



## Life, Language and Religion

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There are some expressions which the missionary in Arabia hears daily. These are like high walls behind which the Moslems take refuge from all that is unpleasant and unpalatable in their own religion, from all those experiences in life, physical and spiritual, which are perplexing and which they cannot and are afraid to explain. And behind these high walls they put at rest their consciences and say, "Peace, peace." It must be admitted that almost all of these expressions contain some element of truth and that the origin of most of them is in God's own Word. And because of this it is most difficult to get the Moslems to see the fallacy of their own statements, for here too your missionary finds that,

"A lie which is half a truth is ever the greatest of lies,  
Since a lie which is all a lie may be met and fought outright,  
But a lie which is part a truth is a harder matter to fight."

Perhaps more than any other expression is heard, "In sha allah," "If God wills." The phrase very often means little more than "maybe," "all right," "by and by," used to evade responsibility, or as a polite, easy, and indisputable way to escape doing what is not agreeable, or possible, or intended. You ask a Moslem to come to a meeting, to do a piece of work, to visit you, to consult the physician, and invariably the answer is, "In sha allah!" You try to point to purity and truth, you urge them to observe God's precepts, to awaken a desire to live a higher, holier life, and there is that non-committal answer. Do you remonstrate, being convinced that these are only excuses, evading of responsibilities, do you try to tell them that God wills the doing of one's duty, of right, of seeking Him and walking in His ways, there is still that same imper- turbable, persistent answer.

Directly connected with this expression is, "Keteb allah aleina," "God decreed it over us." While for the Christian predestination does not relieve man of his responsibility, for the Moslem it becomes a means of disclaiming all responsibility. "In sha allah" prefaces an action, "Keteb allah aleina" explains it after it has happened. A three-year-old child played with matches and was burned to death. It is God who decreed it so and as good Moslems they must submit. A woman had ophthalmia. Her own daughter had become blind through neglect and she was urged the more earnestly to go for treatment while there was still a chance to help her. She gave the usual answer, "If God wills," but she did not come. Now the eye is gone and she says unabashed, "God wrote it over me." How could a Moslem be expected to question that statement, how could he accomplish anything against that! Ignorance, neglect, bitter fanaticism, dumb resignation, fierce pride in everything Moslem, all help the people to continue to use this phrase which is only partly true and mostly a lie.

But it is in a woman's life that the greatest blight has fallen because of this false teaching. A woman is loved and hated, married and divorced, caressed and beaten, appeased and cursed, at the caprice of a man, and all is his by right. It is to these suffering women that the missionary ladies go. Sometimes it is patriotism, sometimes it is religious pride, and sometimes it is just natural reticence, or fear of seeming to criticize their Maker, that causes them to bear in silence all the indignity and injustice of their lot, and to assent to their customs that they are good, but no woman who has learned to trust the missionaries ever defends her state.

But it must not be thought that the women are waiting for their release with outstretched arms. Centuries of repression and domination have worked out their curse and though the women may see and know



ON THE EDGE OF AN ARABIAN TOWN

their bitter lot it is quite another matter to instill initiative to break away from the beaten track. A mother was trying to correct her seven-year-old boy but he refused to be corrected and got a stick and began to beat her about the head. And all she thought of saying was, "What can I do? I am only a woman." A bright and interesting young woman of high birth, to whom the Gospel came home with noted effect, replied, "But what can I do? We women are never allowed to go anywhere, not even outside of the door of the compound, without special permission. Suppose I did accept your religion, what would happen to me? I would never be allowed to do that." Another woman has been labored with for years. She knows the truth and has admitted its claims upon her and yet she holds back. She does not dare to decide as she knows she ought, the future is too painful, and so her only answer to each invi-

tation is, "What can I do? If I were in your country, yes, but not here."

For financial reasons, a young woman of inferior position was married into an influential family while she was still very young. She became the mother of a little girl and then the husband died. The family turned the mother out after they had secured the guardianship of the child. The mother has tried every possible way to reclaim her girl and has grown hard and bitter in the process, but all in vain. Another mother, widowed and remarried, has just been forced to give up her twelve-year-old daughter to male relatives who have more claim to the girl than she has. These mothers have tried, they have not helplessly accepted their lot, but both have been forced to say, "What can I do? There is no hope, no use trying." And so this paralyzing, hopeless wail is heard day after day and almost compels us to excuse them and join them as they say, "Allah wahid," "God is one." This is the Moslem's boast and as he says it he despises all those who are not of his faith. Allah wahid, so he confesses, but he denies it when he says the Jews have Moses, the Christians have Jesus and the Moslems have Mohammed. Allah wahid, but He decreed over Moslem women polygamy, free divorce, slavery and degradation, but over Christian women honor and affection between husband and wife, faithfulness till death. Allah wahid, who has appointed eternal happiness for those that do good and eternal punishment for evildoers, and yet the most hardened criminal expects God's mercy, somehow, to secure for him an entrance into Paradise the blest because he is a Moslem. And so this great truth is bandied about, tossed back and forth without apparent influence upon their lives. In the most trivial way this phrase is used. Shall the sewing be done with single or double thread? Single will do. Yes, why not, God is one. A hostess has only one cup to serve coffee to her guests. She may have looked for another but failed to find it, and so to cover her own embarrassment she says, "One cup is enough, God is one." After refreshments are served and the finger-bowl has been used, some thirsty one proceeds to drink the water from that same bowl, to your astonishment and the shocking of your sensibilities. And the argument is that by so doing there will be no envy or enmity amongst the present company. "God is one, we are one." Later, perhaps even before parting, these same people, who are full of jealousies and family feuds, are eager to slander each other and fan the fires of envy and hatred. Truly they have the form of godliness but deny the power thereof.

Another stock phrase is, "Netekkel ala Allah," "We trust in God." During the last epidemic of plague when many were inoculated, a greater number scorned to stoop to such devilish, infidel, Christian measures. Again and again this expression was heard, and so often in such proud, defiant tones. The Moslem is a fatalist, and in all new-fangled ideas such as inoculation and modern medical treatment, he practices, to his own hurt, this slogan, "We trust in God," but in all things native to his own environment he seems to believe in proving his faith by his works,

though he may not be acquainted with St. James. At least, so their dependence upon magic, charms and kindred usages seem to say. Since last winter a convert has been staying on the Mission compound. Not long ago the mother of this convert came to us and sprinkled a reddish powder all over the place and buried some in the ground. The ingredients of this powder were kettle black, red dye, and dirt from a special spot in the Shiah cemetery. It had to be their own cemetery to make it effective. The hoped-for effect of this magic was to make us hateful in the eyes of the convert by causing us to become immoral and evil, and so win her back to Islam. Of course the mother believed in this, but



AN ARAB FAMILY

even the daughter was a bit worried about us for several days. And when it became known what had been done, many who pride themselves on their independence of thought and their broader views, in spite of it all, were quite alarmed about us. But though the Moslem's trust in God may be so mixed with things of the earth, earthy, there are times when they too are forced to realize that none but God can help, as during the plague this spring. During these days of gloom and fear and death through which they have just passed, their confession, "We trust in God," has been the one ray of hope for many, and in it they have found

some comfort for their fearful, trembling hearts, some courage to face the days of terror and pestilence which surrounded them.

"El hamdu lillah," "Praise be to God." How many, many times a day is that heard. Outwardly, the Moslem, literally in everything, gives thanks. He says it after a sneeze, and it is the answer to the day's greeting. The phrase is attributed to the cock that crows, it is quoted by laughing, quarreling children who do not realize what they say. It serves to fill a pause in the conversation, it is said in love and hate, in joy and sorrow, upon good report and evil. The habit the Moslems have of saying, "El hamdu lillah" is sometimes very annoying. For instance, when the doctor visits his patient and asks how he is, the first answer is, "El hamdu lillah." "Did you rest well last night?" "El hamdu lillah." "Is the pain less this morning?" "El hamdu lillah." And so on, much to the vexation of the busy physician, but the Moslem does not intend to make himself guilty of appearing to blame his Maker for any condition in which he may find himself.

"Allah kereen," "God is merciful." The Moslems grievously abuse this beautiful promise. Without doubt many use it rightly, but so often their use of it reminds one of Paul's words, "What then, shall we sin that grace may abound?" The poor beggar in the street might be helped if he would but work; but no, begging is easier, and "God is merciful, He will provide." As in poverty this phrase is their refuge, so also when they are brought face to face with an unpleasant duty which they want to shirk. Rather than by God's help to try to do what is difficult, they trust to some luck that may turn to their account, by God's "mercy." If they are tempted to do wrong, though fully conscious of it, they say, "Allah keereem," and do their own sweet pleasure, repenting at leisure, and trusting God to help them out when they are come into distress. Even though in their own religion they are taught the wrath of God and eternal punishment, the sinner pleads his own weakness and says, "What can I do? The devil got hold of me. We are the sons of Adam. God is merciful." Or he says, "I will say in *that* hour 'I ask pardon of God,' and God is merciful, I trust in Him."

"Taht eth-tharoureh," "Under compulsion," is something one hears much, but it is not well understood. It has connections with spirits, apparently evil ones. These spirits are called "zeeraan," visitors, and they are able to compel the individual visited to do certain things. It is said that an Arab here is host to such visitors every Friday and then he is compelled to dress like a woman, including her jewelry and hair decorations. He is not seen on that day by anyone! Another case was a woman in our hospital who was nursing a sick daughter. One morning the mother was gone, and after some questioning the daughter said that the mother had been visited by these "zeeraan" during the night and they told her she must leave the hospital at once in the morning, or they would "slaughter" her. The mother rose in fear, and in great haste, very early, she left the hospital and city. Another woman who died of plague this spring, was always known as "Nooreh who has 'zeeraan.'"

There very often were days when no one could see her and when anyone inquired after her the answers were always evasive and suggestive, and it was understood that she was not at liberty to see anyone. There seems to be only one compensation held out to such afflicted ones, that is, that they go directly to Paradise with no purgatory to endure at all. And so while those so visited in this life are looked upon as afflicted ones, and in speech at least, objects of commiseration, in reality they are objects of pride and walk about with a halo over them.

"Istehee" and "aib" mean "to be bashful," "shame." Sometimes the wish rises in one's heart that it would be possible to efface these words from the Arabic language, especially when dealing with the women. Men need not be modest, nothing seems to be cause for shame in them, even their shame becomes their boast and their pride. It is the woman who must keep in the background, who must show modesty and bashfulness in all things. The old adage, "Children must be seen, not heard," here should be, "Women must neither be seen nor heard." This false teaching about the inferiority of womanhood and the glorification of man because of his wonderful superiority is the cause of all these ideas of modesty and shame. These two words are sometimes used interchangeably and the only difference seems to be that "istehee" is connected with things and actions which may have a moral bearing, while "aib" may be so used, but is very much more used in connection with dress, custom and similar things. The whole system of Islam is so permeated with sensuality and carnal relations that the word "Istehee" is seldom used except when a woman has some dealing with the men, whether business, social or otherwise. A woman, however much she may appreciate it, is too bashful to return a courteous greeting from one of our men missionaries, but no sense of modesty before God prevents her taking His holy name in vain. To defile themselves with unseemly and vulgar conversation is too common to be noticed, but if the doctor must examine an eye, extract a tooth, or examine a wound, they feel too virtuously modest to allow it. And these same women who are too modest to dare to return a greeting or face the doctor in the clinic are not too modest to transgress the laws of God in secret. It is not the sinning that is the shame, but to be caught at it. Many a woman lives an adulterous life secretly, and though it is known nothing is said, but for such a woman to confess it is a shame, and when she tries to break away from such a life then only is she slandered. To beg, to ask for a present, to use another's property, to leave debts unpaid, to "sponge" on somebody's generosity, to refuse help to the needy and those in trouble is no shame, but to do good, honest work is a thing to be ashamed of, unless it can be done without sacrifice to pride and custom.

Thus even the hospitality of the Arab becomes a stumbling block to him, for only too often is he influenced by pride, and not seldom the poorest are the proudest in this matter. Not long ago one of the missionaries called on a poor diver. Custom demanded that coffee be served but there was none in the house and the man was too poor to buy, but

that did not phase the host. He asked his guest to stay for refreshments and quite insisted upon it. It might have been interesting to see what would have happened had the invitation been accepted, but innocent of existing conditions, it was refused, though the host insisted that the coffee was ready. Later his wife told about it and said that it was not the lie that he had told that bothered the man, but he was ashamed that coffee was not always on hand in his house. This same man buys coffee before any other household necessity, for "It must not be said that the sound of pounding coffee is not heard in my house, that we are poor." The Arabs have a word that means a present one gives upon returning from a journey. A poor woman is being helped with work in an industrial sort of a



A DOMESTIC SCENE

way, and this same woman insists upon bringing presents to her employers whenever she returns from a stay in a neighboring town, because it is customary to do so, and then without shame she comes to them for financial help. Another went to visit some friends. She was poor but she had to have money for presents, so she robbed a poorer woman, taking her chicken to the market and so securing her gifts. The theft was no shame but to pay the visit, carrying no presents, was. A family in comfortable circumstances were not ashamed to borrow constantly from very poor neighbors and all that was borrowed was never returned. The borrowers were not ashamed to ask while the lenders did not dare to refuse, for that would be shame. To wear torn and filthy clothes is no

shame but to patch them is. The men would rather go unclothed than wear a gown that is stitched with cotton and not with silk. It is a shame to be known as eating eggs, they are too cheap an article of food. A woman will sell her purity for a mess of pottage, and will walk about in clothing which is the price of sin, rather than subject herself to the ridicule of people because of her shabby appearance. Such trivial, foolish things, such perverted ideas of self cause shame. Shame is outward, not of the heart, shame is because of pride, not for sin.

Such an attitude makes the Arab moral and mental world truly topsyturvy. And because of these false ideas they are not ashamed of their ignorance; yes, worse, at times they even boast that they know nothing of



A NATIVE HOUSE

the world. While visiting with some women, the question was asked whether they had ever seen Bombay. The answer was, "No, we don't want to. This is the Moslems' country; that is enough for us." It may have been a case of sour grapes which caused this answer, but too often it is their bigotry that makes them speak out so. And so we often hear from the lips of the women, "Nahnu behem," "We are animals." It is true in many ways, for they have allowed the divine in them to be buried. So often, when appealing to them to educate their girls, they answer, "Girls! What is the use? They are animals, donkeys; they don't under-

stand." And when the women are appealed to for themselves the answer is the same. And this phrase, so often repeated by the men, and women also, has made them believe it true and well-nigh crushed out all aspirations to be anything else than animals. Some women hopelessly accept this verdict; others are too indolent to exert themselves; others are afraid to face the truth, while still others accept it with fatalistic pride in the religion which ordered the veiling of women, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

"Ma feeyeh khateeyeh," "There is no sin in me." If only the Moslems could be convinced that they are sinners half the battle would be won. They are quite ready to admit that all men are sinners, but their confession lacks the personal application. One day in the hospital, when the lesson was about sin and all present were included in the indictment, one woman said most vehemently, "I am *not* a sinner. You can go to Sheikh ——'s court and see if my name is recorded in his files for any crime at all!" When they actually must admit that certain acts are wrong, they say, "The devil made sport of me; the devil did it. God wrote it over me. What can I do?" Just as all good comes from God, so all evil proceeds from Him and He is responsible.

The Moslems' religion is a wonderful mixture of truth and falsehood, trust and worry, freedom and bondage, divine and human. They take a part of the truth for the whole and, instead of the gracious promise and precepts of our Heavenly Father beautifying their faith and comforting them in their daily experiences, this tendency has so blinded them that they grope about in the dark. We are here to clear away the mists so that they may see not only part, but all of the truth and that the truth may make them free.

