

The strength of Calvinism was the truth on which it insisted—the omnipotence of God and the dependence and insufficiency of man; but its error, which was the negation of free will, also killed it. Men could not permanently accept so monstrous a denial of common sense and common experience. Arianism lived by the truth that was in it, to wit, the fact that the reason could not directly reconcile the opposite aspects of a great mystery—that of the Incarnation. But Arianism died because it added to this truth a falsehood—to wit, that the apparent contradiction could be solved by denying the full divinity of our Lord.

And so on with the other heresies. But Mohammedanism, though it also contained errors side by side with those great truths, flourished continually, *and as a body of doctrine is flourishing still*, though 1,300 years have passed since its first great victories in Syria. The causes of this vitality are very difficult to explore, and perhaps cannot be reached. For myself I should ascribe it in some part to the fact that Mohammedanism being a thing from the outside, a heresy that did not arise from within the body of the Christian community but beyond its frontiers, has always possessed a reservoir of men, newcomers pouring in to revivify its energies.

Whatever the cause be, Mohammedanism has survived, and survived vigorously. Missionary effort has had no appreciable effect upon it. It still converts pagan savages wholesale. It even attracts from time to time some European eccentric, who joins its body. But the Mohammedan never becomes a Catholic. No fragment of Islam ever abandons its sacred book, its code of morals, its organized system of prayer, its simple doctrine.

In view of this, anyone with a knowledge of history is bound to ask himself whether we shall not see in the future a revival of Mohammedan political power, and the renewal of the old pressure of Islam upon Christendom.

The recrudescence of Islam, the possibility of that terror under which we lived for centuries reappearing, and of our civilization again fighting for its life against what was its chief enemy for a thousand years, seems fantastic. Who in the Mohammedan world today can manufacture and maintain the complicated instruments of modern war? Where is the political machinery whereby the religion of Islam can play an equal part in the modern world?

I say the suggestion that Islam may re-arise sounds fantastic, but this is only because men are always powerfully affected by the immediate past: one might say that they are blinded by it.

Cultures spring from religions; ultimately the vital force that maintains any culture is its philosophy, its attitude toward the universe; the decay of a religion involves the decay of the culture corresponding to it—we see that most clearly in the breakdown of Christendom today. The bad work begun at the Reformation is bearing its final fruit in the dissolution of our ancestral doctrines. The very structure of our society is dissolving.

In the place of the old Christian enthusiasms of Europe there came, for a time, the enthusiasm for nationality, the religion of patriotism. But self-worship is not enough, and the forces that are making for the destruction of our culture, notably the Communist propaganda from Moscow, have a likelier future before them than our old-fashioned patriotism.

In Islam there has been no such dissolution of ancestral doctrine—or, at any rate, nothing corresponding to the universal breakup of religion in Europe. The whole spiritual strength of

Islam is still present in the masses of Syria and Anatolia, of the East Asian mountains, of Arabia, Egypt, and North Africa.

The final fruit of this tenacity, the second period of Islamic power, may be delayed; but I doubt whether it can be permanently postponed.

There is nothing in the Mohammedan civilization itself that is hostile to the development of scientific knowledge or of mechanical aptitude. I have seen some good artillery work in the hands of Mohammedan students of that arm; I have seen some of the best driving and maintenance of mechanical road transport conducted by Mohammedans. There is nothing inherent to Mohammedanism to make it incapable of modern science and modern war. Indeed the matter is not worth discussing. It should be self-evident to anyone who has seen the Mohammedan culture at work.

That culture happens to have fallen back in material applications; there is no reason whatever why it should not learn its new lesson and become our equal in all those temporal things which now *alone* give us our superiority over it—whereas in *faith* we have fallen inferior to it.

People who question this may be misled by a number of false suggestions dating from the immediate past. For instance, it was a common saying during the nineteenth century that Mohammedanism had lost its political power through its doctrine of fatalism. But that doctrine was in full vigor when the Mohammedan power was at its height. For that matter Mohammedanism is no more fatalist than Calvinism; the two heresies resemble each other exactly in their exaggerated insistence upon the immutability of divine decrees.

There was another more intelligent suggestion made in the nineteenth century, which was this: that the decline of Islam had proceeded from its fatal habit of perpetual civil division, the splitting up and changeability of political authority among the Mohammedans. But that weakness of theirs was present from the beginning; it is inherent in the very nature of the Arabian temperament from which they started. Over and over again this individualism of theirs, this "fissiparous" tendency of theirs, has gravely weakened them. Yet over and over again they have suddenly united under a leader and accomplished the greatest things.

Now it is probable enough that on these lines—unity under a leader—the return of Islam may arrive. There is no leader as yet, but enthusiasm might bring one. There are signs enough in the political heavens today of what we may have to expect from the revolt of Islam at some future date—perhaps not far distant.

*This article is condensed from a much longer essay contained in his book The Great Heresies written in March 1936.*

#### **Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists**

14818 Ranchero Road  
Hesperia, California, USA  
Telephone: 760-220-6818  
FAX: 760-948-7620

E-mail: [pipiisoe@earthlink.net](mailto:pipiisoe@earthlink.net)  
[www.pipiisoe.org](http://www.pipiisoe.org)

Pamphlet 280

## **The Great and Enduring Heresy of Mohammed**

**Hilaire Belloc**

Mohammedanism was a heresy, not a new religion: That is the essential point to grasp before going any further. It was not a pagan contrast with the Church; it was a perversion of Christian doctrine. Its vitality and endurance soon gave it the appearance of a new religion, but those who were contemporary with its rise saw it for what it was—not a denial but an adaptation and a misuse of the Christian thing.

The chief heresiarch, Mohammed, was not, like most heresiarchs, a man of Catholic birth and doctrine. He sprang from pagans. But that which he taught was in the main Catholic doctrine, albeit oversimplified. He took over very few of those old pagan ideas that might have been native to him from his descent. But the very foundation of his teaching was that prime Catholic doctrine, the unity and omnipotence of God. The world of good spirits and angels and of evil spirits in rebellion against God was a part of the teaching, with a chief evil spirit, such as Christendom had recognized. Mohammed preached with insistence that prime Catholic doctrine, on the human side—the immortality of the soul and its responsibility for actions in this life, coupled with the consequent doctrine of punishment and reward after death.

Mohammed gave to our Lord the highest reverence and to our Lady also. On the Day of Judgment (another Catholic idea that he taught) it was our Lord, according to Mohammed, who would be the judge of mankind, not he, Mohammed. The Mother of Christ, "the Lady Miriam," was ever for him the first of womankind. His followers even got from the early Fathers some vague hint of her Immaculate Conception.

But the central point where this new heresy struck home with a mortal blow against Catholic tradition was a full denial of the Incarnation. Mohammed taught that our Lord was the greatest of all the prophets, but still only a prophet: a man like other men. He eliminated the Trinity altogether.

With that denial of the Incarnation went the whole sacramental structure. He refused to know anything of the Eucharist, with its Real Presence; he stopped the sacrifice of the Mass and therefore the institution of a special priesthood. In other words, he, like so many other lesser heresiarchs, founded his heresy on simplification.

Catholic doctrine was true (he seemed to say), but it had become encumbered with false accretions; it had become complicated by needless manmade additions, including the idea that its founder was divine, and the growth of a parasitical caste of priests who batted on a late, imagined, system of sacraments that they alone could administer. All those corrupt accretions must be swept away.

Mohammed's teaching never developed among the mass of his followers, or in his own mind, a detailed theology. He was content to accept all that appealed to him in the Catholic scheme and to reject all that seemed to him, and to so many others of his time, too complicated or mysterious to be true. Simplicity was the note of the whole affair; and since all heresies draw their strength from

some true doctrine, Mohammedanism drew its strength from the true Catholic doctrines that it retained: the equality of all men before God—"All true believers are brothers." It zealously preached and threw on the paramount claims of justice, social and economic.

Now, why did this new, simple, energetic heresy have its sudden overwhelming success?

One answer is that it won battles. It won them at once, as we shall see when we come to the history of the thing. But winning battles could not have made Islam permanent or even strong had there not been a state of affairs awaiting some such message and ready to accept it.

Both in the world of Hither Asia and in the Greco-Roman world of the Mediterranean, but especially in the latter, society had fallen, much as our society has today, into a tangle wherein the bulk of men were disappointed and angry and seeking for a solution to the whole group of social strains. There was indebtedness everywhere; the power of money and consequent usury. There was slavery everywhere. Society reposed upon it, as ours reposes upon wage slavery today. There was weariness and discontent with theological debate, which, for all its intensity, had grown out of touch with the masses. There lay upon the freemen, already tortured with debt, a heavy burden of imperial taxation; and there was the irritant of existing central government interfering with men's lives; there was the tyranny of the lawyers and their charges.

To all this Islam came as a vast relief and a solution of strain. The slave who adopted Islam was free. The debtor who "accepted" was rid of his debts. Usury was forbidden. The small farmer was relieved not only of his debts but of his crushing taxation. Above all, justice could be had without buying it from lawyers. . . . All this in theory. The practice was not nearly so complete. Many a convert remained a debtor, many were still slaves. But wherever Islam conquered there was a new spirit of freedom and relaxation.

It was the combination of all these things—the attractive simplicity of the doctrine, the sweeping away of clerical and imperial discipline, the huge immediate practical advantage of freedom for the slave and riddance of anxiety for the debtor, the crowning advantage of free justice under few and simple new laws easily understood—that formed the driving force behind the astonishing Mohammedan social victory. The courts were everywhere accessible to all without payment and giving verdicts which all could understand. The Mohammedan movement was essentially a Reformation, and we can discover numerous affinities between Islam and the Protestant Reformers—on images, on the Mass, on celibacy, et cetera.

But even more remarkable than the flooding of all near Asia with Mohammedanism in one lifetime was the wealth and splendor and culture of the new Islamic empire. Islam was in those early centuries (most of the seventh, all the eighth and ninth), the highest material civilization of the occidental world. Gaul and Britain, and in some degree Italy, and the valley of the Danube, fell back towards barbarism. They never became completely barbaric, not even in Britain, which was the most remote; but they were harried and impoverished and lacked proper government. From the fifth century to the early eleventh ran the period which we call the Dark Ages of Europe.

So much for the Christian world of that time, against which Islam was beginning to press so heavily; which had lost to Islam the whole of Spain and certain islands and coasts of the central Mediterranean as well. Christendom was under siege from Islam. Islam stood up against us in dominating splendor and wealth and power, and, what was even more important, with superior knowledge in the practical and applied sciences.

Islam preserved the Greek philosophers, the Greek mathematicians and their works, the physical science of the Greek and Roman earlier writers. Islam was also far more lettered than was Christendom. In the mass of the West most men had become illiterate. Even in Constantinople reading and writing were not as common as they were in the world governed by the Caliph.

For centuries to come Islam was to remain a menace, even though Spain was reconquered by Christians. In the East it became more than a menace, and spread continually for seven hundred years until it had mastered the Balkans and the Hungarian plain and all but occupied Western Europe itself. Islam was the one heresy that nearly destroyed Christendom through its early material and intellectual superiority.

Now why was this? The answer lies in the very nature of the Mohammedan conquest. It did *not*, as has been so frequently repeated, destroy at once what it came across; it did *not* exterminate all those who would not accept Islam. It was just the other way. It was remarkable among all the powers that have ruled these lands throughout history for what has wrongly been called its "tolerance." The Mohammedan temper was not tolerant. It was, on the contrary, fanatical and bloodthirsty. It felt no respect for, nor even curiosity about, those from whom it differed. It was absurdly vain of itself, regarding with contempt the high Christian culture about it. It still so regards it even today.

But the conquerors, and those whom they converted and attached to themselves from the native populations, were still too few to govern by force. And (what is more important) they had no idea of organization. They were always slipshod and haphazard. Therefore a very large majority of the conquered remained in their old habits of life and of religion.

Slowly the influence of Islam spread through these, but during the first centuries the great majority in Syria, and even in Mesopotamia and Egypt, were Christian, keeping the Christian Mass, the Christian Gospels, and all the Christian tradition. It was they who preserved the Greco-Roman civilization from which they descended, and it was that civilization, surviving under the surface of Mohammedan government, that gave their learning and material power to the wide territories which we must call, even so early, "the Mohammedan world," though the bulk of it was not yet Mohammedan in creed.

The world of Islam became, and long remained, the heir of the old Greco-Roman culture and the preserver thereof. Thence was it that, alone of all the great heresies, Mohammedanism not only survived but is, after nearly fourteen centuries, as strong as ever spiritually. In time it struck roots and established a civilization of its own over against ours, a permanent rival to us.

Now that we have understood why Islam, the most formidable of heresies, achieved its strength and astounding success we must try to understand why, alone of all the heresies, it has survived in full strength and even continues (after a fashion) to expand to this day.

Millions of modern people of the white civilization—that is, the civilization of Europe and America—have forgotten all about Islam. They have never come in contact with it. They take for granted that it is decaying, and that, anyway, it is just a foreign religion which will not concern them. It is, as a fact, the most formidable and persistent enemy which our civilization has had, and may at any moment become as large a menace in the future as it has been in the past.

There is another point in connection with this power of Islam: Islam is apparently *unconvertible*. The missionary efforts made by great Catholic orders which have been occupied in trying to turn Mohammedans into Christians for nearly 400 years have everywhere wholly failed. We have in some places driven the Mohammedan master out and freed his Christian subjects from Mohammedan control, but we have had hardly any effect in converting individual Mohammedans.

It has always seemed to me possible, and even probable, that there would be a resurrection of Islam and that our sons or our grandsons would see the renewal of that tremendous struggle between the Christian culture and what has been for more than a thousand years its greatest opponent.

Why this conviction should have arisen in the minds of certain observers and travelers, such as myself, I will now consider. It is indeed a vital question: "May not Islam arise again?"

In a sense the question is already answered because Islam has never departed. It still commands the fixed loyalty and unquestioning adherence of all the millions between the Atlantic and the Indus and further afield throughout scattered communities of further Asia. But I ask the question in the sense, "Will not perhaps the temporal power of Islam return and with it the menace of an armed Mohammedan world which will shake off the domination of Europeans—still nominally Christian—and reappear again as the prime enemy of our civilization?"

The future always comes as a surprise, but political wisdom consists in attempting at least some partial judgment of what that surprise may be. And for my part I cannot but believe that a main unexpected thing of the future is the return of Islam. Since religion is at the root of all political movements and changes, and since we have here a very great religion physically paralyzed but morally intensely alive, we are in the presence of an unstable equilibrium which cannot remain permanently unstable. Let us then examine the position.

I have said that the particular quality of Mohammedanism, regarded as a heresy, was its vitality. Alone of all the great heresies Mohammedanism struck permanent roots, developing a life of its own, and became at last something like a new religion. Like all heresies, Mohammedanism lived by the Catholic truths it had retained. Its insistence on personal immortality, on the unity and infinite majesty of God, on his justice and mercy, its insistence on the equality of human souls in the sight of their Creator—these are its strength.

But it has survived for other reasons than these; all the other great heresies had their truths as well as their falsehoods and vagaries, yet they have died one after the other. The Catholic Church has seen them pass, and though their evil consequences are still with us, the heresies themselves are dead.