for these people which they do towards the Europeans. Once Islam is converted, the last obstacle to stand against Christianity will be the Jewish nation. The conversion of these two Semitic peoples may take centuries, but the Catholic Church has all the centuries in which to accomplish her mission, *usque ad consummationem saeculi*.