

## Book Review

**David Samuel Margoliouth (1920). *Mohammedanism*. London, Williams & Norgate, 274 Pages. Online, available at <https://archive.org/details/mohammedanism00marg>.**

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David Samuel Margoliouth (1858-1940), an English orientalist, was briefly active as a priest in the Church of England. He was Laudian Professor of Arabic at the University of Oxford from 1889 to 1937. “Mohammedanism” is a book written by David Samuel Margoliouth. The book included seven chapters as follows: “The Islamic World,” “Mohammed and The Koran,” “The Islamic State,” “Islamic Theory and Practice,” “Islamic Sects,” “Preachers, Saints, and Orders” and “Islamic Art, Literature, and Science Bibliography.”

In the chapter of “The Islamic World,” Margoliouth presented extensively about migrations, invasions and conquests in Islamic countries from the first years of Islam to the beginning of the 20th century. He briefly defined Islam and gave detailed information about the number of Muslim populations living in various continents and countries. He drew attention to the increase in the number of Muslims in the world and emphasized that the most important of the Islamic Empires is Türkiye.

Islam is the infinitive, and Muslim or “Moslem” the participle, of a verb which signifies “to deliver” or “to commit entirely” something or person to someone else; authoritatively interpreted in this context as “to deliver, the, face to God,” *i.e.* to turn to God only in prayer and worship, to the exclusion of all other objects of devotion. Hence the words are equivalent to “monotheism” and “monotheist.” It is almost a consequence of the monotheistic doctrine that there can be only one sovereign in the world at a time; just as, according to the Koran, the simultaneous existence of two Gods would have led to the ruin of heaven and earth, so two sovereigns must necessarily come to blows. The most important of the Islamic Empires is Turkey, of which the capital is Constantinople, in Europe, but which possesses territories in Asia and Africa also.

The chapter of “Mohammed and The Koran” includes the following subtitles: “Islamic Notion of Revelation,” “General Character of Revelation,” “Contents of the Koran,” “Preservation of the Koran, and Probability of its Authenticity,” “Interpretation of the Koran” and “Sources of the Koran.” The author reviewed the Arab history before Islam, the life of The prophet Muhammad (SAW), his ideas, his works and struggles for the sake of Islam. He also gave extensive information about contents, preservation, interpretation and sources of the Holy Qur’an.

..... But in Mohammed’s case no miracle of this convincing kind was claimed during his lifetime; for in whatever sense the miracle of the Koran be interpreted, command of either language or archeology is a different thing from command over the forces of nature. It is quite possible for one critic to find ideal eloquence where another is not even moved to admiration. Hence the historical attitude, which sympathizes with both sides, admits of easy application in dealing with the origins of Islam.

The Word of God is regarded by Islamic theology as literally God’s composition, whence the Divine Being is cited as an authority for grammatical forms and rhetorical figures. The theory of “colouring by the medium,” adopted by Christian theologians in order to explain discrepancies in their Scriptures, is wholly unknown to Islamic orthodoxy. The language of the Koran is God’s language, and its eloquence is miraculous; anyone who tries to rival it can prove that for himself. And being the communication of the All-wise, it is an infallible guide to conduct; the authority for both

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statements and precepts is paramount. It is therefore absolutely and uniquely consistent; inconsistency, which would have been the sign of human effort, cannot be found in it.

Although it is unlikely that we possess the whole Koran, *i.e.* revelations produced from the beginning to the end of the Prophet's mission, this theory of its nature seems to have prevailed from beginning to end. In what is supposed to be the earliest revelation God declares that he has "taught man with the pen, taught him what he did not know." To teach with the pen is evidently to write a book for general guidance, and the Koranic view is that the earlier revelations were of the same sort. The fact that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are written in a style which conflicts with this theory is to the Moslem an argument against their genuineness.

It is denied that the Koran is either in rhymed prose, or in verse; it is in a style *sui generis*, which is inimitable. The meaning of the text is otherwise ordinarily simple and clear; there are few archaisms in the sense of obsolete and obscure words: nevertheless the Koran offered many opportunities for commentary. The source of the Koran in the orthodox opinion is, as we have seen, Divine revelation; the only way in which the question could be put from this point of view is, To what extent do the contents of the book correspond with other known preexisting literature? In the first place it claims to confirm the Law and the Gospel, or in general "what was before it." In the main this is the fact.

The chapter of "The Islamic State" includes the following subtitles: "The Political System," "Criminal Law" and "Jurisprudence." In this section, the author gave extensive information about the establishment, strengthening and expansion of the Islamic state. In addition, the author gave some information about the political system, laws and rules in the religion of Islam, compared them with other religions and wrote his own personal views.

Although we are apt to think of Islam as a religion, it is probable that the Prophet thought of it rather as a nation. "Let there be in you a nation summoning unto the good" is a divine order in the Koran. The Arabic word for "sect," used of Islam, is adopted by the Turks in the sense "nation," and this seems a justifiable mistake: for in the new community all tribal differences were to be sunk, and the theory of the Platonic Republic, according to which the members of the community should share pains and pleasures to the same extent as the members of one body, is attributed to the Prophet. At one time the Arabic language dominated the whole Islamic area from Spain and North Africa to Central Asia; it tolerated no rival language as Latin tolerated Greek. The converts all adopted names of the Islamic pattern, and, like Arabs, called themselves after their sons real or ideal. Mohammed ruled community as divine commissioner; nationally the members of it claimed no rights self-government against Almighty God, and considered it a high privilege that they had a ready means of ascertaining the divine will.

"We must obey God rather than men," is the formula which underlies the Islamic system; and just as we saw that the Ottoman statesmen in the middle of the nineteenth century declared that abrogation of the rule which renders apostasy from Islam a capital offence was outside their competence, so, where the letter of the Koran is unambiguous, there is theoretically no power on earth which can repeal it.

The chapter titled "Islamic Theory and Practice" includes the subtitles of "Age and Sex in Relation to Religious Observances," "Holy Days," "Islamic Theology," "Islamic Ethics," and "Islamic Superstitions." In this section, the author presented detailed information about religious observances, holy days, Islamic ethics and superstitions, the basic obligations of Islam, practices, behaviors and foods made halal and haram by Islam.

The oral test of a Moslem is the pronouncement of the formula which has been mentioned, declaring that there is no god but Allah, and that Mohammed is his Prophet or Messenger. The practical test is to be found in the performance of various obligations. Some of these are incumbent on the individual, others on the community at large. The

four which are incumbent on the individual are: (a) Worship (b) Fasting (c) Pilgrimage and (d) Alms. Besides the main obligations there is a list of things lawful and unlawful; by violation of these rules the Moslem renders himself liable to punishment, but he does not, according to the orthodox opinion, forfeit his claim to the name of Moslem thereby.

In Islamic theology, the system which results is in no way inferior in subtlety to other systems known in Europe. We may quote in illustration a division of beings into (a) what needs neither subject nor determining principle; (b) what needs both a subject and a determining principle; (c) what needs a determining principle, but not a subject; (d) what is in a subject without needing a determining principle. The first of these is God, and the fourth consists of the divine attributes. He has also noted that both Paradise and Hell are painted realistically in the Koran, the former indeed too realistically for modern taste.

In the chapter of "Islamic Sects," by stating the reason for the emergence of theological sects, Margoliouth gave information about the founders of the sects, their characteristics, practical applications and the events that took place at that time. He also wrote some information about Shafi'i, Sunni, Wahhabism, Hanafi, Shi'ah, Mu'tazil, and Murjite.

The ritual sects arose from the necessity of codifying practice, which began to be felt when the period of the great conquests was over and the Islamic Empire was settling down. Their founders are respectively Abu Hanifah (head of the Hanefite school), who died A.H. 150; Malik Ibn Anas (head of the Malekites), who died 179; Shafi'i (head of the Shafeites), who died 204; and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (head of the Hanbalites), who died 241. These four are the jurists of orthodox Islam, and any orthodox Moslem is a follower of one of the four. North Africa follows the system of Malik; the Dutch protectorates the system of Shafi'i; the Ottoman Empire and Orthodox India that of Abu Hanifah; the Hanbalites in these days are few, and chiefly to be found in Arabia. All four systems are taught in the university of Islam, the Cairene al-Azhar.

One most orthodox theologian minds that the first seven verses of the Koran suggest no fewer than 10,000 questions, whence we can easily imagine that the whole Coran would to any thinking mind have suggested at least a score. And indeed the questions had to be posed before even an orthodox reply could be given. Natural election had in this case as in others to determine what should last.

In the chapter of "Preachers, Saints, and Orders," including a subtitle of "Obligations of the Orders," Margoliouth gave extensive information about the Preachers, Saints and Orders in Islam and the aims and ideas of Abd al-Kadir of Gilan and Ahmad Rifa'i. In addition, he provided information about Sufism and the Kadiris (followers of Abd al-Kadir) by quoting from the books of various authors and noted extensively about their daily life practices related to the orders and obligations of Islam. The author used the following words for Islam at the beginning of this chapter:

Islam, as a religion, has often been commended for its simplicity, since the obligations which it imposes, though considerable, are definite, and the dogmas for which it requires assent are at first sight easily intelligible. If Christianity insists on a new birth, the repudiation of the "old man" for the new, Islam reverts to "natural religion"; its sanctions are, as we have seen, unmistakable and realistic: superiority of caste in this world and the enjoyment of carnal pleasures in the next.

The author wrote that the origin of the preacher, the saint, and the order is to be found in ascetic instinct and that the highest thing after which the soul can aspire is satisfaction of Allah.

The origin of the preacher, the saint, and the order is to be found in this ascetic instinct, which as a fact of human nature cannot be neglected. There are those who are fully prepared to join in the Holy War, but cannot be persuaded to share in the plunder that accrues. And there is a feeling among the multitude that those who refuse the plunder are in some way superior to those who rush upon it. Yet even the Koran suggests that wealth is not the best thing, nor even the delights of Paradise; the highest thing after which the

soul can aspire is the goodwill or satisfaction of God. The preacher, then, is one who insists on this aspect of religion, and the saint or ascetic one who finds special means of winning God's favour and approaching God.

The author noted the following words on the prospects of Islam as this chapter was closed:

One statesman prophesied the extinction of Islam within 190 years of the present date. Extinction might mean supersession by some other system, as Paganism was superseded by Christianity and Islam, or it might mean abandonment without a substitute. There is little sign of either prospect being realized (p. 223).

In the chapter of "Islamic Art, Literature, and Science Bibliography," Margoliouth discussed architecture, calligraphy, poetry, versification, wizard, rhymed prose, artistic prose, history, literature, geography and medicine in Islam. He noted the below paragraphs about history. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) included Margoliouth's statement about The Holy Qur'an in the Risale-i Nur Collection, a tafsir on the Holy Qur'an consists of fourteen books, as follows: The Qur'an gave Muslims a sense of superiority. This is such a feeling that it has been the greatest power that has driven great nations to progress.<sup>1</sup>

History is undoubtedly the department of literature which may well constitute the boast of all the Islamic peoples, but especially the Arabic-speaking nations. We know the names of close on six hundred Arabic historians for the first eleven centuries of Islam, and possess a great many of their works; many of them are monumental, e.g. the Chronicle of Tabari, which ends A.H. 302, occupying close on 8,000 pages; certainly rather more than 1,000 of them deal with pre-Islamic history. The classification of Arabic historians made by Gibbon is in the main sound; they are either dry chroniclers, purely objective narrators, or rather reproducers of narrations; or they are flowery orators, who trust to earn gratitude and praise by their manner at least as much as by their matter.

In the main, Islamic literature and science are theological, *i.e.* bear some direct relation to either the Koran or the Tradition of the Prophet. And indeed the service rendered by the Koran to the Arabian people cannot be overestimated; the fact that theirs was the language in which God Almighty despatched His message to mankind gave them a sense of superiority to the rest of the world, and this in the case of most great nations has at one period been a condition of their progress. That for a time it seemed impious to "add unto the words of the prophecy of this book," *i.e.* to reduce any human utterances to book form and so coordinate them with the Koran, is natural; just as the Divine Being had no associates, so His book, it might be thought, could have no rivals or companions. But although enthusiasm for the Koran increased rather than diminished with the ages, and a believer at this day finds matchless wisdom and eloquence in what such an admirer of Mohammed as Carlyle confessed to be a dull book, in the second century of Islam it came to be recognized that, though the Divine Being has no associates, still He has a court; whence there might be a literature subservient to the Koran, and making no claim to rival it. The belief that a sacred book is literally God's Word furnishes a basis for grammatical and lexicographical study which is wanting where no such belief is maintained; hence the two nations who performed wonders in both these departments of study before comparative grammar or historical etymology were invented were the Hindus and the Moslems. On the one hand the language acquired dignity from the fact that God had used it; on the other the sacred book provided an infallible norm, since there could be no question that its grammar, its usage, and its figures were correct. Numerous anecdotes illustrate the value of the Koran for settling such questions.

That the Koran, owing to the historical materials which it contains, encouraged archaeological inquiry should also be acknowledged; for curiosity was naturally aroused in reference to the personages whose names recur so constantly in its pages, and those who professed to know something about them in consequence obtained a hearing, though

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<sup>1</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (2012), *From the Risale-i Nur Collection. İşârâtü'l-İ'câz (in Ottoman Turkish)*, Istanbul: Söz, accessed on 1 June 2022, <http://www.erisale.com/#content.tr.6.369>.

of course they were not ordinarily believed where they contradicted that infallible record. The practice of collating the Jewish and Christian narratives with those embodied in the Koran, and to some extent interpreting the latter by the former, found many adherents, though perhaps not generally approved; and mediaeval Islam has some wonderful performances in lines closely connected with this. As then, all other studies might be regarded as subservient to that of the Word of God, it is probable that in the interminable series of commentaries on the Koran we find the product of the mightiest Islamic minds. The number of titles of Islamic books collected by a bibliographer of the eleventh Islamic century came to over 15,000, one of these being in 470 volumes, and many in fifty or more. It is not therefore possible to give more than the faintest outline of their contents in a few pages; but there are now lucid treatises on Islamic literature in the four chief languages of Europe.

Lastly, Margoliouth noted the following paragraph at the end of the book: In the future it is probable that European models will more and more dominate the literature of the Islamic countries, and our classics are being put into Islamic dress. A friend of the writer has devoted part of his life to rendering Shakespeare into Turkish; another has performed the wonderful achievement of putting the Iliad into Arabic verse. The East, in taking from the West, consoles itself with the thought that it is taking back its own.<sup>30</sup> I believe that this book is useful for those who are curious about the ideas of Western thinkers about the Islamic history, Islam, the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) or who are doing research on this subject.

### References

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