

Survey of Recent Literature on Islam

by PENELOPE JOHNSTONE

IN RECENT years, the United Kingdom and other countries of Europe have seen the arrival of large numbers of Muslims, of varied national origins, seeking a temporary or permanent home. Islam is no longer an 'oriental' religion, somehow mysterious and distant, the province of comparative religion or travel specialists. Muslims are our neighbours: their religious obligations require a place of worship, ranging from purpose-built mosques to converted terrace houses, while their educational or dietary needs may call for sympathetic consideration on the part of the host communities.

Such an approach needs informed awareness of the presence, and of the beliefs, attitudes and practices, of the other faith. From the Christian churches have come publications giving information and guidance, while the Islamic communities themselves have produced a number of booklets aimed at the non-Muslim populations among whom they live.

One such booklet, recently published by the Islamic Foundation, sets out to explain briefly the basic principles and practices of Islam to the Western reader: M. M. Ahsan, *Islam: Faith and Practice*, Islamic Foundation, Leicester, England (1976). A clear statement of this kind is to be welcomed, for from within a faith can come the most sincere expression of conviction and commitment. (The Foundation itself, a centre for mission in Britain, has produced other works including the series comprising *Islam: Its Meaning and Message*, edited by K. Ahmad (1975).)

This booklet does, as it says, give the historical background and origins of Islam, and this is clear and concise; the acceptance of 'historicity' of legend is an integral part of such belief. (However, a Christian might well query the bland statement that in the case of 'earlier scriptures' the 'original texts were lost' (p. 11)— p. 209 with all the consequent assumptions about Christianity which this entails.) It does little more than add to the number of summary presentations of their faith by Muslims. These include *The Straight Path*, from the Islamic Council of Europe (1958) and *Islam*, Ward Lock (1970) in the series Living Religions. This last booklet is by Riadh el-Droubie, director of Minaret House, Croydon, England, which also produces wall-charts, posters and leaflets which can be of use in giving a colourful and lively presentation of Islam for school or parish.

The booklet by M. M. Ahsan is not so helpful when it strays further afield into the tricky area of population percentages. One would wish to question the relevance, at the very least, of his figures and map, the sources for which are emphatically not the most up-to-date or undisputed. Those who wish to pursue this question could find more reliable data elsewhere: others are best advised to pass them by.

M. Ahsan considers Islam to have been 'abused and misunderstood'; a sense of grievance when found among Muslims is very real and must be taken into account. But its justification is open to question particularly today; sheer lack of knowledge is more common than lack of goodwill. The knowledge gap has for a long while now been narrowed by Christian writers in the West who have striven to present Islam favourably. In an earlier generation there are the works of Gibb, Guillaume, Nicholson and Arberry—still reprinted today. More modern writers, combining scholarly insight with sympathetic involvement, include Watt, Cragg and Waardenburg. Watt's detailed works on the life of Muhammad, and his *What is Islam?*; Cragg's *Call of the Minaret* and *The House of Islam*, are notable contributions to interfaith understanding.

Muslims from both West and East, writing in English, have combined religious conviction with a facility of expression able to appeal to a Western Christian readership. Their works include F. Rahman's *Islam*, S. H. Nasr's books such as *Ideal and Realities of Islam*, M. Lings' *What is Sufism?*

Since Islam is a living religion, which in its contemporary manifestations is met with in everyday life, the Western Christian is sometimes understandably at a loss how to approach members of another faith; especially when that faith has taken root and is p. 210 flourishing in the soil of a 'Christian' country and moreover considers itself as the final and complete revelation of God's will to mankind. On interfaith questions the churches have responded, after an initial period of puzzled apprehension, with some detailed, informative and helpful booklets for the general Christian public.

The interest aroused by the 1976 World of Islam Festival led, among other results, to the formation of a special Committee of the British Council of Churches and the Conference of British Missionary Societies, on the Presence of Islam in Britain. Its Chairman, Bishop David Brown, has written an excellent booklet *A New Threshold* (1976): facts, guidance and points for discussion. The British Council of Churches' Community and Race Relations Unit, jointly with the Catholic Committee for Racial Justice, has published a small booklet *Islam*—first of a series on 'World Religions in Britain'.

The Church Missionary Society has a long history of involvement with Islam, originally abroad and now in this country; its publications include a film strip with commentary.

A detailed and attractively-presented book is J. B. Taylor's *Thinking About Islam*, Lutterworth (1971), especially useful for schools.

The United Kingdom has a rapidly expanding centre where religious questions of all kinds are dealt with, outside the denominational boundaries. This is the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham; its courses on Islam number Muslims as well as Christian among its students, and it is beginning documentation work for Christian-Muslim relations throughout Europe. Theses for the University of Birmingham's M.A. in Islamic Studies (Department of Theology) are supervised by the Study Centre. Its Advisory Committee of Christians and Muslims is drawn from Britain and Europe, and includes the Directors of both the Islamic Foundation and Minaret House, with whom it has been able to co-operate on a number of activities.

Many Muslim concerns come within the scope of education authorities, social workers, teachers or health visitors. The Community Relations Commission (CRC) includes Muslim members; it has an excellent series of leaflets and booklets on intercultural matter ranging from diet to burials, a *Directory of* p. 211 *Ethnic Minority Organizations*, and a detailed listing of educational facilities and opportunities for overseas persons. Its periodical *Education and Community Relations* frequently carries relevant articles, reprints of which can be obtained from the CRC.

Local ventures, though numerous, are largely unpublicized, but none the less valuable. One city, however, which has appeared in print is Bradford; the situation is summed up in E. Butterworth's *A Muslim Community in Britain*, published by the Church Information Office (1967). Bradford's own CRC has produced typescript reports of proceedings of discussions and interfaith conferences: 'Islam in the Parish', 1973; 'The Family in Islam and Christianity', 1974; 'Worship and Prayer in Islam and Christianity', 1975. CRC has published a discussion paper on 'The Education of Muslim Girls', emanating from the Yorkshire Committee for Community Relations.

The question of special Islamic education has been tackled by the Union of Muslim Organizations (UMO), with brief reports on 'Guidelines and Syllabus on Islamic Education' and 'Islamic Education and Single Sex Schools' (1975).

Muslims' own attitudes and comments on a variety of issues are reflected in local, national or international periodicals. Produced in London, *Impact International* declares its aim as presenting 'Muslim viewpoint(s) on current affairs'; *The Muslim* comes from the Federation of Students' Islamic Societies (FOSIS); *The Muslim Woman*, in typescript, ranges from seasonal recipes to Qur'anic commentary, and reports activities of the Muslim Women's Association. Islamic books can be obtained through the Muslim Book Service.

Numerous local Muslim organizations may 'overlap' with national or cultural affiliations; most Universities have an Islamic Society, with FOSIS as their central body. In theory at any rate all these associations are included under the aegis of the UMO. The Islamic Council of Europe, based in London, organized in April 1976 an International Islamic Conference to coincide with the opening of the World of Islam Festival. This Conference was specifically aimed at presenting Islam as a living religion concerned with topics of today.

The international church organizations have been concerned with Islam and this is seen especially in the papers and reports p. 212 published by the World Council of Churches' section of Dialogue with Peoples of Living Faiths and ideologies (DFI). The *International Review of Mission*, October 1976, carried an edited report of the proceedings of a Consultation on Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wa, sponsored by IRM in June 1976. More recently, the publication, *Christians meeting Muslims*, traces ten years of Christian-Muslim dialogue under WCC auspices.

The Catholic Church since Vatican II has given more serious thought to the non-Christian religions: within the Secretariat for non-Christians a special section for Islam considers relations with Muslims throughout the world. Members of the Secretariat have taken part in dialogue meetings, often in company with members of the WCC. The Secretariat has published a brief work *Guideline for a dialogue between Muslims and Christians* (1969, 2nd ed. 1971). In Rome the Pontifical Institute for Arabic Studies, apart from conducting excellent courses in Arabic and Islamic, publishes what is one of the best periodicals on the subject: *Islamochristiana* (annually, 1975, 1976 and 1977). The Conference of European Bishops of the Catholic Church, meeting in Vienna in 1977, gave its time to a discussion of Islam in Europe, with a consideration of the situation in specific countries.

Other European countries with large minorities often have to face serious issues of education, worship, social services, intermarriage. On the whole, individual churches and organizations have made their separate assessment and response. Booklets produced include, from Austria: *Moslems und Christen—Partner?* edited by M. Fitzgerald, A. Khoury, W. Wanzura, published by Styria, Graz (1976); from Germany, *Muslimen—unsere Nachbarn*, a collection of articles edited by G. Jasper, published by O. Lembeck, Frankfurt (1977); *Moslems unter uns*, by M. S. Abdullah and M. Mildemberger, Stuttgart (1974). The Evangelische Mission in Oberägypten Wiesbaden, has brought out a series *Christentum und Islam*, dealing briefly but at some depth with major points in Christian-Muslim dialogue: theological as well as practical, seen with sympathy but no compromise of the Christian standpoint.

The Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, Stuttgart, concerned with the welfare of overseas and non-Christian persons, produces a small publication *Materialdienst*. Rather similar is *Orientdienst-Information*, a periodical from Wiesbaden. p. 213

For the Netherlands, the Nederlandse Zendingsraad, Amsterdam, has set out the basic facts in *Moslims en Christenen in Nederland*; in France, the Secrétariat pour les Relations

avec l'Islam (SRI) of the Catholic Church produces information on Muslims in Europe and a Newsletter.

For those wishing to broaden their geographical horizon, there are periodicals produced by the Christian Study Centre in Pakistan (*al-Mushir*) and the Henry Martyn Institute in India (the *Bulletin*). Both give reviews and articles reflecting the situation on the subcontinent, but of wider relevance. Muslim periodicals from that area include *The Criterion* and *Muslimnews International* (both from Karachi), *Islam and the Modern Age* (New Delhi).

Since 1911, the *Muslim World*, published in the United States, has considered historical and contemporary aspects of Christian-Muslim relations: its scholarly articles, reviews, editorials and news items are of lasting interest while they show the changing situation and developing attitudes of the past sixty years and more.

The historical background and implications can be explored with the help of bibliographies: very detailed in *Islamochristiana* 1 and 2, more summary in the section on Islam in the forthcoming *Middle East and Islam: A Bibliographical Introduction*, edited by D. Grimwood-Jones, to be published by Inter Documentation Company. Zug, Switzerland. Briefer bibliographies occur in some of the works mentioned above, such as *A New Threshold and Guidelines*.

All in all, it would not seem that 'wilful misunderstanding', which M. M. Ahsan so rightly deplores, is a main factor in Western attitudes. In the whole question of Christian-Muslim relations, if there is little cause for complacency, there can be a cautious optimism with a determination to avoid any mistakes or misunderstandings of the past. The current opportunities for learning about Islam, for meeting Muslims, can contribute to an atmosphere in which true understanding and friendship can become a reality. The spheres in which Christians and Muslims can, and must, work together for the future are becoming ever wider, to the benefit of all.

Some useful addresses:

Islamic Foundation, 223 London Road, Leicester, UK

Minaret House, 9 Leslie Park Road, Croydon, UK [p. 214](#)

Islamic Council of Europe, 24 Grosvenor Gardens, London S.W.1., UK

Muslim Women's Association, 12 Burlington Road, London, N. 10, UK

Muslim Book Service, 38 Mapesbury Road, London, N.W.2., UK

Federation of the Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Eire (same address)

Union of Muslim Organizations in UK and Eire, 30 Baker Street, London W1M 2DS, UK

News and Media Ltd., 33 Stroud Green Road, London N. 4 (*Impact International*), UK

Islam and the Modern Age: Jamia Nagar, New Delhi-110025, India

The Criterion: Islamic Research Academy, C-163/10, Mansoor, Karachi-3805, Pakistan

Muslimnews International: P.O. Box 7659, Zaib-un-Nisa St, Karachi-3, Pakistan

(In the next issue we will supplement this material by a survey from more conservative evangelical sources—Editor.)

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