

## SOME NOTES ON AFRICANS IN MUSLIM HISTORY

In the matter of inter-racial and inter-cultural relations, Islam enjoys a reputation which, whether justified or not, today stands as a major asset in its position in the world. In view of these circumstances, it is interesting to study the receptivity of Muslim societies to individuals of African descent and culture and the place of these immigrants in their new communities. Here are some notes on relevant cases mentioned in general Muslim history. <sup>1</sup>

### ARABIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE HIJRAH.

Modern Ethiopia, as is well known, originated as a Himyarite colony, circa 115 B.C. Trade relations, including the slave trade, developed early not only between these two countries but also between Ḥaḍramaut and East Africa, described in the Greek Periplus, as traditionally controlled by whoever ruler reigned supreme in southern Arabia. <sup>2</sup> These early contacts resulted in the presence of Africans all over the peninsula. The Quraish, in particular, had black guards (*aḥābīsh*) to protect their houses and caravans, <sup>3</sup> a practice which today stands as one of the oldest existing institutions in the world. Some slaves had their military and intellectual talents duly recognized. Among them, °Antarah ibn Shaddād (c. 525-615 A.D.) is best known, but in his days, Thābit ibn Jābir al-Fahmī's fame as a poet equalled that of °Antarah, and the surname of Shanbara (the man with thick lips) borne by a third poet seems to indicate the same African origins. <sup>4</sup>

The Ethiopian occupations of the Yaman, in 340-378 A.D., and in 525-575, confirmed the position of this country as a bridge between the two continents, and as they built up Ṣanā'a as a place of pilgrimage, rival to that of Mecca, their African brand of the Christian religion is likely to have been the one best known to the Prophet Muḥammad. Such influence, coupled with the experience of the ninety-four early Muslim families, who turned to Ethiopia for refuge at the time of the Quraishī persecution, in 615, is reflected in the Ethiopic origin of important words of the Islamic creed and ritual listed by Hitti.

The Prophet himself, though often fighting the black guard of the Quraish, displayed a definite interest in Ethiopians, and contacted a brother of the Negus, in the hope of converting his nation, which

---

<sup>1</sup> P. K. Hitti's *History of the Arabs*, general basic source: Arabic sources were consulted in the editions available at the New York Public Library. For a brief comparison with other cultures, see my "Coup d'oeil sur l'histoire des Peuples africains et afro-américains", *Zaire*, Brussels, July 1953, pp. 687-706, and December 1953, pp. 1027-1051.

<sup>2</sup> Schoff, W. H., *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, London, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> Lammens, H., *L'Arabie occidentale avant l'Hégire*, Beirut, 1928.

<sup>4</sup> Huart, C., *Littérature arabe*, Paris, 1931, basic source for literature.

ever since has stood as a major thorn in the flesh of the Muslim body. When he decided that the human voice, rather than bells and gongs, would call the faithful to prayer, Bilāl, a black man from Medina, whose tomb still stands at Damascus, became the first muezzin. This recognition of the beauty of African voices has a literary counterpart in the poems of Al-A<sup>ḥ</sup>sha on his black slave-maid Huraya, and reminds of the contemporary success of American Negro singers.

#### MECCA AND THE ḤAJJ <sup>5</sup>

The Ḥajj of itself constitutes a powerful agency of interracial and cross-cultural contact. <sup>6</sup> It added to the importance of the black guard of the sharīfs, which was resented by the Turks who protected the caravans from Iraq, so that the pilgrimage often degenerated into a fight between the two forces. In 1185, Saladin, who had already massacred the black troops in Cairo, ordered the execution of their leaders in Mecca, but the rulers of the Holy City soon regained their independence, and reorganized their black bodyguard. The most famous warrior among them came to power in 1241. Named Abū Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>d al Ḥassān ibn ʿAlī ibn Qitada, he was the son of an Ethiopian mother, who told him on the eve of his first fight: "Behave yourself, my boy. If you prove to be courageous people will say, 'Look at this descendant of the Prophet'. If you are not they will say that it is because his mother is a slave." Abū Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>d's son, Muḥammad Abū Nomai I, ruled Mecca with unusual distinction during most years from 1255 through 1301.

African pilgrims in the Middle Ages usually called at Cairo. In 1325, Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali (Mandingo) traveled that way with a retinue of 15,000, spending so much money that it upset the price system in both Cairo and Mecca. He was followed, in 1495, by Askia Muḥammad, the emperor of Songhai, who had only 800 persons with him but who left lasting trace of his visit by opening a home for Sudanese pilgrims. At that time, unfortunately, the Osmanlis were about to bring an end to the medieval era in the story of Mecca.

#### UMAYYADS AND ʿABBĀSIDS

Under the Umayyads, the East was conquered mostly with the help of Asiatic troops, but in Africa and in Spain, the Nubians, or Sudanese, became conspicuous for their numbers, courage, and loyal behavior. In Damascus, the caliphs patronized the arts, and an Ethiopian from Mecca, Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>īd ibn Misjah (died c. 714) formulated the rules of Arabic music, according to Asiatic rather than to African traditions. Another popular figure of these days was Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>bad, a travelling musician, and a mulatto from Medina.

<sup>5</sup> De Gaury, G., *Rulers of Mecca*, New York, n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Appraised in Rathjens, C., *Die Pilgerfahrt nach Mekka*, Hamburg, 1948.

The ʿAbbasids carried an extensive trade in Zanj slaves, from East Africa, who became a conspicuous feature in the town of Basra, and all over Lower Iraq. This development was almost fatal to the dynasty, as in 869, the Zanj working in the saltpetre mines revolted at the call of ʿAlī ibn-Muḥammad. An interesting aspect of their revolt, was that it revealed how the Zanj had been won over to Khārijite doctrine, so that the question of African participation in early Muslim sectarianism arises. Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868), a noted Muʿtazilite leader of partly Nubian descent, wrote a laudatory essay on the African race entitled *Fahr al Sūdān ʿalā al-Bidan*.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, African good humor helped to relieve the austerity of ʿAbbasid society. Al-Sayyid al-Ḥimyarī (d. 789), of Yamanite Negro and Khārijī descent, was a drunkard but after his conversion to the Shīʿah, he certainly became the most distinguished poet of that sect. Abū Dulāmāh (d. 780), a black poet and court jester, contributed significantly to the Arabian Nights, and Maḥbūbah, a black poetess from Basra, entered the harem of Al-Mutawakkil, becoming a legendary figure on account of her faithfulness to his memory, which angered Al-Muntaṣir, his successor and son by Al-Khayzurān, of mixed Greek and Ethiopian descent.

Popular Arabic literature looked at Africans with sympathy, sometimes respect, taking its lead from the Qurʾān itself, which describes Luqmān (Aesopus?) as the wisest of all men. ʿAntarah became the hero of an epos so well known in the West that it needs no further comment. Another epos, popular in Egypt, celebrates Abū Zaid, who is described as the son of a princess, rejected by his father on account of his negroid appearance, who became the hero of the Zaḥlān Arab tribe. At a more sophisticated level, an opposite trend is represented by Al-Mutanabbī (905-965), who sought the favors of Kāfūr, the black king of Egypt and who, being disappointed, wrote insulting verse that made him a paragon of racial prejudice.<sup>8</sup> The same state of mind may have been that of Al-Namī al-Missīsī (d. circa 1000), Al-Mutanabbī's successor as court poet in Aleppo, who is known for a piece where he said, "A black wife from Africa will not stay long in a house where the second wife is a white woman." Another devastating little work later on was written by Ibn-Ḥubaira (d. 1165), seeking the dismissal of Masʿūd al-Bilālī, a black police commissioner in Baghdad.

#### SECTARIANISM

Persian influence usually is mentioned as the reason why the city of Basra was a hotbed of sectarianism, and this certainly applies to the Shīʿah, in spite of the case of Al-Ḥimyarī, but the Zanj (East

<sup>7</sup> Pellat, C., *Le milieu basrien et la formation de Ghazi*, Paris, 1953.

<sup>8</sup> Blachère, R., *Un poète arabe du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de l'Hégire (Xe siècle de J. C.), About -Tayyib al-Motanebbi*, Paris, 1935.

African) community in town should not be dismissed when it comes to other sects. In direct line of succession from the Khārijites and opposing the Shī'ah as well as orthodoxy, the Qarmaṭians, or "Bolsheviks of Islam", all through the 9th century ran an independent state in Al-Ḥasa, where the population was overwhelmingly Negro. Today, Khārijism survives in ʿUmān, which always had close African connections, and in some parts of Africa (Algeria, Libya, Zanzibar).

But the movements which attracted the greatest numbers of adherents of African descent were of a less violent nature. The whole concept of Muslim sainthood reminds of Africa, to say the least, as much as of Christian hagiology. Rābi'ah al-ʿAdawiyah (d. 801), the "saint par excellence", was a Basra slave-woman of undetermined origins<sup>9</sup>, in close touch with the Nubian Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. Ghizah, 860). Dhū al-Nūn is regarded as the originator of the Ṣūfī order, and he was responsible for the formulation of the doctrine of ecstasy (*wajd*) as the only way to the knowledge of God, a doctrine in accordance with African tribal philosophy. The cult of saints and the propensity to join into fraternal orders, both characteristic of Sufism, met with particular success in North and West Africa.

#### SCHOLARSHIP

It may be no sheer coincidence that North and West Africa were eventually won over to the law of Mālik ibn-Anas, which is founded on the *ijmāʿ* of Medina. The Mālikite School has an extraordinary power of assimilation of exotic concepts, such as the tribal African dowry, paid by the bridegroom to the bride's family.<sup>10</sup> Authorities from Timbuctoo and from other places in inner Africa have been frequently cited in North African judgments and Abū ʿAlī Aberkan, "the Black", was qāḍī at Tlemcen, Algeria, where he died in 1453.<sup>11</sup>

In Cairo, according to Al-Maqrīzī, the black emperor of Kanem-Bornu opened, in 1242 or 1243, the Ibn-Rāshīq medersa for students from his country. The West African scholars, on their way to Mecca, were welcomed by such great scholars as Al-Suyūṭī and Muḥammad al-Bakrī, a noted Cairo Ṣūfī, completed the initiation of Aḥmad ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿUmar, a scion of the most scholarly family in Timbuctoo, in 1549. Scholars from Ethiopia also were frequent visitors and occasionally residents in Egypt. Let us mention Shaikh Yāqūt, who died in Alexandria, aged 80, in the early 14th century. The interest in the subject was such that Abū-Ḥayyān (1256-1344) wrote a treatise on the Ethiopic language.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, M., *Rabi'a the mystic*, Cambridge, 1928.

<sup>10</sup> Phillips, A., *Survey of African Marriage and Family Life*, London, 1953, pp. 232 sq.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Cheneb, M., "Etude sur les Personnages mentionnés dans l'Idjaza du Cheikh Abd El Qâdir El Fâsi", *XIV<sup>e</sup> Congrès International des Orientalistes*, Vol. IV, Paris, 1907.

## EGYPT

A big surprise brought to Cyrus, the patriarch of Alexandria; by the Arab conquest of Egypt, was that he had to negotiate peace with a black ambassador, ʿUbādah ibn-al-Sāmit. The Sudanese fought with distinction everywhere in the Western Muslim world, and all the early Muslim dynasties of Egypt maintained black regiments, for which the Ṭūlūnids, starting in 868, built a suburb situated west of the citadel of modern Cairo.<sup>12</sup> This, though applying to people of other origins, in accordance to Oriental usage, was no unmixed blessing, as it helped malcontents to single out the ever loyal blacks as the bulwark of any ruler they wanted to overthrow. In 905, the Sudanese sacrificed themselves to the point of almost complete destruction, in fighting the army sent by the ʿAbbāsids to occupy the Egyptian capital.

The Baghdad Caliphs were not allowed to enjoy their conquest for a long time, as Egypt, Syria, and the Ḥijāz became a kingdom run by the Turkish Ikhshīdīd dynasty. The fourth ruler of this dynasty was an adopted son, the black eunuch Abū al-Misk Kāfūr (died 968), who was given the throne after twenty years of distinguished service as vizir. Kāfūr was a prominent figure in the history of Egypt, well noted as a patron of arts and sciences. He was the first to build a palace on the site of modern Cairo, where his memory is preserved in the Kāfūr's Gardens.

More black troops came from Tunisia with the Fāṭimids, the heretical Caliphs who founded modern Cairo, in 969. They alone remained loyal to Al-Ḥākim, when he claimed to be God himself, in 1018, and on his order performed massacres which were stopped by the rival Turkish and Berber troops. The climax of Sudanese influence in the capital of Egypt coincided with the zenith of her splendor at the time of Al-Mustaṣṣir (1035-1094), the son of a black mother, who advised him all through the first years of his reign, the longest in Muslim history. He was the wealthiest ruler of his time and lived in unequalled glory, his Sudanese corps alone numbering 30,000 men. However, the Turks succeeded in gaining momentary control over his army, and they expelled the blacks, who retreated to Upper Egypt, stopping the fallāḥīn in their work, so that Cairo was threatened with famine until all sections of the army were put under control again, in 1074.

The end of the Sudanese corps, and of the first epoch in the history of Muslim Egypt, came in 1169, when they sacrificed themselves again for the dynasty, whose rule was terminated by Saladin.

## NORTH AFRICA, SPAIN, AND SICILY

In the Maghrib also, the black troops remained conspicuous for their loyalty, as exemplified in their stand in Spain behind such a ruler as Al-Ḥakam I (796-822).

<sup>12</sup> Lane-Poole, S., *The Story of Cairo*, London, 1902.

They were also numerous in Sicily, where Ibn Ḥawqal complained that they alternately begged and fought for their living. Though the origins of Al-Idrīsī (died 1156), who was born in Ceuta, are obscure, his geography certainly shows how keen the interest and how close the contacts were between Sicily and Negro Africa. After the loss of the island, the Ḥafṣid dynasty of Tunisia (1228-1534) maintained a black guard and carried a regular trade with Bornu, in Central Sudan.<sup>13</sup>

Morocco sought from across the Sahara the strength needed to maintain independence from the Caliphs.<sup>14</sup> The Almoravides went as far south as Senegal to build such power, and they conquered both Morocco and Spain with the help of so many Sudanese soldiers that three thousand of them could die in one single battle. After them, Arab and European help became the fashion, but trade was still carried with the Sudan, especially in Mansa Mūsā's times, as emperor of Mali.

The Maghribī travellers who gave us the only existing accounts of medieval Sudan were not exempt from religious and cultural prejudices, but Al-Bakrī (d. 1094) praised the wise government of Ghana, and Ibn-Baṭṭūṭa (1304-1377) said the same of Mali. The latter, who was extremely sensitive when it came to the faith, displayed rather unusual comprehension of the Sudanese, in spite of the scanty attire of their women, and of their habit of eating prohibited food.

#### IRAN AND INDIA

In ancient times, Negroid populations of unknown origins already existed in Mukran, on the borders of modern Persia and of Baluchistan, and they seem to have supplied the black regiments mentioned by Herodotus in the army of Xerxes.<sup>15</sup> In the course of the 9th century A.D., Persian residents certainly were numerous in East Africa, as witnessed by the ruins of such cities as Gedi, and two mulatto princes from Shiraz are recorded as the originators of the East African kingdoms of Mombasa and of Qiloa.<sup>16</sup>

Leaving Iran for the Muslim conquest of India, black troops distinguished themselves in many ways.<sup>17</sup> Sultan Razīya (1236-1240), the only woman-ruler of Delhi, bestowed exceptional honors upon her Ethiopian master-of-the-horse. The only raid that brought the Muslim standards down to the southernmost tip of India, in 1306, was led by Malik Nāʾib Kāfūr, a eunuch from Cambay, Gujarat, a city noted for its numerous African population. In 1402, Ibrāhīm Shāh, apparently a mulatto (*muwallad*) received the kingdom of Jaunpur-Oudhe, and became a patron of arts and sciences. Black troops, however, were not

<sup>13</sup> Ibn-Khaldūn, *Histoire des Berbères*, Tr. de Slane, Algiers, 1852, Vol. II, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> Coissac de Chavrebiere, *Histoire du Maroc*, Paris, 1931, basic source for Morocco.

<sup>15</sup> Huart, C., *La Perse antique et la civilisation iranienne*, Paris, 1925, p. 74.

<sup>16</sup> Coupland, H., *East Africa and its Invaders*, London, 1938.

<sup>17</sup> *Cambridge History of India*, Vol. III, basic for India.

popular in Northern India, and many of them were massacred together with Deccanis in Delhi, in 1446. A last and brilliant chapter in their story was written in Bengal, where one of them, Nāṣir, or Ḥabash Khān, ran the country under a weak dynasty until his murder, in 1489. After him, another African, Sīdī Badr, was proclaimed king under the name of Shams-al-Dīn Naṣr. The *Ḥabashī* (Ethiopian) dynasty ended with Muẓaffar Shāh (1490-1493), a cruel but efficient king, and the black troops eventually left Bengal for Deccan or Gujarat.

In Deccan, the dark color of the native residents made Africans less evident. They played a conspicuous role in upholding the orthodox Sunnī faith against the Persians and other Shīʿites.

#### THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

The Ottoman period in Islamic history usually meant the rule of white mamelukes and janissaries, but in Constantinople, about two hundred black eunuchs were put in charge of the sultan's harem.<sup>18</sup> Their head, styled *Kızlar Ağhasi* (General of the Women) was one of the top officers of the empire, responsible for the education of the princes and drawing a fortune from the administration of the waqfs of the Holy Cities. Under Aḥmed I (1604-1617) he was the true ruler of the state.

There always were Negroes all over the empire, more numerous in Egypt and in Tripolitania, but everywhere present. Of great significance in the former country was the work of ʿAbd āl-Raḥmān al-Jabartī al-ʿAqīlī (1756-1825), of Somalī origin, who kept a diary of the days of the French occupation and of the rise to power of Muḥammad ʿAlī, and whose son was assassinated, apparently with the Pasha's connivance. In Syria, circa 1850, Shaikh Saʿd met so many Negroes that he was able to recruit from among them all the colonists for the village which still bears his name in Ḥauran.<sup>19</sup> In Tunisia, before the French conquest, the bey was in the habit of taking black women into his harem for a few years, before setting them free, to be absorbed in the general population.<sup>20</sup>

#### MODERN ARABIA AND INDIA

In the distant Ḥijāz, the sharīfs maintained their black guard, letting the janissaries take care of the sultan's representative. Imperial supervision was erratic and clumsy. In 1640, Bashīr Agā, a black eunuch, was trusted with the mission of strengthening imperial control over Mecca but, on his arrival in the Holy City, was greeted with the news,

<sup>18</sup> Lybyer, A. H., *The Government of the Ottoman Empire in the Time of Suleiman the Magnificent*, Cambridge, Mass., 1913.

<sup>19</sup> Abel, A., "Note sur la géographie humaine du Hauran", *Bulletin de la Société royale belge d'Anthropologie et de Préhistoire*, LXIII (1952), 11-22.

<sup>20</sup> Hesse-Warteg, C. de, *Tunis, the Land and the People*, New York, n.d.

unknown to him, of his master's death. In 1670, Sharīf Saʿd let his black men fire on the Turks, killing 200 persons, and wounding 700. He escaped with nothing worse than exile in the Balkans thanks to his personal relations with the Kızlar Aghasi. Backed by his guard, the sharīf often was quite outspoken in his criticisms of imperial policy. In 1700, Sharīf Saʿīd contrasted the sultan's European mother and alliances unfavorably with the more orthodox inter-racial lineage and policy of the ruler of Morocco, and in 1779, Sharīf Sarūr actually married a daughter of the latter sovereign.

All 19th century travellers in Arabia have noted the Negroid appearance of many residents, including among them ʿAbd-al Muṭṭalib ibn-Ghālib, who was ruler of Mecca from 1840 through 1881. In the 1870's, C. M. Doughty met Negroes in all towns of both the Ḥijāz and Najd.<sup>21</sup> At Khaybar, in the Ḥijāz, they were the whole population and the Ottoman "Kurdish" captain was the son of a black mother. Some residents had fled the town on the recent arrival of a Turkish garrison, and they had founded another all-Negro center at Al-Ḥayat, Najd. At Hayil, a prince son of a Galla mother was most influential, and in the Holy Cities, residents of Galla descent were so numerous that their language, locally known as *ḥabashī*, was spoken from house to house. As they had done well, they were not free of prejudice against the less fortunate slaves from other African tribes.

A new situation was created in India by the Portuguese discoveries and in an attempt to stop them, the Ottoman sultan sent from Egypt a fleet commanded by the black admiral Nāṣir, who fought the Christians valiantly in 1536, and later settled in Gujarat, where he received the title of Ḥabash Khān. Cambay, the main port of Gujarat, had been trading with East Africa for centuries and now was full of residents of African descent.

Another new factor in Indian life was the Mughal invasion, which was effectively stopped for many years at Ahmednagar, where Queen Chand Bibi (1586-1599) had united all races in the fight for independence. An African, Malik Anbar, became chief minister of Ahmednagar and succeeded in stemming the Mughal tide until as late as 1625.

South of Bombay, Janjira Island, 325 square miles in size, had been occupied since the 15th century by Africans known as *Sidis*. They recognized the authority of Bijapur, in 1636, and of the Mughals, in 1670, because they could not stand alone against the challenge of the growing Mahratte power. Aurangzīb conferred upon their head the hereditary title of grand admiral, and entrusted them with the task of defending the coast of his empire. In 1661, the same ruler received an embassy from Ethiopia, and slaves from that country were bought by several of his successors. Janjira survived until the political reorganization of India, in 1948. Jafarabad, a smaller African

<sup>21</sup> Doughty, C. M., *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, London, 1888.

state in Gujarat, 42 square miles in size, still exists today as a member of the Sharaustra Union.

Another form of African presence in India was the guard maintained by the Nizām of Hyderabad, and supplied by the Sultan of Mukallah, in Hadramaut, from his own black troops.<sup>22</sup> They made an appearance in New Delhi, in 1950, performing African dances on the occasion of India Independence Day.

#### MODERN MOROCCO

The Prophet's descendants who took power in Morocco in 1511 sought from inner Africa the power needed to stem the tide of the Ottoman Empire. In 1591, Mulay Aḥmad al-Manṣūr al-Daḥbī (1578-1603) effected the conquest of the western Sudan and, on this occasion, Aḥmad Baba (1556-1626), the greatest scholar in Timbuctoo, was brought to teach law in Marrakesh. The sultan himself had Sudanese wives, one of whom, Lalla Djuhar, became the mother of Muḥammad al-Shaikḥ (1603) and of Mulay ʿAbdallāh Abū-Fāris (1603-1609) and, through the former, the grandmother of Mulay ʿAbdallāh (1609-1624).

But the true founder of modern Morocco was Mulay Ismāʿīl, (1672-1727), who reorganized the imperial government, putting the Berbers under the control of black power.<sup>23</sup> From his camp at Makar al-Khinak, he is said to have recruited a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers of Sudanese origin. This was resented by the Berbers but one of their leaders found nothing better to do than, going south, to recruit three thousand Bambara men who, after his defeat, were added to the imperial army. Mulay Ismāʿīl also maintained a corps of twelve hundred black eunuchs, headed by Ibn Murjān al-Kabīr.

Between 1727 and 1757, Morocco was regarded as run by the black guardmen, (sing. ʿabīd) which could hardly be a healthy situation, but order was restored and, at the end of the century, a visitor praised the local mulattoes for their industriousness, listing them as an asset to the empire.<sup>24</sup> From the point of view of religion, they seem to have contributed to the *jinn*-cult, by adding to their accepted list spirits of Sudanese origin, and the *Gnarwa* fraternity of jinn-worshippers, consisting mostly of Negroes, became a conspicuous feature of Moroccan life, while the Sus province acquired fame for magical practices and exorcisms. Though less obvious than in Morocco, influences from inner Africa also may account for the ceremonies observed in both Egypt and Mecca in relation to the belief in the *zar* spirits, a name of Ethiopian origin.<sup>25</sup>

*South Orange, New Jersey*

J. COMHAIRE.

<sup>22</sup> Stark, F., *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, London, 1936, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> Ezziani, A., *Le Maroc de 1631 à 1812*, Tr. O. Houdas, Paris, 1886.

<sup>24</sup> Lempriere, W., *Journal of a six months' journey through the Barbary states and residence in the Court of Morocco*, London, 1816.

<sup>25</sup> Westermarck, E., *Pagan Survivals in Mohammedan Civilization*, London, 1933, p. 1459.

## MUHAMMAD AND ST. FRANCIS

FOR A MORE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF OUR BRETHREN THE  
MUSLIMS.

When we look at the geographical map revealing the diffusion of Islam, we cannot remain indifferent to the disturbing problem raised by the mysterious presence of a phenomenon so important for the history of Christianity and of humanity. It is our most cherished longing to create in the Christian conscience an interest in these millions of people.

Too often one hears repeated by the very persons who live in the lands of Islam: "There is nothing that can be done!" How many times, in the course of seventeen years spent in Muslim territory, have I heard my own confrères enunciate this sad conclusion as the final lesson of their practical experience. However, the more I meditate, the more the verdict strikes me as unacceptable. It appears to me that the contrary must be said: "There is everything that can be done with Muslims." Without contesting the merit and the honor due to those who in the past, at the price of their lives, have preached the Gospel to our Muslim brothers, we must realize that, from the failure of so many attempts, it is not to be concluded that grace has been denied to so many people who likewise are called to salvation.

We are, therefore, convinced that to arrive at a more Christian understanding of our brothers in Islam, it is important for us to adopt the attitude adopted by St. Francis of Assisi and meditate on a phase of his life which has perhaps escaped a number of biographers and admirers, namely the mysterious bonds which united the Poverello to the founder of Islam, the Arab prophet Muḥammad.

### THE PROPHETIC MISSION OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

No one disputes that in the 13th century Divine Providence sent St. Francis to His Church to bring the world back to fidelity to the Gospel. The vision of Innocent III expressed that mission of the Poor Man, who, as a prophet, spoke to the people the language of God.

We shall especially discover that St. Francis approached Islam with an entirely new spirit, with spiritual attitudes completely unknown to medieval Christendom. In this we are once again led to think that St. Francis received the prophetic mission to bring the Christian conscience back to a more just and more evangelical understanding of its relations with Muslims.

For the medieval conscience, Muslims were the "unbelieving profaners of the Holy Places." The papal documents themselves designate them in terms which could not fail to create a strong impression on the