

ISLAM ON THE MARCH

Antoninus McCaffrey, O.P.

“**L**A ILAHA—illa 'lahu Muhammadu—Rasulu—Allah.” (There is no God, but God, and Mohammed is his prophet). This Arabian phrase has echoed and reechoed throughout parts of Europe, Asia and Africa for many centuries. In it is summed up a vast socio-religious system called Islam—a belief which today claims some 350,000,000 adherents, or approximately one-seventh of the world's total population.

The history of Islamism's rapid spread from the 7th century onwards presents a complex but interesting study. Today, as a consequence, most of the Near East and Middle East, Indonesia, Malaya along with sizeable portions of Central Africa, India and Western China may be designated as the land of Islam—a land which has been a perennial thorn in the side of Holy Mother Church. The problem not only still exists, but is even aggravated, since Islam is once again endeavoring to expand. Within recent years Moslem merchants, politicians and social workers have poured into Central Africa to indoctrinate the natives. In Asia Islam has succeeded in setting up Pakistan, a state that was not created on a racial or linguistic basis but on a religious one—Moslem unity. Besides this, it has a network of propaganda centers all over the globe, including the United States. In view of this aggressiveness it is important that we understand something of basic Islamic teachings.

Islam's notion of God is that of an all-powerful creator who demands blind obedience from his creatures; whence the name “Islam” which means submission and the name “Moslem” which connotes one who is subject.

The Islamic religion is one with many faces depending on the particular conditions and circumstances under which it exists, but no matter how great these differences may be, Moslems form a

tightly knit community around the Koran—Islam's bible. This renowned volume touches practically all aspects of their life, and it is responsible for forming their unique mentality. Running through the Koran are four basic dogmas: (1) The all-good and powerful God is one; (2) Mohammed is his true and last prophet; (3) on the last day there will be a general resurrection; (4) believers will enjoy paradise and infidels will be cast into hell.

Islam also possesses the Sunna which is somewhat analogous to Catholic "tradition." It is made up of fragmentary texts which, it is alleged, recount in the most minute details the practices of Mohammed and his early followers. These traditions are very important because they reveal the spirit of the Koran and at the same time have the force of law.

Yet salvation for the Moslem does not depend totally on his interior faith in these dogmas, but it must always be coupled with acts of devotion. Hence a true Islamite builds the superstructure of his life on the famous five pillars of his religion: (1) a verbal profession of the creed; (2) steadfastness in the official prayers, which are performed according to a special ritual; (3) the giving of legal alms; (4) total abstinence from food and drink during the daylight hours of the ninth month—called the month of Ramadan; (5) at least once in his life a pilgrimage to the Mosque at Mecca.

Because of these pious habits which it has instilled in its adherents, Moslemism may be likened to a hard shell which secularism has been slow to crack. But within this shell is a terrible hollow darkness which has yet to be illuminated by the teachings of Christ. The God of Islam is the One God-Creator; the Moslems' relations with Him resemble that of a servant to his master. But the Moslems have no realization of a God who could love his creatures as sons; they have no idea of the possibility of participating in the Divine life. In other words it is impossible for them to recognize a God who is essentially Love itself. Consequently they reject the full expression of God's love in the Incarnation. Although Jesus is referred to with great respect in the Koran He is relegated to the category of mere man. They resent being called Mohammedans because it suggests that they worship Mohammed as Christians do Christ. They believe that all men are born free and equal. They urge that for this reason they cannot accept the Catholic doctrine on original sin, baptism or man's redemption by the cross. Briefly then, they are lacking all the revelations which are specifically Christian.

It is a known fact that Islamic people rarely think above concrete and imaginative terms. Consequently their knowledge of God is quite limited. As a result they either materialize the concept of God in their study or cease to study it at all. A Moslem believer loves to repeat the litany of Allah's 99 attributes found in the Koran, but one will not find in this book or even among its commentators an ex-professo treatment of His nature. Inasmuch as they do not know the Catholic approach to God by analogy, they accuse Catholics of many theological errors. When the Catholic Church asserts that the Word is generated by the Father, Islam accuses it of blasphemy because to Moslemism all generation is carnal. Again, Islamic theologians say that each person must necessarily have a distinct nature as in man. Thus they are unable to believe in a trinity of persons having only one Divine nature.

Those familiar with mission history undoubtedly know of the Church's valiant attempts throughout the centuries to transfuse the life-giving blood of Jesus into Islam, but the transfusion has been repeatedly refused for it will not bare its arm. The theological difficulties mentioned above have been partly responsible for it, but there exist even greater obstacles to conversion. Moslems consider their religion to be the *only* true one—the crown of the Old and New Testaments. Hence a conversion to Christianity among the Islamites is considered a regression to a preliminary stage of revelation. But even more important than this is the social ostracism involved. To leave Islam for another religion means not only damnation in the next life, but also a civil death here and now. In some countries where Moslems are in power the convert must abandon his entire social milieu—his family, his heritage, his public functions—and seek refuge in another country. Parenthetically it might be well to note that it is not unheard of for the neophyte to be found murdered after baptism. Keeping this in mind we can readily see the missionary problem in its true perspective.

Besides continuous prayer and sacrifice, many solutions have been proposed, but education heads the list. As St. Thomas Aquinas said when writing the *Contra Gentiles*: "the Moslems will not accept the scriptures; therefore we must find a common denominator and it is this—that we both can think!" With Islamic peoples today in a deplorable state of illiteracy their governments will gladly allow instruction in human science and natural law, thereby giving the Church an opportunity to lay a foundation

upon which Our Lord's teaching will eventually rest. Scholars could do the Church an invaluable service by scientifically examining the Koran's authenticity. Islam has yet to submit this work to such a scrutiny. Since truth is one the result ought to be resounding!

It must be borne in mind too that Islam, like Catholicism, is a missionary religion; therefore in a direct way its advances must be stemmed. Where the Catholic faith already exists Moslem missionaries find the work of proselyting extremely difficult. Pope Pius XII brought out this fact in March, 1956, when his mission intention was: "for African missions that are bordering Moslem countries." But due to its simplicity of doctrine and the moderation of its demands for curtailing pagan practices Islam is gaining nearly twice as many converts as Catholicism in Africa.

Islam is definitely on the march, but this time it is not conquering by the sword. Therefore it cannot be stopped as at the battles of Tours and Lepanto. Today Holy Mother Church must meet this Moslem advance with an army of zealous, intelligent and persevering apostles.



"It is indeed difficult to counter all these different errors against the faith, and this for two reasons. First, we are seldom well enough acquainted with the sacrilegious assertions of the individuals who have feathered these errors, that we could use their very words as a starting point from which to undertake their refutation. For this used to be the method employed by the earliest Doctors of the Church in refuting the pagans, since having once been pagans themselves they knew where their opponents stood, or at any rate they lived in the midst of pagans and had studied their teachings.—And secondly, because some of our opponents, such as pagans and Mohammedans, do not agree with us in accepting any part of Scripture as authoritative from which we might argue, as we can use the Old Testament in disputing with the Jews, and the New also when dealing with heretics. Mohammedans accept neither. Hence we must fall back on natural reason, to which all men are obliged to give assent. Yet we must recall that this has limited effectiveness in dealing with divine things." *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1, 2.

CHINA MISSION SERIES

The series *Mission to Kianning-Fu*, by Terence Reilly, O.P., Part I of which appeared in the December, 1957 issue, will be resumed in the next issue—Summer, 1958.