

THE MOSLEM WORLD

VOL. XXXIII

JULY, 1943

No. 3

ISLAM IN "ARABIA DESERTA"

Charles M. Doughty stands out alone and supreme as interpreter of Arabia and its people. T. E. Lawrence said of his book *Arabia Deserta*, "It is the true Arabia, the land with its smells and dirt as well as its nobility and freedom. There is no sentiment, nothing merely picturesque. Doughty's completeness is devastating. There is nothing we would take away, little we could add. I have studied *Arabia Deserta* for ten years. The more you learn of Arabia the more you find in this book. It has no date and can never grow old. It is the first and indispensable work upon the Arabs of the desert".¹ In the judgment of a literary critic not one of Doughty's followers or forerunners attained to his supreme opulence, majesty and concrete realism.² Doughty preserved his faith and was not ashamed of his religion amid inhospitable hostility and a fanaticism which led Burton, Burckhardt, Philby and others to don the Islamic cloak in self-defense. He was a scholar, a hero, and a saint—so an Arab told me in our Mission hospital at Bahrein twenty years ago—an Arab who had been with Doughty and who was astonished when I read to him passages from that book that told of his own tribe.

Charles M. Doughty was born in 1843, a younger son of the manse at Theberton Hall, Suffolk. He studied at King's College, London and at Cambridge. His chosen fields were geology, archaeology, and philology. After extensive travels

¹ Introduction to Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, 4th Edition, London, 1936. All references are to this thin-paper edition in one volume complete and unabridged. My own copy was bought in London in 1890 and studied for many years in Arabia, until at Cairo in 1916 T. E. Lawrence bought it for Allenby's staff in the World War. It was a great loss to me.

² *London Times Literary Supplement*, January 9, 1943.

in Europe, North Africa and Greece, he set out in 1876 from Damascus with a pilgrim caravan into Arabia.³ At Medain Salih he left the Hajj and went to the oasis of Khaibar where he joined the wandering Bedouins. In spite of his knowledge of their language and customs, in spite of his poverty and courageous honesty, his life was repeatedly endangered. He met with suspicion and treachery on the part of Arabs, which broke through his kindness and their hospitality. He reached Taima and was sent to Hail, Al Qasim, Buraida and Anaiza; then southward toward Mecca and finally reached safety at Jidda in August, 1878. No part of the Arabian peninsula is more truly the Cradle of Islam and the homeland of the Prophet. No racial group displays more clearly the imprint and the pristine character of Islam and its attitude toward life and thought than the nomads and the settlers of central and western Arabia, where Doughty travelled and took notes.

This masterpiece of English literature, therefore, is more than a book of travel; it is a revelation. Within its pages Doughty carved an enduring image of the Arab mind and religion with incomparable honesty and astonishingly keen penetration.

He saw Islam not in books but in daily life. He sat not in the balcony as a spectator but was in the arena. "The book," he says, "is not milk for babes: it might be likened to a mirror, wherein is set forth faithfully some parcel of the soil of Arabia . . . and as for the persons, if the words written all day from their mouths were rehearsed to them in Arabic everyone would hear his proper voice; and many a rude bystander smiting his thigh should bear witness and cry, Ay Wellah, the sooth indeed."⁴ And what did Doughty record in his "too long and weary years of human fellowship and friendship" among the Bedouin tents "of the bitterness and blight of a fanatical religion in every place"?⁵

The indirect references to Islam are far too many for careful classification. *Arabia Deserta* is a small encyclopedia

³ Encyclopedia Britannica.

⁴ Preface to First Edition.

⁵ Preface to Second Edition.

on Islam. We have chosen typical and striking passages under four captions.

I. *Islam as Religion*. "The Moslem religion ever makes numbness and death in some part of the human understanding".⁶ Yet "What had the world been? if the tongue had not wagged, of this fatal Ishmaelite! Even a thin-witted religion that can array an human multitude, is a main power in the history of the unjust world. Perilous every bond which can unite many of the human millions, for living and dying! Islam and the commonwealth of Jews are as great secret conspiracies, friends only of themselves, and to all without of crude iniquitous heart, unfaithful, implacable.—But the pre-Islamic idolatrous religion of the kaaba was cause that the soon ripe Mawmetry rotted not soon again.

"The heart of their dispersed religion is always Mecca, from whence the Moslems of so many lands every year return fanaticised. From how far countries do they assemble to the sacred festival; the pleasant contagion of the Arabs' religion has spread nearly as far as the pestilence:—a battle gained and it had overflowed into Europe. The nations of Islam, of a barbarous fox-like understanding, and persuaded in their religion, that 'knowledge is only of the koran,' cannot now come upon any way that is good." (I: p. 101)

"Sword is the key of their imagined paradise; and in the next decennium, those unwarlike but frenetic Arabians, inflamed with the new greediness of both worlds, ran down like wolves to devour the civil border-lands. There is moreover a peaceable conquest of the Arabian religion (that preaches a mild-hearted Godhead, and a way of rest—in the sober spiritual fruition of this weak fleshly life, to the bliss of Heaven) which advances now mostly in the African Continent; and that may in time become a danger to Christendom! And such being Mohammed's doctrine, it has obtained a third place among the religions of mankind."

"Wide is the diversity of the Semitic faiths. The Messianic religion—a chastisement of the soul sunning herself in the

⁶ *Arabia Deserta* Vol. II: 7. All other references that follow are to the same book.

divine love—were fain to cast her arms about the human world, sealing all men one brotherhood with a virginal kiss of meekness and charity. The Mohammedan chain-of-credulities is an elation of the soul, breathing of God's favour only to the Moslemîn; and shrewdness out of her cankered bowels to all the world besides. The Arabian religion of the sword must be tempered by the sword: and were the daughter of Mecca and Medina led captive, the Moslemîn should become as Jews! One may be a good Moslem, though he pass his life in the *khala*, without teachers. In the towns are religious elders—not ministers of mysteries: there is no order of priesthood. Mohammed is man, an householder, the father of a family; and his is a virile religion: also his people walk in a large way, which is full of the perfume of the flesh purified; the debate betwixt carnal nature and opinion of godliness is not grievous in their hearts. In the naturally crapulent and idolatrous Europe man himself is divine; every age brings forth god-like heroes." (II: 379)

II. *Attitude toward Christians.* From the beginning to the very end of his long journeys Doughty experienced (as what Christian traveller or missionary has not) the latent fanaticism of Islam, ready to blaze out with or without provocation at the sight of a *Nasrani*. After describing their lavish hospitality he continues: "I wondered with a secret horror at the fiend-like malice of these fanatical Beduins, with whom no keeping touch nor truth of honourable life, no performance of good offices, might win the least favour from the dreary, inhuman, and for our sins, inveterate dotage of their blood-guilty religion. But I had eaten of their cheer, and might sleep among wolves. The fortune of the morrow was dark as death, all ways were shut before me" (I: 502).

"How the Semites are Davids! They are too religious and too very scelerat at once! Their talk is continually, without hypocrisy, of religion" (II: 39). So he writes and immediately afterwards they threaten to kill him: "Then holding the large blade aloft, and turning himself upon me, he said, *Sully aly en-Neby*, 'Give glory to the apostle', so I answered, 'We all worship the Godhead. I cannot forsake my name of

Nasrany, neither wouldst thou thine if thou be'st a worthy man.' But as he yet held the knife above my breast, I said to him, 'What dagger is that? and tell these who are present whether thy meaning be to do me a mischief?' Then he put it down as if he were ashamed to be seen by the company savagely threatening his coffee guest." (II: 39)

Their hospitality was friendly in their camps but on the road the same Arabs often behave as enemies. "I alighted as they were ready to depart again, and would bathe my head in a little water which remained in a waterer's leather after the cattle drinking; but the savage wretch forbade me, saying, 'Nay!—he feared Ullah;' and taking up his gear, he cast out the water, crying with the dreary eyes of his ignorant fanaticism fastened upon me, 'Should he draw for a Nasrany, one that was accursed of Ullah? was the sun hot today, and I fainted? he would God that I died also.' We were not come far in the wilderness, when the peevish tongues of two light young Beduin women in the company, screeched to the men about me, 'Look there, lads, is not that the *kafir* riding? will ye not cut the wezand of him in the way?' I bestowed, in my haste, a Beduin curse upon them, but it needed not; the men marching nigh me answered gravely, 'He is the son of our brother,' because I had been a guest of some of their tribesmen." (I: 376).

Even the town-children in Doughty's day made life miserable for him. "One of these forenoons, when I returned to my house, I saw filth cast before the threshold; and some knavish children had flung stones as I passed by the lonely street. Whilst I sat within, the little knaves came to batter the door; there was a Babel of cries: the boldest climbed by the side walls to the house terrace; and hurled down stones and clay bricks by the stair head. In this uproar I heard a skritch of fanatical women, 'Ya Nasrany! thou shalt be dead!—they are in the way that will do it!' I sat on an hour whilst the hurly-burly lasted: my door held, and for all their hooting the knaves had no courage to come down where they must meet with the *kafir*. At this hour the respectable citizens were reposing at home, or drinking coffee in their

friends' houses; and it was a desolate quarter where I lodged." (II: 402).

And here is an experience similar to my daily life in Bahrain in the early years of our mission. "A fanatic sometimes threatened me as I returned by the narrow and lonely ways, near my house: 'O *kafir!* if it please the Lord, thou wilt be slain this afternoon or night, or else to-morrow's day. Ha! son of mischief, how long dost thou refuse the religion of Islam? We gave thee indeed a time to repent, with long sufferance and kindness!—now die in thy blind way, for the Moslemîn are weary of thee. Except thou say the testimony, thou wilt be slain to-day: thou gettest no more grace, for many have determined to kill thee.' Such deadly kind of arguments were become, as they say, familiar evils, in this long tribulation of Arabian travels." (II: 395-6).

And there are a score of other passages which portray the fanatic devotion to a creed which divides all humanity into believers and *Kafirs*. (Vol. I: 376, 377, 403, 486, 502, 549. II: 134, 321, 326, etc.)

III. *The Arabian Prophet*. In the second volume Doughty gives a character-sketch of the Great Arabian: "The most venerable image in their minds is the personage of Mohammed; which to us is less tolerable: for the household and sheykhly virtues that were in him—mildness and comity and simplicity and good faith, in things indifferent of the daily life—cannot amend our opinion of the Arabian man's barbaric ignorance, his sleight and murderous cruelty in the institution of his religious faction; or sweeten our contempt of an hysterical prophetism and polygamous living.—Mohammed who persuaded others, lived confident in himself; and died persuaded by the good success of his own doctrine. What was the child Mohammed?—a pensive orphan, a herding lad: the young man was sometime a caravan trader,—wherein he discovered his ambitious meaning, when he would not enter Damascus! His was a soaring and wounded (because infirm) spirit, a musing solitary conscience; and his youth was full of dim vaticination of himself, and of re-

ligious aspiration. A soul so cast will pursue the dream of those her inexpert and self-loving years: and how long soever, difficult, ay, and perilous be the circuit which lies before him it were lighter for such an one to endure all things than fail of his presumption and (finally) to fall short of his own soul.—Mohammed, the preacher, found no purer worshippers and witnesses of the God of Abraham than an idolatrous Christianity, and the Yahud, 'a seed of evil-doers.' He calls them in the Koran 'The people of the (former) Scriptures, which were sent down from on high': but as his faction increased he came to account them—since they were not with him—adverse factions; and afterward his enemies." (II: 378)

To the Bedouin Arabs of Doughty's day, Mohammed was the First before every creature (Vol. I: 474), the seal of the prophets, foretold in the gospels (II: 10). His name is so sacred that one uses it carelessly of anyone who bears it, at his own peril (II: 172). At Mohammed's grave in Medina miracles take place (II: 160). "There are sherifs and posterity of the blood of the *Neby* in all great towns of Islam and even in the desert tribes." "The sons of Fatimah and Ali are grown in less than fifty generations to a multitude." (II: 522).

IV. *Beliefs and Practices*. Doughty's book is perhaps best of all in its careful record of the popular-Islam that prevailed among the Arabs. One does not turn in vain to the index for such customs as blood-covenant, *aqiqa*, circumcision, sacrifice, Ramadhan-fasting, the *Hajj*, etc. To the latter alone there are over fifty references that illuminate the subject. Hospitality, "the virtue that imitates Heavenly Providence", finds a large place in the Arab heart and in Doughty. Incense is used as perfume, in sacrifices, and to ward off evil spirits. Tree-worship and stone-worship are common (*menahil*), (I: 449, II: 109, etc). Women and marriage are depicted in unforgettable passages. Women are "like flowers in our houses to enjoy and one day be cast out". "The female is of all animals the better save only in mankind"—such is their