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A New Power in an Old World

THE WORLD INTO WHICH THE ARABS CAME

The world of Ibn Khaldun must have seemed everlasting to most of those who belonged to it, but he himself knew that it had replaced an earlier one. Seven hundred years before his time, the countries he knew had had a different face, beneath the sway of 'the two greatest powers of their time'.

For many centuries the countries of the Mediterranean basin had been part of the Roman Empire. A settled countryside produced grain, fruits, wine and oil, and trade was carried along peaceful sea-routes; in the great cities, a wealthy class of many origins shared in the Greek and Latin culture of the empire. From the fourth century of the Christian era, the centre of imperial power had moved eastwards. Constantinople replaced Rome as the capital city; there the emperor was the focus of loyalty and the symbol of cohesion. Later there appeared what has been called a 'horizontal division' which was to remain in other forms until our own time. In Germany, England, France, Spain and northern Italy, barbarian kings ruled, although the sense of belonging to the Roman Empire still existed; southern Italy, Sicily, the north African coast, Egypt, Syria, Anatolia and Greece remained under direct imperial rule from Constantinople. In this shrunken form, the empire was more Greek than Roman. (In its later phases it is more commonly called 'Byzantine' than Roman, after the former name of Constantinople, Byzantium.) The emperor ruled through Greek-speaking civil servants; the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean, Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt, were centres of Greek culture and sent members of local élites into the imperial service.

Another and a deeper change had taken place. The empire had become Christian, not just by formal decree of the ruler but by conversion at different levels. The majority of the population was Christian, although pagan philosophers taught in the school of Athens until the sixth century, Jewish communities lived in the cities, and memories of the pagan gods still haunted the temples turned into churches. Christianity gave a new

dimension to the loyalty felt towards the emperor and a new framework of unity for the local cultures of those he ruled. Christian ideas and images were expressed in the literary languages of the various regions of the empire as well as in the Greek of the cities: Armenian in eastern Anatolia, Syriac in Syria, Coptic in Egypt. Tombs of saints and other places of pilgrimage might preserve, in a Christian form, the immemorial beliefs and practices of a region.

The self-governing institutions of the Greek cities had disappeared with the expansion of the imperial bureaucracy, but bishops could provide local leadership. When the emperor left Rome, the bishop of the city, the Pope, could exercise authority in a way impossible for the patriarchs and bishops in the eastern Roman cities; they were closely linked with the imperial government, but they could still express local feelings and defend local interests. The hermit or miracle-working saint, too, living on the edge of the city or settled land in Anatolia or Syria, could act as arbiter of disputes or spokesman of the local population, and the monk in the Egyptian desert gave an example of a society differing from that of the secular urban world. Beside the official Orthodox Church, there grew up others which differed from it in doctrine and practice and which gave expression to the loyalties and opposition to central authority of those whose language was other than Greek.

The main doctrinal differences concerned the nature of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon in 451 had defined the second person of the Trinity as possessing two natures, divine and human. This was the formulation accepted by the main body of the Church, whether in the east or west, and supported by the imperial government. It was only later and gradually, and mainly over the question of authority, that there took place a division between the Church in the Byzantine territories, the Eastern Orthodox Church with its Patriarchs as heads of its priesthood, and those in western Europe who accepted the supreme authority of the Pope in Rome. There were some communities, however, which held that Christ had only a single nature, composed of two natures. This, the Monophysite doctrine, was held by the Armenian Church in Anatolia, by most Egyptian Christians (known as 'Copts' from the ancient name for Egypt), and by many of the indigenous, Syriac-speaking Christians of Syria (known as Syrian Orthodox, or 'Jacobites' from the name of their most prominent theologian). Others again made a sharper division between the two natures, in order to maintain the full humanity of Jesus, and thought of the Word of God as dwelling in the man Jesus from his conception; this was the doctrine

of those commonly known as Nestorians, from the name of a thinker identified with the doctrine; their Church was most important among the Christians in Iraq, beyond the eastern frontier of the Byzantine Empire. In the seventh century, a further group appeared, as a result of an attempt at compromise between the Orthodox and Monophysite positions: the Monotheletes, who held that Christ had two natures but one will.

To the east of the Byzantine Empire, across the Euphrates river, lay another great empire, that of the Sasanians, whose rule extended over what are now Iran and Iraq, and stretched into central Asia. The land now called Iran or Persia contained a number of regions of high culture and ancient cities inhabited by different ethnic groups, divided from each other by steppes or deserts, with no great rivers to give them easy communications. From time to time they had been united by strong and lasting dynasties; the latest was that of the Sasanians, whose original power lay among the Persian-speaking peoples of southern Iran. Theirs was a family state ruled through a hierarchy of officials, and they tried to provide a solid basis of unity and loyalty by reviving the ancient religion of Iran, traditionally associated with the teacher Zoroaster. For this religion, the universe was a battle-ground, beneath the supreme God, between good and evil spirits; the good would win, but men and women of virtue and ritual purity could hasten the victory.

After Alexander the Great conquered Iran in 334-33 BC and drew it into closer ties with the eastern Mediterranean world, ideas from the Greek world moved eastwards, while those of a teacher from Iraq, Mani, who tried to incorporate all prophets and teachers into a single religious system (known as Manichaeism) moved westwards. Under the Sasanians the teaching associated with Zoroaster was revived in a philosophical form, with more emphasis on the dualism of good and evil, and with a priesthood and formal worship; this is known as Mazdaism or Zoroastrianism. As a state Church, Mazdaism supported the power of the ruler, regarded as a just king who preserved harmony between the different classes of society.

The Sasanian capital lay not in the plateaux of Iran but at Ctesiphon in the fertile and populous area of central Iraq, watered by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Besides Zoroastrians and followers of Mani, Iraq had Christians of the Nestorian Church, who were important in the service of the state. This area was also the main centre of Jewish religious learning, and a refuge for pagan philosophers and medical scientists from the Greek cities of the Mediterranean world. Various forms of the Persian language were widespread; the written form used at the time is known as Pahlavi.

Widespread too was Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic and current throughout the Middle East at the time; one of its forms is known as Syriac.

The two empires included the main regions of settled life and high culture in the western half of the world, but further south, on either side of the Red Sea, lay two other societies with traditions of organized power and culture maintained by agriculture and by trade between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. One was Ethiopia, an ancient kingdom with Christianity in its Coptic form as the official religion. The other was Yemen in south-western Arabia, a land of fertile mountain valleys and a point of transit for long-distance trade. At a certain stage its small local states had been incorporated in a larger kingdom, which had grown weak when trade declined in the early Christian era but revived later. Yemen had its own language, different from Arabic which was spoken elsewhere in Arabia, and its own religion: a multiplicity of gods were served by priests in temples which were places of pilgrimage, votive offerings and private, but not communal, prayer, and also centres of great estates. In later centuries Christian and Jewish influences had come down from Syria on the trade-routes or across the sea from Ethiopia. In the sixth century, a centre of Christianity had been destroyed by a king attracted to Judaism, but invasions from Ethiopia had restored some Christian influence; both the Byzantines and the Sasanians had been involved in these events.

Between the great empires of the north and the kingdoms of the Red Sea lay lands of a different kind. The greater part of the Arabian peninsula was steppe or desert, with isolated oases having enough water for regular cultivation. The inhabitants spoke various dialects of Arabic and followed different ways of life. Some of them were nomads who pastured camels, sheep or goats by using the scanty water resources of the desert; these have traditionally been known as 'beduin'. Some were settled cultivators tending their grain or palm trees in the oases, or traders and craftsmen in small market towns; some combined more than one way of life. The balance between nomadic and sedentary peoples was precarious. Although they were a minority of the population, it was the camel-nomads, mobile and carrying arms, who, together with merchant groups in the towns, dominated the cultivators and craftsmen. Their ethos of courage, hospitality, loyalty to family and pride of ancestry was also dominant. They were not controlled by a stable power of coercion, but were led by chiefs belonging to families around which there gathered more or less lasting

groups of supporters, expressing their cohesion and loyalty in the idiom of common ancestry; such groups are usually called tribes.

The power of tribal leaders was exercised from oases, where they had close links with merchants who organized trade through the territory controlled by the tribe. In the oases, however, other families were able to establish a different kind of power through the force of religion. The religion of pastoralists and cultivators seems to have had no clear shape. Local gods, identified with objects in the sky, were thought to be embodied in stones, trees and other natural things; good and evil spirits were believed to roam the world in the shape of animals; soothsayers claimed to speak with the tongue of some supernatural wisdom. It has been suggested, on the basis of modern practice in southern Arabia, that gods were thought of as dwelling in a sanctuary, a *haram*, a place or town set apart from tribal conflict, serving as a centre of pilgrimage, sacrifice, meeting and arbitration, and watched over by a family under the protection of a neighbouring tribe.¹ Such a family could obtain power or influence by making skilful use of its religious prestige, its role as arbiter of tribal disputes, and its opportunities for trade.

Throughout this Near Eastern world, much was changing in the sixth and early seventh centuries. The Byzantine and Sasanian Empires were engaged in long wars, which lasted with intervals from 540 to 629. They were mainly fought in Syria and Iraq; for a moment the Sasanian armies came as far as the Mediterranean, occupying the great cities of Antioch and Alexandria as well as the holy city of Jerusalem, but in the 620s they were driven back by the Emperor Heraclius. For a time too Sasanian rule extended to south-western Arabia, where the kingdom of Yemen had lost much of its former power because of invasions from Ethiopia and a decline in agriculture. The settled societies ruled by the empires were full of questionings about the meaning of life and the way it should be lived, expressed in the idioms of the great religions.

The power and influence of the empires touched parts of the Arabian peninsula, and for many centuries Arab pastoral nomads from the north and centre of the peninsula had been moving into the countryside of the area now often called the Fertile Crescent: the interior of Syria, the land lying west of the Euphrates in lower Iraq, and the region between Euphrates and Tigris in upper Iraq (the Jazira) were largely Arab in population. They brought with them their ethos and forms of social organization. Some of their tribal chiefs exercised leadership from oasis towns and were used by the imperial governments to keep other nomads away from the settled

lands and to collect taxes. They were able therefore to create more stable political units, like that of the Lakhmids with its capital at Hira, in a region where the Sasanians did not exercise direct control, and that of the Ghassanids in a similar region of the Byzantine Empire. The people of these states acquired political and military knowledge, and were open to ideas and beliefs coming from the imperial lands; Hira was a Christian centre. From these states, from Yemen, and also by the passage of traders along the trade-routes, there came into Arabia some knowledge of the outside world and its culture, and some settlers from it. There were Jewish craftsmen, merchants and cultivators in the oases of Hijaz in western Arabia, and Christian monks and converts in central Arabia.

THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY

There appears also to have been a growing sense of cultural identity among the pastoral tribesmen, shown in the emergence of a common poetic language out of the dialects of Arabic. This was a formal language, with refinements of grammar and vocabulary, which evolved gradually, perhaps by the elaboration of one particular dialect, or perhaps by a conflation of several. It was used by poets from different tribal groups or oasis towns. Their poetry may have developed out of the use of rhythmic, elevated and rhymed language for incantations or magical spells, but that which has come down to us is in no sense primitive. It is the product of a long cumulative tradition, in which not only tribal gatherings and market towns, but the courts of Arab dynasties on the fringes of the great empires played a part, in particular that of Hira on the Euphrates, open as it was to Christian and Mazdaean influences.

The poetic conventions which emerged from this tradition were elaborate. The poetic form most highly valued was the ode or *qasida*, a poem of up to 100 lines, written in one of a number of accepted metres and with a single rhyme running through it. Each line consisted of two hemistiches: the rhyme was carried in both of them in the first line, but only in the second in the rest. In general, each line was a unit of meaning and total enjambment was rare; but this did not prevent continuity of thought or feeling from one line to another, and throughout the poem.

Poetry was not written down, although it could have been, because writing was known in the peninsula: inscriptions in the languages of southern Arabia go back for centuries. The earliest Arabic inscriptions, in Aramaic script, can be dated to the fourth century, and later an Arabic

script was evolved; apart from inscriptions, writing may well have been used in long-distance trade. Poems, however, were composed to be recited in public, either by the poet himself or by a *rawi* or reciter. This had certain implications: the sense had to be conveyed in a line, a single unit of words of which the meaning could be grasped by listeners, and every performance was unique and different from others. The poet or *rawi* had scope for improvisation, within a framework of commonly accepted verbal forms and patterns, the use of certain words or combinations of them in order to express certain ideas or feelings. There may therefore have been no single authentic version of a poem. As they have come down to us, the versions were produced later by philologists or literary critics in the light of the linguistic or poetic norms of their own time. In the process of doing so, they may have introduced new elements into the poems, changing the language to suit their ideas of what was correct and even forming *qasidas* by combining shorter pieces. In the 1920s two scholars, one British and one Egyptian, built upon these undoubted facts a theory that the poems were themselves the products of a later period, but most of those who have studied the subject would now agree that in substance the poems do come from the time to which they have traditionally been ascribed.

Among scholars and critics of a later period, it was common to refer to certain poems, among the mass of those which have survived, as supreme examples of the ancient Arabian poetry. These came to be called the *Mu'allaqat* or 'suspended poems', a name of which the origin and meaning are obscure; the poets who wrote them – Labid, Zuhayr, Imru'l-Qays and some half-dozen others – were regarded as the great masters of the art. It was customary to call the poetry of this time the *diwan* of the Arabs, the register of what they had done, or the expression of their collective memory, but the strong imprint of the personality of the individual poet was also there.

Later critics and scholars were accustomed to distinguish three elements in the *qasida*, but this was to formalize a practice which was loose and varied. The poem tended to begin with the evocation of a place where the poet had once been, which could also be an evocation of a lost love; the mood was not erotic, so much as the commemoration of the transience of human life:

The abodes are deserted, the places where we halted and those where we camped, in Mina; Ghawl and Rijan are both abandoned. In the flood-courses of Rayyan the riverbeds are naked and worn smooth, as writing is preserved on stone. The

blackened dung lies undisturbed since those who stayed there departed: long years have passed over it, years of holy and ordinary months. Springs which the stars have caused to flow have fed them, and they have been nourished by the waters of thunder-clouds: heavy downpours and light showers, the clouds of night, those that cover the sky at morning, and the evening clouds whose voices answer each other.²

After this, there may come a journey on camel-back, in which the poet speaks of the camel, the countryside and the hunting of animals, and, by implication, of the recovery of his strength and confidence when tested against the forces of nature. The poem may culminate in praise of the poet's tribe:

A house with a high roof has been built for us, and young and old alike try to reach its height . . . They are those who fight when the tribe is in distress, its knights and its arbiters. They are like the spring for those who seek their help, or for widows whose year of mourning is long. They are such a tribe, envy cannot harm them and none of their people are so unworthy as to go with the enemy.³

Beneath the praise and boasting, however, can sometimes be heard another note, that of the limits of human strength in the face of all-powerful nature:

I am tired of the burdens of life; make no mistake, whoever lives to fourscore years grows tired. I know what is happening today and what happened yesterday, but I cannot tell what tomorrow will bring. I have seen the Fates stamp like a camel in the dark; those they touch they kill, and those they miss live on to grow old.⁴

MUHAMMAD AND THE APPEARANCE OF ISLAM

By the early seventh century there existed a combination of a settled world which had lost something of its strength and assurance, and another world on its frontiers which was in closer contact with its northern neighbours and opening itself to their cultures. The decisive meeting between them took place in the middle years of that century. A new political order was created which included the whole of the Arabian peninsula, the whole of the Sasanian lands, and the Syrian and Egyptian provinces of the Byzantine Empire; old frontiers were erased and new ones created. In this new order, the ruling group was formed not by the peoples of the empires but by Arabs from western Arabia, and to a great extent from Mecca.

Before the end of the seventh century, this Arab ruling group was identifying its new order with a revelation given by God to Muhammad, a

citizen of Mecca, in the form of a holy book, the Qur'an: a revelation which completed those given to earlier prophets or messengers of God and created a new religion, Islam, separate from Judaism and Christianity. There is room for scholarly discussion about the way in which these beliefs developed. The Arabic sources which narrate the life of Muhammad and the formation of a community around him are later in date; the first biographer whose work we know did not write until more than a century after Muhammad's death. Sources written in other languages fully attest to the conquest of an empire by the Arabs, but what they say about the mission of Muhammad is different from what the Muslim tradition says, and still needs to be studied and discussed. On the other hand, there seems little reason to doubt that the Qur'an is substantially a document of seventh-century Arabia, although it may have taken some time to assume its definitive literary form. Moreover, there seem to be elements in the traditional biographies and histories which are not likely to have been invented. Undoubtedly such writings reflect later attempts to fit Muhammad into the Near Eastern pattern of a holy man, and the Arabian pattern of a man of noble descent; they reflect also the doctrinal controversies of the time and place where they were composed – Iraq in the eighth century. Nevertheless, they contain facts about Muhammad's life, his family and friends which could scarcely have been invented. It seems best therefore to follow the traditional account of the origins of Islam, although with caution. To do so has an advantage: since that account, and the text of the Qur'an, have remained living without substantial change in the minds and imaginations of believers in the religion of Islam, to follow it makes it possible to understand their view of history and of what human life should be.

The most obscure part of the life of Muhammad, as the biographers narrate it, is the early one. They tell us that he was born in Mecca, a town in western Arabia, perhaps in or near the year 570. His family belonged to the tribe of Quraysh, although not to its most powerful part. Members of the tribe were traders, who had agreements with pastoral tribes around Mecca and also relations with Syria as well as south-western Arabia. They are also said to have had a connection with the sanctuary of the town, the Ka'ba, where the images of local gods were kept. Muhammad married Khadija, a widow engaged in trade, and looked after her business for her. Various anecdotes recorded by those who later wrote his life portray a world waiting for a guide and a man searching for a vocation. A seeker after God expresses his wish to be taught: 'O God, if I knew how you

wished to be worshipped I would so worship you, but I do not know'. Jewish rabbis, Christian monks and Arab soothsayers predict the coming of a prophet: a monk, met by Muhammad on a trading journey to southern Syria, 'looked at his back and saw the seal of prophethood between his shoulders'. Natural objects saluted him: 'Not a stone or tree that he passed but would say, "Peace unto you, O apostle of God!"' ⁵

He became a solitary wanderer among the rocks, and then one day, perhaps when he was about forty years old, something happened: some contact with the supernatural, known to later generations as the Night of Power or Destiny. In one version, an angel, seen in the form of a man on the horizon, called to him to become the messenger of God; in another, he heard the angel's voice summoning him to recite. He asked, 'What shall I recite?' and the voice said:

Recite: in the name of thy Lord who created,
created man of a blood-clot.

Recite: and thy Lord is the most bountiful,
who taught by the pen,
taught man what he knew not.
No, indeed: surely man waxes insolent,
for he thinks himself self-sufficient.
Surely unto thy Lord is the returning.⁶

At this point there occurred an event known in the lives of other claimants to supernatural power: the claim is accepted by some to whom it is told, and this recognition confirms it in the mind of him who has made it. Those who responded were few in number, and included his wife Khadija: 'Rejoice, O son of my uncle, and be of good heart. By Him in whose hand is Khadija's soul, I hope that thou wilt be the prophet of His people'.

From this time Muhammad began communicating to those who adhered to him a succession of messages which he believed to have been revealed by an angel of God. The world would end; God the all-powerful, who had created human beings, would judge them all; the delights of Heaven and the pains of Hell were depicted in vivid colours. If in their lives they submitted to God's Will, they could rely on His mercy when they came to judgement; and it was God's Will that they should show their gratitude by regular prayer and other observances, and by benevolence and sexual restraint. The name used for God was 'Allah', which was already in use for one of the local gods (it is now also used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians as the name of God). Those who submitted to His Will came

eventually to be known as Muslims; the name for their religion, Islam, is derived from the same linguistic root.

Gradually there gathered around Muhammad a small group of believers: a few young members of the influential families of Quraysh, some members of minor families, clients of other tribes who had placed themselves under the protection of Quraysh, and some craftsmen and slaves. As support for Muhammad grew, his relations with the leading families of Quraysh became worse. They did not accept his claim to be a messenger of God, and they saw him as one who attacked their way of life. 'O Abu Talib,' they said to his uncle, who was his protector among them, 'your nephew has cursed our gods, insulted our religion, mocked our way of life, and accused our forefathers of error.' His situation grew worse when his wife Khadija and Abu Talib died in the same year.

As his teaching developed, its differences from accepted beliefs became clearer. The idols of the gods and ceremonies connected with them were attacked; new forms of worship were enjoined, in particular regular communal prayer, and new kinds of good works. He placed himself more explicitly in the line of prophets of the Jewish and Christian tradition.

Finally his position became so difficult that in 622 he left Mecca for an oasis settlement 200 miles to the north, Yathrib, to be known in future as Madina. The way had been prepared by men from Yathrib who had come to Mecca for trade. They belonged to two tribes and needed an arbiter in tribal disputes; having lived side by side with Jewish inhabitants of the oasis, they were prepared to accept a teaching expressed in terms of a prophet and a holy book. This move to Madina, from which later generations were to date the beginning of the Muslim era, is known as the *hijra*: the word has not simply the negative meaning of a flight from Mecca, but the positive one of seeking protection by settling in a place other than one's own. In later Islamic centuries, it would be used to mean the abandonment of a pagan or wicked community for one living in accordance with the moral teaching of Islam. The early biographers have preserved the texts of agreements said to have been made between Muhammad and his adherents on the one side and the two main tribes, together with some Jewish groups, on the other. It was an agreement not unlike those made in modern south Arabia when a *haram* is set up: each party was to keep its own laws and customs, but the whole area of the *haram* was to be one of peace, disputes were not to be settled by force but judged by 'God and Muhammad', and the alliance would act together against those who broke the peace.

From Madina, Muhammad began to gather a power which radiated

throughout the oasis and the surrounding desert. He was soon drawn into an armed struggle with Quraysh, perhaps for control of the trade-routes, and in the course of the struggle the nature of the community was shaped. They came to believe that it was necessary to fight for what was right: 'when Quraysh became insolent towards God and rejected His gracious purpose . . . He gave permission to His apostle to fight and protect himself'. They acquired the conviction that God and the angels were fighting on their side, and accepted calamity when it came as a trial by which God tested believers.

It was in this period of expanding power and struggle that the Prophet's teaching took its final form. In the parts of the Qur'an which are thought to have been revealed then, there is a greater concern with defining the ritual observances of religion and with social morality, the rules of social peace, property, marriage and inheritance. In some regards specific injunctions are given, in others general principles. At the same time the teaching becomes more universal, directed to the whole of pagan Arabia and by implication to the whole world, and it separates itself more clearly from that of the Jews and Christians.

The development of the Prophet's teaching may have been connected with changes in his relations with the Jews of Madina. Although they had formed part of the original alliance, their position became more difficult as Muhammad's claim for his mission expanded. They could not accept him as a genuine messenger of God within their own tradition, and he in turn is said to have accused them of perverting the revelation given to them: 'you have concealed what you were ordered to make plain'. Finally some of the Jewish clans were expelled and others killed.

It may have been a sign of the breach with the Jews that the direction which the community faced in prayer was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca (*qibla*), and a new emphasis was placed on the line of spiritual descent which bound Muhammad to Abraham. The idea that Abraham was the founder of a high monotheistic faith and of the sanctuary at Mecca already existed; now he was seen as neither a Jew nor a Christian, but the common ancestor of both, and of Muslims too. This change was also connected with a change in Muhammad's relations with Quraysh and Mecca. A kind of reconciliation of interests took place. The merchants of Mecca were in danger of losing their alliances with tribal chiefs and their control of trade, and in the city itself there was a growing number of adherents to Islam; an agreement with the new power would remove certain dangers, while the community of Muhammad for its part could not

feel safe so long as Mecca was hostile, and it needed the skills of the Meccan patricians. Since the *haram* at Mecca was thought to have been founded by Abraham, it could be accepted as a place to which pilgrimage was allowed, although with a changed meaning.

By 629 relations had become close enough for the community to be permitted to go to Mecca on pilgrimage, and next year the leaders of the city surrendered it to Muhammad, who occupied it virtually without resistance and announced the principles of a new order: 'every claim of privilege or blood or property is abolished by me except the custody of the temple and the watering of the pilgrims'.

Madina still remained his capital, however. There he exercised authority over his followers less by regular government than by political manipulation and personal ascendancy; of the several marriages he made after Khadija's death, some, although not all, were contracted for political reasons. There was no elaborate administration or army, simply Muhammad as supreme arbiter with a number of deputies, a military levy of believers, and a public treasury filled by voluntary gifts and by levies on tribes which submitted. Beyond the towns, Muhammad's peace stretched over a wide area. Tribal chiefs needed agreements with him because he controlled the oases and markets. The nature of the agreements varied; in some cases there was alliance and renunciation of conflict, in others acceptance of the prophethood of Muhammad, the obligation of prayer and the regular giving of financial contributions.

In 632 Muhammad made his last visit to Mecca, and his speech there has been recorded in the traditional writings as the final statement of his message: 'know that every Muslim is a Muslim's brother, and that the Muslims are brethren'; fighting between them should be avoided, and the blood shed in pagan times should not be avenged. He said too that he would fight until all men should confess, 'There is no god but God'.

Later that year he died. He left more than one legacy. First was that of his personality as seen through the eyes of his close companions. Their testimony, handed down mainly by oral transmission, did not assume its definite shape until much later, and by that time it was certainly swollen by accretions, but it seems plausible to suggest that from an early time those who had known and followed Muhammad would have tried to model their behaviour upon his. In the course of time there evolved a type of human personality which may well be to some extent a reflection of his. Mirrored in the eyes of his followers, he appears as a man searching for truth in early life, then bemused by the sense of some power falling upon

him from on high, eager to communicate what had been revealed to him, acquiring confidence in his mission and a sense of authority as followers gathered around him, an arbiter concerned to make peace and reconcile disputes in the light of principles of justice believed to be of divine origin, a skilful manipulator of political forces, a man not turning his back on habitual modes of human action but trying to confine them within limits which he believed to have been ordained by the Will of God.

If an image of Muhammad was gradually elaborated and transmitted from one generation to another, so was that of the community he founded. As pictured by later ages, it was a community which revered the Prophet and held his memory dear, trying to follow his path and strive in the way of Islam for the service of God. It was held together by the basic rituals of devotion, all of which had a communal aspect: Muslims went on pilgrimage at the same time, fasted throughout the same month and united in regular prayer, the activity which marked them off most clearly from the rest of the world.

Above all, there was the legacy of the Qur'an, a book which depicts in language of great force and beauty the incursion of a transcendent God, source of all power and goodness, into the human world He has created; the revelation of His Will through a line of prophets sent to warn men and bring them back to their true selves as grateful and obedient creatures; God's judgement of men at the end of time, and the rewards and punishments to follow from it.

Orthodox Muslims have always believed that the Qur'an is the Word of God, revealed in the Arabic language through an angel to Muhammad, at various times and in ways appropriate to the needs of the community. Few non-Muslims would entirely accept this belief. At most, some of them would think it possible that in a sense Muhammad received inspiration from outside the human world, but would maintain that it was mediated through his personality and expressed in his words. There is no purely rational way in which this difference of belief can be resolved, but those who are divided by it can agree on certain questions which might legitimately be asked about the Qur'an.

First is the question of when and how it took its final form. Muhammad communicated the revelations to his followers at various times, and they recorded them in writing or kept them in their memories. Most scholars would agree that the process by which different versions were collected and a generally accepted text and arrangement established did not end until after Muhammad's death. The traditional account is that this hap-

pened during the time of his third successor as head of the community, 'Uthman (644-56), but later dates have been suggested, and some Muslim sects have accused others of inserting into the text material not derived by transmission from the Prophet.

A more important question is that of the originality of the Qur'an. Scholars have tried to place it in the context of ideas current in its time and place. Undoubtedly there are echoes in it of the teaching of earlier religions: Jewish ideas in its doctrines; some reflections of eastern Christian monastic piety in the brooding on the terrors of judgement and the descriptions of Heaven and Hell (but few references to Christian doctrine or liturgy); Biblical stories in forms different from those of the Old and New Testaments; an echo of the Manichaean idea of a succession of revelations given to different peoples. There are also traces of an indigenous tradition: the moral ideas in some ways continue those prevalent in Arabia, although in others they break with them; in the early revelations the tone is that of the Arabian soothsayer, stammering out his sense of an encounter with the supernatural.

Such traces of the past need cause no anxiety to a Muslim, who can regard them as signs that Muhammad came at the end of a line of prophets who all taught the same truth; to be effective, the final revelation might use words and images already known and understood, and if ideas or stories took a different form in the Qur'an, that might be because adherents of earlier prophets had distorted the message received through them. Some non-Muslim scholars, however, have drawn a different conclusion: that the Qur'an contains little more than borrowings from what was already available to Muhammad in that time and place. To say this, however, is to misunderstand what it is to be original: whatever was taken over from the religious culture of the age was so rearranged and transmuted that, for those who accepted the message, the familiar world was made anew.