

(From "Survivals and New Arrivals", April 1929)

There remains, apart from the old Paganism of Asia and Africa, another indirect supporter of Neo-Paganism: a supporter which indeed hates all Paganism but hates the Catholic Church much more: a factor of whose now increasing importance the masses of Europe are not as yet aware: I mean the Mahommedan religion: Islam.

Islam presents a totally different problem from that attached to any other religious body opposed to Catholicism. To understand it we must appreciate its origin, character and recent fate. Only then can we further appreciate its possible or probable future relations with enemies of the Catholic effort throughout the world.

#### How did Islam arise?

It was not, as our popular historical text-books would have it, a "new religion". It was a direct derivative from the Catholic Church. It was essentially, in its origins, a heresy: like Arianism or Albigensianism.

When the man who produced it (and it is more the creation of one man than any other false religion we know) was young, the whole of the world which he knew, the world speaking Greek in the Eastern half and Latin in the Western (the only civilised world with which he and his people had come in contact) was Catholic. It was still, though in process of transformation, the Christian Roman Empire, stretching from the English Channel to the borders of his own desert.

The Arabs of whom he came and among whom he lived were Pagan; but such higher religious influence as could touch them, and as they came in contact with through commerce and raiding, was Catholic - with a certain admixture of Jewish communities. Catholicism had thus distinctly affected these few Pagans living upon the fringes of the Empire.

Now what Mahomet did was this. He took over the principal doctrines of the Catholic Church - one personal God, Creator of all things; the immortality of the soul; an eternity of misery or blessedness - and no small part of Christian morals as well. All that was the atmosphere of the only civilisation which had influence upon him or his. But at the same time he attempted an extreme *simplification*.

Many another heresiarch had done this, throwing overboard such and such too profound doctrines, and appealing to the less intelligent by getting rid of mysteries through a crude denial of them. But Mahomet simplified much more than did, say, Pelagius or even Arius. He turned Our Lord into a mere prophet, though the greatest of the prophets; Our Lady (whom he greatly revered, and whom his followers still revere), he turned into no more than the mother of so great a prophet; he cut out the Eucharist altogether, and what was most difficult to follow in the matter of the Resurrection. He abolished all idea of priesthood: most important of all, he declared for social equality among all those who should be "true believers" after his fashion.

With the energy of his personality behind that highly simplified, burning enthusiasm, he first inflamed his own few desert folk, and they in turn proceeded to impose their new enthusiasm very rapidly over vast areas of what had until then been a Catholic civilisation; and their chief allies in this sweeping revolution were politically the doctrine of *equality*, and spiritually the doctrine of *simplicity*. Everybody troubled by the mysteries of Catholicism tended to join them; so did every slave or debtor who was oppressed

by the complexity of a higher civilisation.

The new enthusiasm charged under arms over about half the Catholic world. There was a moment after it had started out on its conquest when it looked as though it was going to transform and degrade *all* our Christian culture. But our civilisation was saved at last, though half the Mediterranean was lost.

For centuries the struggle between Islam and the Catholic Church continued. It had varying fortunes, but for something like a thousand years the issue still remained doubtful. It was not till nearly the year 1700 (the great conquests of Islam having begun long before 700) that Christian culture seemed - for a time - to be definitely the master.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Mahommedan world fell under a kind of palsy. It could not catch up with our rapidly advancing physical science. Its shipping and armament and all means of communication and administration went backward while ours advanced. At last, by the end of the nineteenth century, more than nine-tenths of the Mahommedan population of the world, from India and the Pacific to the Atlantic, had fallen under the government of nominally Christian nations, especially of England and France.

On this account our generation came to think of Islam as something naturally subject to ourselves. We no longer regarded it as a rival to our own culture, we thought of its religion as a sort of fossilised thing about which we need not trouble.

*That was almost certainly a mistake. We shall almost certainly have to reckon with Islam in the near future. Perhaps if we lose our faith it will rise.*

For after this subjugation of the Islamic culture by the nominally Christian had already been achieved, the political conquerors of that culture began to notice two disquieting features about it. The first was that its spiritual foundation proved immovable; the second, that its area of occupation did not recede, but on the contrary slowly expanded.

Islam would not look at any Christian missionary effort. The so-called Christian Governments, in contact with it, it spiritually despised. The ardent and sincere Christian missionaries were received usually with courtesy, sometimes with fierce attack, but were never allowed to affect Islam. I think it true to say that Islam is the only spiritual force on earth which Catholicism has found an impregnable fortress. Its votaries are the one religious body conversions from which are insignificant.

*This granite permanence is a most striking thing, and worthy of serious consideration by all those who meditate upon the spiritual, and, consequently, the social, future of the world.*

And what is true of the spiritual side of Islam is true of the geographical. Mahommedan rulers have had to give up Christian provinces formerly under their control: especially in the Balkans. But the area of Mahommedan *practice* has not shrunk. All that wide belt from the islands of the Pacific to Morocco, and from Central Asia to the Sahara desert - and south of it - not only remains intact but slightly expands. Islam is appreciably spreading its influence further and further into tropical Africa.

Now that state of affairs creates a very important subject of study for those who interest themselves in the future of religious influence upon mankind. The political control of Islam by Europe cannot continue indefinitely: it is already shaken. Meanwhile the

spiritual independence of Islam (upon which everything depends) is as strong as, or stronger than, ever.

**What affinities or support does this threat of Islam promise to the new enemies of Catholic tradition?**

It will sound even more fantastic to suggest that Islam should have effect here than to suggest that Asiatic Paganism should. Even those who are directly in contact with the great Mahommedan civilisation and who are impressed, as all such must be, by its strength and apparently invincible resistance to conversion, do not yet conceive of its having any direct effect upon Christendom. There are a few indeed who have envisaged something of the kind. But what they had to say was said before the Great War, was confined to individuals either isolated or eccentric, and produced no lasting impression upon either the French or the English: the only two European countries closely connected as governing powers, with the Mahommedan. To the New World the problem is quite unfamiliar. It touches Mahommedanism nowhere save very slightly in the Philippines.

Nevertheless I will maintain that this very powerful, distorted simplification of Catholic doctrine (for that is what Mahommedanism is) may be of high effect in the near future upon Christendom; and that, acting as a competitive religion, it is not to be despised.

No considerable number of conversions to Mahommedanism from Christendom is probable. I do not say that such a movement would not be possible, for anything is possible in the near future, seeing the welter into which Christian civilisation has fallen. But I think it improbable, and even highly improbable, because Mahommedanism advances in herd or mob fashion. It does not proceed, as the Catholic religion does, by individual conversions, but by colonisation and group movement.

But there are other effects which a great anti-Catholic force and the culture based upon it can have upon anti-Catholic forces within our own boundaries.

In the first place it can act by example. To every man attempting to defend the old Christian culture by prophesying disaster if its main tenets be abandoned, Mahommedanism can be presented as a practical answer.

"You say that monogamy is necessary to happy human life, and that the practice of polygamy, or of divorce (which is but a modified form of polygamy) is fatal to the State? You are proved wrong by the example of Mahommedanism."

Or again "You say that without priests and without sacraments and without all the apparatus of your religion, down to the use of visible images, religion may not survive? Islam is there to give you the lie. Its religion is intense, its spiritual life permanent. Yet it has constantly repudiated all these things. It is violently anti-sacramental; it has no priesthood; it wages fierce war on all symbols in the use of worship."

This example may, in the near future, be of great effect. Remember that our Christian civilisation is in peril of complete breakdown. An enemy would say that it was living upon its past; and certainly those who steadfastly hold its ancient Catholic doctrines stand today on guard as it were, in a state of siege; they are a minority both in power and in numbers. Upon such a state of affairs a steadfast, permanent, convinced, simple philosophy and rule of

life, intensely adhered to, and close at hand, may, now that the various sections of the world are so much inter-penetrating one and the other, be of effect.

The effect may ultimately be enhanced in the near future by a political change.

We must remember that the subjection of the Mahommedan - a purely political subjection - was accomplished by nothing more subtle or enduring than a superiority in weapons and mechanical invention. We must further remember that this superiority dates from a very short time ago.

Old people with whom I have myself spoken as a child remember the time when the Algerian pirates were seen in the Mediterranean and were still a danger to its southern shores. In my own youth the decaying power of Islam (for it was still decaying) in the Near East was a strong menace to the peace of Europe. Those old people of whom I speak had grandparents in whose time Islam was still able to menace the West. The Turks besieged Vienna and nearly took it, less than a century before the American Declaration of Independence. Islam was then our superior, especially in military art. There is no reason why its recent inferiority in mechanical construction, whether military or civilian, should continue indefinitely. Even a slight accession of material power would make the further control of Islam by an alien culture difficult. A little more and there will cease that which our time has taken for granted, the physical domination of Islam by the disintegrated Christendom we know.

*That was written in 1929, and the book ends with these words: «But if I be asked what sign we may look for to show that the advance of the Faith is at hand, I would answer by a word the modern world has forgotten: Persecution. When that shall once more be at work it will be morning.»*

These last two pages from Belloc form the symmetrical complement to the first two pages of this number of the CRC.

As we end the year 1995, we learn that more baby boys were registered under the name of Mohammed in England this year than under the name of John, whilst all around us mosques are going up to cater for Friday congregations which spill out onto the streets. There was a time when the congregation at Sunday Mass similarly spilled out onto the street before some churches, but that is a sight which has not been seen for over thirty years.

Belloc's foresight was remarkable, though no doubt treated with derision when he was writing in 1929. Another writer of remarkable foresight is Michael Wharton, who can only get into print by posing as a clown under the name of *Peter Simple*: Here is the tailpiece of his Sunday Telegraph "Way of the World" column for 18 February 1996, under the heading of "Bad Dreams":

"I have sometimes wondered whether the Germans, wearying of "Europe", might not go, as in 1939, for a new Russian-German alliance. "They have already partitioned Poland in their hearts." Perhaps. But this time, from the look of it, the Russians would take it all - and Germany and the rest of Europe as well."

That is something the Abbé de Nantes has also long wondered, and still wonders.