

ISLAM AND THE HOLY SEE

JOHN RAMSAY FAIRFAX

COMMENTING on the recent presence in Cairo of the Egyptian Minister to the Holy See, *The Times* has twice alluded to the probability of some joint action by the Vatican and Islam with regard to the formation of a common front against the dangers of Communism. That some form of general *rapprochement* is under consideration can indeed hardly be doubted, since only last November the possibility of this was mentioned by the Holy See itself in an announcement made by the Congregation *de Propaganda Fidei*. This announcement was not, however, any new or sudden departure, but can be best understood if it is regarded merely as a further step in a process that plainly appears as steadily developing during recent years.

Since the Catholic and Islamic Faiths jointly account for a large proportion of the world's inhabitants, the growth of friendly understanding between the leaders of both is of profound importance, and the details of such growth are of much significance. Islam itself has been described as a sounding-box on which an event occurring in one place immediately affects the whole. This is particularly true of Cairo, capital of Egypt, since political happenings there have speedy repercussions among the various Muslim states of the Arab League, whilst also influencing Islamic opinion as a whole, because Muslim students from all over the free world are numbered among those attending at the great University of Al Azhar, one of the main centres of Mohammedan religious thought and teaching today as it has been for ages past.

The importance, therefore, of the relationship between the Holy See and the Muslim Government of Egypt is at once apparent, particularly as in both the Land of the Nile and many of the Arab states there are well-organised Catholic minorities in whose concerns the Vatican is directly interested. As regards Egypt itself, the present dynasty has always displayed an attitude of courtesy towards the Papacy, and it thus seems peculiarly fitting that the Royal Egyptian Government should have been the first Islamic power to enter into official diplomatic relations

with the Holy See. This took place in 1947 under the auspices of His Majesty King Farouk, during whose reign the prestige of the Catholic Church has been steadily growing in Egypt, partly as a result of a general admiration for Vatican policy, and, perhaps even more, through the labours and outstanding personality of the late Mgr Arthur Hughes, W.F., who came to Cairo as Regent of the Apostolic Delegation in 1939, and was subsequently appointed as the first Inter-Nuncio in 1947. He undoubtedly did much to forward a policy of political *rapprochement* between the Holy See and a King and Government to whom he was so very much a *persona grata*, whilst, at the same time, as Inter-Nuncio he exchanged visits with the Premier Sheik of the Al Azhar. The latter, it is interesting to note, has just now recently welcomed the new Inter-Nuncio—Mgr Levamé—on his arrival in Cairo. Mgr Hughes had himself as Inter-Nuncio appealed for the co-operation of Islam against the evils of atheistic Communism when giving an interview to a representative of the vernacular press; and it is perhaps not mere coincidence that he seems to have used words very similar in meaning to those subsequently utilised in the statement from the *Propaganda Fidei*.

Since 1947 the Egyptian Government has continued to give evidence of its respect for the Holy See by a variety of actions. Not only has the Pope been officially thanked for the publication of the Encyclical *Redemptoris Nostri*, but regulations to assist Holy Year pilgrims have been forthcoming. Even more significant is a letter, quoted by *Le Rayon d'Egypte* as issued by the Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs last December, in which the attention of newspapers is drawn to the *bonne entente* existing between the Government and the Holy See, who are mutually supporting each other's endeavours over various diplomatic questions. Newspapers are therefore asked to refrain from publishing matters likely to embarrass such *entente* by any lack of courtesy to the Vatican over matters of interest and concern to both parties. Further instances of goodwill can be quoted; but it seems sufficient to note that the Pope last year conferred honours and decorations on many prominent Egyptians, including particularly the late Prime Minister, the murdered Nokrashy Pasha.

Turning next to the other Mediterranean states, we find similar cordiality operating in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. So far no diplomatic relations exist; but King Abdullah recently granted

a most friendly audience to the new Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, and has also offered to pay for repairs to the Holy Sepulchre damaged by fire. In Jordan itself the late Archbishop of Amman—Mgr Bulos Salman—publicly stated to U.N.O. representatives that the Catholic minority was happy and contented under its Muslim sovereign.

Syria last year appointed a *chargé d'affaires* to the Holy See, and the late President officially received one of the leading Catholic prelates—H-B. Maximus IV, the Melkite Patriarch—with much honour when the latter visited Damascus. The Patriarch had previously been congratulated by all the Muslim Governments and rulers mentioned above on his election; whilst in the small state of Lebanon the existence of diplomatic relations between it and the Vatican has some relevance, although there is there a slight Christian majority amongst the inhabitants.

Looking further afield, we see that in Turkey the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* has advocated the exchange of representatives between that Republic and the Papacy; whilst from distant Persia H.I.M. the Shah has not long since visited the Holy Father. Further away still, the newly-founded state of Indonesia has already decided to open diplomatic relations with the Holy See, whilst the Catholic Church in those largely Muslim islands held a special service to seek blessings on their new Government and the people as a whole. And, though not politically independent, the action of the Muslim President of the Algerian Assembly in North Africa seems equally significant, as he has asked the prayers of a Catholic Archbishop that he may successfully perform his duties; while in the South the Muslim Sultan of Mozambique has paid honour to the statue of Our Lady of Fatima as it passed by on its way to Cairo. On arrival in the latter city its welcome by huge crowds, both Christian and Muslim, had the benevolent interest of the authorities.

Against this background, the possibility of a joint declaration as to future co-operation between the Catholic Church and Islam does indeed seem not unlikely; but it must also be remembered that, for such a movement to succeed, it is necessary for the Church to consider not only the rulers but also the peoples of Islam. This she is in fact doing, and in many Muslim countries her labours for education, for the poor and for social welfare are generally recognised and valued. Particularly is this so as regards the Arab

refugees, for whom Catholic relief organisations have performed a stupendous task for the benefit not only of those who are Catholics, but for thousands of Orthodox and Muslims as well. Similarly, in Upper Egypt, the great work of spiritual and social rehabilitation carried out amongst the Copt-Catholic peasants has paralleled the Government's drive against poverty, ignorance and disease; and the Church has made plain her determination to be recognised as contributing to the good of the country as a whole, a claim she is successfully pursuing in other Muslim lands.

It would be equally wrong to imagine there is no opposition, no fanaticism, and no anti-Catholic feeling. Among many of the ignorant this does still exist, and even in Egypt's internal administration there is local prejudice over such matters as religious teaching in schools, questions of personal status, and other matters which have for long been a cause of anxiety to the leaders of the Christian minorities as they argue and negotiate with the Government Departments concerned. Just recently, too, the adoption of Islam as the official state religion by Syria, despite the protests of the influential Christian minorities, has caused some concern. According to the *Arab World* for April, there are fears lest this lead to the appearance of a new element of exclusiveness and something like fanaticism in Governmental and public life. It is to be hoped such fears may prove groundless and that they do not foreshadow the emergence in Syria of a ruthless and fanatical organisation like that of the Ikhwan el Muslimin recently suppressed in Egypt.

With these exceptions, however, the general picture is certainly one of growing understanding, of toleration and of goodwill between the Church and Islam; and for this all men who truly believe in religion—as against those who know neither God, Christianity, nor the Prophet Mahomet—must surely rejoice, and must pray that such co-operation may continue to the benefit of the countless millions who adhere to the Catholic Faith and to Islam.