

CHAPTER VI

INTOLERANCE AND AGGRESSION

I HAVE before me a book which has unquestionably aroused indignation in consequence of its unreasoning hostility towards Islam. It is from the pen of Miss L. H. Sawbridge and is published under the ægis of the Bishop of London, who says in the Foreword that he has read the first two hundred pages and that he commends it to the Church and Nation.

In order to explain the sort of spirit which is shown by the writer of this remarkable volume, I have made a few excerpts which I propose to criticize as we go along. The text of the first paragraph of the Foreword is encouraging, for we read :—

“ I have only had time to read the first two hundred pages of this beautiful little book, but I must not longer delay to write a Foreword commending it to the Church and Nation ” ; and naturally reading such words from the pen of the Bishop of London, I expected a treat instead of the disappointment which certainly followed my perusal of a very few pages.

“ See now this Vision of awful menace and solemn warning ! The Crescent of the false prophet is lifted over 222 millions of the human race, contending for

the rule of the nations against the Cross of Christ. That scimitar-like Crescent fitly symbolizes the world spirit, which gained adherents to its faith at the point of the sword: the faith that appeals to the worldly and sensual, through its impure mixture of religiousness and immorality. The lust of the world contends with the love of God."

All this is directed against Islam. The "scimitar-like Crescent" is certainly not more revolting than the symbol of the Cross which waved over the Crusaders during some of the most sanguinary and senseless wars of history.

"Then turn and see what this false Spirit of Islam did for Womanhood and the Home, for marriage and morality, when it defiantly bound again in perpetual decree, and in the very name of religion, those same immoral chains of servitude, degradation, and lust from which Woman's Redeemer had come to set her free. Hear the Koran ruthlessly cast aside that pure and lifelong union, and those noble God-given rights of wife and mother, which the incarnate Lord of Life and Love had ordained to be restored to the Life-bearers of humanity. Islam, claiming to be the world-religion, and to supersede the Christian Faith, sanctioned in its 'sacred book' the age-long sensual customs of the non-Christian East. . . .

"Up to the time of Muhammad, the Arabian woman enjoyed a great deal of social freedom, and her relationship with the other sex was healthier and franker than it has ever been since."

Whatever the writer means by the "age-long sensual customs," there appears to be no doubt in her mind that our Holy Prophet interfered with the "social freedom" of woman as well as with her "healthy and frank dealings with the opposite sex." The absolute reverse is, of course, the truth. Before Muhammad's time polygamy was rampant; there was no protection for women, because men were allowed to do exactly what they wished. Muhammad made a good beginning and limited the number of wives a man might have.

Again, we read:—

"See, then, the awful vision of the Churches of North Africa, of Syria, and Asia Minor, going down before the sword of Islam. . . . Gaze at the Crescent, literally supplanting the Cross above numbers of Christian basilicas and temples; as even to-day it glitters over the Church of St. John the Baptist at Damascus."

"Hear the Koran, the book of the false prophet—the only one of all the sacred books of the world's religions that claims to supersede and deny the Everlasting Gospel. . . ."

"The unutterable cruelties which Muhammad allowed his followers to inflict on conquered nations in the taking of slaves have indeed lasted to this day, and are countenanced by the Koran."

This is not true, for Muhammad never countenanced cruelty: he was renowned for his leniency and generosity, and invariably exercised that leniency when

victorious in his battles. There must be a certain amount of cruelty in time of war—it cannot be avoided. But why does not Miss Sawbridge turn her attention to the doings of the “Holy” Inquisition if she wishes to find fault? Here she will find accounts of gangs of cold-blooded miscreants systematically putting to death in calm, calculating, inhuman style hundreds of Jews and Muslims. All was done in the name of the gentle Jesus and for the glory of God! All under the ægis of the Christian banner! I would ask this question: In recent times has it been the Muslim or the Christian who has been most busy with the sword? Where do we find accounts of systematic burnings and torturings carried out by Muslims? We have to turn to Spain and other Christian countries to get a glimpse of such fiendish cruelty, and I for one should like to hear some sympathy expressed for victims other than those who happen to suffer in Eastern countries. During the reign of terror in a country far nearer to our shores than Turkey or Persia or Syria, when cruel murders were of almost daily occurrence, I failed to notice any very marked activity on the part of the Bishops or the Clergy nor any scathing denunciation of the murderers; but, the moment there is a rumour that someone in the East—several thousands of miles away—has been marrying too many wives or taking a few extra servants into his establishment, up rise the British clerics, positively snorting with righteous indignation. It is somewhat curious that these

worthy divines are more affected by far-distant outrages than they are by those which occur next door ; probably they think that charity does not begin at home, but in Armenia, or Persia, or Timbuctoo.

Whenever it is a case of Christians committing outrages on Christians or others, the clerics are silent. Gentlemen may be torn from their beds and assassinated in cold blood in the presence of their wives, and scores of heartless murders may take place throughout an almost adjacent country and no clerical tears are shed, because in their eyes, apparently, a crime does not become really wicked until it is committed by a Muslim.

I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the clerics are jealous because Muslims make better citizens on account of their sober habits, which render them less prone to crime. Christians are usually responsible for the introduction of spirits into a country.

The order is : first the missionary with his Bible ; next the trader with his whisky, rum, and gin ; and then the murder by the " poor heathen " who has killed the missionary, or someone else, in a drunken fit ; and last, but not least, the British punitive expedition !

It is hardly to be wondered at that the simplicity and purity of Islam is more readily understood by primitive savages than the complicated tangle of improbabilities advanced by teachers of modern Christianity—hence, I believe, the jealousy and anxiety felt in many quarters.

Again Miss Sawbridge writes: "Those who worship Allah and those who honour Odin are indeed brothers of the same family. They are alike animated by the same lust of aggression and sensuality, cruelty and lies."

The mention of Odin, the Norse deity, in the same line with Allah, is particularly offensive, and I cannot myself reconcile such conduct as this with a true Christian spirit such as we Muslims try to cultivate. What troubles me most is that this offending passage, as do all the others which I quote here, appears in chapter ix. which is well within the two hundred pages the Bishop claims to have read. The problem for solution is: "How could such an important Dignitary of the Church as the Bishop of London give his name to such a concatenation of unseemly attacks on a sister religion, professed and followed by such a large proportion of the British Empire?"

I could quote a great many more passages full of rancour and abuse, but I think I have perhaps given enough to show how much we have to complain of at the hands of overzealous and unscrupulous traducers.

Not wishing to run any risks by relying on my own unsupported opinion, I have shown this venomous little work to several people of sound judgment—both men and women—and the universal opinion has been that it is the work of a hysterical fanatic who would write or say anything to vilify Islam. The worst of it is that if anyone finds fault with the writer, she can always protect herself by saying—with perfect

truth—that she had the sanction of the Bishop of London, to whom I believe she has been acting as secretary!

Muslims are very long-suffering people; it is part of their religion to make allowances for the failings of others, and I try to think what my own feelings would be if, in a moment of inconsiderate enthusiasm, I had used language half as offensive as that which has been allowed to find place between the covers of *The Vision and the Mission of Womanhood*¹—for this is the title of the work I take exception to.

My one desire would be to make amends as far as possible, either by explaining my overheated language, or by a frank and free expression of regret that my religious fervour had caused me to exceed the limits of decency. But although I have called attention to the matter in quarters where Church authority is supposed to be concentrated, I have as yet received no apology or expression of regret. Both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London are well aware that the language used in this book is of such a character as to bring about bad feeling between law-abiding and loyal British subjects. My personal regret is the thought that many Muslims may imagine that Christians as a body are imbued with fanatical ideas; of course this is not the case, but why does not the Church exercise its authority and forbid the issue of literature calculated to arouse religious bitterness?

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I do not suppose that Church prohibition could be legally enforced, but an interdiction would have the effect of showing that the spirit of toleration is still respected by the high Dignitaries of the Church.

Bearing on this important subject I now quote from "Notes" in the August number of the *Islamic Review*, under the heading of "Plain Speaking":—

"We have many times before in these pages asked the British public, in the interest of the British Empire, to refrain from rousing the religious susceptibilities of the Muslim world, a world ever sensitive to insults to the personalities of the Prophets of God, whether Moses, Jesus or Muhammad, the absence of which might have brought Jews, Christians and Muslims to a true fellow-feeling.

"But the followers of the 'Prince of Peace,' when unable to give vent to their overflowing energy in destructive wars with deadly weapons, console themselves by pouring forth rancorous literature for the purpose of offending the religious sentiments of their fellow-men, whom, later on, they calmly invite to co-operate through better mutual understanding in the Leagues, Pacts and other Associations which have nowadays become a kind of eyewash. For this, of course, there can be no excuse. To handle the question on moral or spiritual grounds seems waste of time. Ears have they, but hear not; therefore we think the time has come to seek to arouse the better instincts

of our Western friends. For those who have any ambition of gaining commercial openings or seeing their trade flourish in Muslim countries must in their own interests cease from insulting the religious feelings of their customers, in whose eyes their prestige is dwindling and the price of their goods also depreciated.

“ Many factors contribute towards the lowering of the prestige of a nation or the lessening of its commercial standing amongst the races of an empire, but, in our opinion, the most potent factor of all is what we may call, to put it very mildly, Religious Indiscretion. Examples are only too abundant. Take one. There appeared on the advertising page of *The Western Mail*, Christmas number, 1924, a cartoon of Muhammad with an insulting and offensive phrase regarding ‘The Mountain and Mohammed.’ Again, later on, to the great annoyance of the Muslim public, there was published another irritating phrase in the news-column of *The Western Mail*, Perth, April 29, 1926, viz. : ‘Islam’s paradise lies in the shadow of the sword,’ which should have run : ‘Islam’s paradise lies at the feet of the mother.’

“ This last saying of the chivalrous Prophet shows the greatest respect towards the mother, who used to be a mere chattel in the Roman or Persian household, and of whom was said in the Judaistic theory : ‘Of the woman came the beginning of sin, and through her we all die.’ Woman, who was regarded by Solomon as unclean, and by Buddhists as a snare for temptation,

was to be respected in Islam and given the highest and noblest position that could be conceived.

“THROUGH COLOURED GLASSES.

“ In the *Manchester Guardian* of the 19th June, 1926, appeared an article under the title of ‘ The New Turkey and Islam,’ stating, greedily as it were and with a smacking of lips, that ‘ The Government of New Turkey appears to be anxious to dissipate the impression in the Moslem world that the Turkish people, once the leaders of Islam, have lost the faith and become infected by Western scepticism.

“ Now, leaving at present the question of the truth of the above statement, we find first of all a striking example of the ignorance of the average European about Islam. He has a sort of blurred image of our Religion in his mind, being of opinion, apparently, that the greatest evil has accrued from it. He seems unacquainted with the age before the Renaissance, when Mediæval Europe was a hotbed of religious fanaticism, and when true freedom of thought or speech or action were unknown. The free exercise of conscience, the free choice of will, and the evolution of mental faculties were so cruelly crushed under the intolerable persecutions by autocrat Popes and their myrmidons in the time of the Inquisition, that to the Westerner Religion and Freedom of Conscience seem poles asunder, never to be bridged by any system whatsoever. But a little study of the Religion of Islam must eradicate that erroneous idea cherished by the majority of mankind,

that Religion and Life are two different things ; that Religion and Politics are two separate systems, and that they could never merge one into the other.

“ It is not difficult to make it quite clear to an unprejudiced reader in the West, that Islam is elastic as well as ameliorating. Islam advances with the advanced thought of each age ; it is in perfect harmony with each new invention, with each scientific discovery ; it does not clash with evolutionary reformations in the fields of art and culture, and, moreover, it is a fact that Islam is not lethargic and Al-Qur-án not a collection of cut-and-dried rules of ritualism or formalism. Its belief is linked to life, its thought is translatable into action ; it is free from fanaticism, it turns its back on intriguing and idle monks, and on celibacy (which is a curse, because unnatural) ; on foolish popular superstitions and on all forms of worship in which the mind does not correspond with the lips, i.e. when devoid of spirit, for Al-Qur-án says : ‘ So woe to the praying ones, who are unmindful of their prayers, who do good to be seen and withhold alms ’ (cvii. 4-7).”

It is lamentable that we should have to utter such reproofs, but unless there is remonstrance I fear there will be no recognition of the fact that we are being constantly insulted. It is no pleasure to make complaints, and I trust that it will not be considered that I have spoken too strongly in the foregoing pages. My animadversions on what nine people out of ten would regard as insulting language and insulting con-

duct generally may be severe, but I think they are deserved. I regret more than I can say that the high dignitaries of the Church do not openly discountenance all unseemly reference to Islam and all that savours of a narrow view of the situation.