

Book Review

Major Arthur Glyn Leonard (1909). *Islam, Her Moral and Spiritual Value: A Rational and Psychological Study*. London: Luzac. 160 Pages.

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Major Arthur Glyn Leonard (1856-1939) was a soldier, ethnographer, and Rhodesian pioneer. However, he was far from typical in racial outlook of his fellow Rhodesian pioneers underlined in his book, entitled “Islam. Her Moral and Spiritual Value. A Rational and Psychological Study.”¹ A flattering foreword was noted to the book by Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928), order of the star of India, an Indian/British Indian jurist, a prominent political leader, and author of a number of influential books on Muslim history and the modern development of Islam. Ali noted the followings about the book:

Major Leonard has dealt with his subject in this broad spirit; he has approached it with sympathy born of intimate acquaintance with races and peoples who profess the Faith of Islam. His is eminently a philosophical study of its Founder, of its true moral and spiritual utility, and of the great impetus it gave to the progress of the world. Moslems, laymen and scholars, will probably not agree with some of Major Leonard’s remarks in his outline of the Prophet’s character and temperament; but they must all acknowledge his sincerity. He describes Mohammed as a great and true man—great not only as a teacher, but as a patriot and statesman; a material as well as a spiritual builder, who constructed a nation and an enduring Faith, which holds, to a greater degree than most others, the hearts of millions of human beings; a man true to himself and his people, but above all to his God.

The book included eight chapters as follows: “The So-called Moslem Menace!,” “An Outline of Mohammed’s Temperament and Characteristics,” “The Environment that Moulded Mohammed,” “Mohammed’s Principles and Beliefs,” “The Material and Other Sides of the Prophet’s Character,” “A Brief Summary of Mohammed’s Work and Worth,” “Moslem Morality and Christendom’s Attitude towards Islam” and “Europe’s Debt to Islam: Ethnic Spheres of Influence.”

In the first chapter titled “The So-called Moslem Menace!,” major Leonard has applied himself to expose the absurdity and hollowness of the Pan-Islamic “bogy.” He proves conclusively that the Pan-Islamic movement is no modern political movement; but that morally and spiritually Islam, in its very essence, is Pan-Islamic. In this chapter, he has dealt the moral and spiritual utility, with the soul of Islam. Major Leonard summarized the essence of Islam with these sentences: “For Islam, believe me, has a soul—a sincere and earnest soul, a great and profound soul—that is worth knowing. It is in this soul that the whole kernel and essence of Islam lies.” In the following paragraphs, the author explains his purpose in this study and how he followed the path to reach his goal, and what needs to be done to fully understand the spirit of Muhammad or the soul of Islam.

In this short study, my one idea all through has been to delineate Mohammed as he was and Islam as she is. For this reason, I have neither painted them with my own coloring, nor introduced into their natural complexion any outside flesh tints. In plain English, I have not placed upon their beliefs and principles a construction that, being ethnically foreign to the entire sociological system upon which they are based, would have been a fundamental error, at complete variance with them.

The better to achieve my object, I have consulted no works on either Mohammed or Islam, but have gone straight to the source or fountain head—to Mohammed himself, the Koran, and to Moslems of various nationalities with whom I have been brought into close and personal touch during a wide and a varied experience. It is here in the man and his work

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¹ Arthur Glyn Leonard (2009), Dictionary of Irish Biography, <https://www.dib.ie/index.php/biography/leonard-arthur-glyn-a4796>.

that the true soul of Islam is to be found. Islam is the devotion of Moslems to Mohammed and the Koran-his work, plus their patient resignation and entire submission to God, His will and His service! The man of fixed and unchanging purpose has a supreme contempt for obstacles. But when, as in Mohammed's case, that purpose is the glorification of God, he has at hand a lever that can move the world. In this peculiar sense, the great Prophet of Arabia was self-contained. He had everything within himself: that everything centered in God and Arabian unity. He sought only what he needed. This was to unify God and his country. How he succeeded is a matter of history.

If ever man on this earth found God, if ever man devoted his life to God's service with a good and a great motive, it is certain that the Prophet of Arabia was that man. In any case, if the satisfaction which ensues as the consequence of duty done, and well done, is happiness; if the consciousness that he has done his best in all sincerity and conscientiousness, gives happiness to the ego, then it is possible to assume that in bequeathing the grand heritage of Islam to posterity, Mohammed must have gone to his final rest in a state of supreme happiness.

To thoroughly comprehend the spirit of Mohammed or the soul of Islam, the student himself must be thoroughly in earnest and sincere. He must in addition possess that moral, mental and intellectual sympathy which gives the ego an insight into human subtleties as well as simplicities. He must take Mohammed and Islam as he finds them—in the same intensely sincere spirit that constituted the one and inculcated the other. A man not only great, but one of the greatest—i.e. truest—men that Humanity has ever produced. Great, i.e. not simply as a prophet, but as a patriot and a statesman: a material as well as a spiritual builder who constructed a great nation, a greater empire, and more even than all these, a still greater Faith. True, moreover, because he was true to himself, to his people, and above all to his God. Recognizing this, he will thus acknowledge that Islam is a profound and true cult, which strives to uplift its votaries from the depths of human darkness upwards into the higher realm of Light and Truth.

In the second chapter, the author extensively wrote his thoughts about “An Outline of Mohammed's Temperament and Characteristics”. He particularly emphasizes that the more a person reads, researches and understands the Quran, the more obvious he will understand the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) temperament and characteristics. In this chapter, the prominent paragraphs about the characteristics of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) are as follows:

One of the first thoughts that a very careful perusal of the Koran brings home to me, is the intense humanity of Mohammed and his work. The more one studies the various motives that led to his so-called revelations, the more one is struck by the strong associations that connect these divine messages and ordinances with the actions and movements that were going on all round him, as well as in his own mind-owing in a great measure to his own preaching.

The more one studies the Koran, the more obvious does it become that Mohammed had a powerfully receptive mind, and a specially retentive memory. Notwithstanding that he was illiterate, unable even to read and write, it is clear that he was well versed in all the tenets and traditions of his own people and of the Jews; and that in addition he had made himself acquainted with some of the doctrines and dogmas of the Christian Gospels.

Mohammed was a thinker and a worker not only for his own, but for all time. He recognized that man was equally a political and religious product of God's creation. He understood that as a counterpoise to man's materialism and to the destructive in his nature, is that indefinable essence which we call the spiritual and the constructive. The more one looks into and understands the Koran, the more obvious is it that Mohammed concentrated all the active and vigorous energies of his vivid and powerful imagination, also his virile mentality, on the accomplishment of his great design.

In the third chapter, “The Environment that Moulded Mohammed,” the author particularly underlines that it is impossible to understand the Prophet Muhammad’s (SAW) strong personality without examining the specific features and conditions of the desert. In this chapter major Leonard wrote the following paragraphs:

A true son of the desert, it is impossible to understand the powerful and complex personality of Mohammed, unless we can appreciate the peculiar character and genius of the desert. More so in some ways even than the seaman, the dweller or sojourner in the desert is distinct and unique in himself. Possessing the courage of the Fatalist, and as free as the roving winds of heaven, he is all the same of a shrinking and timorous nature, confronted as he often is by certain aspects and phenomena that imperil his life and strike down to the very roots of his moral consciousness.

As it has been with all the great religious leaders of history, so too it was with Mohammed. Fearing, yet venerating, the might, the majesty and the goodness of God, the companionship that he most wanted was not human but divine. Communion with Him, through his own thought and through the great Infinity around him, was what his heart most desired. A town Arab by birth and breeding, a Bedawin by feeling and instinct, he was something more than a mere native of Arabia. Rather a son of men, an apostle chosen out specially from among men, that he might bear to them the message and truth of God.

Surely, if ever man was in deadly earnest, this faithful son of Arabia was. If ever man opened his heart and soul to the Father and Mother of all things, this Mohammed, the merchant, did. Truly if ever the great Author of our being responded to a soul in silent agony, i.e. in conflict, in a struggle for victory, it was to this great descendant of the bond-woman Hagar! For in Islam, and the soul of Islam, such as he inculcated, the victory was greater than any Marathon or Thermopylae.

In the fourth chapter, “Muhammad’s Principles and Beliefs” were examined in detail. The author wrote that the Prophet Mohammed (SAW) was a supporter of unity and cohesion, that he was sincere, morally persistent and determined, and that both body and mind cleanliness is the absolute essential in Islam. The author also cited some ayats from the Holy Qur’an related to these subjects.

Mohammed, as I have more than once said, was all for unity and cohesion, therefore against division and disintegration of any kind. Concentration was as the breath of life to him. Dissension a deadly evil. In his scheme of religion and politics, there was no place for schism. Schism meant discord, and discord the devil. This Statesman Prophet was the essence and personification of centralization and concord. For unity alone rendered Islam feasible. Thus in the second Surah he insists that mankind was of one faith from the beginning. Thus too as a just, faithful and consistent man, he is opposed to violence and taking the offensive, even in the name and under the cloak of religion; he constantly advocates and authorizes (that is, has God’s authority for) the defensive. Yet to him, fanatic as he was with regard to religion, Islam was the only true Faith, the covenant, the sure ark of God that alone could secure salvation. Of this and of God he was no more than an Apostle—i.e. a messenger; also an expounder—but as such he obviously tried to live up to his name of Faithful. This speaks volumes for his toleration and humanity in an age when neither one nor the other of these attributes were much in repute; when both, in fact, were at a low ebb. Yet it shows us how intensely human the Prophet was. A man of great patience, prudence and trustworthiness, of retentive memory, strong character, and with the disposition of a judge—a very commander of men. Thus he acknowledges the divinity of God in forgiving, and the humanity of man in demanding reparation and restitution. Here the moral excellence of Mohammed shines out as a brilliant.

But of all the passages in the Koran, the following is, in many ways, one of the most significant: “Whatever good befalleth thee, O man, it is from God; and whatever evil befalleth thee, it is from thyself.” It is obvious from this that the prophet believed evil to be a human weakness with man as an active and self-willed agent. “And who is more unjust than he who deviseth a lie against God, that he may seduce men without understanding?”

The frequent repetition of this and other like passages is significant of Mohammed's sincerity, also of his moral persistence and tenacity.

In Islam, not only was cleanliness of the body an absolute essential, but cleanliness of mind. Filthy immoral actions and depravities that he knew existed, unjust violence and iniquities, whether openly done or in concealment, were condemned and forbidden in scathing terms as a violation of God's express command. The sophistry that would make an evil to be no crime unless found out, he denounced with all the fiery ardour of his fervent nature. From God there was no concealment. In his eyes it was a crime all the same-greater, in fact, because of attempted concealment.

In the fifth chapter entitled "The Material and Other Sides of the Prophet's Character," major Leonard explained that all the senses of the Prophet Mohammed (SAW) were developed, that he had not only a spiritual but also a material side like every human being, that he was not only a preacher and a prophet, but a statesman, and that his sense and spirit of duty was very strong supporting by giving verses from the Holy Qur'an.

As an observer, all his senses were developed and on the alert. He not only saw, but felt every vibration that thrilled, as it were, the very soul of the first great mother. In every flitting cloud, as in every fugitive thought, he was conscious of an unseen Power.

Mohammed was not only spiritual. He, like every human being, had a material side to his character. Not only was he a preacher and a prophet; not only was he a lawgiver-a law and a light unto his people to this very day; but as one who himself rigidly practiced self-denial and economy and condemned extravagance, who possessed the organizing ability to administer the estate of others, and who could command preferably in peace, but if necessary in war, he was a statesman and an economist.

To him (Mohammed) personally Islam was a something more than a mere creed or belief. It was God's own religion sealed and delivered to him by God. Not to deliver it to his people as commanded, not to carry it through—by persuasion first of all, by fire and sword if man's obstinacy and rejection of it made it necessary—would mean that he had failed in his duty to the Most High. The sense and spirit of duty was stronger in Mohammed than in Nelson. In him it was not simply an active and vital principle. It was an impelling force. So inseparable from God, that to him it appeared as God Himself. But with him God always came first. His duty to his country was subordinate to his duty to his Maker. His duty to Him, therefore, was his duty to his country.

In the sixth chapter entitled "A Brief Summary of Mohammed's Work and Worth," major Leonard emphasized that the Prophet Mohammed (SAW) was a very great man and that the current soul of Islam is the soul of Mohammed. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) included major Leonard's following statement about the Holy Qur'an under the title of "Testimony of Foreign Philosophers on the Confirmation of the Qur'an" in *İşaratü'l-İ'câz* from the *Risale-i Nur* Collection, a tafsir of the Holy Qur'an: If a book is to be gauged by its net results—by the effect it has produced on all that is deepest and best in human nature-then the Koran must necessarily take high rank as one of the world's greatest works. Leonard also noted that "As God's word, there is a sanctity in the Koran for every Moslem that exceeds the reverence of the Christian for the Bible, as much as the fiery splendor of the sun surpasses the cold pale glamour of the moon-which is but a shadow, a pale reflection of the substance and reality." In this chapter, the author noted the following paragraphs about the Prophet Mohammed (SAW).

Looking at him and his work from every aspect, Mohammed was not merely a heroic prophet. He was much more. A king and a leader of men. A ruler and a judge over them. If we are to judge of him, to take him for what he is worth, by his work—the rich ripe fruit of his rare and strenuous effort—the Koran on the one hand, and, on the other, the mighty spiritual force he has left behind him in the Church of Islam, we must pronounce him to have been a great and remarkable man. A man who, when his true value is understood and appreciated, will stand out in history as a political and religious reformer of a virile and heroic type. A man who will be regarded in even a greater light than he now is, when

humanity shall have become less denominational and more rationally humanitarian. In reality Mohammed was an ultra great man.

Mohammed fought with all his might and main. In exact proportion to his labour he has prevailed. Prevailed over the issues of life and death. Death had no terrors for him. Life alone was full of terror—i.e. of the fear of God. In death there was no sting. In the grave there was no victory. Death but killed the mortal part of him. The spiritual it has increased and multiplied out of all proportion. The present soul of Islam is the spirit of Mohammed. Only when this exhausts itself will Islam wither and die! To this day he is, and for many aeons to come he will be in spirit, the ruler and judge over Islam. In spite of sects and theological speculators, as long as Islam lasts, his spirit will continue to preside over its destinies.

In the seventh chapter, “Moslem Morality and Christendom’s Attitude towards Islam” the author reported an extensive information about Moslem morality and Christendom’s attitude towards Islam giving some examples. The author has also stated that Christian missionaries are often a cause of war in various parts of the world, that Islam is not the enemy, that Christendom presents Islam as an enemy, that Islam has no intention of encroaching on Christendom, that Islam and Christendom are completely different realms and that it is impossible to bring these two groups together.

....But in the case of Islam there can be no mistake. True, the Arabs in themselves were a great and virile people. But it was the genius of Mohammed, the spirit he breathed into them through the soul of Islam, that exalted them. That raised them out of the lethargy and low level of tribal stagnation, up to the high water mark of national unity and Empire. It was in the sublimity of Mohammed’s deism, the simplicity, the sobriety and purity it inculcated, the fidelity of its founder to his own tenets, that acted on their moral and intellectual fibre with all the magnetism of true inspiration. To them Islam was the Faith—the Faith God.

It is an indisputable fact that in China and in various parts of the world, the high-handed interference and injudicious zeal of Christian missionaries—outrunning all discretion, tact, and common sense—has frequently been the cause of war and bloodshed.

Islam is not an enemy. It is Christendom only that makes her so. It is that craven conscience, which finding in her a teacher and a worker of solid worth, has aroused the envy and malice of the ever jealous theological spirit, which has invariably been responsible for so much war and bloodshed. It is a relic of the same militant envy that, burning with fury throughout the Dark Ages, fired the Crusades to a very great extent. A cramped and dogmatic spirit such as this does not surely represent the true spirit of modern Europe, which is presumably rational and reasonable, and consistent with the genius of progress and advancement. There is no real and spontaneous Moslem menace. Even, however, if there is, it is but the re-echo of these aggressively Christian sentiments. It is but the answer to a challenge, as undignified and contemptuous as it is aggressive and defiant.

Islam, I repeat, is not an enemy, but a co-worker with us in the great and glorious cause of uplifting humanity from a lower to a higher civilization. Islam has neither intention nor design of encroaching upon the spiritual preserves of Christendom. Further, she has no itching wish to do so. Her leaders have the common sense to recognize that Christendom is separated from her by ethnic laws and social customs that are indivisible. She is only too willing; all, in fact, she asks, is to be left alone to work in her own sphere of influence.

The origin of Islam, as I have described it, is in itself evidence of Islam’s moral and spiritual stability-of that part of her which has not deviated from, but clung to the spirit of her great Founder. But even allowing for denominational deviations, Islam in the mass is truly devout. The two creeds represent two absolutely divergent sections of humanity. Unquestionably, in a social, moral and religious sense, Islam is Islam, and Christendom,

Christendom. To remedy this divergence, to bring the two sections together, enters into the impossible.

In the eighth chapter entitled “Europe’s Debt to Islam: Ethnic Spheres of Influence,” major Leonard has noted that Europe owes to Islam, that the religion of Mohammed, far from being antagonistic to human development, that Islam materially helped in the progress of the world.

But apart from all these weighty considerations, the attitude of Europe towards Islam should be one of eternal gratitude, instead of base ingratitude and forgetfulness. Never to this day has Europe acknowledged in an honest and whole-hearted manner the great and everlasting debt she owes to Islamic culture and civilization. Only in a lukewarm and perfunctory way has she recognized that when, during the Dark Ages, her people were sunk in feudalism and ignorance, Moslem civilization under the Arabs reached a high standard of social and scientific splendor that kept alive the flickering embers of European society from utter decadence.

It cannot surely be said of Christian Europe that for centuries now she has done her best to hide her obligation to the Arabs? Yet most assuredly obligations such as these are far too sacred to lie much longer hidden! Let Europe—Christendom rather—confess and acknowledge her fault. Let her proclaim aloud to her own ignorant masses, and to the world at large, the ingratitude she has displayed, and the eternal debt she owes to the Islam she no longer despises. Open confession is good for the soul, and only a confession such as this can wipe off the black stain which has for so long besmirched her fair fame. Let Christendom once and for all recognize that the greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none—that acknowledging a fault is saying, only in other words, we are wiser to-day than we were yesterday. Only through magnanimity such as this can she claim redemption. For she must surely know that “injustice founded on religious rancour and national conceit cannot be perpetrated for ever.”

Lastly, major Leonard noted, “In every clime and under a variety of conditions, I have been in touch with Moslems of all classes and shades, and have always found them animated by the same spirit for race or color makes no difference to the spirit of Islam.” As the final word, I strongly believe that this book should be read by all Muslim and non-Muslim people interested in Islam, Islamic history, or Islamic psychology.

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