

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.¹² 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 Salādin.

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).

¹² 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.¹³

Morocco sought from across the Sahara the strength needed to maintain independence from the Caliphs.¹⁴ 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-Battūṭa (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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

Leaving Iran for the Muslim conquest of India, black troops distinguished themselves in many ways.¹⁷ 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 Nāṣir 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

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

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

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

¹⁶ Coupland, H., *East Africa and its Invaders*, London, 1938.

¹⁷ *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.¹⁸ Their head, styled *Kızlar Aghasi* (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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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,

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

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

²⁰ 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 Saʿūr 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.²¹ 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. Aurangzib 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

²¹ 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.²² 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-Dahbī (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-Shaikh (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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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 *Gnawra* 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.²⁵

South Orange, New Jersey

J. COMHAIRE.

²² Stark, F., *The Southern Gates of Arabia*, London, 1936, p. 51.

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

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

²⁵ 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

imagination of the faithful: "enemies of the Cross of Christ," "dogs," "the most wicked lot of warriors," "a wicked people," and so forth. Islam was presented not only as a politico-military power against which it was necessary to defend oneself, but above all as the most diabolically anti-Christian force. The Popes and Bishops many a time stirred the zeal of the faithful by the ideal of the Crusade.

It is in this environment of anti-Muslim reaction that St. Francis appeared, as the inspired prophet, sent by God to His Church in order that Christians might regard the followers of Islam with a more evangelical outlook. Continual meditation on the Passion of Christ made St. Francis understand that God brought about the salvation of man through annihilation and affliction, through the death of His Divine Son, and not through violence and the deployment of material power. The Christian attitude towards Islam ought to conform itself to that evangelical outlook.

Consequently Francis discovered in Muslims not the terrible enemies against whom it had to be a question of taking up swords, because they themselves took up the sword, but alienated brothers who had to be led to their Father's house through kindness and goodness. Jesus treated men with love and saved them by giving Himself on the Cross. The Church, which is His Mystical Body, cannot pursue another way; she must treat Muslims with charity and understanding and save them by prayer and suffering.

In the redaction of his first rule, St. Francis gave to his friars, — "those who wish to go among the Saracens," — a program so far removed from the mentality of that time, that it could not have been impressed upon his mind without an inspiration from above. It was impossible for him to look upon Muslims as "enemies of the Cross of Christ," profaners of the Holy Sepulchre. He sees in them only brothers of God; redeemed by the blood of Jesus; called to share in the Kingdom of God; more precious than the mounds of earth covered with the blood of the Son and still more precious than the stone of the Sepulchre.

But let us hear St. Francis as he proposed his program of apostolic conquest. He divided it into two periods. The first period (which, we add, could eventually last for centuries, since in the eyes of God a thousand years are as yesterday already passed), is that in which the evangelical message is announced in the land of Islam by the practice of Christian virtues. The brothers (who go among the Saracens) must not take action against them, nor cause disputes, but must submit themselves to all (and therefore even to the Muslim authorities). It was considered to be humanly impossible to live in the Orient without taking such action: in the light of this the value of the attitude prescribed by the Franciscan precept is more clearly apparent. After an assiduous practice had shown that humility, poverty, and gentleness were the superior spiritual values, the ground would be well prepared.

It would be easier for Islam to accept and understand the humiliation of the Son of God.

If the testimony which they tried for centuries to render to Christ in the lands of Islam has not produced the expected result, that derives precisely from being preoccupied in looking for immediate results.

The second period, that of external manifestation and preaching, is determined by the choice of God. In this respect we should heed the words of Jesus to His Apostles: "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority." (Acts I, 7).

The hour for action is determined by Divine mercy. The Apostle must be ready to execute that second part of his mission. To announce the word of God pre-supposes, besides the spiritual preparation required for the first period, a serious intellectual preparation: the Lord is in no way bound to give to all messengers of His Word the gift of tongues. On the other hand, no one can pretend to announce the Gospel to a people, without first knowing the language and the mentality of that people in order to be able, according to the teaching of St. Paul, to become all things to all men — a Jew among Jews, a Greek among Greeks, and so an Arab among the Arabs, in order to draw all to Christ. No one before St. Francis understood the apostolate among Muslims in this way. He remained unique among his contemporaries, the rest of whom viewed the problem of Islam in a pessimistic light.

It is necessary here to underline an important eventual consequence of the attitude encouraged for the first period of the apostolic mission: the testimony of blood realized in union with the sacrifice of the Savior for the redemption of our brothers the Muslims. That supreme expression of Charity taught by Christ will manifest to the world that we consider Muslims as true brothers. St. Francis affirmed in his rule that it is precisely because Muslims make us suffer and because they inflict suffering and death upon us, that they must be considered as our dearest friends. In these words is embodied the answer to be given to all those who invoke the malice of the Saracens and their obstinacy in refusing the teachings of the Gospel. Nothing can belittle for St. Francis the value of the words of Christ which He repeated to His sons: "Behold I send you as sheep among wolves."

It was in that spirit that he was able to see in Muslims his own brothers. He would not have dared to consider himself a friend of Christ if he had not felt himself animated with zeal for the salvation of all those whose brother Christ had become before the Father. For St. Francis and for whoever wishes to remain faithful to the Seraphic spirit, Muslims must be the object of a constant love, even if in return they hate us. Did not Christ go even further, He who loved Judas?

St. Francis, by a special illumination which conferred upon him a prophetic mission, understood that Islam could not be won over by contempt, still less by threats and violence. One of his most ardent

preoccupations had been to make the Gospel known to Muslims. He devoted his life to that ideal; he offered it to God as a living sacrifice for his Muslim brethren in union with the dying Christ, in order to redeem humanity. To this end, he set out three times to seek martyrdom among them.

The prophetic character of the mission of St. Francis for Islam was confirmed by the connection — evident to us — between certain events in the history of Muḥammad and two events in the life of the Seraphic Father. By relating them we are able to acquire a full understanding of them. In so doing, we discover the particular vocation of the Franciscan apostolate in Islam. It is only with the heart and spirit of a Francis of Assisi or of a Charles de Foucauld that one can understand the mind of Muslims and draw near to them.

MUHAMMAD AND THE CHRISTIANS OF NAJRÂN

It is impossible to understand the profound and supernatural meaning of the apostolate of St. Francis at Damietta, the reaction of the Sultân Malik-al-Kâmil and the Muslim doctors to the proposition of the saint, if one does not compare the happening at Damietta with that which occurred at Medina, in the tenth year of Hijrah.

At that time Muḥammad had practically extended his authority over all of Arabia: numbers of tribes had spontaneously submitted. Although he was still far from knowing the true Christianity, Muḥammad manifested more sympathy for the Christians than for the Jews. The official meeting with a delegation of the Christians of Najrân and their conduct strongly modified his personal judgment on Christianity, and, afterwards, the personal judgment of all Muslims who saw in the conduct of Muḥammad the rule to be observed before every Christian desirous of engaging in a religious discussion.

The Christian delegation was led by the Bishop Abū-l-Hārith ibn Aqāmah. Muḥammad summoned the delegation to the burialground at Medina; and there, in the presence of the dead, after a discussion on the Passion of Jesus, asked the Christians to prove the truth of the Incarnation, inviting them to invoke together with him and his five companions the malediction of God on those who would be wrong, by means of the *mubāhalah* or ordeal, consisting of passing through fire.

These Christians did not accept the challenge and did not wish to recognize the prophetic mission. However, they declared themselves ready to negotiate a compromise with Muḥammad who then conceded the first "capitulation of Islam." The faithful of the two Abrahamic monotheisms, Jews and Christians, because of their holy books (the Bible), should have the right to refuse to embrace Islam) by paying a tribute (the *jizyah*), by which means their life, property and entire communal autonomy would be guaranteed them.

This event is very important for many reasons. In the first place it is a manifestation of the complete faith of Muḥammad in his mission;