

CALVINISM AND ISLAM

ONE of the most interesting developments in the religious thought of Europe is the revival of Calvinism and a renewed interest in its historic significance.

Pastor Daniel Couvé, the Secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Society in Paris, in a public address after the Jerusalem Council meeting, used the argument, "we believe in Missions and world evangelism not only because we are Frenchmen and because we are Christians, but more especially *because we are Calvinists.*" "It is not a mere coincidence," writes a French historian, "that the French Reformer, Calvin, is considered the most faithful interpreter of the spirit of Paul's Gospel, and that St. Paul has always been held up as the very incarnation of the spirit of missions." Doumergue in his life of John Calvin exclaims, "Who first penetrated the virgin forests of the new world to carry the Gospel to the savages, was it not Brainerd and Eliot, both Calvinists? All the heroes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of Protestant Missions were disciples of the same Calvin—Carey and Martyn in India, Moffat and Livingstone in Africa, Morrison in China, and Paton in the South Seas" (Doumergue, *Jean Calvin*, IV, p. 454). Calvinism then was not static but kinetic—not only a creed but a missionary programme.

FROUDE ON MOHAMMED AND CALVIN

Now it is remarkable that as far back as 1871 in an address on Calvinism delivered as Rector of St. Andrews, the historian James Anthony Froude, called attention to the strange parallel between the Reformation in Europe under Calvin and that in Arabia under Mohammed. Islam, indeed, as Bancroft remarks, is the Calvinism of the Orient. It, too, was a call to acknowledge the sovereignty of God's will. "There is no god but Allah." It, too, saw in nature and sought in Revelation the majesty of God's presence and power, the manifestation of his glory transcendent and omnipotent. "God," said Mohammed, "there is

no god but He, the living, the self-subsistent, slumber seizeth Him not, nor sleep—His throne embraces the heavens and the earth and none can intercede with Him save by His permission. He alone is exalted and great.” It is this vital, theistic principle that explains the victory of Islam over the weak, divided, and idolatrous Christendom of the Orient in the sixth century. “As the Greek theology,” so Froude remarks, “was one of the most complicated accounts ever offered of the nature of God and his relation to man, so the message of Mahomet, when he first unfolded the green banner, was one of the most simple: There is no god but God; God is King, and you must and shall obey his will. This was Islam, as it was first offered at the sword’s point to people who had lost the power of understanding any other argument; your images are wood and stone; your metaphysics are words without understanding; the world lies in wickedness and wretchedness because you have forgotten the statutes of your Master, and you shall go back to those; you shall fulfil the purpose for which you were set to live upon the earth, or you shall not live at all” (Froude, *Calvinism*, p. 36).

And then he goes on to say, by way of correction: “I am not upholding Mahomet as if he had been a perfect man, or the Koran as a second Bible. The Crescent was no Sun, nor even a complete moon, reigning full-orbed in the night heaven. The light there was in it was but reflected from the sacred books of the Jews and the Arab traditions. The morality of it was defective. The detailed conception of man’s duties inferior, far inferior, to what St. Martin and St. Patrick, St. Columba and St. Augustine, were teaching or had taught in Western Europe. Mahometanism rapidly degenerated. The first caliphs stood far above Saladin. The descent from Saladin to a modern Moslem despot is like a fall over a precipice. But the light which there was in the Moslem creed was real. It taught the omnipotence and omnipresence of one eternal Spirit, the Maker and Ruler of all things, by whose everlasting purpose all things were, and whose *will* all things must obey” (Froude, *Calvinism*, pp. 37–8).

“LIEVER TURKSCH DAN PAAPSCH”

The Reformers themselves felt that Islam with all its errors and its Arabian fanaticism was closer to the truth than the Medieval Papacy. The Dutch in their struggle with Spain chose for their motto, “Liever Turksch dan Paapsch”—

Rather the Turk than the Pope! You may still read these words and the symbols that accompany them on the carved pillars of a church at Middelburg. Islam was long considered a Christian heresy, and so should be approached.

In one of his letters Erasmus actually proposed that "the best and most effectual way to overcome and win the Turks would be if they shall perceive that things which Christ taught and expressed in His life shine in us. For truly, it is not meet nor convenient to declare ourselves Christian men by this proof or token if we kill very many, but rather if we save very many. Nor if we send thousands of heathen people to hell, but if we make many infidels faithful. In my mind it were the best before we should try with them in battle, to attempt them with epistles and some little books . . ."

Calvinism and Islam have indeed much in common. Both are opposed to compromise and all half-measures. Both were a trumpet-call in hard times for hard men for, "intellects that could pierce to the roots of things where truth and lies part company".

Intolerance is sometimes a virtue. The very essence and life of all great religious movements is the sense of authority; of an external, supernatural frame-work or pattern to which all must be made conformable.

THE WILL OF GOD SUPREME

Calvinism and Islam were neither of them systems of opinion but both were attempts to make the will of God as revealed (in the Bible or in the Koran) an authoritative guide for social as well as personal affairs, for Church not only, but for State. They both believed in election and reprobation, dependent on God's will, not on man.

Calvinism and Islam have at their very core the principle of a claim of finality and universality, and it is this principle that is the very basis of a missionary religion. Paul's theology and soteriology made him a missionary—drove him across all racial barriers and compelled him to set forth Christianity as final and triumphant. The strongest plea for missions is the will of God for the whole world. We can only have a passion for the glory of God when we acknowledge His sovereignty in every realm of life.

Again, singleness of aim is a mark of leadership, and in this respect Calvin and Mohammed were born leaders. As

Barth expresses it: "Calvin first had a theme and then thought of its variation; first knew what he willed and then willed what he knew." The same might be said of Mohammed. The genius of spiritual conquest is the consciousness that God is commanding the battalions, that the issue is not uncertain, and that the goal is God's eternal glory. More than a century ago James Montgomery, a true Calvinist, closed his great missionary hymn, beginning, "O Spirit of the Living God", with the stanza:

"God from eternity hath willed
All flesh shall His salvation see;
So be the Father's love fulfilled
The Saviour's sufferings crowned through thee."

Our American statesman, John Hay, a century later, interpreted in true Calvinistic fashion the prayer, "Thy will be done", in his great hymn, beginning: "Not in dumb resignation we lift our hands on high."

With God's sovereignty as basis, God's glory as goal, and God's will as motive, the missionary enterprise to-day can face the most difficult of all missionary tasks—the evangelization of the Moslem world. The survival of the *unfittest* by election and by grace. It is in this arena that "Greek meets Greek", and then comes the "tug of war".

CALVINIST MISSIONARIES TO ISLAM

God in His sovereign Providence and by His Holy Spirit has led the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches geographically to the very heart of the Moslem world. For more than one hundred years they, and they alone, have challenged Islam in the very lands of its birth—in its cradle and strongholds. They, more than other branches of the Church, were pioneers in the world of Islam. Jessup, Van Dyck, Dennis in Syria, Shedd and his colleagues in Persia, Lansing, Hogg, Watson in Egypt, Forman, Wherry, Ewing in North India, Keith Falconer, John Young, Peter Zwemer, Henry Bilkert in Arabia—to mention only a few, who have passed on to their reward.

It is still true (as Professor Lindsay stated at the meeting of the Reformed and Presbyterian Alliance in Glasgow) that "the Presbyterian churches do more than a fourth of the whole mission work abroad done by all the Protestant churches together". The Calvinistic churches entered the world of Islam

earlier and more vigorously than any other group of churches. The first missionary to the Turks was a Reformed preacher, Venceslaus Budovetz of Budapest. He was born in the year 1551, and belonged by his religion to the *Unitas Fratrum*, which was a branch of the Hussite Church in Bohemia. He was very faithful and a zealous member of that Church. Having spent more than ten years in Western Europe either at Protestant universities, especially Reformed, or in travels, he became a very strong and convinced Calvinist, and became acquainted with some of the most renowned evangelical scholars and religious leaders of his time. (See *The Moslem World*, Vol. XVII, pp. 401 ff., where we have a sketch of his life and influence by Professor Josef Soucek of Prague.)

BEZA, DU PLESSIS, AND BUDOVEC

Among these friends were Theodore Beza of Geneva, the French Reformed lawyer Philip Mornay du Plessis, the Basel Reformed theological Professor Grynaeus and also one of the Lutheran theologians, David Chytraeus, who had part in composing the famous Lutheran book of symbols, *Formula Concordiae*.

Vačlav Budovec lived in Constantinople from 1577 to 1581. He sought opportunity to win back apostates and to preach to the Turks; but he was staggered by the power of Islam. "I have been not a little in temptation," he wrote, "seeing how these ungodly Turks prosper and that the noblest parts of the earth where God himself walked in human body . . . have been conquered by them in an incredibly short time."

In one of his letters sent to his son in later years, he mentions the fact that he actually did win one Turk for Christ. Budovec wrote a number of books in the Czech language, one of them being called "Anti-al-Koran". It is a defence of the Christian faith and a refutation of Islam. This book is very rare, but copies are found in the University and other (private) libraries in Prague. Here we have the first Christian apologetic written by the Reformation Church for Moslems.

Nor can we forget that the Reformed Churches of South-Eastern Europe were the bulwark against the invasion of Islam for centuries. Again we note that in Java and Sumatra the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands have had more converts from Islam than any other Mission in any part of the world. Over 62,000 living converts from Islam are connected with

the various missions in Java alone. These missions cover territory which has a population (almost solidly Mohammedan) of nearly forty million souls.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

As regards America, it is not without providential significance that when the world of Islam faces a crisis and affords the Church a new opportunity, Reformed and Presbyterian bodies together have the strongest and widest work in four of the great lands of the Moslem world: Egypt, Syria, Persia, and Arabia. "The union of the United Presbyterian, the Reformed, and the Presbyterian Church," says Dr. Robert E. Speer, "would bring a new joy and faith to the Church which to-day has responsibility for the strongest mission work in the world for the evangelization of Mohammedans."

God's providence has indeed led the children of the Covenanters, of the Huguenots, of the Dutch into the very heart of the world of Islam. Its old historic cities are mission stations of our churches: Alexandria, Cairo, Khartum, Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Bagdad, Busrah, Mosul, Teheran, and Tabriz. The Arabian mission of the Reformed Church and the South Arabia Mission of the Scotch Church have marched around Islam's Jericho and their trumpet gives no uncertain sound. The walls of Arabian intolerance and fanaticism have already fallen before the medical missionary pioneers of these Churches. But there are whole provinces of Arabia still unoccupied and vast areas in Africa and Asia where the missionary has never entered. This is the missionary challenge to the Calvinists of to-day. A challenge to dauntless faith and indiscourageable hope and a love that will not let go. Think of Afghanistan, and Western Arabia; of Russian Turkestan, parts of Siberia, Bokhara, and the Crimea! Of Tripoli in Africa, the French Sudan, which fields together have a population of nearly forty-five millions—all these are a call for those who have Paul's ambition and Calvin's courage to preach the Gospel, "not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation; but, as it is written, 'They shall see to whom no tidings of him came, and they who have not heard shall understand'." But we need men of blood and iron for this spiritual warfare. True disciples of John Calvin.

S. ZWEMER

Princeton Theological Seminary, N. J., U.S.A.

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