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EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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Maranatha: Advent in the Muslim World

S. von Sicard

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Professor von Sicard discusses some of the traditions associated with the signs of the last days in Islam and finds in the expectation of the returning Madhi and of Jesus, Spirit-given opportunities to invite Muslims to "consider Jesus". He calls the Church universal to traverse cultural barriers and help former Muslims witness to Jesus the Messiah through "Islamic churches".

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Something is afoot in the Muslim World. In the last ten years or so Muslims have been listening to the Gospel message with unprecedented openness and interest. In 1966–1967 tens of thousands of Muslims turned to Christ in Indonesia. The reasons were social, political and religious. Above all, however, it would seem that it was the stand and witness of the Batak churches which contributed to this. Similar movements also took place in Ethiopia; and in Egypt the revival within the Coptic Church is finding a response among Muslims.¹

In 1974, one radio station reported a jump in response letters from Muslims from 12 to 70 per month. During the first six months of 1976 one Bible correspondence school enrolled 7,000 new students of whom 3,900 were reported to be Muslims. From Turkey and East Africa come reports of Muslims who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.²

From West Africa comes news of the movement of the Fulani eastwards, and of the *Banu Isa* (the Jesus People)—large groups of Muslims who have been gathering at Bima Hill in the Gombe area of Bauchi State, Nigeria, to await the coming of "*Isa the Mahdi*", and who have requested the Evangelical Churches of West Africa to instruct them about *Isa* (Burns 1978:9; Hinds 1976:9ff.).³ A member of the Tijani order, in which mahdist expectations have been developed, is recorded to have said.

When the Mahdi comes he will finalise everything in this world. Signs of his coming are: there will be killing of many people without proper reason; p. 51 there will be drought. When that happens people will go towards the East. Bima Hill will be a starting place for the Mahdi (Hinds 1976:9).

The pronouncement must be seen against the background both of the civil war and unrest in Nigeria in the recent past, and also of the droughts and famines which have plagued the Sahel region. At a deeper level however the demographic facts and the oral traditions seem to be playing a decisive role.

¹ V. Tranholm-Mikkelsen, private communication, Salzburg, February 10, 1978.

² D. Schenck, private communication, Nairobi, February 8, 1978. See also Conn 1977:6 and Wilder 1977:302.

³ Also private communications with J. Hinds (Birmingham, January 4, 1978) and I. Shelley (Selly Oak Colleges, January 30, 1978).

Bima Hill is surrounded by villages of the Tera people, many of whom are Christians, but who themselves have no traditions about the hill. The Fulani however have traditions describing a flock of mysterious pigeons which circle the place, a noise of the neighing of horses and the appearance of a white flag glistening in the hills. The rock itself is huge and there is water on top; it may at times have served as refuge (*ibid*:9f.).

There does not seem to be an explanation of these stories although it lies near at hand to associate pigeons with the symbol of peace, well known in antiquity as much as it is today. Similarly the neighing of horses may well have been meant as a symbol of war. Both concepts are closely connected with the signs of the last days in Islam. The impression that this is the case is strengthened by the belief among the Fulanis that the Mahdi will come and open a door (*Kofa*) in the rock, through which those who are saved (*tsira*) will pass and be hidden at the time of the end of the world. This belief is undoubtedly connected with the fact that the original people used to hide in the deep caves of the rock when the Fulanis came to raid. There in the cool, dark interior of the caves there was also water to sustain the hideaways. However, in the olden days no one would enter the caves without first consulting the ancestors.

Although Muslim tradition may be unclear on the whole issue of the association of *Isa* and the restoration of Islam, there are sufficient traditions circulating to make this a lively issue for a growing number of Muslims. The expectation has been further enhanced of late through the meeting of the Islamic Foreign Ministers in Istanbul and Tripoli in 1976 and 1977 respectively. Among other things, they have announced preparatory plans for the celebration of the 14th centenary of the *hijra* which begins on November 20, 1979. The language of this material clearly strikes a note of expectation. Some examples will help to illustrate this. p. 52

*The celebrations will help to create among the Muslims the awareness that they have been ... a spiritual, moral and cultural force ... The celebrations will help to create among Muslims ... a sense of destiny which proclaims ... the re-emergence of Islam as a living, dynamic and growing civilization.*⁴

THE SIGNS OF THE "HOUR"

The spirit of such language ties in closely with the traditions about the signs of the "hour", or the last days, in Islam. If one reads on in the preparatory material for the Hijra Centenary with this in mind, one discovers plans for all Muslim leaders to gather for a visit to Mecca and Medina. All this reflects an apocalyptic mood. It is not just a cerebral fact, but a matter of living faith and conviction (*ibid*:2).

Muslim theology as it developed came to distinguish between lesser and greater signs of the last days. Some authorities reckon the former to number as many as 500. These signs include such things as the decline of faith among men, the promotion of the meanest persons to positions of authority, the growth of moral laxity etc. (Klein 1906:84f.). Muslims everywhere are, like Christians, concerned about these things and recognise them to be prevalent in society today.

In the context of the present mood, however, it is some of the so-called greater signs which tend to highlight the mood of expectation. At the top of the list is the belief that the *mahdi*, the directed or rightly guided one, will appear. He will come from Medina and go to Mecca where he will be made *imam*. He will be a great conqueror and will make the *ummah* a mighty nation. He will break crosses and kill swine. Among the Shi'ah the *mahdi*

⁴ The Muslim Institute for Research and Planning. The Hijra Centenary Year. K. Siddiqui, Hijra Centenary Programme. May 1976 and 1977.

has already appeared in the person of Abu'l-Qasim, the 12th imam, who went into *satr* (concealment) in A.H. 255 (A.D. 869), and who will appear again at the end of the world (*ibid*:85).

Another important sign is the appearance of Anti-Christ, *al-Masih* 'l-Dajjal (literally "the impostor Messiah"). He is said to be one-eyed and marked on his forehead with the letters KFR which stand for *kafir* (infidel). He will appear between Iraq and Syria, or near Medina, riding on an ass followed by 70,000 Jews. He will rule for 40 days, laying waste all places, but will not be able to enter Mecca, Medina or Jerusalem. He will be slain by Jesus at the gate of Lydda (*ibid*; Wensinck 1965:227).

The most important of the signs in this context however is the p. 53 expectation that Jesus will descend either near the white minaret to the east of the mosque at Damascus, or on a hill in the holy land called Afiq. He will have a spear in his hand with which he will slay Anti-Christ. He will then enter the mosque: according to one tradition, in Damascus for the afternoon prayer; according to another, in Jerusalem for the morning prayer. The *imam* will make way for him to lead the prayer. In one version, he accepts; in another, he declines. Both versions emphasize that he performs the prayer according to the rites of the law of Muhammad. He will then go out to kill the swine, break the cross (*sic*), destroy chapels and churches and kill the Christians, except those who believe in him. He will then marry a wife, have children, die after 40 years and be buried at Medina. Under him there will be great security and prosperity. Lions and camels, bears and sheep will live in peace and a child will play with serpents unhurt.⁵

These traditions go back to surah 43:61, "Verily he shall be a sign of the last hour." Also 4:1 57, "There shall not be one of the people of the book but shall believe in him before his death."

The theme occurs again and again in Islamic history. Ibn Khaldun in his Introduction to History wrote,

It has been accepted by all Muslims in every age that at the end of time a man from the family of the Prophet will without fail make his appearance, one who will strengthen Islam and make justice triumph. Muslims will follow him and he will gain dominion over the Muslim realm. He will be called the Mahdi and he will be one of the signs of the Day of Judgement. After the Mahdi, Jesus will descend together with the Mahdi, and help him kill the Anti-Christ (Ibn Khaldun 1958: 156).

From this material it is obvious that the interrelation between the *Mahdi* and Jesus is not clear. It is however interesting that among the Hanafis, who are found mainly in the East but also in Egypt and North Africa, there is a belief that Jesus will be the viceregent of God on earth in the last days to the exclusion of the *Mahdi* whom they do not expect (Wensinck 1965:244). In view of the fact that Hanafi theology was the earliest to develop, and hence may well incorporate the original teachings of Islam, this viewpoint may be an important aspect of the present expectations. p. 54

THE SIGN OF THE SPIRIT

This being the situation, there is a need for Christians to be even more sensitive and aware of the situation. It may well be that God in his inscrutable wisdom and grace is calling the Church to prepare itself to engage in a meeting with Muslims in which the Christians

⁵ Tafsiru 'l-Baidawi to surah 43:61. Al-Tha'ali, I. Qisasu 'l-Anbiya', 1951 edition, p. 334f. See also Klein 1906:85, and cf. Wensinck 1960:112f. (*Isa*).

overriding concern must be to respond to this apocalyptic mood by inviting them to “consider Jesus.”

Muslims, standing on the threshold of a new century, are being called to consider the past “because it helps to guide the future development of the *ummah*.” Inherent in this is a call to repentance for failing to make Islam what the Almighty intends it to be, and a call to re-commitment to the fulness of his word. This, at the same time it would seem, is a call to all Christians to direct the seeking to him who was, who is and ever shall be. Now is the time. Let the Church venture great things for God and expect great things from him.

But in doing that the Church must beware not to dim the vision or quench the expectation, blinded by its own traditions developed in various places at different times in history. Jesus will not be seen or understood by the Indonesian Muslim if he is presented through American Sankey and Moody hymns. The Arab Muslim will not consider Jesus if he is presented in electronic language. The Nigerian Muslim will not perceive him if he comes in Anglo-Saxon fashion.

THE CALL TO THE CHURCH

The call to the Church is to “let God be God”; to allow him to reveal himself in such forms that men everywhere may acknowledge him as Lord and Saviour. How can this be done? How can the Church become an instrument?

One way is to be sensitive to the traditions associated with the expectancy. Within the above related traditions among the Fulani there is the potential of speaking about “the rock of salvation” ([Ps 89:26](#), [95:1](#)) and to develop this, pointing to Jesus ([I Co 10:4](#)). One could pick up the “gnashing of teeth” ([Mt 8:12](#), [13:42](#), [22:13](#) etc.) inherent in the symbolism of the “neighing.”

But the situation created by the “signs” points beyond this to four important considerations.

(1) It calls on the Church to enable those whom God has called unto himself from within Islam to bear witness in a meaningful way to their former co-religionists. They have not only the experience, [p. 55](#) but the whole background it takes to present the Messiah whom they have found. The Church instead of considering them weak vessels must trust that the Spirit will use these men and women in the present climate.

(2) It calls the Church to enable former Muslims to develop their own “islamic church” by an acceptance of Islam as a cultural expression and a social system—just as so many expressions of the German or Anglo-Saxon or American culture have become unquestioned parts of the Church. This means “allowing” each part of the Muslim world to be *itself*, and express its faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour in a form meaningful to itself and those it is called to reach (Wilder 1977:31 3ff.).

(3) It calls the Church to enable cross-continental exchanges by Christians from various parts of the world. This, in turn, will demonstrate to Muslims that even from areas they think solidly Muslim there are Christians who can speak to them in an idiom which conveys meaning—and offers them a valid opportunity to consider Jesus, the Messiah. This has unwittingly been experienced through government recruitment schemes in Northern Nigeria (and other places) when teachers seconded from India and Pakistan turned out to be Christians, rather than Muslims. Again, however, the Church is called upon to *enable* such people to witness—to undergird and support their efforts—not to estrange them because they are not within the framework or jurisdiction of the Church (Conn 1977:10).

(4) It calls the Church to motivate, prepare and encourage the large number of Christians from all over the world who are employed throughout the Muslim world to

witness to their risen Lord and Master in word and deed. The opportunities which present themselves in everyday life, in all walks of life, should be placed in his service. In another era the reformers, when faced with the Muslim in Eastern Europe, sought to prepare their people going into battle as soldiers to use the opportunities they might have if they were prisoners (*Luther's Works* vol. 53:571f.). Today, in various parts of the Arab world alone there are thousands of people, particularly from the West, employed by governments and private companies. Among these a not inconsiderable number are committed Christians who, without compromising their position as technical advisers, experts or employees, have many opportunities in the way they carry out their work, in personal relationships and during their spare time to bear witness to Christ (Conn 1977:3). p. 56

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Dr. S. von Sicard is a Lecturer at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, England. p. 57

Assistance Programs Require Partnership

Vinay Samuel and Charles Corwin

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In this article a national Asian Church leader and a former western missionary together call for better cross-cultural research and greater sensitivity to historical and psychodynamic