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Islam

The green banner of Mohamed and the expansion of world trade

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV428 - September 2010 -

Publication date: Wednesday 15 September 2010

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“A century after the date when Muhammad, an obscure camel driver, had begun to gather around him in his house a few poor Meccans, his successors dominated the approaches of the Loire and the lands beyond the Indus, from Poitiers to Samarkand”. ... from now on, Islam – which was then the ideology of modernity - would govern the expansion of markets, and do so “from the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire until the rise of Venice, and even of England”.

Mohamed was born in Mecca, around 570 A.D. Central Arabia was at that time experiencing rapid development, stimulated by the flow of caravans which conveyed goods and information on the North-South axis, from Palestine to Yemen, and the East-West axis, from Ethiopia to the Persian Gulf. The birth of Islam cannot be understood outside of this context.

At the four cardinal points of this universe, the two great empires, Byzantine Roman - which still controlled most of the lands around the Mediterranean - and Sassanid Persian, and the two civilisations of Ethiopia (the kingdom of Aksum) and of “Arabia Felix” (Himyar or Yemen), constituted powerful centres of attraction. Byzantium was at that time the ally of Christian Ethiopia, while Sassanid Persia had succeeded in subjecting South Arabia, which thus lost part of its dominance over the rest of the peninsula. From 540 to 629 however, the incessant wars between Byzantines and Persians weakened their influence over the disputed zones of the Fertile Crescent, increasingly populated by migrants of Arab origin.

Playing to the full their role of intermediaries, the Bedouin tribes of Central Arabia, partly sedentarized, developed a network of markets and fairs, with Mecca at the centre. They were in contact with many Christian dissidents (monophysites, Nestorians, etc.) of the Fertile Crescent, but also of Ethiopia and Yemen, who were arguing about the double nature, divine and human, of Christ, and also with the Zoroastrians and the Jews of Persia. [Patricia Crone has claimed that Islam must have originated in Northern Arabia, rather than in Central Arabia, where the development of trade, but also the diffusion of Judaism and Christianity, was still very limited in the first third of the 7th century (*Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton U.P., 1987). The bases of this startling hypothesis have however been weakened by recent archaeological digs.]

The Arabia of Mohamed

“The Fertile Crescent and its surrounding areas offer points of contact with more distant trade routes than any other comparable region” of Eurasia. [The quotations from M. S. Hodgson are taken from *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization, vol. 1: The Classical Age of Islam*, Chicago, 1977.] In addition, its relative aridity – apart from its large alluvial plains -, was favourable to semi-nomadic stockbreeders and merchants, who were able together to counterbalance the influence of the landed aristocracy. This social alchemy encouraged the blossoming of monotheist religions - Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity -, which better corresponded to the needs of the commercial classes, who were above all preoccupied by the regulation of interpersonal relations. The individual was from now on presented as a person in charge of a single life (not of multiple reincarnations), before only one God and only one community, incarnating the same justice, with egalitarian aspirations.

On the borders of the great agricultural states, the societies of stockbreeders and merchants, who also often engaged in plunder, controlled the exchanges between the Mediterranean and the southern seas. To be sure, they were dwarves compared to the great agricultural civilizations, but they sat on the shoulders of giants and sometimes saw further than them. The domestication of the camel guaranteed them milk, the caravan (from the Sanskrit *karhaba*

meaning camel) and provided a decisive military asset, in addition to the horse. These tribes, like their cousins, established in the oases, were the most prestigious: they called themselves the Arabs. They enjoyed a social order that was not very hierarchical, not very polarized, and thus characterised by solidarity: the individual was regarded there as a person responsible for his choices, so much so that violence between groups was limited by the reprisals which it provoked.

“During the childhood of Mohamed, notes Hodgson, “the major part of trade between the Mediterranean basin and the Indian Ocean passed through the land routes controlled by the Arabs”. On the spiritual level, while the Persians, guardians of the Jews, were winning victory after victory against Byzantium, biblical ideas of all shades were spreading in Central Arabia along the caravan routes. “People were then turning to the universalist religions, the religions of the individual, those which, instead of relating to ethnicity, aimed at ensuring the salvation of each human being in his or her incomparable singleness”. [Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, London, Penguin Books, 1996. The other quotations from Rodinson are drawn from the revised and corrected version of his brilliant synthesis, published for the first time in 1961. By the same author: *Islam and capitalism*, New York, Pantheon 1973; *Marxism and the Muslim World*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1981; *The Arabs*, London, Croom Helm, 1981; *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, Seattle, distributed by University of Washington Press, c1987; *Islam: politique et croyances*, Paris, Fayard, 1993.] Judaism, already established in some oases, but also Christianity, whose pious hermits struck the imagination of their contemporaries, lacked however local roots.

Was old Allah, the unifying divinity of the Bedouins, who up to now had had no specific cult, going to be able to push aside the innumerable tribal idols and “be reborn” as the authentic God of the Book? Rodinson considers that it was in resonance with the time: “An Arab state, guided by an Arab ideology, adapted to the new conditions and however still close to the Bedouin milieu that it was to structure, constituting a power that was respected on equal terms with the great empires, that was the great need of the time. The road was open to the man of genius who would know better than others how to respond to it”. This mission would fall to Mecca, which controlled the North-South axis of the Hejaz - the main trading junction of Western and Central Arabia, at equal distance from Syria, Persia and Yemen. It should be said that its place of worship, the Ka' Ba, already under the supervision of Allah, offered a sanctuary to the many pagan divinities of the whole region and even attracted Christians on pilgrimage.

The first steps of a prophet

At the beginning of the 7th century, Arabia benefited from the political weakening of its neighbours, in a context of dynamization of the commercial exchanges on its territory. On the cultural level, this vitality resulted in the flowering of the pre-Islamic poetry which contributed to the development of a common language, starting from various dialects. These odes were recited, they were rhythmic, with a codified metre. They vividly depicted the life, the ideals and the feelings of the Arabs of this time. [Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard U.P., 1991, pp. 12-14.] *The Madman and Laylā* [Andre Miquel & Ghani Alani, *Le Fou de Laylā*, Paris, Sindbad-Actes Sud, 2003.] dates from the second half of the 7th century: it evokes the impossible love which can lead to social transgression, to madness, but also to spirituality:

“In the evening her face lit up the darkness like the lamp of a monk withdrawn from the world. ”

These inspired poets, just like the Christian hermits, were not unconnected, as we shall see, with the destiny of Mohamed (we should rather call him Muhammad - Mehmet for the Turks, Mamadou for the Africans). He was born in an ordinary clan of the powerful Quraysh tribe, which controlled the temple of Mecca, and which according to legend dominated the main trade routes of the Hejaz. Having lost his father and mother at a young age, he was taken in by his grandfather, then by his uncle, Abu Tālib, a well-off merchant, before marrying at the age of twenty-five a rich widow fifteen years older than him, Khadīja, with whom he had four daughters.

The historian knows more about Mohamed than about Jesus [The life of Mohamed is known to us by accounts (hadīth), of which the oldest probably go back to at least 120 years after the facts. They were validated by great Muslim jurists who attested to their credibility by analyzing the chain of testimonies on which they depend, not always avoiding contradictions, with the result that they often added: "And God is the most erudite". For further information: Ibn Warraq (ed.), *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, New York, Amherst, 2000.]. He is apparently described as someone of average height, with broad shoulders and a strong bone structure, solidly built. With a large head, a long thin face, enlivened by dark eyes, he was thoughtful and well-balanced, able to negotiate at length as well as to move quickly into action. He quickly became a prosperous merchant, to such an extent that his language remained impregnated by it: thus the Koran evokes the last judgement as "the settling of accounts" (21, 1). This material success however did not appear to bring him sufficient satisfaction: his incapacity to give his wife a male heir troubled him; his voluntary renunciation of any extra-marital relation no doubt frustrated him, in a world where young men led very free sexual lives; and especially, he suffered from not being able to utilise his exceptional spiritual and political qualities.

In the tracks of his Arab predecessors of monotheism (*hanif*), but also of Jewish and Christian mystics, Mohamed spent long hours meditating in a cave on the hill of Hira, near Mecca. It was there that one night he received "the True Vision, like dawn breaking", as he later confided to his future wife Aisha. It was first of all a voice which said to him: "You are the Messenger of God! (...) After the sensations of a supernatural presence, the vague visions, the hearing of simple phrases, came the long sequences of well organised words, presenting a clear meaning, a message". Finally, the powerful Being ordered him to recite: "In the name of God..." He had just pronounced the first words of what would become the Koran. "All that happened in the brain of a single man", comments Rodinson, "but it reflected there, it stirred there, the problems of a whole world and the historic circumstances were such that the product of this mental agitation was such as to shake Arabia, and beyond that, the universe".

The social discourse of incipient Islam

Any monotheist faith tends to pose the principle of the equality of each individual and their submission to the will of God, but also their salvation or their judgment at the end of time, without regard to their fortune. This is all the more true for Islam, which rejects even the Christian dogma of the Trinity in the name of the absolute singleness of Allah. Thus the Koran presents to the faithful, in a very colourful way, the torments of Hell and the delights of Paradise. "The individual (...), underlines Rodinson, "took on a particular and eminent value. It was with him that the Supreme Being was concerned, who had created him and who would judge him without taking into consideration relationship, family or tribe".

As of the closing decades of the 6th century, notes Hodgson, the enrichment of the merchants of Mecca "threatened tribal solidarity and, in any case, undermined the Bedouin ideal of a generous man for whom wealth was a welcome but relatively ephemeral distinction". So it was the freest spirits, rejecting the domination of the leading layers of Meccan society, who first turned towards Mohamed: among them, there were young people from good families who were in revolt against their elders, but also members of less influential clans, non Meccan, individuals who were outside clans, even freedmen or slaves. Moreover, the prophet took the side of the poor and the orphans, admonishing the rich Qurayshis, for whose arrogance he had contempt:

"Watch out! You do not honour the orphan!

You do not encourage people to feed the poor!

You greedily devour your inheritance!

You love wealth with a limitless passion! ”

(Koran, 89,17-20)

In the principle of the revealed religions, the injunctions of the Very High are communicated to men through a prophet, whose position makes him legitimately have the ambition of being the supreme spiritual power: “How could a man with whom God spoke directly”, remarks Rodinson, “be subject to the decisions of any senate. How could the directives of the Supreme Being be discussed by the Meccan aristocracy? ” Besides, does not Mohamed develop “a critical attitude [Rodinson even says: “implicitly revolutionary”] - towards those who are rich and powerful, therefore conformists?”.

So measures of repression struck the roughly forty partisans of Mohamed, in particular the most vulnerable of them: thus, the black slave Bilal was exposed to the sun by his masters, at the hottest hours of the day, with a rock on his chest. In this heavy atmosphere, the prophet still however won some disciples, like Omar ibn Al-Khattab, who would later succeed him as the second caliph. Some emigrated to Abyssinia, although the majority still enjoyed the support of their clan: Mohamed was protected by the Banou Hashim, in particular by his uncle, the very influential Abu Talib. It was the death of the latter, in 619, and that of his first wife, Khadija, which broke this precarious equilibrium. In 622, while a starving Byzantium was besieged by the Persians and the Avars in an atmosphere of apocalypse, the small group of believers took the road to Medina, 350 kilometres to the north-west: it was the Hegira, that is to say the beginning of the Muslim calendar. Here, the new social organization over which Mohamed presided, encouraged by the voice of Allah, continued to defend the interests of the orphans, the beggars and the travellers. It recommended treating slaves well and if possible freeing them; slavery was even proscribed among the faithful. In 632, when the prophet in person, a few months before his death, led the first pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj), he insisted on the equality of all men before Allah, whether they were rich or poor, Arab or not, thus inspiring the fairly general rejection of racism by Islam. {{{Under the green banner of trade}}} Hodgson insists on the fact that the community of the faithful - those who accepted the revelation - were from now on joined together within the umma (from {umm}, mother) by bonds that went beyond tribal barriers. In Medina, Mohamed endeavoured to equip this community with clear rules, but also with financial means, in particular by means of taxes, thus providing the foundations of a new social order. He arbitrated the conflicts between pagan clans and benefited at the beginning from a certain benevolent attitude of the powerful Jewish tribes, from whom he borrowed certain rituals: the midday prayer turned towards Jerusalem and the fast of Kippur; Allah also allowed eating the food of the people of the Book and marrying their women. During this time, he extended his political influence by ensuring the independence of his supporters by means of a series of “raids” against the caravans from Mecca (private war was at that time a perfectly acceptable practice). The adversaries within the Bedouin tribes seem to have been few: over time, they came round or were eliminated. That was the case with the poetess Aqma, assassinated in her sleep. Had she not declared: “Arseholes of Makhlik and Nabat (...) [clans and tribes of Medina]. You obey a foreigner (...) Is there not a man of honour (...) who will cut short the hopes of these fools?” (quoted by Rodinson).

On the other hand, the Jews had more threatening political ambitions and greater ideological cohesion. They treated the religious ideas of Mohamed with contempt, and he challenged them by asserting the ancestral origins of Islam: did not the Arabs descend from Ismael, son of Abraham (Ibrahim), himself original founder of the religions of the Book?. He also broke with them by instituting the fast of Ramadan, by rejecting some of their food prohibitions (however he banned wine, which was associated with pagan religions), then by requiring believers to pray towards Mecca. He got the better of them by a series of expulsions, expropriations and massacres, among which the massacre of Banou Qorayza, in 627, left several hundred dead. He also took his distance from the Christians by recognizing Jesus as a prophet, admittedly capable of miracles, but nevertheless a man like other men.

Master of Medina and of the very busy trade route of the North of the Hejaz, from which it drew more and more resources, the party of Mohamed posed an insoluble problem to the rich merchants of Mecca, who did not succeed in

defeating it by armed force. This was because the emerging young state, which owed its strong cohesion to the Muslim ideology, was led by an exceptional man who could reconcile long term vision and a sense of opportunity. He was also surrounded by wise advice, in particular from his two fathers-in-law and successors, Abu Bekr and Omar, who were sometimes opposed by his cousin Ali, husband of his daughter Fāṭima.

In 628, Mohamed announced that he intended to begin the spiritual conquest of Mecca by leading a peaceful march. The enterprise was crowned with success, in spite of the humiliating concessions that he had to accept: as of 629, Muslims were allowed into the city for the pilgrimage. In 630, however, he prepared a great military expedition to intimidate his last adversaries: the Meccan aristocracy, divided, avoided a showdown by submitting and then converting. Medina thus became the capital of Arabia, unified around its prophet, around whom the great Qurayshi families now crowded. At the height of his power, the Messenger of Allah died on June 6, 632.

At the same time, an exhausted Byzantium once again gained the advantage over Persia, which was finally defeated. The armies of the first caliphs (heirs of the prophet), which could no longer hold to ransom the Islamized Arabs, seized this opportunity to launch out on the conquest of the known world. As Rodinson recounts, they advanced at lightning speed: "A century after the date when Muhammad, an obscure camel driver, had begun to gather around him in his house a few poor Meccans, his successors dominated the approaches of the Loire and the lands beyond the Indus, from Poitiers to Samarkand". For the philosopher Ernst Bloch: "The green flag soon floated over a movement that was homogeneous, above the commercial, warlike and religious storm" which was turning the Middle East and the Mediterranean world upside down: from now on, Islam – which was then the ideology of modernity - would govern the expansion of markets, and do so "from the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire until the rise of Venice, and even of England". [Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1986.]

The Koran and women

"Men have authority over women"; they are entitled to admonish them and even to strike them (Koran, 4, 34). Polygamy is limited to four women (except for the prophet), provided that the husband feels capable of treating them on an equal footing. This of course only concerned a minority of sufficiently well-off believers.

Women were active within early Islam. They questioned, advised and fought. Thus Aāsha, one of the wives of Mohamed, was astonished that Allah only spoke to men, provoking a modification of the revelation, which was now addressed to both sexes. As a general rule, however, they received a half-share of inheritance, because they did not have a material responsibility with regard to their family (Koran, 4, 11).

The sexual desire of women is reputed to be ten times superior to that of men. This is not a cause for blame – in heaven, each orgasm should last at least twenty-four years - but must be strictly contained within patriarchal marriage. The Koran does not evoke excision.

Concerning the wearing of the veil, a Koranic verse recommends women to hide their breasts with their shawl (24, 31); another enjoins them to tighten their dress (33, 59). It was also prescribed to address the wives of the prophet behind a curtain (33, 53). Tradition argues that the body of women must be hidden, except for their face and their hands (this is, however, a hadīth whose chain of transmission is not well established).

Adultery must be proven by four concurring testimonies in order to be punished (4, 15). Stoning is not mentioned in the Koran, but in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy, 22, 23-24). Some hadīth refer to it, but their credibility is doubtful.

An Islam of the poor?

“The Koran (...) transmitted to the future generations the message of an oppressed man, who had at a certain moment been made indignant by injustice and oppression. It contained in its chaotic text invectives and challenges to the powerful, calls for the equity and the equality of men. One day, men were found who would seize hold of these words and make weapons of them.

“The original Arabs of (...) had had to accept equality with those whom they had conquered and among whom many now identified completely with them. The revolutionary movement which imposed this equality triumphed in the name of its own values, the values which had brought them victory. (...) Throughout the centuries, many other movements (...) would do the same. (...) Somewhere, at the source of these agitations, successful or not, of these more or less justified, more or less inadequate conceptions, , there was the man who had been an obscure camel-driver of a humble family of the Quraysh tribe. (...)

“Ideas have their own life and this life was revolutionary. Once anchored in the memory of men, written down on papyrus, on parchment or even, for the Koran, on flat camel bones, they continue their action, to the consternation of the statesmen and churchmen who have used them, channelled them, worked out a casuistry in order to eliminate from them the dangerous repercussions for the good order of a well regulated society. ”

(Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 1994)

When and how was the Koran written?

There are considerable disagreements among scientists today over the concrete modalities and the probable time of the final drafting of the Koran. Was it essentially completed while Mohamed was alive or just after his death, or some 200 years later, well after the Arab conquest? For Maxime Rodinson: “The groups of words that Muhammad recited as having been inspired to him by Allah, the revelations, formed what was called a ‘recital’, in Arabic *qor’ Ān*. They were written down during his lifetime on scattered documents, pieces of leather, flat camel bones, shards of pottery, palm stems, etc. During his life also, these fragments began to be gathered together, they made suras or chapters from them. (...) A book (*kitāb*) like those of the Jews and the Christians was constituted. (...) Thus the whole of the revelations was set in the mould of units in which a certain order, a certain plan could be distinguished. (...) This work was certainly done at least under the supervision of Muhammad, if did not work on it himself. (...)” (*Muhammad*, 1996).

For John Wansbrough: the rewriting of the Koran was a long process, marked by many confrontations with Judaism and Christianity, and its final version is posterior to the year 800 A.D. (*Quranic Studies*, Oxford, 1977; *The Sectarian Medium: Content and Composition off Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford, 1978.). Furthermore, Patricia Crone (1987) has gone so far as to question that Mohamed and Islam originated in Mecca (cf. note 1).

To learn more, consult the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, 12 vol., Leiden, Brill, 1960-2005.

Trade and religions of individual salvation

“As long as he was bound, so to speak, organically to his clan, his tribe, his village, his city, he was nothing more, in a rigorously hierarchical society, than an interchangeable element, riveted to the place which destiny had assigned to him for a function that was always the same; man was subject to the idea of a life beyond the grave similar or parallel

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to this one. Over there too, the social unities of this world would continue to regiment the pale phantoms which would lead a diminished existence. In these lands beyond death, the shades of servants would serve the ghosts of the masters, the phantoms of peasants would cultivate the land for them and the artisans beyond the grave would provide them with all that they needed. Merit and demerit on this earth did not make much of a difference. (...)

“But when there came the time of large-scale international trade which mixed peoples, men and ideas, when societies were established where money became the measure of all things, where the money economy broke down the borders between different ethnic groups, where everyone could make his personal fortune, where the value of the individual in this world depended on the place that he made for himself by his own efforts, people started to hope that everyone would have a destiny at his own measure. Consequently, prophets arose who (...) promised individually [to the rich] a punishment first of all in this world, then in the other. From then on societies and communities were constituted, which taught their members how to attain a happy condition in the other world, how to save themselves individually.” (Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad*, 1996)