

ARAB AND HINDU: A STUDY IN MENTALITY

"A fierce and treacherous people gaining as much by fraud as by merchandise, and to make it worse they give you the most pious reasons for every villainy they commit. If you are their captive and offer all to save your life they say, 'No! It is written in the Koran that it is not lawful to plunder the living, but we are not prohibited from stripping the dead.' So saying, they knock you on the head!"

Such was a seventeenth century traveler's¹ outspoken opinion of the people of Oman. Whether or not the characterization was a fair one at that time, we will not venture to say. The author might have had in mind the Bedouin beyond the Hajar mountains or the dwellers of the Trucial Coast. At all events, it would be manifestly unjust to take at its face value such an estimate of this people to-day. True, one has not to stay long or travel far in East Arabia without seeing abundant evidence of the vitality of the old Adam,—the ubiquitous *khanjar*, ugly even when ornate; the frequent rifle, fingered most familiarly; the look or act that betrays suspicion, not to mention the more substantial memorials of an age of strife and hate in the form of crumbling forts. Undenially there is a coercive air about the place which inclines one to suspect a measure of truth in that ancient judgment. But life is decidedly more secure now than it was two or three centuries ago. It was inevitable that it should be so. Just as the rigor of Roman rule was softened, and the barbaric soul of the Teuton sensitized by the influence of the Christian Church, so Arabia in common with the rest of the world is destined to become less

¹ Dr. J. Fryer, "Letters of a Nine-year Travel in East India and Persia," 1677.

pitiless as the power of the Life launched into the world two millenia ago is felt. It is therefore not with that aspect of Arab character uppermost in mind that the writer looks back to a brief stay among the peoples bestrewn the littoral of Oman and the Persian Gulf.

Appreciation is contingent on contrast, and Arabia is better understood against the background of India. Comparisons are odious, and invidious distinctions are to be avoided, for were it possible to tabulate the virtues and vices of the various races, it is an open question whether one would not be more impressed with their close correspondence rather than their divergences, and the smallness of the balance struck. Between "jet and ivory" the range is large in respect to appearance, custom and culture, yet certain unifying traits underlie all, and in our common responses bind us together. Equally appropriate from the lips of a Hindu or a Moslem would have fallen the words which Shakespeare put into the mouth of the Jew,—“fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is.” Unity in diversity and diversity in unity,—it is one of the riddles of the race. Cohering by race and religion, Arabia answers to the first; divided by the same yet subtly united as to disposition, India to the second.

There is a school of historians who hold that the deepest causes of historical events are to be sought in the necessity of mankind to subsist—"bread and butter" theorists they have been nicknamed—to whom geography is the basis of history. As a river or a range will deflect a railway, so, they say, the same factors determine the route the race will take down the corridors of Time. Whether or not the explanation is adequate, that different peoples have pursued divergent cultural routes, and that there are radical contrasts is plain.

In that notorious book "Mother India," the authoress spoke of the "slave mentality" of the peoples of that land.

The epithet came from an unsympathetic mind, yet it does suggest something in the make-up of the Hindu which, seen against the character of his Semitic neighbor, becomes acutely evident. The cause of this submissiveness is not far to seek. Fundamentally the root is not political but religious. The Aryan, brooding over the enigma of existence, took refuge from the mystery in a philosophy of denial. There is something elusive and equivocal about the First Cause, the nature of whose existence can only be affirmed, paradoxically enough, by negation. Is He this or is He that? "Neti, Neti!"—not so, not so! Whatever He is, He is not that but something different. Like the musings of Christopher Robin trying to locate himself as he squatted "half-way down the stairs," the mind can come to no more certain conclusion regarding the character of the Absolute than this child did concerning his own whereabouts.

"It isn't really
Anywhere,
It's somewhere else
Instead."

And so it is with the phenomenal world; it is but the sleight of the Cosmic Conjurer. The only reality that can be affirmed in regard to it is its elusiveness. And what of the hereafter and end of all? There Hindu thought is equally non-committal and Hindu hope equally vacuous. The "consummation devoutly to be wished" is a state of lost-ness where personality is non-existent, activity is suspended and responsibility at an end. Nobody denies that philosophically there is much more depth to Hinduism than to Islam. But mere depth is a poor foundation on which to found a state or build a life. For some purposes the ocean's abyss may prove less serviceable than a foot of land.

How different Islam, both as to content and as to achievement! Like Judaism and Christianity, it is a religion of affirmation. Allah is, and his will is paramount. The world is good and appearance is precisely what it seems to be. The eye of man may not "pierce beyond