

The Quran and its Message

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سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

A STROLL THROUGH BROOKWOOD CEMETERY & WOKING IN SURREY ENGLAND, UK

Joseph A Islam

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EXCERPTS FROM MY TRAVEL BLOG

My travels in England would lead me to the UK's largest cemetery (also possibly the largest in Western Europe) and the leafy environs of Surrey. Brookwood cemetery (situated between Woking, Guildford and Aldershot) and adjacent to the village of Brookwood is undoubtedly a serene, exquisite location for those that rest in peace. One could be forgiven to think it was a sprawling, splendid park with meandering walkways than a privately owned burial ground.

Zoroastrians, Christians, Hindu's, Jews and Muslims alike were often buried in close proximity and sometimes side by side. There were chapels, places to contemplate and some of the most beautiful and elaborate tombstones and burial grounds I had ever seen.

Famous graves housed powerful and well known personalities. It almost felt like a walking lesson through history.

My interest initially focused on two graves and that of two personalities that gave the English speaking world two of the best known English translations of the Quran, Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Marmaduke Pickthall.

The gentle quiet walk led me past the Parsee (Zoroastrian) burial grounds closely admiring the exquisite facades of the structures which often beautified the burial locations and towards the old Muslim cemetery.

Three rows passed the Zoroastrian grounds and two graves in, stood the arched tombstone of Yusuf Ali. It was a serene moment. The epitaph for me captured the essence of his biography which portrays Yusuf Ali's troubling life, his bond with the Quran which was forged during these extremely

difficult periods of anguish and when he searched for solace. It was the Quran's message of help and hope that appealed most to Yusuf Ali and led him to his distinct scholarship. The biography incidentally is also entitled 'Searching for Solace' which many have described as a 'tearful read'.

As I stared at his epitaph and its simplicity, I couldn't help but ask some obvious questions. Given his life and troubled family life, what led a man of so many words resulting in such few words on his epitaph?

ABDULLAH YUSUF ALI
C.B.E.. M.A.. LL.M.. F.R.S.L.. I.C.S
BORN SURAT INDIA. APRIL 4th 1872.
DIED LONDON. DEC 10th 1953

As his biography states:

"...Elsewhere there is a biographical ring to a comment on children whose 'conflict with your ideals may vex your spirit,' but this behaviour 'may at the same time search out your fidelity to God'. Yusuf Ali's sense of hurt ran deep and surfaced as late as 1940 when he castigated his estranged children for maintaining an attitude of ill will and hostility 'in spite of all I have done for them'. The question raised in the commentary, 'If there were no Hereafter, how could you reconcile the inequalities of this world?' ceases to be an abstract one against the backdrop of his own sense of betrayal and disappointment..." [1]

After spending some time to reflect at Yusuf Ali's grave and within a few meters vicinity, I located the grave of Marmaduke Pickthall, another well noted Western Islamic Scholar who initially practiced Christianity and traced his comfortable middle class English lineage back to a knight of William the Conqueror.

He declared his alliance in faith to the old religion of Islam whilst delivering a talk in 1917 in West London. There he lay where I stood, buried peacefully.

Well known for his English translation of the Quran I read from his epitaph, his own translation of a verse from the Quran (2:112), arguably a befitting tribute to his own life:

" Whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah while doing good, his reward is with his Lord"

The epitaph itself was designed in the form of a scroll as if being unrolled over a stone base. The Arabic read from the Quranic verse: 2:156 "Lo! we are Allah's and lo! unto Him we are returning"

إِنَّا لِلّٰهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

**TO THE DEAR MEMORY OF
MUHAMMAD MARMADUKE
PICKTHALL
BORN 7TH APRIL 1875
DIED 19TH MAY 1936**

WHOSOEVER SURRENDERETH HIS
PURPOSE TO ALLAH WHILE DOING GOOD
HIS REWARD IS WITH HIS LORD

An external image of Marmaduke Pickthall's tombstone can be found here:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/25182307@N00/2906989242/>

Two great translators and commentators of the Quran rested almost side by side.

We then made our way to Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking which was the first purpose-built mosque in the UK in 1889. Its construction was commissioned by Shah Jahan, Begum of Bhopal (1868-1901) and was designed in a Mughal-Gothic style. The Mosque itself was built by a well-known Orientalist, Professor Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner who spent a lot of his scholarship clearing myths and Western misconceptions of Islam both in popular and academic fields of criticism.



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Woking Mosque, United Kingdom

A letter written by G.W.Leitner to the Editor of the 'Daily Telegraph' Newspaper underscores the message of unity that has long been a tradition throughout history, amongst all those that study and contemplate with sincerity. They undoubtedly see all of God's messages, with the truth that they have been imparted.

Dr. G.W.Leitner is also buried at Brookwood Cemetery.

ISLAM AND MUHAMMADAN SCHOOLS

LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE DAILY TELEGRAPH
BY DR G. W. LEITNER

Sir, Having had the exceptional opportunity of studying Arabic and the Koran at a Muhammadan Mosque school at Constantinople, both before and after the Russian War in 1854–56, and having since inspected hundreds of Muhammadan schools in India, not to speak of receiving the detailed reports of several thousands of these schools, I ask leave to protest against certain sweeping assertions lately made to the effect that they are dens of iniquity. It is, as regards these schools, an utterly unjustifiable libel. Deviations from morality are rendered almost impossible in them, owing to both scholastic and family organisation, and the influence of the admirable religious treatises and books on conduct (Akhlaq — qualities) which have to be read by the student. At the first mentioned of these schools primary education was given to both boys and girls together (some of the latter wearing the half veil of betrothal). Precocious as Easterns are deemed to be, there was never the slightest approach to impropriety in the school in question. A few boys once threw stones at some Christian lads, and this misconduct was immediately punished by the Imam of the Mosque, and was not repeated. The youths in what may be called the “higher form” were examples of good

behaviour, and, indeed, the placidity of the Oriental temper is generally a sufficient law in itself. Vice is not so alluring as in Europe, and although the ideal in our schools may be higher, the practical purity in Muhammadan schools is probably greater.

In none of the schools that I have inspected in India did I hear of any cases of impropriety of any kind, except in some boarding houses attached to Government schools. In fact, the religious sentiment, the discipline of reverence and obedience, the inter-dependence or co-operation of teacher and parent, seem to me to render departures from morality far more difficult in Muhammadan than in Government schools in India, in which religious teaching is ignored, and even the introduction of a reader on morals and conduct (of little use among Orientals without a religious basis), has only quite recently been ordered by the Government of India. In my humble opinion, our greatest mistake in that country has been our system of secular education, and our displacement of the indigenous schools which ought to have been developed so as to combine ancient culture with modern requirements.

As for the wider question of the respective merits of Christianity and Muhammadanism as civilising agencies, allow me to observe that no person unacquainted with Arabic can discuss, at any rate, the theory of the latter religion, which is far more interwoven with the practice of the everyday life of its professors than, unfortunately, is Christianity. At the same time, there is no reason why, in our relations with Muhammadans, we should not emphasise the points of agreement of our respective faiths, rather than their differences.

Muhammadans recognise Christians and Jews as “Ehl Kitab,” or possessors of a (sacred) book. In the solemn “covenant with the Creator” into which the boy enters on leaving school he confesses his faith in these books. The Koran enjoins the protection of mosques, synagogues, and churches, in which the name of the one God is preached, as the special object of the effort (Jihad) of a true believer. Jesus is called the Spirit and Word of God, and His miraculous conception and glorious return are accepted in a sense which is not irreconcilable with doctrines that have been held by Christian sects. Muhammadans have liberally supported Christian schools and even churches, though few Christians have subscribed to mosques. Under Turkish rule, the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish denominations have preserved their autonomy for centuries. In India the “Kazi” is little more than tolerated, and numerous Muhammadan endowments have been curtailed, mis-applied, or “resumed” — an euphemism for confiscation. These should be restored, and their educational side be developed in accordance with the practical, as well as the religious, requirements of the Muhammadan community.

The social economy of Muhammadans, for which there is scriptural precedent, provides for women, and gives them greater legal rights than are possessed by Englishwomen, even since the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882. Indeed, nothing, except perhaps the Hindu family life in the higher castes, can exceed the respect, tenderness, purity, and legitimate influence of women in the Muhammadan household. The “beau sexe” forms no subject of conversation among Muhammadan as among Christian youths, and its seclusion is the protection given to what is precious and weak. The pious Muhammadan widow is proverbial as a patroness of education. The kindness of Muhammadans to dependents, their humane treatment of animals, “who also return to the Lord,” their great charity, and the simplicity which characterises the true believer should draw us to Him, and, instead of clamouring against “the false prophet,” our missionaries would do well in cementing an alliance between the sister-faiths of Islam and Christianity. Even now many a good Muhammadan would rather send his boy to a missionary school, “because the Bible, at any rate, is taught there,” than to a Government school, where there is “nothing” (in the form of religious instruction). Indirectly, also, the unexpected effect of Christian teaching in missionary schools in very many places is to increase the conversion of Hindus to Muhammadanism, for reasons which are too long to

explain. In my humble opinion we ought to set aside the first hour in Government schools in India to the separate religious teaching of the various denominations frequenting them in their own faiths, the remaining five hours of secular instruction being enjoyed in common by all denominations. Unless we do this we practically condemn the Muhammadan either to give up the worldly advantages of modern education, or else to abandon what he considers most sacred, and that is, his religious training. "Religious neutrality" should mean that "religious *impartiality*" which gives a share of the taxation of Orientals to what they value most, their religion; and if we wish to attach Muhammadans to British rule, we must give them 'din wa dunya' (religion and worldly advantages), and believe, with the Emperor Akbar, that "Government and religion are twins," for just as no Government can last that destroys the religious sentiment among its subjects, so also can no Government prosper that does not support their respective faith with equal generosity and justice.

It is, however, the special alliance of Islam and Christianity which I would urge, not only from a religious, but also from a political standpoint. There was a time when the Englishman was looked upon as the natural protector of the Muhammadan world, chiefly owing to the traditional friendship with Turkey, the ruler of which is the *de facto* Khalifa of the Sunni Muhammadans, who also form the majority of our Muhammadan fellow-subjects. This friendship should be strengthened, and among minor measures I would urge the admission of Muhammadan youths (as, indeed, also of Rajputs) of good birth into our military schools, with the view of their being employed, with exactly the same prospects of promotion as European officers, in the Indian army of the future, which will have to be very largely increased.

In conclusion, allow me to express the conviction that to advances such as I have ventured to indicate, made in a true Christian spirit to the professors of a sister-faith, the followers of Muhammad will cordially respond, much to the advantage of real religion throughout the world, and to the legitimate promotion of British interests, which will otherwise deservedly suffer at the hands of a new rival in the affections of Muhammadans. [2]

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