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GIBBON AND MOHAMMEDANISM

by Beverley E. Smith

Edward Gibbon, whose fame as the greatest of the English historians is secured by *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, has been called "the most important and most influential of militant unbelievers."¹ In his own time, Gibbon’s attacks upon religion, especially Christianity, evoked an immediate and violent storm of bitter protests, which, in a letter to his stepmother, Gibbon described as being "as hot a canonading as can be pointed against Washington."² Indeed, Christian apologists, in a decidedly un-Christian manner, leveled repeated volleys of criticism at the calm little historian; and at his death a contemporary, Hannah More, "gave thanks that she had escaped undefiled by his acquaintance."³ Even today, almost two hundred years after his death, an article concerning Gibbon rarely appears which does not include some sort of apology for his treatment of Christianity. From his chapters on Christianity, Gibbon’s critics have drawn all general pronouncements concerning the historian’s religious opinions; very few, if any, have examined to any considerable extent his attitude toward Mohammedanism. Perhaps most of these commentators prefer not to deal with Gibbon’s discussion of the rise and progress of Mohammedanism because they find there an evident sympathy with certain aspects of the faith, a sympathy which is contrary

to their notions of the historian's contempt for religion. It is the opinion of the present writer, however, that a detailed examination of Gibbon's treatment of Islam will show that he is consistent in his attitude toward religion, that he uses the same trenchant irony to criticize in Mohammedanism the very things that he criticizes in Christianity, and that his evident sympathy for certain aspects of the Islamic faith is in complete accord with his view of religion as a whole.

According to Gibbon, the religion preached by the prophet Mohammed is "compounded of an eternal truth, and a necessary fiction, THAT THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD, AND THAT MAHOMET IS THE APOSTLE OF GOD." Gibbon is sympathetic toward the idea of one God, which seemed to him more consistent with reason than the compound deities of other religions: "The religions of the world were guilty, at least in the eyes of the prophet [and in those of the historian as well], of giving sons, or daughters, or companions, to the supreme God" (III, 375). The statement of the unity of God which forms the popular creed of Mohammedanism is, according to Gibbon, a concept to which a philosopher might subscribe. Nevertheless, the historian ironically states that this creed, which is "free from ambiguity," is "defined with metaphysical precision by the interpreters of the Koran" (III, 375). As he continues, Gibbon again smiles at the petty efforts of those involved in the resolution of religious problems. Following his statement that Mohammedans embrace the doctrine of predestination, Gibbon mentions that they, like the Christians, struggle with the "common difficulties" of reconciling an omniscient God with their belief in the freedom of the human will and of explaining the presence of evil in a world created by a deity infinite in both power and goodness (III, 376).

Although Gibbon never overtly states the point, it is evident from his discussion of the traditions of Mohammedanism that

4 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Rev. H. H. Milman (New York: Harper & Bros., 1843), I, 250. All subsequent references to the *Decline and Fall* will be to this edition and will contain only the volume and page number, inserted parenthetically in the text.
the religion is an eclectic one, made up of borrowings from Judaism, Christianity, and Arabian Paganism. Mohammed, in Gibbon’s view, combined into a single system various elements from the religions which he encountered on every hand. It is clear that Gibbon has his tongue in his cheek in this passage dealing with the background of Mohammedanism:

The liberality of Mahomet allowed to his predecessors the same credit which he claimed for himself; and the chain of inspiration was prolonged from the fall of Adam to the promulgation of the Koran. During that period, some rays of prophetic light had been imparted to one hundred and twenty-four thousand of the elect, discriminated by their respective measure of virtue and grace; three hundred and thirteen apostles were sent with a special commission to recall their country from idolatry and vice; one hundred and four volumes have been dictated by the Holy Spirit; and six legislators of transcendent brightness have announced to mankind the six successive revelations of various rites, but of one immutable religion. The authority and station of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, and Mahomet, rise in just gradation above each other; but whosoever hates or rejects any one of the prophets is numbered with the infidels. (III, 376)

By including Christ and himself in his list, Mohammed excludes from the ranks of the faithful both the Jews and the Christians, on whose traditions he has drawn for his own religion.

Gibbon proceeds to a consideration of the generation and character of the Koran, the sacred book of the Mohammedan religion. The historian's straightforward narrative, in which he never once questions the authenticity of the "facts" he is relating, is obviously intended to condemn the Koran as a spurious production dictated by the demands of expediency:

The substance of the Koran, according to himself [Mohammed] or his disciples, is uncreated and eter-
nal; subsisting in the essence of the Deity, and inscribed with a pen of light on the table of his everlasting decrees. A paper copy in a volume of silk and gems, was brought down to the lowest heaven by the angel Gabriel, who, under the Jewish economy had indeed been despatched on the most important errands; and this trusty messenger successively revealed the chapters and verses to the Arabian prophet. Instead of a perpetual and perfect measure of the divine will, the fragments of the Koran were produced at the discretion of Mahomet; each revelation is suited to the emergencies of his policy or passion; and all contradiction is removed by the saving maxim, that any text of Scripture is abrogated or modified by any subsequent passage. The word of God, and of the apostle, was diligently recorded by his disciples on palm-leaves and the shoulder-bones of mutton; and the pages without order or connexion, were cast into a domestic chest in the custody of one of his wives. (III, 377—italics mine)

The scattered fragments of the sacred writings were collected and published after the death of Mohammed; thus their order was uncertain, and the consequent difficulties of interpretation—particularly in the light of the fact that subsequent passages modified earlier ones—are obvious. The problem is unsatisfactorily resolved by Gibbon’s ironic statement that the Koran enjoyed the “miraculous privilege of...[an] incorruptible text” (III, 377). Continuing his discussion of the Koran, Gibbon states that either the enthusiasm or the vanity of Mohammed prompted him to base the validity of his mission on the stylistic merit of the sacred book: “the prophet...audaciously challenges both men and angels to imitate the beauties of a single page, and presumes to assert that God alone could dictate his incomparable performance” (III, 377). The boasts of the prophet notwithstanding, Gibbon finds the best portions of the Koran inferior to the beauties of the book of Job. In a question, he further expresses his doubt that the Koran was authored by the Deity: “If the composition of the Koran exceed the faculties of man, to what superior intelligence should we ascribe the Iliad of Homer or the Phillipics of Demosthenes?” (III, 378)
Having indicated his belief that the Koran is the production of a mortal man rather than of an immortal god, Gibbon passes on to the subject of miracles. In his discussion of the miraculous powers traditionally ascribed to Christ and the early Christian fathers, Gibbon had dealt severely with the claims of the Church, and he is no less severe with Mohammedanism. In spite of the fact that Mohammed was frequently called upon to perform some prodigy and thus confirm his divine mission, he was, according to Gibbon, unable to comply with any of these requests (III, 378). Nevertheless, the miraculous gifts of the prophet were affirmed by his votaries, especially those who lived and wrote some years after his death. Gibbon's lack of credence is obvious as he lists the miracles associated with Mohammed:

They [the followers of Mohammed] believe or affirm that trees went forth to meet him; that he was saluted by stones; that water rushed from his fingers; that he fed the hungry, cured the sick and raised the dead; that a beam groaned to him; that a camel complained to him; that a shoulder of mutton informed him of its being poisoned; and that both animate and inanimate nature were equally subject to the apostle of God. (III, 378)

After discussing several miraculous journeys which Mohammed is supposed to have made, Gibbon examines the Mohammedan version of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. According to the teachings of Mohammed, on the day of judgment the bodies of those who have died will be reunited with their souls. He makes no attempt, however, to explain how this reunion will be effected, and philosophically "relies on the omnipotence of the Creator, whose word can reanimate the breathless clay, and collect the innumerable atoms, that no longer retain their form or substance" (III, 381). Although Gibbon probably did not believe in the immortality of the soul, the Mohammedan attitude of resignation likely appealed to him; nevertheless, he cannot forbear adding one sarcastic comment: "The intermediate state of the soul is hard to decide; and those who most firmly believe her immaterial nature, are at a
loss to understand how she can think or act without the agency of the organs of sense” (III, 381). This being the case, Gibbon proceeds to discuss the soul after its reunion with the body. Mohammed, according to Gibbon, is wrongly accused by his adversaries not only of extending the hope of salvation to all men, but of “asserting the blackest heresy, that every man who believes in God, and accomplishes good works, may expect in the last day a favourable sentence” (III, 381). As Gibbon sarcastically points out, however, these accusations are unjust, for “such rational indifference is ill adapted to the character of a fanatic; nor is it probable that a messenger from heaven should depreciate the value and necessity of his own revelation” (III, 381).

According to the doctrine set forth in the Koran, belief in God is one with belief in Mohammed, and the “good works” are specifically defined by the prophet. Thus, for Mohammedan, belief in God and the performance of good works imply acceptance of Islam. On the day of judgment, all infidels will be immediately consigned to hell; only the Mohammedans will be judged. Those of the faithful who are judged worthy will pass into paradise, while the guilty will be punished in the “first and mildest of the seven hells” (III, 382). The sojourner of the guilty in this “mildest” hell is only temporary, however. After their sins have been expiated by varying terms of penance, they, too, enter into paradise, for Mohammed has promised “that all his disciples, whatever may be their sins, shall be saved...from eternal damnation” (III, 382). Gibbon is not especially pleased with the Mohammedan paradise, as his ironic description shows:

Instead of inspiring the blessed inhabitants with a liberal taste for harmony and science, conversation and friendship, he [Mohammed] idly celebrates the pearls and diamonds, the robes of silk, palaces of marble, dishes of gold, rich wines, artificial dainties, numerous attendants, and the whole train of sensual and costly luxury, which becomes insipid to the owner, even in the short period of this mortal life. Seventy-two Houris, or black-eyed girls, of resplendent beauty, blooming youth, virgin purity, and
exquisite sensibility, will be created for the use of the meanest believer; a moment of pleasure will be prolonged to a thousand years, and his faculties will be increased a hundred fold, to render him worthy of his felicity. Notwithstanding a vulgar prejudice, the gates of heaven will be open to both sexes, but Mahomet has not specified the male companions of the female elect, lest he should either alarm the jealousy of their former husbands, or disturb their felicity, by the suspicion of an everlasting marriage. (III, 382)

In commenting on the nature of the Mohammedan afterlife, Gibbon cannot resist an oblique jab at the Christian monks: “This image of a carnal paradise has provoked the indignation, perhaps the envy, of the monks: they declaim against the impure religion of Mahomet; and his modest apologists are driven to the poor excuse of figures and allegories” (III, 382). In spite of the “figures and allegories,” however, Gibbon points out that the majority of the faithful adhere to the literal interpretation of the Koran, saying that the resurrection of the mortal body of man would be useless if paradise were not a sensual existence.

The first conversions made by Mohammed were of those persons closest to him, such as his wife and servant. Gibbon deprecates the value of such conquests by implying that the prophet’s wife was bound to follow her husband’s wishes, and by overtly stating that the servant was “tempted by the prospect of freedom” (III, 383). In gaining other converts, Mohammed preached in public and private, asserting “the liberty of conscience, and... [disclaiming] the use of religious violence” (III, 383-384). For his preaching, Mohammed was mercilessly persecuted by the votaries of the established religion and was forced to flee from Mecca to Medina, where he and his doctrine were reverently embraced by the people. As time passed, the new religion gained more and more followers, all of whom held the person of the prophet in such high regard that the deputy of the city of Mecca was astonished (III, 386). Apparently Gibbon was also astonished at the reverence accorded Mohammed, for, with evident sarcasm, he adds a word of explanation: “The
devout fervour of enthusiasm acts with more energy...than the cold and formal servility of courts” (III, 386). Eventually, the people invested Mohammed with the office of sovereign, giving him the power to make war, which action conveniently coincided with a divine command to propagate the religion of Islam by means of warfare. Gibbon’s comments on the prophet’s reversal of his position with respect to the use of violence clearly show the historian’s belief that Mohammed’s earlier preaching of nonviolence resulted from his own lack of strength (III, 386-387).

In the prosecution of his holy war, Mohammed offered his enemies their choice of friendship (which meant payment of tribute for the privilege of continuing in the worship of their accustomed religion), submission to Islam, or destruction. As Gibbon points out, “the clemency of the prophet was decided by his interest” (III, 387). By uniting the professions of merchant and robber, Mohammed continued to win converts:

From all sides the roving Arabs were allured to the standard of religion and plunder: the apostle sanctified the license of embracing the female captives as their wives or concubines; and the enjoyment of wealth and beauty was a feeble type of the joys of paradise prepared for the valiant martyrs of the faith. (III, 387)

In one battle, Mohammed is said to have been aided by a host of angels. The tone of Gibbon’s comment in a footnote is worth noting:

The loose expressions of the Koran allow the commentators to fluctuate between the numbers of 1000, 3000, or 9,000 angels; and the smallest of these might suffice for the slaughter of seventy of the Koreish. Yet the same scholiasts confess, that this angelic band was not visible to any mortal eye. (III, 388n.)

In the holy war, not even former allies were spared, although they often made the mistake of expecting clemency from their
former friends; but, as Gibbon says, “fanaticism obliterates the feelings of humanity” (III, 390). Mohammed was eventually strong enough to attack Mecca, but was nevertheless defeated when he did so. He concluded a truce of ten years with the leaders of the city, but when his forces were augmented by other conquests, he attacked again. His efforts were successful this time, and, as the victor, he was easily able to convict the losers—whom he branded as “idolaters”—of having broken the treaty (III, 391). Gibbon ironically praises the clemency of Mohammed in awarding his portion of the plunder to the defeated forces—if they would accept Islam as the true faith. The position of these unfortunates is obvious; the prophet coerced them into acceptance through force and bribery. Realizing this, Gibbon goes on to say that “Mecca was sincerely converted to the profitable religion of the Koran” (III, 393—italics mine).

Gibbon describes the death of Mohammed in such a manner as to firmly establish the prophet’s character as a religious fanatic (he states that to the moment of his death Mohammed maintained “the faith of an enthusiast”), and in the process, the historian reflects further doubt upon the sacred writings of Islam, pointing out that Mohammed dictated a “divine book, the sum and accomplishment of all his revelations,” near the close of his life, “at a moment when his faculties were visibly impaired” (III, 395).

Having brought his narrative to the death of Mohammed, Gibbon proposes to assess the virtues and the faults of the prophet, in order to determine “whether the title of enthusiast or impostor more properly belongs to that extraordinary man” (III, 396). It is worth noting that to Gibbon, writing in the eighteenth century, both terms were odious. In his summary, the historian states that “the use of fraud, and perfidy, of cruelty and injustice, were often subservient to the propagation of the faith” (III, 397). Further, Gibbon calls Mohammed to task for his ambition and for his abandon with women: “A special revelation dispensed him from the laws which he had imposed on his nation; the female sex, without reserve, was abandoned to his desires” (III, 397-398). Gibbon does, however, praise the efforts of the prophet to keep his religion within
the bounds of reason, although his efforts in this area were not always successful.

After the death of Mohammed, whose personal magnetism must have been immense, his successors experienced some difficulty in restraining the people, who threatened to return to their old religion. The faith of the converts did not waver long, however, for, as Gibbon neatly puts it, "The appearance of a military force revived and confirmed the loyalty of the faithful" (III, 408). Eventually the force of arms was no longer necessary to prevent the people from deserting the ranks of Islam, and the Mohammedans persevered in their religion from force of habit; the arms were used as before in the propagation of the faith through the holy war.

Although there are aspects of Mohammedanism which Gibbon criticizes, he is on the whole rather more tolerant of this Arabian religion than of Christianity. There are several reasons for his attitude. Mohammedanism is more than merely a religion; it is a system of jurisprudence which forms the basis for all civil law in the Islamic community. Thus, in Gibbon's eyes, Mohammedanism tended to perpetuate the order and harmony of the state, while Christianity tended to destroy it. Further, there is no organized priesthood in the Mohammedan religion (III, 380); the judicial authority devolves upon the individual believer. As many commentators have pointed out, Gibbon has strong objections to the clergy and monks of the Christian religion, and it would seem that any religion which excluded them might come nearer winning his approval than Christianity. Finally, in Gibbon's own words, the religion of Mohammed seemed "less inconsistent with reason, than the creed of mystery and superstition, which, in the seventh century, disgraced the simplicity of the Gospel" (III, 457).

Thus, Gibbon's ironic barbs are not directed at Christianity alone, and those scholars whose investigations have led them to conclude otherwise have overlooked the remarkable consistency with which the historian criticizes other religious systems. Further, they have failed to approach Gibbon's history with a clear conception of the author's historical method. Edward Gib-
bon, truly a product of his age, brought to historiography a mind fortified by Humean scepticism and an implicit faith in reason, guided by experience, as the only means of discovering truth. As a historian, Gibbon was, of course, primarily concerned with the statement of factual, historical truth; and his empirical approach quite naturally led him to deprecate anything which had no basis in sensory experience, or which contributed to the degradation of the reason. In the eighteenth century, reason was opposed by passion, and it was Gibbon’s contention that this latter faculty was the parent of religious enthusiasm; with the increase of religious fervor, there was a corresponding loss of the capacity to reason. Thus Gibbon was led to criticize religion both by his temperament and by his approach to history.

As has been stated before, Gibbon is consistent in his criticism of religion. He is the champion of civil and intellectual liberty, and he views organized religion as an attempt to curb these freedoms. Thus, regardless of what religious system he is considering, he attacks the same things: the overthrow of reason by passion, the inherent intellectual tyranny of the system, bigoted intolerance, and superstitious zeal. Gibbon’s mind is that of the rational, eighteenth-century sceptic, which looks askance at any system of thought or way of life which goes beyond the present life and the realm of man’s sensory experience. It was this disposition of mind which led the historian, in his famous chapters on Christianity, to examine only the “secondary causes” (I, 250) of the spread of Christianity, and in his examination to cast doubts at every turn upon the numerous accounts in the ecclesiastical writings of antiquity of divine intercession in human affairs, miraculous prodigies, and other suspensions of the natural order of the universe. In addition, Gibbon’s antipathy for Christianity is due in part to its disruptive influence on the civil government of the Roman empire. The zeal of the early Christians for martyrdom, he feels, led them to invite persecution. Further, the internal dissensions of the various Christian factions, the struggle for supremacy between the “orthodox” and the “heretics” contributed in no small degree to the historian’s unfavorable opinion of Christianity. Everything about that religion’s progressive growth is con-
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Contrary to Gibbon's conception of the value of order and moderation. But despite the vehemence with which he attacks the Christian faith, it must be urged that he is ever consistent, for the fanatical votaries of Mohammedanism, whose efforts to spread the Islamic faith involved them in almost constant warfare, are likewise brought within his line of fire. The Mohammedan holy war, with its bloody conquests and riotous plundering, is of the utmost repugnance to a man of Gibbon's temperament. In Mohammedanism, too, the historian criticizes the concept that the Koran is a divine production, as well as the beliefs surrounding the miraculous journeys and performances of the prophet himself. Just as he earlier ridicules the vain attempts of Christian ecclesiastics to decide the nature of life after death, so Gibbon disparages the pronouncements of the Mohammedan commentators on that subject.

In conclusion it may be stated that Gibbon does not, as some critics have maintained, use the vehicle of a Roman history to settle a private account with the Christian religion. As a representative of the best of the eighteenth century, his intellectual outlook is, above all, ordered and reasonable, and as a result of this outlook those chapters of the History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire which deal with ecclesiastical matters are in complete accord with the social and political philosophies that underlie the entire work.