XXXI

SEVEN CENTURIES IN ASIA (CIRCA 50 B.C. TO A.D. 650)

§ 1

IN the preceding two chapters we have concentrated our attention chiefly on the collapse in the comparatively short space of four centuries of the political and social order of the western part of the great Roman Empire of Cæsar and Trajan. We have dwelt upon the completeness of that collapse. To any intelligent and public-spirited mind living in the time and under the circumstances of St. Benedict or Cassiodorus, it must have seemed, indeed, as if the light of civilization was waning and near extinction. But with the longer views a study of universal history gives us, we can view those centuries of shadow as a phase, and probably a necessary phase, in the onward march of social and political ideas and understandings. And if, during that time, a dark sense of calamity rested upon Western Europe, we must remember that over large portions of the world there was no retrogression.

With their Western prepossessions European writers are much too prone to underrate the tenacity of the Eastern empire that centred upon Constantinople. This empire embodied a tradition much more ancient than that of Rome. If the reader will look at the map we have given of its extent in the sixth century, and if he will reflect that its official language had then become Greek, he will realize that what we are dealing with here is only nominally{v1-615} a branch of the Roman Empire; it is really the Hellenic Empire of which Herodotus dreamt and which Alexander the Great founded. True it called itself Roman and its people “Romans,” and to this day modern Greek is called “Romaic.” True also that Constantine the Great knew no Greek and that Justinian’s accent was bad. These superficialities of name and form cannot alter the fact that the empire was in reality Hellenic, with a past of six centuries at the time of Constantine the Great, and that while the real Roman Empire crumpled up completely in four centuries, this Hellenic “Roman Empire” held out for more than eleven, from 312, the beginning of the reign of Constantine the Great, to 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks.

And while we have had to tell of something like a complete social collapse in the west, there were no such equivalent breakdowns in the east. Towns and cities flourished,

the countryside was well cultivated, trade went on. For many centuries Constantinople was the greatest and richest city in the world. We will not trouble ourselves here with the names and follies, the crimes and intrigues, of its tale of emperors. As with most monarchs of great states, they did not guide their empire; they were carried by it. We have already dealt at some length with Constantine the Great (312-337), we have mentioned Theodosius the Great (379-395), who for a little while reunited the empire, and Justinian I (527-565).[304] Presently we shall tell something of Heraclius (610-641). Justinian, like Constantine, may have had Slav blood in his veins. He was a man of great ambition and great organizing power, and he had the good fortune to be married to a woman of equal or greater ability, the Empress Theodora, who had in her youth been an actress of doubtful reputation. But his ambitious attempts to restore the ancient greatness of the empire probably overtaxed its resources. As we have told, he reconquered the African province from the Vandals and most of Italy from the Goths. He also recovered the South of Spain. He built the great and beautiful church of Saint Sophia in Constantinople, founded a university, and codified the law.[305] But{v1-616} against this we must set his closing of the schools of Athens. Meanwhile a great plague swept the world, and at his death this renewed and expanded empire of his crumpled up again like a blown-out bladder. The greater part of his Italian conquests was lost to the Lombards. Italy was indeed at that time almost a desert; the Lombard historians assert they came into an empty country. The Avars and Slavs struck down from the Danube country towards the Adriatic, Slav populations establishing themselves in what is now Serbia, Croatia, and Dalmatia, to become the Yugo-Slavs of to-day. Moreover, a great and exhausting struggle began with the Sassanid Empire in Persia.

But before we say anything of this struggle, in which the Persians thrice came near to taking Constantinople, and which was decided by a great Persian defeat at Nineveh (627), it is necessary to sketch very briefly the history of Persia from the Parthian days.

§ 2

We have already drawn a comparison between the brief four centuries of Roman imperialism and the obstinate vitality of the imperialism of the Euphrates-Tigris country. We have glanced very transitorily at the Hellenized Bactrian and Seleucid monarchies that flourished in the eastern half of Alexander's area of conquest for three centuries, and told how the Parthians came down into Mesopotamia in the last century B.C. We have described the battle of Carrhæ and the end of Crassus. Thereafter for two centuries and a half the Parthian dynasty of the Arsacids ruled in the east and the Roman in the west, with Armenia{v1-617} and Syria between them, and the boundaries shifted east and west as either side grew stronger. We have

marked the utmost eastward extension of the Roman Empire under Trajan (see map to chap. xxix., § 3), and we have noted that about the same time the Indo-Scythians (chap. xxix., § 4), poured down into India.

In 227 occurred a revolution, and the Arsacid dynasty gave way to a more vigorous line, the Sassanid, a national Persian line under Ardashir I. In one respect the empire of Ardashir I presented a curious parallelism with that of Constantine the Great a hundred years later. Ardashir attempted to consolidate it by insisting upon religious unity, and adopted as the state religion the old Persian faith of Zoroaster, of which we shall have more to say later.

This new Sassanid Empire immediately became aggressive, and under Sapor I, the son and successor of Ardashir, took Antioch. We have already noted how the Emperor Valerian was defeated (260) and taken prisoner. But as Sapor was retiring from a victorious march into Asia Minor, he was fallen upon and defeated by Odenathus, the Arab king of a great desert-trading centre, Palmyra.

For a brief time under Odenathus, and then under his widow Zenobia, Palmyra was a considerable state, wedged between the two empires. Then it fell to the Emperor Aurelian, who carried off Zenobia in chains to grace his triumph at Rome (272).

We will not attempt to trace the fluctuating fortunes of the Sassanids during the next three centuries. Throughout that time war between Persia and the empire of Constantinople wasted Asia Minor like a fever. Christianity spread widely and was persecuted, for after the Christianization of Rome the Persian monarch remained the only god-monarch on earth, and he saw in Christianity merely the propaganda of his Byzantine rival. Constantinople became the protector of the Christians and Persia of the Zoroastrians; in a treaty of 422, the one empire agreed to tolerate Zoroastrianism and the other Christianity. In 483, the Christians of the east split off from the Orthodox church and became the Nestorian church; which, as we have already noted, spread its missionaries far and wide throughout Central and Eastern Asia. This separation from Europe, since it freed the{v1-618} Christian bishops of the east from the rule of the Byzantine patriarchs, and so lifted from the Nestorian church the suspicion of political disloyalty, led to a complete toleration of Christianity in Persia. With Chosroes I (531-579) came a last period of Sassanid vigour. He was the contemporary and parallel of Justinian. He reformed taxation, restored the orthodox Zoroastrianism, extended his power into Southern Arabia (Yemen), which he rescued from the rule of Abyssinian Christians, pushed his northern frontier into Western Turkestan, and carried on a series of wars with Justinian. His reputation as an enlightened ruler stood so high, that when Justinian closed the schools of Athens, the last Greek philosophers

betook themselves to his court. They sought in him the philosopher king—that mirage which, as we have noted, Confucius and Plato had sought in their day. The philosophers found the atmosphere of orthodox Zoroastrianism even less to their taste than orthodox Christianity, and in 549 Chosroes had the kindness to insert a clause in an armistice with Justinian, permitting their return to Greece, and ensuring that they should not be molested for their pagan philosophy or their transitory pro-Persian behaviour.

It is in connection with Chosroes that we hear now of a new Hunnish people in Central Asia, the Turks, who are, we learn, first in alliance with him and then with Constantinople.

Chosroes II (590-628), the grandson of Chosroes I, experienced extraordinary fluctuations of fortune. At the outset of his career he achieved astonishing successes against the empire of Constantinople. Three times (in 608, 615, and 627) his armies reached Chalcedon, which is over against Constantinople; he took Antioch, Damascus, and Jerusalem (614), and from Jerusalem he carried off a cross, said to be the true cross on which Jesus was crucified, to his capital Ctesiphon. (But some of this or some other true cross had already got to Rome. It had been brought from Jerusalem, it was said, by the "Empress Helena," the idealized and canonized mother of Constantine, a story for which Gibbon displayed small respect.[306]) In 619, Chosroes II conquered that facile country, Egypt. This career of conquest was at last arrested by the Emperor Heraclius (610), who set about restoring{v1-619} the ruined military power of Constantinople. For some time Heraclius avoided a great battle while he gathered his forces. He took the field in good earnest in 623. The Persians experienced a series of defeats culminating in the battle of Nineveh (627); but neither side had the strength for the complete defeat of the other. At the end of the struggle there was still an undefeated Persian army upon the Bosphorus, although there were victorious Byzantine forces in Mesopotamia. In 628 Chosroes II was deposed and murdered by his son. An indecisive peace was concluded between the two exhausted empires a year or so later, restoring their old boundaries; and the true cross was sent back to Heraclius, who replaced it in Jerusalem with much pomp and ceremony.

§ 3

So we give briefly the leading events in the history of the Persian as of the Byzantine Empire. What is more interesting for us and less easy to give are the changes that went on in the lives of the general population of those great empires during that time. The present writer can find little of a definite character about the great pestilences that we know swept the world in the second and sixth centuries of this era. Certainly they

depleted population, and probably they disorganized social order in these regions just as much as we know they did in the Roman and Chinese empires.

The late Sir Mark Sykes, whose untimely death in Paris during the influenza epidemic of 1919 was an irreparable loss to Great Britain, wrote in *The Caliph's Last Heritage* a vivid review of the general life of Nearer Asia during the period we are considering. In the opening centuries of the present era, he says: "the direction of military administration and imperial finance became entirely divorced in men's minds from practical government; and notwithstanding the vilest tyranny of sots, drunkards, tyrants, lunatics, savages, and abandoned women, who from time to time held the reins of government, Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Syria contained enormous populations, huge canals and dykes were kept in repair, and commerce and architecture flourished, in spite of a perpetual procession of hostile armies and a continual changing of the nationality of the governor. Each peasant's interest was{v1-620} centred in his ruling town; each citizen's interest was in the progress and prosperity of his city; and the advent of an enemy's army may have sometimes been looked on even with satisfaction, if his victory was assured and the payment of his contracts a matter of certainty.

"A raid from the north,[307] on the other hand, must have been a matter for dread. Then the villagers had need to take refuge behind the walls of the cities, from whence they could descry the smoke which told of the wreck and damage caused by the nomads. So long, however, as the canals were not destroyed (and, indeed, they were built with such solidity and caution that their safety was assured), no irreparable damage could be effected....

"In Armenia and Pontus the condition of life was quite otherwise. These were mountain districts, containing fierce tribes headed by powerful native nobility under

recognized ruling kings, while in the valleys and plains the peaceful cultivator provided the necessary economic resources.... Cilicia and Cappadocia{v1-621} were now thoroughly subject to Greek influence, and contained numerous wealthy and highly civilized towns, besides possessing a considerable merchant marine. Passing from Cilicia to the Hellespont, the whole Mediterranean coast was crowded with wealthy cities and Greek colonies, entirely cosmopolitan in thought and speech, with those municipal and local ambitions which seem natural to the Grecian character. The Grecian Zone extended from Caria to the Bosphorus, and followed the coast as far as Sinope on the Black Sea, where it gradually faded away.

"Syria was broken up into a curious quiltlike pattern of principalities and municipal kingdoms; beginning with the almost barbarous states of Commagene and Edessa (Urfa) in the north. South of these stood Bambyce, with its huge temples and priestly governors. Towards the coast a dense population in villages and towns clustered around the independent cities of Antioch, Apamea, and Emesa (Homs); while out in the wilderness the great Semitic merchant city of Palmyra was gaining wealth and greatness as the neutral trading-ground between Parthia and Rome. Between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon we find, at the height of its glory, Heliopolis (Baalbek), the battered fragments of which even now command our admiration.... Bending in towards Galilee we find the wondrous cities of Gerasa and Philadelphia (Amman) connected by solid roads of masonry and furnished with gigantic aqueducts.... Syria is still so rich in ruins and remains of the period that it is not difficult to picture to oneself the nature of its civilization. The arts of Greece, imported long before, had been developed into magnificence that bordered on vulgarity. The richness of ornamentation, the lavish expense, the flaunting wealth, all tell that the tastes of the voluptuous and artistic Semites were then as now. I have stood in the colonnades of Palmyra and I have dined in the Hotel Cecil, and, save that the latter is built of iron, daubed with sham wood, sham stucco, sham gold, sham velvet, and sham stone, the effect is identical. In Syria there were slaves in sufficient quantity to make real buildings, but the artistic spirit is as debased as anything made by machinery. Over against the cities the village folk must have dwelt pretty much as they do now, in houses of mud and dry stone wall;{v1-622} while out in the distant pastures the Bedouin tended their flocks in freedom under the rule of the Nabatean kings of their own race, or performed the office of guardians and agents of the great trading caravans.

“Beyond the herdsmen lay the parching deserts, which acted as the impenetrable barrier and defence of the Parthian Empire behind the Euphrates, where stood the great cities of Ctesiphon, Seleucia, Hatra, Nisibin, Harran, and hundreds more whose very names are forgotten. These great townships subsisted on the enormous cereal wealth of Mesopotamia, watered as it then was by canals, whose makers’ names were even then already lost in the mists of antiquity. Babylon and Nineveh had passed away; the successors of Persia and Macedon had given place to Parthia; but the people and the cultivation were the same as when Cyrus the Conqueror had first subdued the land. The language of many{v1-623} of the towns was Greek, and the cultured citizens of Seleucia might criticize the philosophies and tragedies of Athens; but the millions of the agricultural population knew possibly no more of these things than does many an Essex peasant of to-day know of what passes in the metropolis.”

Compare with this the state of affairs at the end of the seventh century.

“Syria was now an impoverished and stricken land, and her great cities, though still populated, must have been encumbered with ruins which the public funds were not sufficient to remove. Damascus and Jerusalem themselves had not recovered from the effects of long and terrible sieges; Amman and Gerash had declined into wretched villages under the sway and lordship of the Bedouin. The Hauran, perhaps, still showed signs of the prosperity for which it had been noted in the days of Trajan; but the wretched buildings and rude inscriptions of this date all point to a sad and depressing decline. Out in the desert, Palmyra stood empty and desolate save for a garrison in the castle. On the coasts and in the Lebanon a shadow of the former business and wealth was still to be seen; but in the north, ruin, desolation, and abandonment must have been the common state of the country, which had been raided with unfailing regularity for one hundred years and had been held by an enemy

for fifteen. Agriculture must have declined, and the population notably decreased through the plagues and distresses from which it had suffered.

“Cappadocia had insensibly sunk into barbarism; and the great basilicas and cities, which the rude countrymen could neither repair nor restore, had been levelled with the ground. The Anatolian peninsula had been ploughed and harrowed by the Persian armies; the great cities had been plundered and sacked.”

§ 4

It was while Heraclius was engaged in restoring order in this already desolated Syria after the death of Chosroes II and before the final peace with Persia, that a strange message was brought to him. The bearer had ridden over to the imperial outpost at Bostra in the wilderness south of Damascus. The letter was in Arabic, the obscure Semitic language of the nomadic peoples of{v1-624} the southern desert; and probably only an interpretation reached him—presumably with deprecatory notes by the interpreter.

It was an odd, florid challenge from someone who called himself “Muhammad the Prophet of God.” This Muhammad, it appeared, called upon Heraclius to acknowledge the one true God and to serve him. Nothing else was definite in the document.

There is no record of the reception of this missive, and presumably it went unanswered. The emperor probably shrugged his shoulders, and was faintly amused at the incident.

But at Ctesiphon they knew more about this Muhammad. He was said to be a tiresome false prophet, who had incited Yemen, the rich province of Southern Arabia, to rebel against the King of Kings. Kavadh was much occupied with affairs. He had deposed and murdered his father Chosroes II, and he was attempting to reorganize the Persian military forces. To him also came a message identical with that sent to Heraclius. The thing angered him. He tore up the letter, flung the fragments at the envoy, and bade him begone.

When this was told to the sender far away in the squalid little town of Medina, he was very angry. “Even so, O Lord!” he cried; “rend Thou his kingdom from him.” (A.D. 628.)

§ 5

But before we go on to tell of the rise of Islam in the world, it will be well to complete our survey of the condition of Asia in the dawn of the seventh century. And a word or so is due to religious developments in the Persian community during the Sassanid period.

From the days of Cyrus onward Zoroastrianism had prevailed over the ancient gods of Nineveh and Babylon. Zoroaster (the Greek spelling of the Iranian, “Zarathustra”), like Buddha, was an Aryan. We know nothing of the age in which he lived; some authorities make him as early as 1000 B.C., others make him contemporary with Buddha or Confucius; and as little do we know of his place of birth or his exact nationality. His teachings are preserved to us in the Zend Avesta, but here, since they no longer play any great part in the world’s affairs, we cannot deal with them{v1-625} in any detail. The opposition of a good god, Ormuzd, the god of light, truth, frankness, and the sun, and a bad god, Ahriman, god of secrecy, cunning, diplomacy, darkness, and night, formed a very central part of his religion. As we find it in history, it is already surrounded by a ceremonial and sacerdotal system; it has no images, but it has priests, temples, and altars, on which burn a sacred fire and at which sacrificial ceremonies are performed. Among other distinctive features is its prohibition of either the burning or the burial of the dead. The Parsees of India, the last surviving Zoroastrians, still lay their dead out within certain open towers, the Towers of Silence, to which the vultures come.

Under the Sassanid kings from Ardashir onward (227), this religion was the official religion; its head was the second person in the state next to the king, and the king in quite the ancient fashion was supposed to be divine or semi-divine and upon terms of peculiar intimacy with Ormuzd.

But the religious fermentation of the world did not leave the supremacy of Zoroastrianism undisputed in the Persian Empire. Not only was there a great eastward diffusion of Christianity, to which we have already given notice, but new sects arose in Persia, incorporating the novel ideas of the time. One early variant or branch of Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, we have already named.[308] It had spread into Europe by the first century B.C., after the eastern campaigns of Pompey the Great. It became enormously popular with the soldiers and common people, and, until the time of Constantine the Great, continued to be a serious rival to Christianity. Indeed, one of his successors, the Emperor Julian (361-363), known in Christian history as “Julian the Apostate,” made a belated attempt to substitute it for the accepted faith.[309] Mithras was a god of light, “proceeding” from Ormuzd and miraculously born, in much the same way that the third person in the Christian Trinity proceeds from the first. Of this branch of the Zoroastrian stem we need say no more. In the third{v1-626} century A.D., however, another religion, Manichæism, arose, which deserves some notice now.

Mani, the founder of Manichæism, was born the son of a good family of Ecbatana, the old Median capital (A.D. 216). He was educated at Ctesiphon. His father was some sort of religious sectary, and he was brought up in an atmosphere of religious

discussion. There came to him that persuasion that he at last had the complete light, which is the moving power of all religious initiators. He was impelled to proclaim his doctrine. In A.D. 242, at the accession of Sapor I, the second Sassanid monarch, he began his teaching.

It is characteristic of the way in which men's minds were moving in those days that his teaching included a sort of theocrasia. He was not, he declared, proclaiming anything new. The great religious founders before him had all been right: Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus Christ—all had been true prophets, but to him it was appointed to clarify and crown their imperfect and confused teaching. This he did in Zoroastrian language. He explains the perplexities and contradictions of life as a conflict of light and darkness, Ormuzd was God and Ahriman Satan. But how man was created, how he fell from light into darkness, how he is being disentangled and redeemed from the darkness, and of the part played by Jesus in this strange mixture of religions we cannot explain here even if we would. Our interest with the system is historical and not theological.

But of the utmost historical interest is the fact that Mani not only went about Iran preaching these new and to him these finally satisfying ideas of his, but into Turkestan, into India, and over the passes into China. This freedom of travel is to be noted. It is interesting also because it brings before us the fact that Turkestan was no longer a country of dangerous nomads, but a country in which cities were flourishing and men had the education and leisure for theological argument. The ideas of Mani spread eastward and westward with great rapidity, and they were a most fruitful rootstock of heresies throughout the entire Christian world for nearly a thousand years.

Somewhen about A.D. 270 Mani came back to Ctesiphon and made many converts. This brought him into conflict with the{v1-627} official religion and the priesthood. In 277 the reigning monarch had him crucified and his body, for some unknown reason, flayed, and there began a fierce persecution of his adherents. Nevertheless, Manichæism held its own in Persia with Nestorian Christianity and orthodox Zoroastrianism (Mazdaism) for some centuries.

§ 6

It becomes fairly evident that in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. not merely Persia, but the regions that are now Turkestan and Afghanistan were far more advanced in civilization than were the French and English of that time. The obscurity of the history of these regions has been lifted in the last two decades, and a very considerable literature written in languages of the Turkish group has been discovered. These extant

manuscripts date from the seventh century onward. The alphabet is an adaptation of the Syrian, introduced by Manichæan missionaries, and many of the MSS. discovered—parchments have been found in windows in the place of glass—are as beautifully written as any Benedictine production. Mixed up with a very extensive Manichæan literature are translations of the Christian scriptures and Buddhistic writings. Much of this early Turkish material still awaits examination.

Everything points to the conclusion that those centuries, which were centuries of disaster and retrogression in Europe, were comparatively an age of progress in Middle Asia eastward into China.

A steady westward drift to the north of the Caspian of Hunnish peoples, who were now called Tartars and Turks, was still going on in the sixth century, but it must be thought of as an overflow rather than as a migration of whole peoples. The world from the Danube to the Chinese frontiers was still largely a nomadic world, with towns and cities growing up upon the chief trade routes. We need not tell in any detail here of the constant clash of the Turkish peoples of Western Turkestan with the Persians to the south of them, the age-long bickering of Turanian and Iranian. We hear nothing of any great northward marches of the Persians, but there were great and memorable raids to the south both by the Turanians to the east and the Alans to the west of the Caspian before the big series of movements of the third and fourth century{v1-628} westward that carried the Alans and Huns into the heart of Europe. There was a nomadic drift to the east of Persia and southward through Afghanistan towards India, as well as this drift to the north-west. These streams of nomads flowed by Persia on either side. We have already mentioned the Yueh-Chi (chap. xxix., § 4), who finally descended into India as the Indo-Scythians in the second century. A backward, still nomadic section of these Yueh-Chi remained in Central Asia, and became numerous upon the steppes of Turkestan, as the Ephthalites or White Huns. After being a nuisance and a danger to the Persians for three centuries, they finally began raiding into India in the footsteps of their kinsmen about the year 470, about a quarter of a century after the death of Attila. They did not migrate into India; they went to and fro, looting in India and returning with their loot to their own country, just as later the Huns established themselves in the great plain of the Danube and raided all Europe.

The history of India during these seven centuries we are now reviewing is punctuated by these two invasions of the Yueh-Chi, the Indo-Scythians who, as we have said, wiped out the last traces of Hellenic rule, and the Ephthalites. Before the former of these, the Indo-Scythians, a wave of uprooted populations, the Sakas, had been pushed; so that altogether India experienced three waves of barbaric invasion, about A.D. 100, about A.D. 120, and about A.D. 470. But only the second of these

invasions was a permanent conquest and settlement. The Indo-Scythians made their headquarters on the Northwest Frontier and set up a dynasty, the Kushan dynasty, which ruled most of North India as far east as Benares.

The chief among these Kushan monarchs was Kanishka (date unknown), who added to North India Kashgar, Yarkand, and Khotan. Like Asoka, he was a great and vigorous promoter of Buddhism, and these conquests, this great empire of the Northwest Frontier, must have brought India into close and frequent relations with China and Tibet.

We will not trouble to record here the divisions and coalescences of power in India, nor the dynasties that followed the Kushans, because these things signify very little to us from our present point of view. Sometimes all India was a patchwork quilt of{v1-629} states; sometimes such empires as that of the Guptas prevailed over great areas. These things made little difference in the ideas, the religion, and the ordinary way of life of the Indian peoples. Brahminism held its own against Buddhism, and the two religions prospered side by side. The mass of the population was living then very much as it lives to-day; dressing, cultivating, and building its houses in much the same fashion.

J.F.H
An Ephthalite Coin....

The irruption of the Ephthalites is memorable not so much because of its permanent effects as because of the atrocities perpetrated by the invaders. These Ephthalites very closely resembled the Huns of Attila in their barbarism; they merely raided, they produced no such dynasty as the Kushan monarchy; and their chiefs retained their headquarters in Western Turkestan. Mihiragula, their most capable leader, has been called the Attila of India. One of his favourite amusements, we are told, was the expensive one of rolling elephants down precipitous places in order to watch their sufferings. His abominations roused his Indian tributary princes to revolt, and he was overthrown (528). But the final ending of the Ephthalite raids into India was effected not by Indians, but by the destruction of the central establishment of the Ephthalites on the Oxus (565) by the growing power of the Turks, working in alliance with the

Persians. After this break-up, the Ephthalites dissolved very rapidly and completely into the surrounding populations, much as the European Huns did after the death of Attila a hundred years earlier. Nomads without central grazing lands must disperse; nothing else is possible. Some of the chief Rajput clans of to-day in Rajputana in North India are descended, it is said, from these White Huns.[310]

{v1-630}

§ 7[311]

These seven centuries which saw the beginning and the end of the emperors in Rome and the complete breakdown and recasting of the social, economic, political, and religious life of Western Europe, saw also very profound changes in the Chinese world. It is too commonly assumed by both Chinese, Japanese, and European historians, that the Han dynasty, under which we find China at the beginning of this period, and the Tang dynasty, with which it closed, were analogous ascendancies controlling a practically similar empire, and that the four centuries of division that elapsed between the end of the Han dynasty (220) and the beginning of the Tang period (619) were centuries of disturbance rather than essential change. The divisions of China are supposed to be merely political and territorial; and, deceived by the fact that at the close as at the commencement of these four centuries, China occupied much the same wide extent of Asia, and was still recognizably China, still with a common culture, a common script, and a common body of ideas, they ignore the very fundamental breaking down and reconstruction that went on, and the many parallelisms to the European experience that China displayed.

It is true that the social collapse was never so complete in the Chinese as in the European world. There remained throughout the whole period considerable areas in which the elaboration of the arts of life could go on. There was no such complete deterioration in cleanliness, decoration, artistic and literary production as we have to record in the West, and no such abandonment of any search for grace and pleasure. We note, for instance, that “tea” appeared in the world, and its use spread throughout China. China began{v1-631} to drink tea in the sixth century A.D. And there were Chinese poets to write delightfully about the effects of the first cup and the second cup and the third cup, and so on. China continued to produce beautiful paintings long after the fall of the Han rule. In the second, third, and fourth centuries some of the most lovely landscapes were painted that have ever been done by men. A considerable production of beautiful vases and carvings also continued. Fine building and decoration went on. Printing from wood blocks began about the same time as tea-drinking, and with the seventh century came a remarkable revival of poetry.

Certain differences between the great empires of the East and West were all in favour of the stability of the former. China had no general coinage. The cash and credit system of the Western world, at once efficient and dangerous, had not strained her economic life. Not that the monetary idea was unknown. For small transactions the various provinces were using perforated zinc and brass "cash," but for larger there was nothing but stamped ingots of silver. This great empire was still carrying on most of its business on a basis of barter like that which prevailed in Babylon in the days of the Aramean merchants. And so it continued to do to the dawn of the twentieth century.

We have seen how under the Roman republic economic and social order was destroyed by the too great fluidity of property that money brought about. Money became abstract, and lost touch with the real values it was supposed to represent. Individuals and communities got preposterously into debt, and the world was saddled by a class of rich men who were creditors, men who did not handle and administer any real wealth, but who had the power to call up money. No such development of "finance" occurred in China. Wealth in China remained real and visible. And China had no need for any Licinian law, nor for a Tiberius Gracchus. The idea of property in China did not extend far beyond tangible things. There was no "labour" slavery, no gang servitude.[312] The occupier and user of the land was in most instances practically the owner of it, subject to a land tax. There was a certain amount of small scale landlordism, but no great{v1-632} estates. Landless men worked for wages paid mostly in kind—as they were in ancient Babylon.

These things made for stability and the geographical form of China for unity; nevertheless, the vigour of the Han dynasty declined, and when at last at the close of the second century A.D. the world catastrophe of the great pestilence struck the system, the same pestilence that inaugurated a century of confusion in the Roman empire, the dynasty fell like a rotten tree before a gale. And the same tendency to break up into a number of warring states, and the same eruption of barbaric rulers, was displayed in East and West alike. In China, as in the Western empire, faith had decayed. Mr. Fu ascribes much of the political nervelessness of China in this period to Epicureanism, arising, he thinks, out of the sceptical individualism of Lao Tse. This phase of division is known as the "Three Kingdom Period." The fourth century saw a dynasty of more or less civilized Huns established as rulers in the province of Shen-si. This Hunnish kingdom included not merely the north of China, but great areas of Siberia; its dynasty absorbed the Chinese civilization, and its influence carried Chinese trade and knowledge to the Arctic circle. Mr. Fu compares this Siberian monarchy to the empire of Charlemagne in Europe; it was the barbarian becoming "Chinized" as Charlemagne was a barbarian becoming Romanized. Out of a fusion of

these Siberian with native north Chinese elements arose the Suy dynasty, which conquered the south. This Suy dynasty marks the beginning of a renascence of China. Under a Suy monarch the Lu-chu isles were annexed to China, and there was a phase of great literary activity. The number of volumes at this time in the imperial library was increased, we are told, to 54,000. The dawn of the seventh century saw the beginning of the great Tang dynasty, which was to endure for three centuries.

The renascence of China that began with Suy and culminated in Tang was, Mr. Fu insists, a real new birth. “The spirit,” he writes, “was a new one; it marked the Tang civilization with entirely distinctive features. Four main factors had been brought together and fused: (1) Chinese liberal culture; (2) Chinese classicism; (3) Indian Buddhism; and (4) Northern bravery. A new China had come into being. The provincial system, the{v1-633} central administration and the military organization of the Tang dynasty, were quite different from those of their predecessors. The arts had been much influenced and revivified by Indian and Central Asiatic influences. The literature was no mere continuation of the old; it was a new production. The religious and philosophical schools of Buddhism were fresh features. It was a period of substantial change.

“It may be interesting to compare this making of China with the fate of the Roman Empire in her later days. As the Roman world was divided into the eastern and western halves, so was the Chinese world into the southern and the northern. The barbarians in the case of Rome and in the case of China made similar invasions. They established dominions of a similar sort. Charlemagne’s empire corresponded to that of the Siberian dynasty (Later Wei), the temporary recovery of the Western empire by Justinian corresponded to the temporary recovery of the north by Liu Yu. The Byzantine line corresponded to the southern dynasties. But from this point the two worlds diverged. China recovered her unity; Europe has still to do so.{v1-634}”

The dominions of the emperor Tai-tsung (627), the second Tang monarch, extended southward into Annam and westward to the Caspian Sea. His southern frontier in that direction marched with that of Persia. His northern ran along the Altai from the Kirghis steppe, north of the desert of Gobi. But it did not include Korea, which was conquered and made tributary by his son. This Tang dynasty civilized and incorporated into the Chinese race the whole of the southward population, and just as the Chinese of the north call themselves the "men of Han," so the Chinese of the south call themselves the "men of Tang." The law was codified, the literary examination system was revised, and a complete and accurate edition of all the Chinese classics was produced. To the court of Tai-tsung came an embassy from Byzantium, and, what is more significant, from Persia came a company of Nestorian missionaries (631). These latter Tai-tsung received with great respect; he heard them state the chief articles of their creed, and ordered the Christian scriptures to be translated into Chinese for his further examination. In 638 he announced that he found the new religion entirely satisfactory, and that it might be preached within the empire. He also allowed the building of a church and the foundation of a monastery.

A still more remarkable embassy also came to the court of Tai-tsung in the year 628, three years earlier than the Nestorians. This was a party of Arabs, who came by sea to Canton in a trading vessel from Yanbu, the port of Medina in Arabia. (Incidentally it is interesting to know that there were such vessels engaged in an east and west trade at this time.) These Arabs had been sent by that Muhammad we have already mentioned, who styled himself "The Prophet of God," and the message they brought to Tai-tsung was probably identical with the summons which was sent in the same year to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and to Kavadh in Ctesiphon. But the Chinese monarch neither neglected the message as Heraclius did, nor insulted the envoys after the fashion of the parricide Kavadh. He received them well, expressed great interest in their theological views, and assisted them, it is said, to build a mosque for the Arab traders in Canton—a mosque which survives to this day. It is one of the oldest mosques in the world.{v1-635}

§ 8

The urbanity, the culture, and the power of China under the early Tang rulers are in so vivid a contrast with the decay, disorder, and divisions of the Western world, as at once to raise some of the most interesting questions in the history of civilization. Why did not China keep this great lead she had won by her rapid return to unity and order? Why does she not to this day dominate the world culturally and politically?

For a long time she certainly did keep ahead. It is only a thousand years later, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the discovery of America, the spread of printed books and education in the West, and the dawn of modern scientific discovery, that we can say with confidence that the Western world began to pull ahead of China. Under the Tang rule, her greatest period, and then again under the artistic but rather decadent Sung dynasty (960-1279), and again during the period of the cultured Mings (1358-1644), China presented a spectacle of prosperity, happiness, and artistic activity far in front of any contemporary state. And seeing that she achieved so much, why did she not achieve more? Chinese shipping was upon the seas, and there was a considerable overseas trade during that time.[313] Why did the Chinese never discover America or Australia? There was much isolated observation, ingenuity, and invention. The Chinese knew of gunpowder in the sixth century,[314] they used coal and gas heating centuries before these things were used in Europe; their bridge-building, their hydraulic engineering was admirable; the knowledge of materials shown in their enamel and lacquer ware is very great. Why did they never organize the system of record{v1-636} and co-operation in inquiry that has given the world modern science? And why, in spite of their general training in good manners and self-restraint, did intellectual education never soak down into the general mass of the population? Why are the masses of China to-day, and why have they always been, in spite of an exceptionally high level of natural intelligence, illiterate?

It is customary to meet such questions with rather platitudinous answers. We are told that the Chinaman is the most conservative of human beings, that, in contrast with the European races, his mind is twisted round towards the past, that he is the willing slave of etiquette and precedent to a degree inconceivable to Western minds. He is represented as having a mentality so distinct that one might almost expect to find a difference in brain structure to explain it. The appeals of Confucius to the wisdom of the ancients are always quoted to clinch this suggestion.

If, however, we examine this generalization more closely, it dissolves into thin air. The superior intellectual initiative, the liberal enterprise, the experimental disposition that is supposed to characterize the Western mind, is manifest in the history of that mind only during certain phases and under exceptional circumstances. For the rest, the Western world displays itself as traditional and conservative as China. And, on the other hand, the Chinese mind has, under conditions of stimulus, shown itself quite as inventive and versatile as the European, and the very kindred Japanese mind even more so. For, take the case of the Greeks, the whole swing of their mental vigour falls into the period between the sixth century B.C. and the decay of the Alexandrian

Museum under the later Ptolemies in the second century B.C. There were Greeks before that time and Greeks since, but a history of a thousand years of the Byzantine empire showed the Hellenic world at least as intellectually stagnant as China. Then we have already drawn attention to the comparative sterility of the Italian mind during the Roman period and its abundant fertility since the Renaissance of learning. The English mind again had a phase of brightness in the seventh and eighth centuries, and it did not shine again until the fifteenth. Again, the mind of the Arabs, as we shall presently tell, blazed out like a star for half a dozen generations after the appearance of Islam, having never achieved anything{v1-637} of importance before or since. On the other hand, there was always a great deal of scattered inventiveness in China, and the progress of Chinese art witnesses to new movements and vigorous innovations. We exaggerate the reverence of the Chinese for their fathers; parricide was a far commoner crime among the Chinese emperors than it was even among the rulers of Persia. Moreover, there have been several liberalizing movements in China, several recorded struggles against the "ancient ways."

It has already been suggested that phases of real intellectual progress in any community seem to be connected with the existence of a detached class of men, sufficiently free not to be obliged to toil or worry exhaustively about mundane needs, and not rich and powerful enough to be tempted into extravagances of lust, display, or cruelty. They must have a sense of security, but not a conceit of superiority. This class, we have further insinuated, must be able to talk freely and communicate easily. It must not be watched for heresy or persecuted for any ideas it may express. Such a happy state of affairs certainly prevailed in Greece during its best days. A class of intelligent, free gentlefolk is indeed evident in history whenever there is a record of bold philosophy or effective scientific advances.

In the days of Tang and Sung and Ming there must have been an abundance of pleasantly circumstanced people in China of just the class that supplied most of the young men of the Academy at Athens, or the bright intelligences of Renaissance Italy, or the members of the London Royal Society, that mother society of modern science; and yet China did not produce in these periods of opportunity any such large beginnings of recorded and analyzed fact.

If we reject the idea that there is some profound racial difference between China and the West which makes the Chinese by nature conservative and the West by nature progressive, then we are forced to look for the operating cause of this difference in progressiveness in some other direction. Many people are disposed to find that operating cause which has, in spite of her original advantages, retarded China so greatly during the last four or five centuries, in the imprisonment of the Chinese mind

in a script and in an idiom of thought so elaborate and so difficult that the{v1-638} mental energy of the country has been largely consumed in acquiring it. This view deserves examination.

We have already given an account in chap. xviii. of the peculiarities of Chinese writing and of the Chinese language. The Japanese writing is derived from the Chinese, and consists of a more rapidly written system of forms. A great number of these forms are ideograms taken over from the Chinese and used exactly as the Chinese ideograms are used, but also a number of signs are used to express syllables; there is a Japanese syllabary after the fashion of the Sumerian syllabary we have described in chap. xviii. The Japanese writing remains a clumsy system, as clumsy as cuneiform, though not so clumsy as Chinese; and there has been a movement in Japan to adopt a Western alphabet. Korea long ago went a step farther and developed a true alphabet from the same Chinese origins. With these exceptions all the great writing systems now in use in the world are based on the Mediterranean alphabets, and are beyond comparison more easily learnt and mastered than the Chinese. This means that while other peoples learn merely a comparatively simple and straightforward method of setting down the language with which they are familiar, the Chinaman has to master a great multitude of complex word signs and word groups. He must not simply learn the signs, but the established grouping of those signs to represent various meanings. He must familiarize himself, therefore, with a number of exemplary classical works. Consequently in China, while you will find great numbers of people who know the significance of certain frequent and familiar characters, you discover only a few whose knowledge is sufficiently extensive to grasp the meaning of a newspaper paragraph, and still fewer who can read any subtlety of intention or fine shades of meaning. In a lesser degree this is true also of Japan. No doubt European readers, especially of such word-rich languages as English or Russian, vary greatly among themselves in regard to the extent of books they can understand and how far they understand them; their power varies according to their vocabularies; but the corresponding levels of understanding among the Chinese represent a far greater expenditure of time and labour upon their attainment. A mandarin's education in China is, mainly, learning to read.{v1-639}

And it may be that the consequent preoccupation of the educated class during its most susceptible years upon the Chinese classics gave it a bias in favour of this traditional learning upon which it had spent so much time and energy. Few men who have toiled to build up any system of knowledge in their minds will willingly scrap it in favour of something strange and new; this disposition is as characteristic of the West as of the East; it is shown as markedly by the scholars of the British and American

universities as by any Chinese mandarins, and the British at the present time, in spite of the great and manifest advantages in popular education and national propaganda the change would give them, refuse to make any move from their present barbaric orthography towards a phonetic alphabet and spelling. The peculiarities of the Chinese script, and the educational system arising out of that script, must have acted age after age as an invincible filter that favoured the plastic and scholarly mind as against the restive and originating type, and kept the latter out of positions of influence and authority. There is much that is plausible in this explanation.

There have been several attempts to simplify the Chinese writing and to adopt an alphabetical system. In the early days of Buddhism in China, when there was a considerable amount of translation from Sanskrit, Indian influences came near to achieving this end; two Chinese alphabets were indeed invented, and each had some little use. But what hindered the general adoption of these, and what stands in the way of any phonetic system of Chinese writing to-day, is this, that while the literary script and phraseology is the same from one end of China to the other, the spoken language of the common people, both in pronunciation and in its familiar idioms, varies so widely that men from one province may be incomprehensible to men from another. There is, however, a "standard Chinese," a rather bookish spoken idiom, which is generally understood by educated people; and it is upon the possibility of applying an alphabetical system of writing to this standard Chinese that the hopes of modern educational reformers in China are based at the present time. For fresh attempts are now being made to release the Chinese mind from this ancient entanglement.{v1-640}

A Chinese alphabet has been formed; it is taught in the common schools, and newspapers and pamphlets are issued in it. And the rigid examination system that killed all intellectual initiatives has been destroyed.

The very success and early prosperity and general contentment of China in the past must have worked to justify in that land all the natural self-complacency and conservatism of mankind. No animal will change when its conditions are "good enough" for present survival. And in this matter man is still an animal. Until the nineteenth century, for more than two thousand years, there was little in the history of China that could cause any serious doubts in the mind of a Chinaman of the general superiority of his own civilization to that of the rest of the world, and there was no reason apparent therefore for any alteration. China produced a profusion of beautiful art, some delightful poetry, astonishing cookery, and thousands of millions of glowingly pleasant lives generation after generation. Her ships followed her marvellous inland waterways, and put to sea but rarely, and then only to India or Borneo as their utmost adventure. (Until the sixteenth century we must remember

European seamen never sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean. The Norse discovery of America, the Phœnician circumnavigation of Africa, were exceptional feats.) And these things were attained without any such general boredom, servitude, indignity, and misery as underlay the rule of the rich in the Roman Empire. There was much poverty, much discontent, but it was not massed poverty, it was not a necessary popular discontent. For a thousand years the Chinese system, though it creaked and swayed at times, seemed proof against decay. Dynastic changes there were, rebellions, phases of disorder, famines, pestilences; two great invasions that set foreign dynasties upon the throne of the Son of Heaven, but no such shock as to revolutionize the order of the daily round. The emperors and dynasties might come and go; the mandarins, the examinations, the classics, and the traditions and habitual life remained. China's civilization had already reached its culmination in the seventh century A.D., its crowning period was the Tang period; and though it continued to spread slowly and steadily into Annam, into Cambodia, into Siam, into Tibet, into Nepal, Korea, Mongolia, and{v1-641} Manchuria, there is henceforth little more than such geographical progress to record of it in this history for a thousand years.[315]

{v1-642}

§ 9[316]

In the year 629, the year after the arrival of Muhammad's envoys at Canton and thirty odd years after the landing of Pope Gregory's missionaries in England, a certain learned and devout Buddhist named Yuan Chwang started out from Singan, Tai-tsung's capital, upon a great journey to India. He was away sixteen years, he returned in 645, and he wrote an account of his travels which is treasured as a Chinese classic. One or two points about his experiences are to be noted here because they contribute to our general review of the state of the world in the seventh century A.D.

Yuan Chwang was as eager for marvels and as credulous as Herodotus, and without the latter writer's fine sense of history; he could never pass a monument or ruin without learning some fabulous story about it; Chinese ideas of the dignity of literature perhaps prevented him from telling us much detail of how he travelled, who were his attendants, how he was lodged, or what he{v1-643} ate and how he paid his expenses—details precious to the historian; nevertheless, he gives us a series of illuminating flashes upon China, Central Asia, and India in the period now under consideration.

His journey was an enormous one. He went and came back by way of the Pamirs. He went by the northern route, crossing the desert of Gobi, passing along the southern slopes of the Thien Shan, skirting the great deep blue lake of Issik Kul, and so to Tashkend and Samarkand, and then more or less in the footsteps of Alexander the Great southward to the Khyber Pass and Peshawur. He returned by the southern route, crossing the Pamirs from Afghanistan to Kashgar, and so along the line of retreat the Yueh Chi had followed in the reverse direction seven centuries before, and by Yarkand, along the slopes of the Kuen Lun to rejoin his former route near the desert end of the Great Wall. Each route involved some hard mountaineering. His journeyings in India are untraceable; he was there fourteen years, and he went all over the peninsula from Nepal to Ceylon.

At that time there was an imperial edict forbidding foreign{v1-644} travel, so that Yuan Chwang started from Singan like an escaping criminal. There was a pursuit to prevent him carrying out his project. How he bought a lean red-coloured horse that knew the desert paths from a strange grey-beard, how he dodged a frontier guard-house with the help of a “foreign person” who made him a bridge of brushwood lower down the river, how he crossed the desert guided by the bones of men and cattle, how he saw a mirage, and how twice he narrowly escaped being shot by arrows when he was getting water near the watch-towers on the desert track, the reader will find in the *Life*. He lost his way in the desert of Gobi, and for four nights and five days he had no water; when he was in the mountains among the glaciers, twelve of his party were frozen to death. All this is in the *Life*; he tells little of it in his own account of his travels.

He shows us the Turks, this new development of the Hun tradition, in possession not only of what is now Turkestan, but all along the northern route. He mentions many cities and considerable cultivation. He is entertained by various rulers, allies of or

more or less nominally tributaries to China, and among others by the Khan of the Turks, a magnificent person in green satin, with his long hair tied with silk.

“The gold embroidery of this grand tent shone with a dazzling splendour; the ministers of the presence in attendance sat on mats in long rows on either side all dressed in magnificent brocade robes, while the rest of the retinue on duty stood behind. You saw that although it was a case of a frontier ruler, yet there was an air of distinction and elegance. The Khan came out from his tent about thirty paces to meet Yuan Chwang, who, after a courteous greeting, entered the tent.... After a short interval envoys from China and Kao-chang were admitted and presented their despatches and credentials, which the Khan perused. He was much elated, and caused the envoys to be seated; then he ordered wine and music for himself and them and grape-syrup for the pilgrim. Hereupon all pledged each other, and the filling and draining of the winecups made a din and bustle, while the mingled music of various instruments rose loud: although the airs were the popular strains of foreigners, yet they pleased the senses and exhilarated the mental faculties. After a little, piles of{v1-645} roasted beef and mutton were served for the others, and lawful food, such as cakes, milk, candy, honey, and grapes, for the pilgrim. After the entertainment, grape-syrup was again served, and the Khan invited Yuan Chwang to improve the occasion, whereupon the pilgrim expounded the doctrines of the ‘ten virtues,’ compassion for animal life, and the paramitas and emancipation. The Khan, raising his hands, bowed, and gladly believed and accepted the teaching.”

Yuan Chwang’s account of Samarkand[317] is of a large and prosperous city, “a great commercial entrepôt, the country about it very fertile, abounding in trees and flowers and yielding many fine horses. Its inhabitants were skilful craftsmen, smart and energetic.” At that time we must remember there was hardly such a thing as a town in Anglo-Saxon England.

As his narrative approached his experiences in India, however, the pious and learned pilgrim in Yuan Chwang got the better of the traveller, and the book becomes congested with monstrous stories of incredible miracles.[318] Nevertheless, we get an impression of houses, clothing, and the like, closely resembling those of the India of to-day. Then, as now, the kaleidoscopic variety of an Indian crowd contrasted with the blue uniformity of the multitude in China. In the time of Buddha it is doubtful if there were reading and writing in India; now reading and writing were quite common accomplishments. Yuan Chwang gives an interesting account of a great Buddhist university at Nalanda, where ruins have quite recently been discovered and excavated. Nalanda and Taxilla seem to have been considerable educational centres as early as the opening of the schools of Athens. The caste system Yuan Chwang

found fully established in spite of Buddha, and the Brahmins were now altogether in the ascendant. He names the four main castes we have mentioned in chap. xx., § 4 (*q.v.*), but his account of their functions is rather different. The Sudras, he says, were the tillers of the soil. Indian writers say that their function was to wait upon the three "twice born" castes above them.{v1-646}

But, as we have already intimated, Yuan Chwang's account of Indian realities is swamped by his accumulation of legends and pious inventions. For these he had come, and in these he rejoiced. The rest, as we shall see, was a task that had been set him. The faith of Buddha which in the days of Asoka, and even so late as Kanishka, was still pure enough to be a noble inspiration, we now discover absolutely lost in a wilderness of preposterous rubbish, a philosophy of endless Buddhas, tales of manifestations and marvels like a Christmas pantomime, immaculate conceptions by six-tusked elephants, charitable princes giving themselves up to be eaten by starving tigresses, temples built over a sacred nail-paring, and the like. We cannot give such stories here; if the reader likes that sort of thing, he must go to the publications of the Royal Asiatic Society or the India Society, where he will find a delirium of such imaginations. And in competition with this Buddhism, intellectually undermined as it now was and smothered in gilded decoration, Brahminism was everywhere gaining ground again, as Yuan Chwang notes with regret.

Side by side with these evidences of a vast intellectual decay in India we may note the repeated appearance in Yuan Chwang's narrative of ruined and deserted cities. Much of the country was still suffering from the ravages of the Ephthalites and the consequent disorders. Again and again we find such passages as this: "he went north-east through a great forest, the road being a narrow, dangerous path, with wild buffalo and wild elephants, and robbers and hunters always in wait to kill travellers, and emerging from the forest he reached the country of Kou-shih-na-ka-lo (Kúsinagara). The city walls were in ruins, and the towns and villages were deserted. The brick foundations of the 'old city' (that is, the city which had been the capital) were above ten *li* in circuit; there were very few inhabitants, the interior of the city being a wild waste." This ruin was, however, by no means universal; there is at least as much mention of crowded cities and villages and busy cultivations.

The *Life* tells of many hardships upon the return journey: he fell among robbers; the great elephant that was carrying the bulk of his possessions was drowned; he had much difficulty in getting fresh transport. Here we cannot deal with these adventures.{v1-647}

The return of Yuan Chwang to Singan, the Chinese capital, was, we gather, a triumph. Advance couriers must have told of his coming. There was a public holiday; the streets were decorated by gay banners and made glad with music. He was escorted into the city with great pomp and ceremony. Twenty horses were needed to carry the spoils of his travels; he had brought with him hundreds of Buddhist books written in Sanskrit, and made of trimmed leaves of palm and birch bark strung together in layers; he had many images great and small of Buddha, in gold, silver, crystal, and sandalwood; he had holy pictures, and no fewer than one hundred and fifty well authenticated true relics of Buddha. Yuan Chwang was presented to the emperor, who treated him as a personal friend, took him into the palace, and questioned him day by day about the wonders of these strange lands in which he had stayed so long. But while the emperor asked about India, the pilgrim was disposed only to talk about Buddhism.

Buddhist writers thought very highly of Tai-tsung because of his reception of Yuan Chwang (645). But so did the Moslem historians, because of that mosque at Canton, and so did the Christian writers, because of the Nestorian envoys (631).

The subsequent history of Yuan Chwang contains two incidents that throw light upon the mental workings of this great monarch, Tai-tsung, who was probably quite as much a Moslem as he was a Christian or a Buddhist. The trouble about all religious specialists is that they know too much about their own religion and how it differs from others; the advantage, or disadvantage, of such creative statesmen as Tai-tsung and Constantine the Great is that they know comparatively little of such matters. Evidently the fundamental good of all these religions seemed to Tai-tsung to be much the same fundamental good. So it was natural to him to propose that Yuan Chwang should now give up the religious life and come into his foreign office, a proposal that Yuan Chwang would not entertain for a moment. The emperor then insisted at least upon a written account of the travels, and so got this classic we treasure. And finally Tai-tsung proposed to this highly saturated Buddhist that he should now use his knowledge of Sanskrit in translating the works of the great Chinese teacher, Lao Tse, so as to make them{v1-648} available for Indian readers. It seemed, no doubt, to the emperor a fair return and a useful service to the fundamental good that lies beneath all religions. On the whole, he thought Lao Tse might very well rank with or even a little above Buddha, and therefore that if his work was put before the Brahmins, they would receive it gladly. In much the same spirit Constantine the Great had done his utmost to make Arius and Athanasius settle down amicably together. But naturally enough this suggestion was repulsed by Yuan Chwang. He retired to a monastery and spent the

rest of his years translating as much as he could of the Buddhist literature he had brought with him into elegant Chinese writing.{v1-981}

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§ 1

WE have already described how in A.D. 628 the courts of Heraclius, of Kavadh, and of Tai-tsung were visited by Arab envoys sent from a certain Muhammad, "The Prophet of God," at the small trading town of Medina in Arabia. We must tell now who this prophet was who had arisen among the nomads and traders of the Arabian desert.

From time immemorial Arabia, except for the fertile strip of the Yemen to the south, had been a land of nomads, the headquarters and land of origin of the Semitic peoples. From Arabia at various times waves of these nomads had drifted north, east, and west into the early civilizations of Egypt, the Mediterranean coast, and Mesopotamia. We have noted in this history how the Sumerians were swamped and overcome by such Semitic waves, how the Semitic Phœnicians and Canaanites established themselves along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, how the Babylonians and Assyrians were settled Semitic peoples, how the Hyksos conquered Egypt, how the Arameans established themselves in Syria with Damascus as their capital, and how the Hebrews partially conquered their "Promised Land." At some unknown date the Chaldeans drifted in from Eastern Arabia and settled in the old{v2-002} southern Sumerian lands. With each invasion first this and then that section of the Semitic peoples comes into history. But each of such swarmings still leaves a tribal nucleus behind to supply fresh invasions in the future.

The history of the more highly organized empires of the horse and iron period, the empires of roads and writing, shows Arabia thrust like a wedge between Egypt, Palestine, and the Euphrates-Tigris country, and still a reservoir of nomadic tribes who raid and trade and exact tribute for the immunity and protection of caravans. There are temporary and flimsy subjugations. Egypt, Persia, Macedonia, Rome, Syria, Constantinople, and again Persia claim some unreal suzerainty in turn over Arabia, profess some unsubstantial protection. Under Trajan there was a Roman province of “Arabia,” which included the then fertile region of the Hauran and extended as far as Petra. Now and then some Arab chief and{v2-003} his trading city rises to temporary splendour. Such was that Odenathus of Palmyra, whose brief career we have noted in chap. xxxi, § 2, and another such transitory desert city whose ruins still astonish the traveller was Baalbek.

After the destruction of Palmyra, the desert Arabs began to be spoken of in the Roman and Persian records as Saracens.

In the time of Chosroes II., Persia claimed a certain ascendancy over Arabia, and maintained officials and tax collectors in the Yemen. Before that time the Yemen had been under the rule of the Abyssinian Christians for some years, and before that for seven centuries it had had native princes professing, be it noted, the Jewish faith.

Until the opening of the seventh century A.D. there were no signs of any unwonted or dangerous energy in the Arabian deserts. The life of the country was going on as it had gone on for long generations. Wherever there were fertile patches, wherever, that is, there was a spring or a well, a scanty agricultural population subsisted, living in walled towns because of the Bedouin who wandered with their sheep, cattle, and horses over the desert. Upon the main caravan routes the chief towns rose to a certain second-

rate prosperity, and foremost among them were Medina and Mecca.[320] In the beginning of the seventh century Medina was a town of about 15,000 inhabitants all told; Mecca may have had twenty or twenty-five thousand. Medina was a comparatively well-watered town, and possessed abundant date groves; its inhabitants were Yemenites, from the fertile land to the south. Mecca was a town of a different character, built about a spring of water with a bitter taste, and inhabited by recently settled Bedouin.

Mecca was not merely nor primarily a trading centre; it was a place of pilgrimage. Among the Arab tribes there had long existed a sort of Amphictyony (see chap. xxii, § 1) centring upon Mecca and certain other sanctuaries; there were months of truce to war and blood feuds, and customs of protection and hospitality for the pilgrim. In addition there had grown up an Olympic element in these gatherings; the Arabs were discovering possibilities of beauty in their language, and there were recitations of war poetry and love songs. The sheiks of the tribes, under a{v2-004} "king of the poets," sat in judgment and awarded prizes; the prize songs were sung through all Arabia.

The Kaaba, the sanctuary at Mecca, was of very ancient date. It was a small square temple of black stones, which had for its corner-stone a meteorite. This meteorite was regarded as a god, and all the little tribal gods of Arabia were under his protection. The permanent inhabitants of Mecca were a tribe of Bedouin who had seized this temple and constituted themselves its guardians. To them there came in the months of truce a great incourse of people, who marched about the Kaaba ceremonially, bowed themselves, and kissed the stone, and also engaged in trade and poetical recitations. The Meccans profited much from these visitors.

All of this is very reminiscent of the religious and political state of affairs in Greece fourteen centuries earlier. But the paganism of these more primitive Arabs was already being assailed from several directions. There had been a great proselytizing of Arabs during the period of the Maccabeans and Herods in Judea; and, as we have already noted, the Yemen had been in succession under the rule of Jews (Arab proselytes to Judaism, *i.e.*), Christians, and Zoroastrians. It is evident that there must have been plenty of religious discussion during the pilgrimage fairs at Mecca and the like centres. Naturally enough Mecca was a stronghold of the old pagan cult which gave it its importance and prosperity; Medina, on the other hand, had Jewish proclivities, and there were Jewish settlements near by. It was inevitable that Mecca and Medina should be in a state of rivalry and bickering feud.

§ 2

It was in Mecca about the year A.D. 570 that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was born. He was born in considerable poverty, and even by the standards of the desert he was uneducated; it is doubtful if he ever learnt to write. He was for some years a shepherd's boy; then he became the servant of a certain Kadija, the widow of a rich merchant. Probably he had to look after her camels or help in her trading operations; and he is said to have travelled with caravans to the Yemen and to Syria. He does not seem to have been a very useful trader, but he had the good fortune to find favour in the lady's eyes, and she married him, to the great annoyance{v2-005} of her family. He was then only twenty-five years old. It is uncertain if his wife was much older, though tradition declares she was forty. After the marriage he probably made no more long journeys. There were several children, one of whom was named Abd Manif—that is to say, the servant of the Meccan god Manif, which demonstrates that at that time Muhammad had made no religious discoveries.

Until he was forty he did indeed live a particularly undistinguished life in Mecca, as the husband of a prosperous wife. There may be some ground for the supposition that he became partner in a business in agricultural produce. To anyone visiting Mecca about A.D. 600 he would probably have seemed something of a loafer, a rather shy, good-looking individual, sitting about and listening to talk, a poor poet, and an altogether second-rate man.

About his internal life we can only speculate. Imaginative writers have supposed that he had great spiritual struggles, that he went out into the desert in agonies of doubt and divine desire. "In the silence of the desert night, in the bright heat of noontide desert day, he, as do all men, had known and felt himself alone yet not in solitude, for the desert is of God, and in the desert no man may deny Him."[321] Maybe that was so, but there is no evidence of any such desert trips. Yet he was certainly thinking deeply of the things about him. Possibly he had seen Christian churches in Syria; almost certainly he knew much of the Jews and their religion, and he heard their scorn for this black stone of the Kaaba that ruled over the three hundred odd tribal gods of Arabia. He saw the pilgrimage crowds, and noted the threads of insincerity and superstition in the paganism of the town. It oppressed his mind. The Jews had perhaps converted him to a belief in the One True God, without his knowing what had happened to him.

At last he could keep these feelings to himself no longer. When he was forty he began to talk about the reality of God, at first apparently only to his wife and a few intimates. He produced certain verses, which he declared had been revealed to him by an angel. They involved an assertion of the unity of God and some acceptable generalizations about righteousness. He also insisted upon a future life, the fear of hell for the

negligent and evil, and the{v2-006} reservation of paradise for the believer in the One God. Except for his claim to be a new prophet, there does not seem to have been anything very new about these doctrines at the time, but this was seditious teaching for Mecca, which partly subsisted upon its polytheistic cult, and which was therefore holding on to idols when all the rest of the world was giving them up. Like Mani, Muhammad claimed that the prophets before him, and especially Jesus and Abraham, had been divine teachers, but that he crowned and completed their teaching. Buddhism, however, he did not name, probably because he had never heard of Buddha. Desert Arabia was in a theological backwater.

For some years the new religion was the secret of a small group of simple people, Kadija, the prophet's wife, Ali, an adopted son, Zeid, a slave, and Abu Bekr, a friend and admirer. For some years it was an obscure sect in a few households of Mecca, a mere scowl and muttering at idolatry, so obscure and unimportant that the leading men of the town did not trouble about it in the least. Then it gathered strength. Muhammad began to preach more openly, to teach the doctrine of a future life, and to threaten idolaters and unbelievers with hell fire. He seems to have preached with considerable effect. It appeared to many that he was aiming at a sort of dictatorship in Mecca, and drawing many susceptible and discontented people to his side; and an attempt was made to discourage and suppress the new movement.

Mecca was a place of pilgrimage and a sanctuary; no blood could be shed within its walls; nevertheless, things were made extremely disagreeable for the followers of the new teacher. Boycott and confiscation were used against them. Some were driven to take refuge in Christian Abyssinia. But the Prophet himself went unscathed because he was well connected, and his opponents did not want to begin a blood feud. We cannot follow the fluctuations of the struggle here, but it is necessary to note one perplexing incident in the new prophet's career, which, says Sir Mark Sykes, "proves him to have been an Arab of the Arabs." After all his insistence upon the oneness of God, he wavered. He came into the courtyard of the Kaaba, and declared that the gods and goddesses of Mecca might, after all, be real, might be a species of saints with a power of intercession.{v2-007}

His recantation was received with enthusiasm, but he had no sooner made it than he repented, and his repentance shows that he had indeed the fear of God in him. His lapse from honesty proves him honest. He did all he could to repair the evil he had done. He said that the devil had possessed his tongue, and denounced idolatry again with renewed vigour. The struggle against the antiquated deities, after a brief interval of peace, was renewed again more grimly, and with no further hope of reconciliation.

For a time the old interests had the upper hand. At the end of ten years of prophesying, Muhammad found himself a man of fifty, and altogether unsuccessful in Mecca. Kadija, his first wife, was dead, and several of his chief supporters had also recently died. He sought a refuge at the neighbouring town of Tayf, but Tayf drove him out with stones and abuse. Then, when the world looked darkest to him, opportunity opened before him. He found he had been weighed and approved in an unexpected quarter. The city of Medina was much torn by internal dissension, and many of its people, during the time of pilgrimage to Mecca, had been attracted by Muhammad's teaching. Probably the numerous Jews in Medina had shaken the ancient idolatry of the people. An invitation was sent to him to come and rule in the name of his God in Medina.

He did not go at once. He parleyed for two years, sending a disciple to preach in Medina and destroy the idols there. Then he began sending such followers as he had in Mecca to Medina to await his coming there; he did not want to trust himself to unknown adherents in a strange city. This exodus of the faithful continued, until at last only he and Abu Bekr remained.

In spite of the character of Mecca as a sanctuary, he was very nearly murdered there. The elders of the town evidently knew of what was going on in Medina, and they realized the danger to them if this seditious prophet presently found himself master of a town on their main caravan route to Syria. Custom must bow to imperative necessity, they thought; and they decided that, blood feud or no blood feud, Muhammad must die. They arranged that he should be murdered in his bed; and in order to share the guilt of this breach of sanctuary they appointed a committee to do this, representing every family in the city except Muhammad's own.{v2-008} But Muhammad had already prepared his flight; and when in the night they rushed into his room, they found Ali, his adopted son, sleeping, or feigning sleep, on his bed.

The flight (the Hegira[322]) was an adventurous one, the pursuit being pressed hard. Expert desert trackers sought for the spoor to the north of the town, but Muhammad and Abu Bekr had gone south to certain caves where camels and provisions were hidden, and thence he made a great detour to Medina. There he and his faithful companion arrived, and were received with great enthusiasm on September 20, 622. It was the end of his probation and the beginning of his power.[323]

§ 3

Until the Hegira, until he was fifty-one, the character of the founder of Islam is a matter of speculation and dispute. Thereafter he is in the light. We discover a man of

great imaginative power but tortuous in the Arab fashion, and with most of the virtues and defects of the Bedouin.

The opening of his reign was “very Bedouin.” The rule of the One God of all the earth, as it was interpreted by Muhammad, began with a series of raids—which for more than a year were invariably unsuccessful—upon the caravans of Mecca. Then came a grave scandal, the breaking of the ancient customary truce of the Arab Amphictyony in the sacred month of Rahab. A party of Moslems, in this season of profound peace, treacherously attacked a small caravan and killed a man. It was their only success, and they did it by the order of the Prophet.

Presently came a battle. A force of seven hundred men had come out from Mecca to convoy home another caravan, and they encountered a large raiding party of three hundred. There was a fight, the battle of Badr, and the Meccans got the worst of it. They lost about fifty or sixty killed and as many wounded. Muhammad returned in triumph to Medina, and was inspired by{v2-009} Allah and this success to order the assassination of a number of his opponents among the Jews in the town who had treated his prophetic claims with a disagreeable levity.

But Mecca resolved to avenge Badr, and at the battle of Uhud, near Medina, inflicted an indecisive defeat upon the Prophet’s followers. Muhammad was knocked down and nearly killed, and there was much running away among his followers. The Meccans, however, did not push their advantage and enter Medina.

For some time all the energies of the Prophet were concentrated upon rallying his followers, who were evidently much dispirited. The Koran records the chastened feelings of those days. “The *suras* of the Koran,” says Sir Mark Sykes, “which are attributed to this period, excel nearly all the others in their majesty and sublime confidence.” Here, for the judgment of the reader, is an example of these majestic utterances, from the recent orthodox translation by the Maulvi Muhammad Ali.[324]

“Oh, you who believe! If you obey those who disbelieve, they will turn you back upon your heels, so you will turn back losers.

“Nay! Allah is your Patron, and He is the best of the helpers.

“We will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve, because they set up with Allah that for which He has sent down no authority, and their abode is the fire; and evil is the abode of the unjust.

“And certainly Allah made good to you His promise, when you slew them by His permission, until when you became weak-hearted and disputed about the affair and

disobeyed after He had shown you that which you loved; of you were some who desired this world, and of you were some who desired the hereafter; then He turned you away from them that He might try you; and He has certainly pardoned you, and Allah is Gracious to the believers.

“When you ran off precipitately, and did not wait for anyone, and the Apostle was calling you from your rear, so He gave you another sorrow instead of your sorrow, so that you might not grieve at what had escaped you, nor at what befell you; and Allah is aware of what you do.

“Then after sorrow he sent down security upon you, a calm{v2-010} coming upon a party of you, and there was another party whom their own souls had rendered anxious; they entertained about Allah thoughts of ignorance quite unjustly, saying: We have no hand in this affair. Say, surely the affair is wholly in the hands of Allah. They conceal within their souls what they would not reveal to you. They say: Had we any hand in the affair, we would not have been slain here. Say: had you remained in your houses, those for whom slaughter was ordained would certainly have gone forth to the places where they would be slain, and that Allah might test what was in your breasts and that He might purge what was in your hearts; and Allah knows what is in the breasts.

“As for those of you who turned back on the day when the two armies met, only the devil sought to cause them to make a slip on account of some deeds they had done, and certainly Allah has pardoned them; surely Allah is Forgiving, Forbearing.”

Inconclusive hostilities continued for some years, and at last Mecca made a crowning effort to stamp out for good and all the growing power of Medina. A mixed force of no fewer than 10,000 men was scraped together, an enormous force for the time and country. It was, of course, an entirely undisciplined force of footmen, horsemen, and camel riders, and it was prepared for nothing but the usual desert scrimmage. Bows, spears, and swords were its only weapons. When at last it arrived amid a vast cloud of dust in sight of the hovels and houses of Medina, instead of a smaller force of the same kind drawn up for battle as it had expected, it found a new and entirely disconcerting phenomenon, a trench and a wall. Assisted by a Persian convert, Muhammad had entrenched himself in Medina!

This trench struck the Bedouin miscellany as one of the most unsportsmanlike things that had ever been known in the history of the world. They rode about the place. They shouted their opinion of the whole business to the besieged. They discharged a few

arrows, and at last encamped to argue about this amazing outrage. They could arrive at no decision. Muhammad would not come out; the rains began to fall, the tents of the allies got wet, and the cooking difficult, views became divergent and{v2-011} tempers gave way, and at last this great host dwindled again into its constituent parts without ever having given battle (627). The bands dispersed north, east, and south, became clouds of dust, and ceased to matter. Near Medina was a castle of Jews, against whom Muhammad was already incensed because of their disrespect for his theology. They had shown a disposition to side with the probable victor in this last struggle, and Muhammad now fell upon them, slew all the men, nine hundred of them, and enslaved the women and children. Possibly many of their late allies were among the bidders for these slaves. Never again after this quaint failure did Mecca make an effective rally against Muhammad, and one by one its leading men came over to his side.

We need not follow the windings of the truce and the treaty that finally extended the rule of the Prophet to Mecca. The gist of the agreement was that the faithful should turn towards Mecca when they prayed instead of turning towards Jerusalem, as they had hitherto done, and that Mecca should be the pilgrimage centre of the new faith. So long as the pilgrimage continued, the men of Mecca, it would seem, did not care very much whether the crowd assembled in the name of one god or many. Muhammad was getting more and more hopeless of any extensive conversion of the Jews and Christians, and he was ceasing to press his idea that all these faiths really worshipped the same One God. Allah was becoming more and more his own special God, tethered now by this treaty to the meteoric stone of the Kaaba, and less and less the father of all mankind. Already the Prophet had betrayed a disposition to make a deal with Mecca, and at last it was effected. The lordship of Mecca was well worth the concession. Of comings and goings and a final conflict we need not tell. In 629 Muhammad came to the town as its master. The image of Manif, the god after whom he had once named his son, was smashed under his feet as he entered the Kaaba.

Thereafter his power extended, there were battles, treacheries, massacres; but on the whole he prevailed, until he was master of all Arabia; and when he was master of all Arabia in 632, at the age of sixty-two, he died.{v2-012}

Throughout the concluding eleven years of his life after the Hegira, there is little to distinguish the general conduct of Muhammad from that of any other welder of peoples into a monarchy. The chief difference is his use of a religion of his own creation as his cement. He was diplomatic, treacherous, ruthless, or compromising as the occasion required and as any other Arab king might have been in his place; and there was singularly little spirituality in his kingship. Nor was his domestic life during

his time of power and freedom one of exceptional edification. Until the death of Kadija, when he was fifty, he seems to have been the honest husband of one wife; but then, as many men do in their declining years, he developed a disagreeably strong interest in women.

He married two wives after the death of Kadija, one being the young Ayesha, who became and remained his favourite and most influential partner; and subsequently a number of other women, wives and concubines, were added to his establishment. This led to much trouble and confusion, and in spite of many special and very helpful revelations on the part of Allah, these complications still require much explanation and argument from the faithful. There was, for example, a scandal about Ayesha; she was left behind on one occasion when the howdah and the camel went on, while she was looking for her necklace among the bushes; and so Allah had to intervene with some heat and denounce her slanderers. Allah also had to speak very plainly about the general craving among this household of women for "this world's life and its ornature" and for "finery." Then there was much discussion because the Prophet first married his young cousin Zainib to his adopted son Zaid, and afterwards, "when Zaid had accomplished his want of her," the Prophet took her and married her—but, as the inspired book makes clear, only in order to show the difference between an adopted and a real son. "We gave her to you as a wife, so that there should be no difficulty for the believers in respect of the wives of their adopted sons, when they have accomplished their want of them, and Allah's command shall be performed." Yet surely a simple statement in the Koran should have sufficed without this excessively practical demonstration. There was, moreover, a mutiny in the harem on account of{v2-013} the undue favours shown by the Prophet to an Egyptian concubine who had borne him a boy, a boy for whom he had a great affection, since none of Kadija's sons had survived. These domestic troubles mingle inextricably with our impression of the Prophet's personality. One of his wives was a Jewess, Safiyya, whom he had married on the evening of the battle in which her husband had been captured and executed. He viewed the captured women at the end of the day, and she found favour in his eyes and was taken to his tent.

These are salient facts in these last eleven years of Muhammad's career. Because he too founded a great religion, there are those who write of this evidently lustful and rather shifty leader as though he were a man to put beside Jesus of Nazareth or Gautama or Mani. But it is surely manifest that he was a being of a commoner clay; he was vain, egotistical, tyrannous, and a self-deceiver; and it would throw all our history out of proportion if, out of an insincere deference to the possible Moslem reader, we were to present him in any other light.

Yet, unless we balance it, this insistence upon his vanity, egotism, self-deception, and hot desire does not complete the justice of the case. We must not swing across from the repudiation of the extravagant pretensions of the faithful to an equally extravagant condemnation. Can a man who has no good qualities hold a friend? Because those who knew Muhammad best believed in him most. Kadija for all her days believed in him—but she may have been a fond woman. Abu Bekr is a better witness, and he never wavered in his devotion. Abu Bekr believed in the Prophet, and it is very hard for anyone who reads the history of these times not to believe in Abu Bekr. Ali again risked his life for the Prophet in his darkest days. Muhammad was no impostor, at any rate, though at times his vanity made him behave as though Allah was at his beck and call, and as if his thoughts were necessarily God's thoughts. And if his bloodstained passion with Safiyya amazes and disgusts our modern minds, his love for little Ibrahim, the son of Mary the Egyptian, and his passionate grief when the child died, reinstate him in the fellowship of all those who have known love and loss.

He smoothed the earth over the little grave with his own{v2-014} hands. "This eases the afflicted heart," he said. "Though it neither profits nor injures the dead, yet it is a comfort to the living."

§ 4

But the personal quality of Muhammad is one thing and the quality of Islam, the religion he founded, is quite another. Muhammad was not pitted against Jesus or Mani, and his relative stature is only a very secondary question for us; it is Islam which was pitted against the corrupted Christianity of the seventh century and against the decaying tradition of the Zoroastrian Magi with which the historian has the greater concern. And whether it was through its Prophet, or whether it was in spite of its Prophet, and through certain accidents in its origin and certain qualities of the desert from which it sprang, there can be no denying that Islam possesses many fine and noble attributes. It is not always through sublime persons that great things come into human life. It is the folly of the simple disciple which demands miraculous frippery on the majesty of truth and immaculate conceptions for righteousness.

A year before his death, at the end of the tenth year of the Hegira, Muhammad made his last pilgrimage from Medina to Mecca. He made then a great sermon to his people of which the tradition is as follows. There are, of course, disputes as to the authenticity of the words, but there can be no dispute that the world of Islam, a world still of three hundred million people, receives them to this day as its rule of life, and to a great extent observes it. The reader will note that the first paragraph sweeps away all plunder and blood feuds among the followers of Islam. The last makes the believing

Negro the equal of the Caliph. They may not be sublime words, as certain utterances of Jesus of Nazareth are sublime; but they established in the world a great tradition of dignified fair dealing, they breathe a spirit of generosity, and they are human and workable. They created a society more free from widespread cruelty and social oppression than any society had ever been in the world before.

“Ye people: Hearken to my words; for I know not whether, after this year, I shall ever be amongst you here again. Your lives{v2-015} and property are sacred and inviolable amongst one another until the end of time.

“The Lord hath ordained to every man the share of his inheritance; a testament is not lawful to the prejudice of heirs.

“The child belongeth to the parent; and the violator of wedlock shall be stoned.

“Whoever claimeth falsely another for his father, or another for his master, the curse of God and the angels and of all mankind shall rest upon him.

“Ye people! Ye have rights demandable of your wives, and they have rights demandable of you. Upon them it is incumbent not to violate their conjugal faith nor commit any act of open impropriety; which things if they do, ye have authority to shut them up in separate apartments and to beat them with stripes, yet not severely. But if they refrain therefrom, clothe them and feed them suitably. And treat your women well, for they are with you as captives and prisoners; they have not power over anything as regards themselves. And ye have verily taken them on the security of God, and have made their persons lawful unto you by the words of God.

“And your slaves, see that ye feed them with such food as ye eat yourselves, and clothe them with the stuff ye wear. And if they commit a fault which ye are not inclined to forgive, then sell them, for they are the servants of the Lord, and are not to be tormented.

“Ye people! hearken to my speech and comprehend the same. Know that every Moslem is the brother of every other Moslem. All of you are on the same equality.”

This insistence upon kindliness and consideration in the daily life is one of the main virtues of Islam, but it is not the only one. Equally important is the uncompromising monotheism, void of any Jewish exclusiveness, which is sustained by the Koran. Islam from the outset was fairly proof against the theological elaborations that have perplexed and divided Christianity and smothered the spirit of Jesus. And its third source of strength has been in the meticulous prescription of methods of prayer and worship, and its clear statement of the limited and conventional significance of the

importance ascribed to Mecca. All sacrifice was{v2-016} barred to the faithful; no loophole was left for the sacrificial priest of the old dispensation to come back into the new faith. It was not simply a new faith, a purely prophetic religion, as the religion of Jesus was in the time of Jesus, or the religion of Gautama in the lifetime of Gautama, but it was so stated as to remain so. Islam to this day has learned doctors, teachers, and preachers; but it has no priests.

It was full of the spirit of kindliness, generosity, and brotherhood; it was a simple and understandable religion; it was instinct with the chivalrous sentiment of the desert; and it made its appeal straight to the commonest instincts in the composition of ordinary men. Against it were pitted Judaism, which had made a racial hoard of God; Christianity talking and preaching endlessly now of trinities, doctrines, and heresies no ordinary man could make head or tail of; and Mazdaism, the cult of the Zoroastrian Magi, who had inspired the crucifixion of Mani. The bulk of the people to whom the challenge of Islam came did not trouble very much whether Muhammad was lustful or not, or whether he had done some shifty and questionable things; what appealed to them was that this God, Allah, he preached, was by the test of the conscience in their hearts a God of righteousness, and that the honest acceptance of his doctrine and method opened the door wide in a world of uncertainty, treachery, and intolerable divisions to a great and increasing brotherhood of trustworthy men on earth, and to a paradise not of perpetual exercises in praise and worship, in which saints, priests, and anointed kings were still to have the upper places, but of equal fellowship and simple and understandable delights such as their souls craved for. Without any ambiguous symbolism, without any darkening of altars or chanting of priests, Muhammad had brought home those attractive doctrines to the hearts of mankind.

§ 5

The true embodiment of the spirit of Islam was not Muhammad, but his close friend and supporter Abu Bekr. There can be little doubt that if Muhammad was the mind and imagination of primitive Islam, Abu Bekr was its conscience and its will. Throughout their life together it was Muhammad who said the{v2-017} thing, but it was Abu Bekr who believed the thing. When Muhammad wavered, Abu Bekr sustained him. Abu Bekr was a man without doubts, his beliefs cut down to acts cleanly as a sharp knife cuts. We may feel sure that Abu Bekr would never have temporized about the minor gods of Mecca, or needed inspirations from Allah to explain his private life. When in the eleventh year of the Hegira (632) the Prophet sickened of a fever and died, it was Abu Bekr who succeeded him as Caliph and leader of the people (Kalifa = Successor), and it was the unflinching confidence of Abu Bekr in the righteousness of Allah which prevented a split between Medina and Mecca, which stamped down a widespread

insurrection of the Bedouin against taxation for the common cause, and carried out a great plundering raid into Syria that the dead Prophet had projected. And then Abu Bekr, with that faith which moves mountains, set himself simply and sanely to organize the subjugation of the whole world to Allah—with little armies of 3000 or 4000 Arabs—according to those letters the Prophet had written from Medina in 628 to all the monarchs of the world.

And the attempt came near to succeeding. Had there been in Islam a score of men, younger men to carry on his work, of Abu Bekr's quality, it would certainly have succeeded. It came near to succeeding because Arabia was now a centre of faith and will, and because nowhere else in the world until China was reached, unless it was upon the steppes of Russia or Turkestan, was there another community of free-spirited men with any power of belief in their rulers and leaders. The head of the Byzantine Empire, Heraclius, the conqueror of Chosroes II, was past his prime and suffering from dropsy, and his empire was exhausted by the long Persian War. Nor had he at any time displayed such exceptional ability as the new occasion demanded. The motley of people under his rule knew little of him and cared less. Persia was at the lowest depths of monarchist degradation, the parricide Kavadh II had died after a reign of a few months, and a series of dynastic intrigues and romantic murders enlivened the palace but weakened the country. The war between Persia and the Byzantine Empire was only formally concluded about the time of the beginning of Abu Bekr's rule. Both sides had made great{v2-018} use of Arab auxiliaries; over Syria a number of towns and settlements of Christianized Arabs were scattered who professed a baseless loyalty to Constantinople; the Persian marches between Mesopotamia and the desert were under the control of an Arab tributary prince, whose capital was at Hira. Arab influence was strong in such cities as Damascus, where Christian Arab gentlemen would read and recite the latest poetry from the desert competitors. There was thus a great amount of easily assimilable material ready at hand for Islam.

And the military campaigns that now began were among the most brilliant in the world's history. Arabia had suddenly become a garden of fine men. The name of Khalid stands out as the brightest star in a constellation of able and devoted Moslem generals. Whenever he commanded he was victorious, and when the jealousy of the second Caliph, Omar, degraded him unjustly and inexcusably,[325] he made no ado, but served Allah cheerfully and well as a subordinate to those over whom he had ruled. We cannot trace the story of this warfare here; the Arab armies struck simultaneously at Byzantine Syria and the Persian frontier city of Hira, and everywhere they offered a choice of three alternatives: either pay tribute, or confess the true God

and join us, or die. They encountered armies, large and disciplined but spiritless armies, and defeated them. And nowhere was there such a thing as a popular resistance. The people of the populous irrigation lands of Mesopotamia cared not a jot whether they paid taxes to Byzantium or Persepolis or to Medina; and of the two, Arabs or Persian court, the Arabs, the Arabs of the great years, were manifestly the cleaner people, more just and more merciful. The Christian Arabs joined the invaders very readily and so did many Jews. Just as in the west, so now in the east, an invasion became a social revolution. But here it was also a religious revolution with a new and distinctive mental vitality.

It was Khalid who fought the decisive battle (634) with the army of Heraclius upon the banks of the Yarmuk, a tributary{v2-019} of the Jordan. The legions, as ever, were without proper cavalry; for seven centuries the ghost of old Crassus had haunted the east in vain; the imperial armies relied upon Christian Arab auxiliaries, and these deserted to the Moslems as the armies joined issue. A great parade of priests, sacred banners, pictures, and holy relics was made by the Byzantine host, and it was further sustained by the chanting of monks. But there was no magic in the relics and little conviction about the chanting. On the Arab side the Emirs and sheiks harangued the troops, and after the ancient Arab fashion the shrill voices of women in the rear encouraged their men. The Moslem ranks were full of believers{v2-020} before whom shone victory or paradise. The battle was never in doubt after the defection of the irregular cavalry. An attempt to retreat dissolved into a rout and became a massacre. The Byzantine army had fought with its back to the river, which was presently choked with its dead.

Thereafter Heraclius slowly relinquished all Syria, which he had so lately won back from the Persians, to his new antagonists. Damascus soon fell, and a year later the Moslems entered Antioch. For a time they had to abandon it again to a last effort from Constantinople, but they re-entered it for good under Khalid.

Meanwhile on the eastern front, after a swift initial success which gave them Hira, the Persian resistance stiffened. The dynastic struggle had ended at last in the coming of a king of kings, and a general of ability had been found in Rustam. He gave battle at Kadessia (637). His army was just such another composite host as Darius had led into Thrace or Alexander defeated at Issus; it was a medley of levies. He had thirty-three war elephants, and he sat on a golden throne upon a raised platform behind the Persian ranks, surveying the battle, which throne will remind the reader of Herodotus, the Hellespont, and Salamis more than a thousand years before. The battle lasted three days; each day the Arabs attacked and the Persian host held its ground until nightfall called a truce. On the third day the Arabs received reinforcements, and towards the evening the Persians attempted to bring the struggle to an end by a charge of elephants. At first the huge beasts carried all before them; then one was wounded painfully and became uncontrollable, rushing up and down between the armies. Its panic affected the others, and for a time both armies remained dumbfounded in the red light of sunset, watching the frantic efforts of these grey, squealing monsters to escape from the tormenting masses of armed men that hemmed them in. It was by the merest chance that at last they broke through the Persian and not through the Arab array, and that it was the Arabs who were able to charge home upon the resulting confusion. The twilight darkened to night, but this time the armies did not separate. All through the night the Arabs smote in the name of Allah, and pressed upon the shattered and retreating Persians. Dawn broke upon the{v2-021} vestiges of Rustam's army in flight far beyond the litter of the battlefield. Its path was marked by scattered weapons and war material, abandoned transport, and the dead and dying. The platform and the golden throne were broken down, and Rustam lay dead among a heap of dead men....

Already in 634 Abu Bekr had died and given place to Omar, the Prophet's brother-in-law, as Caliph; and it was under Omar (634-643) that the main conquests of the Moslems occurred. The Byzantine Empire was pushed out of Syria altogether. But at the Taurus Mountains the Moslem thrust was held. Armenia was overrun, all Mesopotamia was conquered and Persia beyond the rivers. Egypt passed almost passively from Greek to Arab; in a few years the Semitic race, in the name of God and His Prophet, had recovered nearly all the dominions it had lost to the Aryan Persians a thousand years before. Jerusalem fell early, making a treaty without standing siege,

and so the True Cross which had been carried off by the Persians a dozen years before, and elaborately restored by Heraclius, passed once more out of the rule of Christians. But it was still in Christian hands; the Christians were to be tolerated, paying only a poll tax; and all the churches and all the relics were left in their possession.

Jerusalem made a peculiar condition for its surrender. The city would give itself only to the Caliph Omar in person. Hitherto he had been in Medina organizing armies and controlling the general campaign. He came to Jerusalem (638), and the manner of his coming shows how swiftly the vigour and simplicity of the first Moslem onset was being sapped by success. He came the six-hundred-mile journey with only one attendant; he was mounted on a camel, and a bag of barley, another of dates, a waterskin, and a wooden platter were his provision for the journey. He was met outside the city by his chief captains, robed splendidly in silks and with richly caparisoned horses. At this amazing sight the old man was overcome with rage. He slipped down from his saddle, scrabbled up dirt and stones with his hands, and pelted these fine gentlemen, shouting abuse. What was this insult? What did this finery mean? Where were his warriors? Where were the desert men? He would not let these popinjays escort him. He went on with his attendant, and the smart Emirs rode{v2-022} afar off—well out of range of his stones. He met the Patriarch of Jerusalem, who had apparently taken over the city from its Byzantine rulers, alone. With the Patriarch he got on very well. They went round the Holy Places together, and Omar, now a little appeased, made sly jokes at the expense of his too magnificent followers.

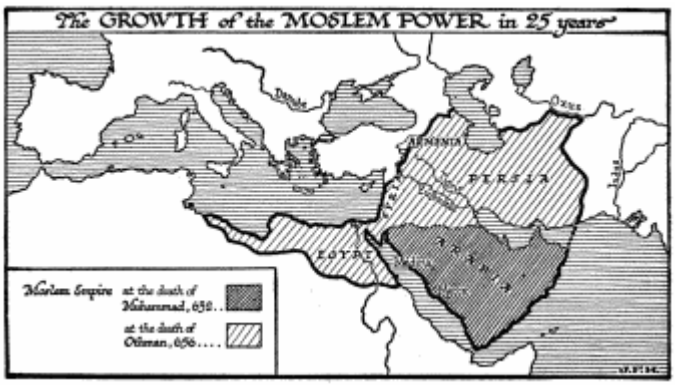
Equally indicative of the tendencies of the time is Omar's letter ordering one of his governors who had built himself a palace at Kufa, to demolish it again.

"They tell me," he wrote, "you would imitate the palace of Chosroes,[326] and that you would even use the gates that once were his. Will you also have guards and porters at those gates, as Chosroes had? Will you keep the faithful afar off and deny audience to the poor? Would you depart from the custom of our Prophet, and be as magnificent as those Persian emperors, and descend to hell even as they have done?"[327]

§ 6

Abu Bekr and Omar I are the two master figures in the history of Islam. It is not within our scope here to describe the wars by which in a hundred and twenty-five years Islam spread itself from the Indus to the Atlantic and Spain, and from Kashgar on the borders of China to Upper Egypt. Two maps must suffice to show the limits to which the vigorous impulse of the new faith carried the Arab idea and the Arabic scriptures, before worldliness, the old trading and plundering spirit, and the glamour of the silk

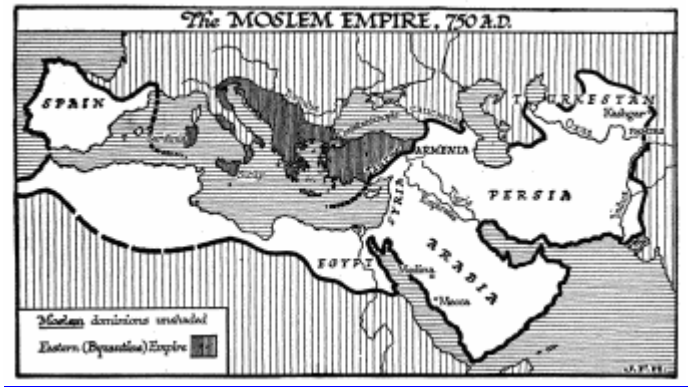
robe had completely recovered their paralyzing sway over the Arab intelligence and will. The reader will note how the great tide swept over the footsteps of Yuan Chwang, and how easily in Africa the easy conquests of the Vandals were repeated in the reverse direction. And if the reader entertains any delusions about a fine civilization, either Persian, Roman, Hellenic, or Egyptian, being submerged by this flood, the sooner he dismisses such ideas the better. Islam prevailed because it was the best social and political order the times could offer. It prevailed because everywhere it found politically apathetic peoples, robbed,{v2-024} oppressed, bullied, uneducated, and unorganized, and it found selfish and unsound governments out of touch with any people at all. It was the broadest, freshest, and cleanest political idea that had yet come into actual activity in the world, and it offered better terms than any other to the mass of mankind. The capitalistic and slave-holding system of the Roman Empire and the literature and culture and social tradition of Europe had altogether decayed and broken down before Islam arose; it was only when mankind lost faith in the sincerity of its representatives that Islam too began to decay.



The larger part of its energy spent itself in conquering and assimilating Persia and Turkestan; its most vigorous thrusts were northwardly from Persia and westwardly through Egypt. Had it concentrated its first vigour upon the Byzantine Empire, there can be little doubt that by the eighth century it would have taken Constantinople and come through into Europe as easily as it reached the Pamirs. The Caliph Moawiya, it is true, besieged the capital for seven years (672 to 678), and Suleiman in 717 and 718; but the pressure was not sustained, and for three or four centuries longer the Byzantine Empire remained the crazy bulwark of Europe. In the newly Christianized or still pagan Avars, Bulgars, Serbs, Slavs, and Saxons, Islam would certainly have found as ready converts as it did in the Turks of Central Asia. And though, instead of insisting upon Constantinople, it first came round into Europe by the circuitous route of Africa

and Spain, it was only in France, at the end of a vast line of communications from Arabia, that it encountered a power sufficiently vigorous to arrest its advance.

From the outset the Bedouin aristocrats of Mecca dominated the new empire. Abu Bekr, the first Caliph, was in an informal shouting way elected at Medina, and so were Omar I and Othman, the third Caliph, but all three were Meccans of good family. They were not men of Medina. And though Abu Bekr and Omar were men of stark simplicity and righteousness Othman was of a baser quality, a man quite in the vein of those silk robes, to whom conquest was not conquest for Allah but for Arabia, and especially for Mecca in Arabia, and more particularly for himself and for the Meccans and for his family, the Omayyads. He was a{v2-026} worthy man, who stood out for his country and his town and his "people." He was no early convert as his two predecessors had been; he had joined the Prophet for reasons of policy in fair give and take. With his accession the Caliph ceases to be a strange man of fire and wonder, and becomes an Oriental monarch like many Oriental monarchs before and since, a fairly good monarch by Eastern standards as yet, but nothing more.



The rule and death of Othman brought out the consequences of Muhammad's weaknesses as clearly as the lives of Abu Bekr and Omar had witnessed to the divine fire in his teaching. Muhammad had been politic at times when Abu Bekr would have been firm, and the new element of aristocratic greediness that came in with Othman was one fruit of those politic moments. And the legacy of that carelessly compiled harem of the Prophet, the family complications and jealousies which had lurked in the background of Moslem affairs during the rule of the first two Caliphs, was now coming out into the light of day. Ali, who was the nephew, the adopted son, and the son-in-law of the Prophet—he was the husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima—he had considered himself the rightful Caliph. His claims formed an undertow to the resentment of Medina and of the rival families of Mecca against the advancement of

the Omayyads. But Ayesha, the favourite wife of the Prophet, had always been jealous of Fatima and hostile to Ali. She supported Othman.... The splendid opening of the story of Islam collapses suddenly into this squalid dispute and bickering of heirs and widows.

In 656 Othman, an old man of eighty, was stoned in the streets of Medina by a mob, chased to his house, and murdered; and Ali became at last Caliph, only to be murdered in his turn (661). In one of the battles in this civil war, Ayesha, now a gallant, mischievous old lady, distinguished herself by leading a charge, mounted on a camel. She was taken prisoner and treated well.

While the armies of Islam were advancing triumphantly to the conquest of the world, this sickness of civil war smote at its head. What was the rule of Allah in the world to Ayesha when she could score off the detested Fatima, and what heed were the Omayyads and the partisans of Ali likely to take of the unity of mankind when they had a good hot feud of this sort to entertain them,{v2-027} with the caliphate as a prize? The world of Islam was rent in twain by the spites, greeds, and partisan silliness of a handful of men and women in Medina. That quarrel still lives. To this day one main division of the Moslems, the Shiites, maintain the hereditary right of Ali to be Caliph *as an article of faith*! They prevail in Persia and India. But an equally important section, the Sunnites, with whom it is difficult for a disinterested observer not to agree, deny this peculiar addendum to Muhammad's simple creed. So far as we can gather at this length of time, Ali was an entirely commonplace individual.

To watch this schism creeping across the brave beginnings of Islam is like watching a case of softening of the brain. To the copious literature of the subject we must refer the reader who wishes to learn how Hasan, the son of Ali, was poisoned by his wife, and how Husein, his brother, was killed. We do but name them here because they still afford a large section of mankind scope for sentimental partisanship and mutual annoyance. They are the two chief Shiite martyrs. Amidst the coming and going of their conflicts the old Kaaba at Mecca was burnt down, and naturally there began endless disputation whether it should be rebuilt in exactly its ancient form or on a much larger scale.

In this and the preceding sections we have seen once more the inevitable struggle of this newest and latest unifying impulse in the world's affairs against the everyday worldliness of mankind, and we have seen also how from the first the complicated household of Muhammad was like an evil legacy to the new faith. But as this history now degenerates into the normal crimes and intrigues of an Oriental dynasty, the student of history will realize a third fundamental weakness in the world reforms of

Muhammad. He was an illiterate Arab, ignorant of history, totally ignorant of all the political experiences of Rome and Greece, and almost as ignorant of the real history of Judea; and he left his followers with no scheme for a stable government embodying and concentrating the general will of the faithful, and no effective form to express the very real spirit of democracy (using the word in its modern sense) that pervades the essential teaching of Islam. His own rule was unlimited autocracy, and autocratic Islam has remained. Politically Islam was not an advance, but a retrogression{v2-028} from the traditional freedoms and customary laws of the desert. The breach of the pilgrims' trace that led to the battle of Badr is the blackest mark against early Islam. Nominally Allah is its chief ruler—but practically its master has always been whatever man was vigorous and unscrupulous enough to snatch and hold the Caliphate—and, subject to revolts and assassinations, its final law has been that man's will.

For a time, after the death of Ali, the Omayyad family was in the ascendant, and for nearly a century they gave rulers to Islam.

The Arab historians are so occupied with the dynastic squabbles and crimes of the time, that it is difficult to trace the external history of the period. We find Moslem shipping upon the seas defeating the Byzantine fleet in a great sea fight off the coast of Lycia (A.D. 655), but how the Moslems acquired this victorious fleet thus early we do not clearly know. It was probably chiefly Egyptian. For some years Islam certainly controlled the eastern Mediterranean, and in 662 and again in 672, during the reign of Muawiya (662-680), the first great Omayyad Caliph, made two sea attacks upon Constantinople. They had to be sea attacks because Islam, so long as it was under Arab rule, never surmounted the barrier of the Taurus Mountains. During the same period the Moslems were also pressing their conquests further and further into Central Asia. While Islam was already decaying at its centre, it was yet making great hosts of new adherents and awakening a new spirit among the hitherto divided and aimless Turkish peoples. Medina was no longer a possible centre for its vast enterprises in Asia, Africa, and the Mediterranean, and so Damascus became the usual capital of the Omayyad Caliphs.

Chief among these, as for a time the clouds of dynastic intrigue clear, are Abdal Malik (685-705) and Walid I (705-715), under whom the Omayyad line rose to the climax of its successes. The western boundary was carried to the Pyrenees, while to the east the domains of the Caliph marched with China. The son of Walid, Suleiman (715), carried out a second series of Moslem attacks upon Constantinople which his father had planned and proposed. As with the Caliph Muawiya half a century before, the approach was by sea—for Asia Minor, as we have just noted, was still unconquered—

and the shipping was drawn chiefly{v2-029} from Egypt. The emperor, a usurper, Leo the Isaurian, displayed extraordinary skill and obstinacy in the defence; he burnt most of the Moslem shipping in a brilliant sortie, cut up the troops they had landed upon the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus, and after a campaign in Europe of two years (717-718), a winter of unexampled severity completed their defeat.

From this point onward the glory of the Omayyad line decays. The first tremendous impulse of Islam was now spent. There was no further expansion and a manifest decline in religious zeal. Islam had made millions of converts, and had digested those millions very imperfectly. Cities, nations, whole sects and races, Arab pagans, Jews, Christians, Manichæans, Zoroastrians, Turanian pagans, had been swallowed up into this new vast empire of Muhammad's successors. It has hitherto been the common characteristic of all the great unifying religious initiators of the world, the common oversight, that they have accepted the moral and theological ideals to which the first appeal was made, as though they were universal ideals. Muhammad's appeal, for example, was to the traditional chivalry and underlying monotheistic feelings of the intelligent Arabs of his time. These things were latent in the mind and conscience of Mecca and Medina; he did but call them forth. Then, as the new teaching spread and stereotyped itself, it had to work on a continually more uncongenial basis, it had to grow in soil that distorted and perverted it. Its sole textbook was the Koran. To minds untuned to the melodies of Arabic, this book seemed to be, as it seems to many European minds to-day, a mixture of fine-spirited rhetoric with—to put it plainly—formless and unintelligent gabble. Countless converts missed the real thing in it altogether. To that we must ascribe the readiness of the Persian and Indian sections of the faith to join the Shiite schism upon a quarrel that they could at least understand and feel. And to the same attempt to square the new stuff with old prepossessions was due such extravagant theology as presently disputed whether the Koran was and always had been co-existent with God.[328] We should be stupefied by the preposterousness of this idea if we did not recognize in it at once the well-meaning attempt of some learned Christian convert to{v2-030} Islamize his belief that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."[329]

None of the great unifying religious initiators of the world hitherto seems to have been accompanied by any understanding of the vast educational task, the vast work of lucid and varied exposition and intellectual organization involved in its propositions. They all present the same history of a rapid spreading, like a little water poured over a great area, and then of superficiality and corruption.

In a little while we hear stories of an Omayyad Caliph, Walid II (743-744), who mocked at the Koran, ate pork, drank wine, and did not pray. Those stories may have been true

or they may have been circulated for political reasons. There began a puritan reaction in Mecca and Medina against the levity and luxury of Damascus. Another great Arab family, the Abbas family, the Abbasids, a thoroughly wicked line, had long been scheming for power, and was making capital out of the general discontent. The feud of the Omayyads and the Abbasids was older than Islam; it had been going on before Muhammad was born. These Abbasids took up the tradition of the Shiite "martyrs," Ali and his sons Hasan and Husein, and identified themselves with it. The banner of the Omayyads was white; the Abbasid adopted a black banner, black in mourning for Hasan and Husein, black because black is more impressive than any colour; moreover, the Abbasids declared that all the Caliphs after Ali were usurpers. In 749 they accomplished a carefully prepared revolution, and the last of the Omayyad Caliphs was hunted down and slain in Egypt. Abul Abbas was the first of the Abbasid Caliphs, and he began his reign by collecting into one prison every living male of the Omayyad line upon whom he could lay hands and causing them all to be massacred. Their bodies were heaped together, a leathern carpet was spread over them, and on this gruesome table Abul Abbas and his councillors feasted.[330] Moreover, the tombs of the{v2-031} Omayyad Caliphs were rifled, and their bones burnt and scattered to the four winds of heaven. So the grievances of Ali were avenged at last, and the Omayyad line passed out of history.

There was, it is interesting to note, a rising on behalf of the Omayyads in Khorasan which was assisted by the Chinese emperor.

§ 7

But the descendants of Ali were not destined to share in this triumph for long. The Abbasids were adventurers and rulers of an older school than Islam. Now that the tradition of Ali had served its purpose, the next proceeding of the new Caliph was to hunt down and slaughter the surviving members of his family, the descendants of Ali and Fatima.

Clearly the old traditions of Sassanid Persia and of Persia before the Greeks were returning to the world. With the accession of the Abbasids the control of the sea departed from the Caliph, and with it went Spain and North Africa, in which, under an Omayyad survivor in the former case, independent Moslem states now arose. The centre of gravity of Islam shifted across the desert from Damascus to Mesopotamia. Mansur, the successor of Abul Abbas, built himself a new capital at Bagdad near the ruins of Ctesiphon, the former Sassanid capital. Turks and Persians as well as Arabs became Emirs, and the army was reorganized upon Sassanid lines. Medina and Mecca were now only of importance as pilgrimage centres, to which the faithful

turned to pray. But because it was a fine language, and because it was the language of the Koran, Arabic continued to spread until presently it had replaced Greek and become the language of educated men throughout the whole Moslem world.

Of the Abbasid monarchs after Abul Abbas we need tell little here. A bickering war went on year by year in Asia Minor in which neither Byzantium nor Bagdad made any permanent gains, though once or twice the Moslems raided as far as the Bosphorus. A false prophet, Mokanna, who said he was God, had a brief but troublesome career. There were plots, there were insurrections;{v2-032} they lie flat and colourless now in the histories like dead flowers in an old book. One other Abbasid Caliph only need be named, and that quite as much for his legendary as for his real importance, Haroun-al-Raschid[331] (786-809). He was not only the Caliph of an outwardly prosperous empire in the world of reality, but he was also the Caliph of an undying empire in the deathless world of fiction, he was the Haroun-al-Raschid of the *Arabian Nights*.

Sir Mark Sykes[332] gives an account of the reality of his empire from which we will quote certain passages. He says: “The Imperial Court was polished, luxurious, and unlimitedly wealthy; the capital, Bagdad, a gigantic mercantile city surrounding a huge administrative fortress, wherein every department of state had a properly regulated and well-ordered public office; where schools and colleges abounded; whither philosophers, students, doctors, poets, and theologians flocked from all parts of the civilized globe.... The provincial capitals were embellished with vast public buildings, and linked together by an effective and rapid service of posts and caravans; the frontiers were secure and well garrisoned, the army loyal, efficient, and brave; the governors and ministers honest and forbearing. The empire stretched with equal strength and unimpaired control from the Cilician gates to Aden, and from Egypt to Central Asia. Christians, Pagans, Jews, as well as Moslems, were employed in the government service. Usurpers, rebellious generals, and false prophets seemed to have vanished from the Moslem dominions. Traffic and wealth had taken the place of revolution and famine.... Pestilence and disease were met by Imperial hospitals and government physicians.... In government business the rough-and-ready methods of Arabian administration had given place to a complicated system of Divans, initiated partly from the Roman, but chiefly taken from the Persian system of government. Posts, Finance, Privy Seal, Crown Lands, Justice, and Military affairs were each administered by separate bureaux in the hands of ministers and officials; an army of clerks, scribes, writers, and accountants swarmed into these offices and gradually swept the whole power of the government into their own hands by separating{v2-033} the Commander of the Faithful from any direct intercourse with his subjects. The Imperial Palace and the entourage were equally based on Roman and Persian

precedents. Eunuchs, closely veiled 'harems' of women, guards, spies, go-betweens, jesters, poets, and dwarfs clustered around the person of the Commander of the Faithful, each, in his degree, endeavouring to gain the royal favour and indirectly distracting the royal mind from affairs of business and state. Meanwhile the mercantile trade of the East poured gold into Bagdad, and supplemented the other enormous stream of money derived from the contributions of plunder and loot despatched to the capital by the commanders of the victorious raiding forces which harried Asia Minor, India, and Turkestan. The seemingly unending supply of Turkish slaves and Byzantine specie added to the richness of the revenues of Irak, and, combined with the vast commercial traffic of which Bagdad was the centre, produced a large and powerful moneyed class, composed of the sons of generals, officials, landed proprietors, royal favourites, merchants, and the like, who encouraged the arts, literature, philosophy, and poetry as the mood took them, building palaces for themselves, vying with each other in the luxury of their entertainments, suborning poets to sound their praises, dabbling in philosophy, supporting various schools of thought, endowing charities, and, in fact, behaving as the wealthy have always behaved in all ages.

"I have said that the Abbasid Empire in the days of Haroun-al-Raschid was weak and feeble to a degree, and perhaps the reader will consider this a foolish proposition when he takes into consideration that I have described the Empire as orderly, the administration definite and settled, the army efficient, and wealth abundant. The reason I make the suggestion is that the Abbasid Empire had lost touch with everything original and vital in Islam, and was constructed entirely by the reunion of the fragments of the empires Islam had destroyed. There was nothing in the empire which appealed to the higher instincts of the leaders of the people; the holy war had degenerated into a systematic acquisition of plunder. The Caliph had become a luxurious Emperor or King of Kings; the administration had changed from a patriarchal system to a bureaucracy. The wealthier classes were{v2-034} rapidly losing all faith in the religion of the state; speculative philosophy and high living were taking the place of Koranic orthodoxy and Arabian simplicity. The solitary bond which could have held the empire together, the sternness and plainness of the Moslem faith, was completely neglected by both the Caliph and his advisers.... Haroun-al-Raschid himself was a wine-bibber, and his palace was decorated with graven images of birds and beasts and men....

"For a moment we stand amazed at the greatness of the Abbasid dominion; then suddenly we realize that it is but as a fair husk enclosing the dust and ashes of dead civilizations."

Haroun-al-Raschid died in 809. At his death his great empire fell immediately into civil war and confusion, and the next great event of unusual importance in this region of the world comes two hundred years later when the Turks, under the chiefs of the great family of the Seljuks, poured southward out of Turkestan, and not only conquered the empire of Bagdad, but Asia Minor also. Coming from the northeast as they did, they were able to outflank the great barrier of the Taurus Mountains, which had hitherto held back the Moslems. They were still much the same people as those of whom Yuan Chwang gave us a glimpse four hundred years earlier, but now they were Moslems, and Moslems of the primitive type, men whom Abu Bekr would have welcomed to Islam. They caused a great revival of vigour in Islam, and they turned the minds of the Moslem world once more in the direction of a religious war against Christendom. For there had been a sort of truce between these two great religions after the cessation of the Moslem advance and the decline of the Omayyads. Such warfare as had gone on between Christianity and Islam had been rather border-bickering than sustained war. It became only a bitter fanatical struggle again in the eleventh century.

§ 8

But before we go on to tell of the Turks and the Crusaders, the great wars that began between Christendom and Islam, and which have left a quite insane intolerance between these great systems right down to the present time, it is necessary to give a little more attention to the intellectual life of the Arabic-speaking{v2-035} world which was now spreading more and more widely over the regions which Hellenism had once dominated. For some generations before Muhammad, the Arab mind had been, as it were, smouldering, it had been producing poetry and much religious discussion; under the stimulus of the national and racial successes it presently blazed out with a brilliance second only to that of the Greeks during their best period. From a new angle and with a fresh vigour it took up that systematic development of positive knowledge which the Greeks had begun and relinquished. It revived the human pursuit of science. If the Greek was the father, then the Arab was the foster-father of the scientific method of dealing with reality, that is to say, by absolute frankness, the utmost simplicity of statement and explanation, exact record, and exhaustive criticism. Through the Arabs it was and not by the Latin route that the modern world received that gift of light and power.

Their conquests brought the Arabs into contact with the Greek literary tradition, not at first directly, but through the Syrian translations of the Greek writers. The Nestorian Christians, the Christians to the east of orthodoxy, seem to have been much more intelligent and active-minded than the court theologians of Byzantium, and at a much higher level of general education than the Latin-speaking Christians of the west. They

had been tolerated during the latter days of the Sassanids, and they were tolerated by Islam until the ascendancy of the Turks in the eleventh century. They had preserved much of the Hellenic medical science, and had even added to it. In the Omayyad times most of the physicians in the Caliph's dominions were Nestorians, and no doubt many learned Nestorians professed Islam without any serious compunction or any great change in their work and thoughts. They had preserved much of Aristotle both in Greek and in Syrian translations. They had a considerable mathematical literature. Their equipment makes the contemporary resources of Saint Benedict or Cassiodorus seem very pitiful. To these Nestorian teachers came the fresh Arab mind out of the desert, keen and curious, and learnt much and improved upon its teaching.

But the Nestorians were not the only teachers available for the{v2-036} Arabs. Throughout all the rich cities of the east the kindred Jews were scattered with their own distinctive literature and tradition, and the Arab and the Jewish mind reacted upon one another to a common benefit. The Arab was informed and the Jew sharpened to a keener edge. The Jews have never been pedants in the matter of their language; we have already noted that a thousand years before Islam they spoke Greek in Hellenized Alexandria, and now all over this new Moslem world they were speaking and writing Arabic. Some of the greatest of Jewish literature was written in Arabic, the religious writings of Maimonides, for example. Indeed, it is difficult to say in the case of this Arabic culture where the Jew ends and the Arab begins, so important and essential were its Jewish factors.

Moreover, there was a third source of inspiration, more particularly in mathematical science, to which at present it is difficult to do justice—India. There can be little doubt that the Arab mind during its best period was in effective contact with Sanskrit literature and with Indian ideas, and that it derived much from this source.

The distinctive activities of the Arab mind were already manifest under the Omayyads, though it was during the Abbasid time that it made its best display. History is the beginning and core of all sound philosophy and all great literature, and the first Arab writers of distinction were historians, biographers, and quasi-historical poets. Romantic fiction and the short story followed as a reading public developed, willing to be amused. And as reading ceased to be a special accomplishment, and became necessary to every man of affairs and to every youth of breeding, came the systematic growth of an educational system and an educational literature. By the ninth and tenth centuries there are not only grammars, but great lexicons, and a mass of philological learning in Islam.

And a century or so in advance of the west, there grew up in the Moslem world at a number of centres, at Basra, at Kufa, at Bagdad and Cairo, and at Cordoba, out of what were at first religious schools dependent upon mosques, a series of great universities. The light of these universities shone far beyond the Moslem world, and drew students to them from east and west.{v2-037} At Cordoba in particular there were great numbers of Christian students, and the influence of Arab philosophy coming by way of Spain upon the universities of Paris, Oxford, and North Italy and upon Western European thought generally, was very considerable indeed. The name of Averroes (Ibn-rushd) of Cordoba (1126-1198), stands out as that of the culminating influence of Arab philosophy upon European thought. He developed the teachings of Aristotle upon lines that made a sharp division between religious and scientific truth, and so prepared the way for the liberation of scientific research from the theological dogmatism that restrained it both under Christianity and under Islam. Another great name is that of Avicenna (Ibnsinā), the Prince of Physicians (980-1037), who was born at the other end of the Arabic world at Bokhara, and who travelled in Khorasan.... The book-copying industry flourished at Alexandria, Damascus, Cairo, and Bagdad, and about the year 970 there were twenty-seven free schools open in Cordoba for the education of the poor.

"In mathematics," say Thatcher and Schwill,[333] "the Arabs built on the foundations of the Greek mathematicians. The origin of the so-called Arabic numerals is obscure. Under Theodoric the Great, Boethius made use of certain signs which were in part very like the nine digits which we now use. One of the pupils of Gerbert also used signs which were still more like ours, but the zero was unknown till the twelfth century, when it was invented by an Arab mathematician named Muhammad-Ibn-Musa, who also was the first to use the decimal notation, and who gave the digits the value of position. In geometry the Arabs did not add much to Euclid, but algebra is practically their creation; also they developed spherical trigonometry, inventing the sine, tangent, and cotangent. In physics they invented the pendulum, and produced work on optics. They made progress in the science of astronomy. They built several observatories, and constructed many astronomical instruments which are still in use. They calculated the angle of the ecliptic and the precession of the equinoxes. Their knowledge of astronomy was undoubtedly considerable.

"In medicine they made great advances over the work of the{v2-038} Greeks. They studied physiology and hygiene, and their *materia medica* was practically the same as ours to-day. Many of their methods of treatment are still in use among us. Their surgeons understood the use of anæsthetics, and performed some of the most difficult operations known. At the time when in Europe the practice of medicine was

forbidden by the Church, which expected cures to be effected by religious rites performed by the clergy, the Arabs had a real science of medicine. In chemistry they made a good beginning. They discovered many new substances, such as alcohol,[334] potash, nitrate of silver, corrosive sublimate, and nitric and sulphuric acid.... In manufactures they outdid the world in variety and beauty of design and perfection of workmanship. They worked in all the metals—gold, silver, copper, bronze, iron, and steel. In textile fabrics they have never been surpassed. They made glass and pottery of the finest quality. They knew the secrets of dyeing, and they manufactured paper. They had many processes of dressing leather; and their work was famous throughout Europe. They made tinctures, essences, and syrups. They made sugar from the cane, and grew many fine kinds of wine. They practised farming in a scientific way, and had good systems of irrigation. They knew the value of fertilizers, and adapted their crops to the quality of the ground. They excelled in horticulture, knowing how to graft and how to produce new varieties of fruit and flowers. They introduced into the west many trees and plants from the east, and wrote scientific treatises on farming."

One item in this account must be underlined here because of its importance in the intellectual life of mankind, the manufacture of paper. This the Arabs seem to have learnt from the Chinese by way of Central Asia. The Europeans acquired it from the Arabs. Until that time books had to be written upon parchment or papyrus, and after the Arab conquest of Egypt Europe was cut off from the papyrus supply. Until paper became abundant, the art of printing was of little use, and newspapers and popular education by means of books was impossible. This was{v2-039} probably a much more important factor in the relative backwardness of Europe during the dark ages than historians seem disposed to admit....

And all this mental life went on in the Moslem world in spite of a very considerable amount of political disorder. From first to last the Arabs never grappled with the problem, the still unsolved problem, of the stable progressive state; everywhere their form of government was absolutist and subject to the convulsions, changes, intrigues, and murders that have always characterized the extremer forms of monarchy. But for some centuries, beneath the crimes and rivalries of courts and camps, the spirit of Islam did preserve a certain general decency and restraint in life; the Byzantine Empire was impotent to shatter this civilization, and the Turkish danger in the north-east gathered strength only very slowly. Until the Turk fell upon it, the intellectual life of Islam continued. Perhaps it secretly flattered itself that it would always be able to go on in spite of the thread of violence and unreason in its political direction. Hitherto in all countries that has been the characteristic attitude of science and literature. The

intellectual man has been loath to come to grips with the forcible man. He has generally been something of a courtier and time server. Possibly he has never yet been quite sure of himself. Hitherto men of reason and knowledge have never had the assurance and courage of the religious fanatic. But there can be little doubt that they have accumulated settled convictions and gathered confidence during the last few centuries; they have slowly found a means to power through the development of popular education and popular literature, and to-day they are far more disposed to say things plainly and to claim a dominating voice in the organization of human affairs than they have ever been before in the world's history.{v2-040}