

THE FUTURE OF ISLAM

BY

WILFRID SCAWEN BLUNT

"La taknatu addurru yontharu akduhu
Liauda ahsana fin nithami wa ajmala."

"Fear not. Often pearls are unstrung
To be put in better order."

CONTENTS

- PREFACE.
- CHAPTER I.
 - Census of the Mohammedan World. The Haj
- CHAPTER II.
 - The Modern Question of the Caliphate
- CHAPTER III.
 - The True Metropolis – Mecca
- CHAPTER IV.
 - A Mohammedan Reformation
- CHAPTER V.
 - England's Interest in Islam

PREFACE.

These essays, written for the *Fortnightly Review* in the summer and autumn of 1881, were intended as first sketches only of a maturer work which the author hoped, before giving finally to the public, to complete at leisure, and develop in a form worthy of critical acceptance, and of the great subject he had chosen. Events, however, have marched faster than he at all anticipated, and it has become a matter of importance with him that the idea they were designed to illustrate should be given immediate and full publicity. The French, by their invasion of Tunis, have precipitated the Mohammedan movement in North Africa; Egypt has roused herself for a great effort of national and religious reform; and on all sides Islam is seen to be convulsed by political portents of ever-growing [Pg vi]intensity. He believes that his countrymen will in a very few months have to make their final choice in India, whether they will lead or be led by the wave of religious energy which is sweeping eastwards, and he conceives it of consequence that at least they should know the main issues of the problem before them. To shut their eyes to the great facts of contemporary history, because that history has no immediate connection with their daily life, is a course unworthy of a great nation; and in England, where the opinion of the people guides the conduct of affairs, can hardly fail to bring disaster. It should be remembered that the modern British Empire, an agglomeration of races ruled by public opinion in a remote island, is an experiment new in the history of the world, and needs justification in exceptional enlightenment; and it must be remembered, too, that no empire ever yet was governed without a living policy. The author, therefore, has resolved to publish his work, crude as it is, without more delay, in the hope that it may be instrumental in guiding the national choice. He is, nevertheless, fully aware of its [Pg vii]defects both in accuracy and completeness, and he can only hope that they may be pardoned him in view of the general truth of the picture he has drawn.

Since the last of these essays was written, their author has returned to Egypt, and has there had the satisfaction of finding the ideas, vaguely foreshadowed by him as the dream of some few liberal Ulema of the Azhar, already a practical reality. Cairo has now declared itself as the home of progressive thought in Islam,

and its university as the once more independent seat of Arabian theology. Secured from Turkish interference by the national movement of the Arabs, the Ulema of the Azhar have joined heart and soul with the party of reform. The importance of this event can hardly be overrated; and if, as now seems probable, a liberal Mohammedan Government by a free Mohammedan people should establish itself firmly on the Nile, it is beyond question that the basis of a social and political Reformation for all Islam has been laid. It is more than all a hopeful sign that extreme moderation with regard to the Caliphate [Pg viii]is observed by the Egyptian leaders. Independence, not opposition, is the motto of the party; and no rent has been made or is contemplated by them in the orthodox coat of Islam. Abd el Hamid Khan is still recognized as the actual Emir el Mumenin, and the restoration of a more legitimate Caliphate is deferred for the day when its fate shall have overtaken the Ottoman Empire. This is as it should be. Schism would only weaken the cause of religion, already threatened by a thousand enemies; and the premature appearance of an Anti-Caliph in Egypt or Arabia, however legitimate a candidate he might be by birth for the office, would divide the Mohammedan world into two hostile camps, and so bring scandal and injury on the general cause. In the meantime, however, liberal thought will have a fair field for its development, and can hardly fail to extend its influence wherever the Arabic language is spoken, and among all those races which look on the Azhar as the centre of their intellectual life. This is a notable achievement, and one which patience may turn, perhaps in a very few years, to a more [Pg ix]general triumph. There can be little doubt now that the death of Abd el Hamid, or his fall from Empire, will be the signal for the return of the Caliphate to Cairo, and a formal renewal there by the Arabian mind of its lost religious leadership.

To Mohammedans the author owes more than a word of apology. A stranger and a sojourner among them, he has ventured on an exposition of their domestic griefs, and has occasionally touched the ark of their religion with what will seem to them a profane hand; but his motive has been throughout a pure one, and he trusts that they will pardon him in virtue of the sympathy with them which must be apparent in every line that he has written. He has predicted for them great political misfortunes in the immediate future, be-

cause he believes that these are a necessary step in the process of their spiritual development; but he has a supreme confidence in Islam, not only as a spiritual, but as a temporal system the heritage and gift of the Arabian race, and capable of satisfying their most civilized wants; and he believes in the hour of their political resurgence. In the mean[Pg x]time he is convinced that he serves their interests best by speaking what he holds to be the truth regarding their situation. Their day of empire has all but passed away, but there remains to them a day of social independence better than empire. Enlightened, reformed and united in sympathy, Mussulmans need not fear political destruction in their original homes, Arabia, Egypt, and North Africa; and these must suffice them as a Dar el Islam till better days shall come. If the author can do anything to help them to preserve that independence they may count upon him freely within the limits of his strength, and he trusts to prove to them yet his sincerity in some worthier way than by the publication of these first essays.

Cairo, January 15th, 1882.

THE FUTURE OF ISLAM.

CHAPTER I.

CENSUS OF THE MOHAMMEDAN WORLD.

THE HAJ.

In the lull, which we hope is soon to break the storm of party strife in England, it may not perhaps be impossible to direct public attention to the rapid growth of questions which for the last few years have been agitating the religious mind of Asia, and which are certain before long to present themselves as a very serious perplexity to British statesmen; questions, moreover, which if not dealt with by them betimes, it will later be found out of their power to deal with at all, though a vigorous policy at the present moment might yet solve them to this country's very great advantage.

The revival which is taking place in the Moham[Pg 2]medan world is indeed worthy of every Englishman's attention, and it is difficult to believe that it has not received anxious consideration at the hands of those whose official responsibility lies chiefly in the direction of Asia; but I am not aware that it has hitherto been placed in its true light before the English public, or that a quite definite policy regarding it may be counted on as existing in the counsels of the present Cabinet. Indeed, as regards the Cabinet, the reverse may very well be the case. We know how suspicious English politicians are of policies which may be denounced by their enemies as speculative; and it is quite possible that the very magnitude of the problem to be solved in considering the future of Islam may have caused it to be put aside there as one "outside the sphere of practical politics." The phrase is a convenient one, and is much used by those in power amongst us who would evade the labour or the responsibility of great decisions. Yet that such a problem exists in a new and very serious form I do not hesitate to affirm, nor will my proposition, as I think, be doubted by any who have mingled much in the

last few years with the Mussulman populations of Western Asia. There it is easily discernible that great changes [Pg 3]are impending, changes perhaps analogous to those which Christendom underwent four hundred years ago, and that a new departure is urgently demanded of England if she would maintain even for a few years her position as the guide and arbiter of Asiatic progress.

It was not altogether without the design of gaining more accurate knowledge than I could find elsewhere on the subject of this Mohammedan revival that I visited Jeddah in the early part of the past winter, and that I subsequently spent some months in Egypt and Syria in the almost exclusive society of Mussulmans. Jeddah, I argued, the seaport of Mecca and only forty miles distant from that famous centre of the Moslem universe, would be the most convenient spot from which I could obtain such a bird's-eye view of Islam as I was in search of; and I imagined rightly that I should there find myself in an atmosphere less provincial than that of Cairo, or Bagdad, or Constantinople.

Jeddah is indeed in the pilgrim season the suburb of a great metropolis, and even a European stranger there feels that he is no longer in a world of little thoughts and local aspirations. On every side the politics he hears discussed are those of the [Pg 4]great world, and the religion professed is that of a wider Islam than he has been accustomed to in Turkey or in India. There every race and language are represented, and every sect. Indians, Persians, Moors, are there,—negroes from the Niger, Malays from Java, Tartars from the Khanates, Arabs from the French Sahara, from Oman and Zanzibar, even, in Chinese dress and undistinguishable from other natives of the Celestial Empire, Mussulmans from the interior of China. As one meets these walking in the streets, one's view of Islam becomes suddenly enlarged, and one finds oneself exclaiming with Sir Thomas Browne, "Truly the (Mussulman) world is greater than that part of it geographers have described." The permanent population, too, of Jeddah is a microcosm of Islam. It is made up of individuals from every nation under heaven. Besides the indigenous Arab, who has given his language and his tone of thought to the rest, there is a mixed resident multitude descended from the countless pilgrims who have remained to live and die in the holy cities. These preserve, to a certain extent, their individuality, at least for a

generation or two, and maintain a connection with the lands to which they owe their origin and the people who were their [Pg 5]countrymen. Thus there is constantly found at Jeddah a free mart of intelligence for all that is happening in the world; and the common gossip of the bazaar retails news from every corner of the Mussulman earth. It is hardly too much to say that one can learn more of modern Islam in a week at Jeddah than in a year elsewhere, for there the very shopkeepers discourse of things divine, and even the Frank Vice-Consuls prophesy. The Hejazi is less shy, too, of discussing religious matters than his fellow Mussulmans are in other places. Religion is, as it were, part of his stock-in-trade, and he is accustomed to parade it before strangers. With a European he may do this a little disdainfully, but still he will do it, and with less disguise or desire to please than is in most places the case. Moreover—and this is important—it is almost always the practical side of questions that the commercial Jeddah will put forward. He sees things from a political and economical point of view, rather than a doctrinal, and if fanatical, he is so from the same motives, and no others, which once moved the citizens of Ephesus to defend the worship of their shrines.

In other cities, Cairo and Constantinople excepted, the Ulema, or learned men, of whom a [Pg 6]stranger might seek instruction, would be found busying themselves mainly with doctrinal matters not always interesting at the present day, old-world arguments of Koranic interpretation which have from time immemorial occupied the schools. But here even these are treated practically, and as they bear on the political aspect of the hour. For myself, I became speedily impressed with the advantage thus afforded me, and neglected no opportunity which offered itself for listening and asking questions, so that without pretending to the possession of more special skill than any intelligent inquirer might command, I obtained a mass of information I cannot but think to be of great value—while this in its turn served me later as an introduction to such Mussulman divines as I afterwards met in the North. Jeddah then realized all my hopes and gratified nearly all my curiosities. I will own, too, to having come away with more than a gratified curiosity, and to having found new worlds of thought and life in an atmosphere I had fancied to be only of decay. I was astonished at the vigorous life

of Islam, at its practical hopes and fears in this modern nineteenth century, and above all at its reality as a moral force; so that if I had not exactly come to scoff, I certainly re[Pg 7]mained, in a certain sense, to pray. At least I left it interested, as I had never thought to be, in the great struggle which seemed to me impending between the parties of reaction in Islam and reform, and not a little hopeful as to its favourable issue. What this is likely to be I now intend to discuss.

First, however, it will I think be as well to survey briefly the actual composition of the Mohammedan world. It is only by a knowledge of the elements of which Islam is made up that we can guess its future, and these are less generally known than they should be. A stranger from Europe visiting the Hejaz is, as I have said, irresistibly struck with the vastness of the religious world in whose centre he stands. Mohammedanism to our Western eyes seems almost bounded by the limits of the Ottoman Empire. The Turk stands in our foreground, and has stood there from the days of Bajazet, and in our vulgar tongue his name is still synonymous with Moslem, so that we are apt to look upon him as, if not the only, at least the chief figure of Islam. But from Arabia we see things in a truer perspective, and become aware that beyond and without the Ottoman dominions there are races and nations, no less truly followers of the Prophet, beside whom the [Pg 8]Turk shrinks into numerical insignificance. We catch sight, it may be for the first time in their real proportions, of the old Persian and Mogul monarchies, of the forty million Mussulmans of India, of the thirty million Malays, of the fifteen million Chinese, and the vast and yet uncounted Mohammedan populations of Central Africa. We see, too, how important is still the Arabian element, and how necessary it is to count with it, in any estimate we may form of Islam's possible future. Turkey, meanwhile, and Constantinople, retire to a rather remote horizon, and the Mussulman centre of gravity is as it were shifted from the north and west towards the south and east.

I was at some pains while at Jeddah to gain accurate statistics of the Haj according to the various races and sects composing it, and with them of the populations they in some measure represent. The pilgrimage is of course no certain guide as to the composition of the Mussulman world, for many accidents of distance and political

circumstance interfere with calculations based on it. Still to a certain extent a proportion is preserved between it and the populations which supply it; and in default of better, statistics of the Haj afford us an index not without value of [Pg 9]the degree of religious vitality existing in the various Mussulman countries. My figures, which for convenience I have arranged in tabular form, are taken principally from an official record, kept for some years past at Jeddah, of the pilgrims landed at that port, and checked as far as European subjects are concerned by reference to the consular agents residing there. They may therefore be relied upon as fairly accurate; while for the land pilgrimage I trust in part my own observations, made three years ago, in part statistics obtained at Cairo and Damascus. For the table of population in the various lands of Islam I am obliged to go more directly to European sources of information. As may be supposed, no statistics on this point of any value were obtainable at Jeddah; but by taking the figures commonly given in our handbooks, and supplementing and correcting these by reference to such persons as I could find who knew the countries, I have, I hope, arrived at an approximation to the truth, near enough to give a tolerable idea to general readers of the numerical proportions of Islam. Strict accuracy, however, I do not here pretend to, nor would it if obtainable materially help my present argument.

[Pg 10]The following is my table:—

Table of the Mecca Pilgrimage of 1880.

Nationality of Pilgrims.	Arriving by Sea.	Arriving by Land.	Total of Mussulman population represented.
Ottoman subjects including pilgrims from Syria and Irak, but not from Egypt or Arabia proper	8,500	1,000	22,000,000
Egyptians	5,000	1,000	5,000,000

Mogrebbins ("people of the West"), that is to say Arabic-speaking Mussulmans from the Barbary States, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, and Morocco. These are always classed together and are not easily distinguishable from each other	6,000	...	18,000,000
Arabs from Yemen	3,000	...	2,500,000
Arabs from Oman and Hadramaut	3,000	...	3,000,000
Arabs from Nejd, Assir, and Hasa, most of them Wahhabites	...	5,000	4,000,000
Arabs from Hejaz, of these perhaps 10,000 Meccans	...	22,000	2,000,000
Negroes from Soudan	2,000	...	10,000,000(?)
Negroes from Zanzibar	1,000	...	1,500,000
Malabari from the Cape of Good Hope	150	...	
Persians	6,000	2,500	8,000,000

Indians (British subjects)	15,000	...	40,000,000
Malays, chiefly from Java and Dutch subjects	12,000	...	30,000,000
Chinese	100	...	15,000,000
Mongols from the Khanates, included in the Ottoman Haj	6,000,000
Lazis, Circassians, Tartars, etc. (Russian subjects), included in the Ottoman Haj	5,000,000
Independent Afghans and Beluchis, included in the Indian and Persian Hajs	3,000,000
Total of Pilgrims present at Arafat	93,250		
	Total Census of Islam		175,000,000

[Pg 11]The figures thus roundly given require explanation in order to be of their full value as a bird's-eye view of Islam. I will take them as nearly as possible in the order in which they stand, grouping them, however, for further convenience sake under their various sectarian heads, for it must be remembered that Islam, which in its institution was intended to be one community, political and religious, is now divided not only into many nations, but into many

sects. All, however, hold certain fundamental beliefs, and all perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, where they meet on common ground, and it is to this latter fact that the importance attached to the Haj is mainly owing.

The main beliefs common to all Mussulmans are—

1. A belief in one true God, the creator and ordainer of all things.

2. A belief in a future life of reward or punishment.

3. A belief in a divine revelation imparted first to Adam and renewed at intervals to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, and to Jesus Christ, and last of all in its perfect form to Mohammed. This revelation is not only one of dogma, but of practice. [Pg 12]It claims to have taught an universal rule of life for all mankind in politics and legislation as well as in doctrine and in morals. This is called Islam.

4. A belief in the Koran as the literal word of God, and of its inspired interpretation by the Prophet and his companions, preserved through tradition (Hadith).[1]

These summed up in the well-known "Kelemat" or act of faith, "There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the apostle of God," form a common doctrinal basis for every sect of Islam—and also common to all are the four religious acts, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage, ordained by the Koran itself. On other points, however, both of belief and practice, they differ widely; so widely that the sects must be considered as not only distinct from, but hostile to, each other. They are nevertheless, it must be admitted, less absolutely irreconcilable than are the corresponding sects of Christianity, for all allow the rest to be distinctly [Pg 13]within the pale of Islam, and they pray on occasion in each other's mosques and kneel at the same shrines on pilgrimage. Neither do they condemn each other's errors as altogether damnable—except, I believe, in the case of the Wahhabites, who accuse other Moslems of polytheism and idolatry. The census of the four great sects may be thus roughly given—

1. The Sunites or Orthodox Mohammedans	145,000,000
2. The Shiites or Sect of Ali	15,000,000