

poverty seventh century Arabia lay. A brief survey of Arabian Judaism, Christianity and paganism shows that none of them was a likely seedbed for a new world religion.

*Judaism.* This religion had been established in the Arabian peninsula for several centuries, but it had made relatively little headway. The Jews do not seem to have proselytized very actively, their only notable triumph being the conversion of the King of Yemen, Dhu Nuwas, ensuing in a persecution of Christians. Nor do the Arabian Jews seem to have been in that state of spiritual fermentation which precedes the birth of a new religion or the transformation of an old one. No important new ideas are known to have been contributed by the Arabian Jews to the development of Jewish theology. Except for the fact that the proportion of craftsmen was higher among them, the Jews did not differ greatly from their Arab neighbors, and the one literary portrait of an Arabian Jew which has come down to us—that of the hero As Samaw'al—does not bear any marks distinguishing him from the surrounding Arabs.

It therefore seems reasonably safe to say that Judaism in Arabia could not have provided the seeds of a new world-religion.

*Christianity* was in a somewhat different position. Supported by the prestige—and sometimes the arms—of Byzantium and Abyssinia it had undoubtedly made considerable progress in the northern and western parts of the peninsula, as witness the contemporary descriptions of Christian basilicas and the persecutions of Najran.<sup>4</sup> The very development of Muhammad's thought shows to what an extent Christian ideas—sometimes in an extremely distorted form—were current in Mecca and other parts of Arabia. There is then nothing to warrant the affirmation that Christianity could *not* have spread in Arabia, perhaps eventually converting the whole population of the country.

But, equally, there is not the slightest reason to believe

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<sup>4</sup>There is also some evidence that Christianity was spreading in the area around Qatif and Bahrain—see Peter Bruce Cornwall, "In Search of Arabia's Past," *National Geographical Magazine*, April 1948.

that this Arabian Christianity would have made any startling contribution to world history either by creating a radically new form of Christianity or by spurring the Arabs to world conquest, which is precisely what Islam succeeded in doing.

There is even less justification for thinking that *Arab Paganism* had evolved to the stage where it was ready to produce a new, superior, world religion, in the way the Hellenistic world had been ripe for a new religion and had produced Mithraism, Christianity and other creeds.

Central Arabian paganism at the time of Muhammad was a polydaemonism evolving towards the higher forms of polytheism.<sup>5</sup> One can go even further and notice, in the subordination of the main goddesses to the god Allah, an emerging monotheism. The trend itself is significant, and it is irrelevant for the purposes of this paper to enquire whether it was due to Christian or Jewish influence or to other causes.

There is also evidence that the old fetishism no longer "satisfied the religious emotions and insights of many of the Arabs."<sup>6</sup> In all the biographies of Muhammad mention is made of certain Arabs, such as Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who were seeking a higher religion, generally turning towards Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

All this is important, as showing that, to a certain extent, the ground had been prepared for Muhammad to come forward with a new message. It is also true that Muhammad incorporated much of the old Arabian religions in his system.<sup>8</sup> But this "does not alter the fact that the religious

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<sup>5</sup> Tor Andrae, *Mohammad*. By the sixth century Yemen had "not only been thoroughly impregnated with Judaism and Christianity but had modified its ancient paganism, consolidating the old pagan gods . . . in the person of dhu-Samawi, the lord of the heavens, who at an earlier period of the highland culture had shared the supreme power with Talab Riyam and other deities." H. St. J. B. Philby, *The Background of Islam*, p. 114. As the same author goes on to say "in the highly civilised south paganism had virtually gone down before the impact of the monotheistic creeds of the north and had, presumably about this time, withdrawn to its last defenses in the area of Mecca." *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, "Muhammad and the Qur'ān," *MUSLIM WORLD*, April 1948.

<sup>7</sup> See article HANIF in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

<sup>8</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, "The structure of religious thought in Islam," *MUSLIM WORLD*, January 1948.

attitudes expressed in and mediated by the Qur'ān constitute a new and distinctive religious structure."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Muhammad created not merely a new tribal or national religion but a new *world-religion*. He was able to do this because he united in himself not only the religious intuition of a prophet but also the power of expression of a poet and the shrewdness and political sense of a statesman. This combination is probably unique in history and nothing short of it could have launched Islam on its career of world conquest.

Confirming the above contentions is the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, no prophets or seers *preceded* Muhammad, in the way that John the Baptist preceded Jesus Christ or that Wycliffe and Huss preceded Luther. The "false prophets" (of whom Maslama is the best known) who arose during Muhammad's lifetime and after his death were most probably inspired by his remarkable success, and must therefore be regarded as imitators, not forerunners.

To emphasize the importance of Muhammad's personality in the foundation of Islam does not, however, imply ignoring the historical conditions which enabled his religion to sweep the Near East. Islam's success seems to have arisen mainly from its attractiveness to the religious and national sentiments of the peoples living in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt.

There is considerable evidence that the Semitic world, which had been brought under Greek rule by Alexander's conquest and subjected to an intense process of Hellenization, was becoming increasingly restless and striving to liberate itself from both Roman political and Greek cultural domination.<sup>10</sup> The revolts of the Jews were the most spectacular, though not the most enduring manifestation of this discontent. The renaissance of Aramaic literature was another pointer in the same direction. But perhaps the most significant, because the most widespread, sign of revolt was the emergence of one Christian heresy after another,

<sup>9</sup> H. A. R. Gibb, "Muhammad and the Qur'ān"; *MUSLIM WORLD*, April 1948.

<sup>10</sup> See Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vol. I.

the consequent sects engendered and the ceaseless struggle between the sects and the Orthodox Church centered on Byzantium. Historians are becoming increasingly aware that the religious struggles of the 4-6th centuries contained a very large, if not predominant, political element, viz., a nationalist revolt of Syrians and Egyptians against Byzantine rule.<sup>11</sup>

Judging from the results, Islam presented itself to those peoples as a Semitic religion which had transcended Jewish particularism into a world wide view and at the same time had eliminated most of the Greek elements in Christianity. Islam's appeal was greatly reinforced by the fact that it had itself been greatly influenced, both in fundamentals and in details, by Nestorian Christianity,<sup>12</sup> which had been precisely a product of that revolt against Greek Christianity.

As a result, not only did the Muslim invaders get much help from the local populations<sup>13</sup> but within two centuries they had converted the bulk of the inhabitants to their own faith.

Islam's great advantage over the competing Christian heresies which were attempting to supplant the Church lay in the simplicity of its dogma; its social equalitarianism; and the prestige which it enjoyed as the religion of a conquering group.

The simplicity of Islamic dogma is well known and recognized. All that it demands is a belief in the Unity of God, in his Revelation to Muhammad, and in the Day of Judgment, as well as some simple observances. As a result, Islam readily appeals to all types of mind, the most sophisticated as well as the most primitive, and to all types of temperament, the laxest as well as the strictest. (It should, however, be remembered that some Christian sects were also striving after the same simplicity of dogma.)

No sect born in the Fertile Crescent or Egypt during

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<sup>11</sup> See H. Lammens, *La Syrie*; Edmond Rabbath, "Querelles Byzantines avant l'Islam" in *Cahiers de l'Est*, Beirut, Vol. I, No. 5; and Gustave Neyron "Foi catholique en Orient avant l'Islam," in *Cahiers de l'Est*, Vol. II, No. 1.

<sup>12</sup> See Tor Andrae, *Mohammed*.

<sup>13</sup> See A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*.

the sixth or seventh centuries, however, had the social equalitarianism of Islam. Muslim equalitarianism was a product of desert tribal society, not of the caste-ridden ancient civilizations.

The same may be said of the prestige enjoyed by Islam as a conquering religion. And there is no doubt that the political power enjoyed by Islam greatly helped its diffusion. For while it is, with few exceptions, true that the Muslims did not try to convert others at the point of the sword,<sup>14</sup> it is equally true that the temporal success of Islam, its position as the State religion and the great social advantages to be gained by becoming a Muslim, were all potent factors in swelling the stream of converts.

Thus the spread of Islam must be attributed partly to the qualities it derived from its desert environment and partly to the state of mind of the contemporary Near East. But the fact that outside conditions helped him in no way detracts from Muhammad's achievement.

*Arab-Islamic Civilization.* The rich and complex entity known as Arab, Saracenic, or Islamic civilization contained many ingredients and was the product of many forces. Here it is sufficient to distinguish four main factors:<sup>15</sup>

First, a universal state ruled, for about a century and a half, by an Arab dynasty and an Arab ruling class. This gave the political framework in which the different elements could blend.

Secondly, the diffusion of Islam, the acceptance of Muslim religion as the underlying social and political ideology and the regulation of social life by Muslim law.

Thirdly, the universal use, for at least four or five centuries, of Arabic as the language of theology, philosophy, science and even literature throughout the vast expanse of the Muslim world.

Finally the immense intellectual and esthetic contribu-

<sup>14</sup> Sir Thomas Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*. In India more coercion seems to have been used than elsewhere; see James D. Brown "The History of Islam in India", *MUSLIM WORLD*, January, April and July 1949.

<sup>15</sup> For a fuller treatment, see C. Issawi "The role of the Arabs in Islamic Civilization," *MUSLIM WORLD*, July 1948.

tions made by the non-Arab subjects (whether Muslims, Christians, Jews, or pagans) such as the Persians, Turks, Copts, and Syrians.

This brief sketch brings out the central fact on which this civilization was built, viz., a conquest by *Muslim Arabs*. And this brings out, in turn, Muhammad's contribution to that civilization. For while there is considerable divergence of opinion as to how far the conquest was due to Muhammad's preaching and how far to other factors, there can be no doubt that the fact that the Arab conquerors had already embraced Islam fundamentally changed the character of their conquest. This fact has not been sufficiently stressed by historians and deserves some elucidation.

The Arab conquest was due not only to religious factors, important as they were, but also to economic and demographic factors.<sup>16</sup> In fact the Arab conquest was merely the last of a long series of Semitic invasions from the desert to the sown. In the four millenia preceding Islam successive outbursts from the Arabian peninsula had resulted in the emergence of the Babylonians, Canaanites, Phoenicians, Hebrews, Aramaeans, Nabataeans and other Semitic peoples.<sup>17</sup> Whenever the power that controlled Syria or Mesopotamia showed any sign of weakening, a pressure from the desert would make itself felt. And the powers that controlled these countries in the 7th century, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, were definitely showing signs of exhaustion. Perhaps the most eloquent proof of this is that, in their wars, both came to depend heavily on their satellite Arab forces; the Byzantines on the Syrian Arab kingdom of Ghassan and the Sasanians on the Mesopotamian Arab kingdom of Hira. In fact the last great Perso-Byzantine war was practically fought out and decided by the armies of the two rival Arab kingdoms.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See P. K. Hitti: *History of the Arabs*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> A close historical parallel is to be found in the last stage of the Achaemenid empire, where both the central government and the rebels against its authority (such as the Egyptians or the provincial satraps) relied heavily on Greek mercenaries, a fact which paved the way for Alexander's sweeping conquest. See A. T. Olmstead *History of the Persian Empire*.

It will therefore be seen that the Persian and the Eastern Roman Empire had, like the Western Roman Empire, entrusted the keeping of their marches to allied "barbarians." In these circumstances, it is difficult to believe that sooner or later, the Eastern barbarians, like the Western, would not have sought to conquer and take over the territories they were supposed to be guarding. With or without Muhammad, an Arab conquest of Syria and Mesopotamia would not only have been possible but even highly probable.

*But*, and this is the vital difference, such a conquest would have had consequences very different from those that actually took place. But for Islam, the Arab conquerors would have been—as their Semitic predecessors had been, or as their Western counterparts were—simple, raw, uncivilized barbarians. In such circumstances there is no reason to doubt that, like their eastern predecessors and western contemporaries, they would have succumbed to the civilization and religion of the peoples they had conquered. They would have been Persianized and Romanized. Above all they would have been Christianized.

Those are not mere speculations but a deduction, by analogy, from the fate of the Ghassanids of Hauran and, to a lesser extent, the Lakhmids of Hira, as well as the fate of those earlier Arab invaders who had founded the states of Palmyra and Petra. The Ghassanid ruins of Bosra and other places in the Syrian desert show how deeply Roman civilization had been assimilated; and Christianity too had struck deep roots, claiming both the ruling dynasty and the subjects. There is no reason to believe that any pagan Arab conquerors would have reacted to the impact of Romanism and Christianity differently from the way the Ghassanids had reacted.

Instead the 7th century Muslim conquerors came not only as raw barbarians seeking loot and conquest but also as missionaries of a new faith. They came committed to a religion, a law and, since the language of the Qur'an was sacred, a language. The 14th century Arab sociologist and