

MUHAMMAD AT MEDINA

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THIS book¹ is intended to be read both by the specialist and by the more enterprising general reader. From the point of view of the specialist it reviews and makes new use of familiar material and also exploits the field of social anthropology in an experimental way. At the same time it is written clearly and readably and, together with the same author's *Muhammad at Mecca*, constitutes a very full guide both to the life of Muhammad and to his social, political and religious background, for any reader who is already interested in, or is at least not put off by, themes and settings outside the European tradition.

In *Muhammad at Mecca* Dr Watt presented the prophetic call as a response to the individualism of the tribal system in decay. In his new book he shows himself particularly aware of two aspects of the Prophet's reforms: of the individualistic trend of the legislation, and of the institution of the religious community. It is the sense of this community which has always been so characteristic of Islam, and this aspect appears especially clearly in the chapters on the 'Unifying of the Arabs' and on the 'Character of the Islamic State'. Dr Watt expressly sees the whole of Muhammad's work as a 'building on religious foundations', equally when it is political, social or economic. The early unifying of the tribes under Muhammad prefigures and leads onwards to the later unity of the Islamic world under the Caliphs. The section on the character of the *ummah* is one of very great interest. The community (*ummah*) to which a prophet is sent, and which may reject him, develops as the Qur'anic revelation continues into the *ummah* which is itself the religious community. In this aspect we see clearly how false it is to overstress the apparent contrast between the prophetic period at Mecca and the legislative period at Medina which has been a commonplace of Christian criticism. Thus, for example, instructions and regulations for the spending of money, whether booty of war, voluntary offerings, or tax enforced by religion or negotiated by treaty, always envisage similar groups of beneficiaries, the poor, the

¹ *Muhammad at Medina*. By W. Montgomery Watt. (Oxford, Clarendon Press; 42s.)

orphans, the strangers. There is 'an impressive witness to the continuity of the Qur'anic message'; from the first, there had been insistence on generosity, the denunciation of niggardliness as leading to Hell. At the same time expenditure on affairs of state was also 'in the way of God', since the State was a theocracy. A religious act such as the Worship was essentially communal; a social act, such as the payment of legal alms (*zakāt*), was essentially religious and 'took up into itself old Semitic ideas of sacrifice'. The communal aspect of the religious institutions of Islam, and particularly of the five pillars, is seen to date from the earliest days.

What is most characteristic of the author's treatment is his insistence on the combination of individualism and communalism in the new religious system. This is especially evident in the treatment of 'Reform of the Social Structure'; of, for example, the new laws of marriage which have given such scandal over the ages to Christian critics. Dr Watt will have none of that weak modernism which sees the Qur'ān as recommending monogyny, as having only a permissive attitude to polygyny. He maintains that Muhammad was concerned positively to recommend plurality of wives. At the same time he sees this against a social background in the investigation of which he is a pioneer. Muhammad, he tells us, was creating virilocal and patrilineal marriage in the place of an uxorilocal, matrilineal system, already perhaps in dissolution, which offered such fluidity of relationships as to be equivalent, at its worst, to prostitution, in either a Christian or a Muslim view. The stability of the Muslim family is a fact the Westerner is sometimes astonished to realize when he first travels in the East. Here Dr Watt traces this phenomenon to the reforms which the Prophet was conscious of imposing as God's will. Similarly the laws of inheritance are shown as supplying the want left by the break-up of tribal communalism: 'the Qur'ān goes far to meet the individualism of the times, and yet is not completely individualistic' (even in its purely secular definitions).

These two themes, of the recognition through legislation of economic individualism, and of the creation of a fresh, self-conscious and essentially religious community, reappear constantly in the intricate treatment of the historical and sociological detail. It is the persistence of these easily recognized themes that

makes the significance of the mass of detail comprehensible to the non-specialist reader. The author suggests that certain sections may be omitted by the non-specialist; but those who take pleasure from the subtle exploitation of evidence will yet like to read some at least of such chapters as that devoted to the tribes.

Yet this book has a significance beyond its interest for scholars and others and its utility for students. Its author is not only an academic specialist but also a clergyman of the Scottish Episcopal Church with known interests in theology; and his book is the latest in the long series of evaluations of the Prophet of Islam by Christian thinkers. It is from this point of view that his life of Muhammad has a special importance. Although it covers much of the ground from new angles, the actual ground covered is necessarily much the same as has been the subject of active Christian debate, in the case of Europe, for the best part of nine centuries. In the last generation Christian attitudes to Islam have changed very greatly. First such men as Nicholson and Massignon created the now widespread interest in Islamic mystics, and more recently Père Abd-el-Jalil and Louis Gardet have taught us to understand something of the spiritual wealth of actual day-to-day practising Islam. We who possess the whole truth without serving it wholly can afford to recognize that Islam habitually gives more powerful witness to certain truths than our Christian practice does. Yet where it is easy, given good will, to realize this, it is much harder to estimate fairly and sympathetically the figure of the Prophet himself.

Dr Watt does not attempt to obscure the obvious fact that there is no Christian ethical system by which Muhammad will not be judged to fall short. At least so long as Christians believe in absolute moral standards, and Catholics that there is a natural law, Muhammad's own behaviour, and the moral system that he established, must seem at the best defective. While pointing this out, Dr Watt never ceases to stress the fact of the religious nature of almost all Muhammad's actions; and he makes it clear that it is to this (and not to borrowings from other religions) that Islam owes its specific character. At the end of his long and detailed analysis of the quarrel with the Medinan Jews, he concludes: 'the fundamental reason for the quarrel was theological on both sides'. This is important for the light it shines upon the character of Muhammad, and also for its contribution to the old argument

that Islam is a hodge-podge of Christian, Jewish and pagan elements, and to the newer, modernist view of both Islam and Christianity as deriving simply from Judaism (and it in turn from pagan Semitic religion). The Islamic view, of course, is that both the two older religions are a falling-away from the one Islamic religion revealed to all the prophets. Here mutual understanding can only benefit from recognition of differences on all sides, and there is nothing to be gained by Christians dissimulating their position. For Christians, the significance of Judaism (in this context) can only be the prefiguration of the revelation of Christ; Islam must appear as a prophesying that falls short, but that gives a new spiritual content to its superficial loans (the fast from Judaism, pilgrimage to the Ka'bah from paganism, and so on) through the unifying influence of themes that are powerful, consistent and wholly true and Christian.

As all Christian historians must, Dr Watt stresses the absence from the Qur'ān and from the Prophet's mind of any conception of Christianity, as such, which Christians can accept as a true and fair one. He reminds us that Islam had a strong attraction for the nomadic Christian tribes, who were too lightly attached to their religion, and too unsure of it, to represent it clearly to the Prophet. 'Only a deeply rooted Christianity could withstand such fascination.' This judgment reinforces a traditional view. It is as seer, as statesman and as administrator that the author recognizes Muhammad's greatness. He believes that Muslims have done nothing 'towards convincing Christian Europe that Muhammad is a moral exemplar' by universal standards; on this basis he is unable to concede more than his willingness to listen to argument and to learn from it. He fully admits that Islam has retained emphases, as, for example, on the reality of God, more successfully than 'important sections of monotheistic religions' have done. It is here that it is possible to go further, and to say that Muslims emphasize some aspects of the truth which is ours, more strongly than we. Dr Watt is hardly prepared to go so far. He acknowledges his personal debt to al-Ghazālī, but al-Ghazālī is sometimes seen by Muslims less as typical or central to their own religious tradition than as an eccentric, almost a crypto-Christian. Dr Watt's charity shows most luminously in the passage upon the Prophet's appearance and manner: sad, thoughtful, always busy, speaking clearly, rapidly and to the point. 'When he was

annoyed he would turn aside; when he was pleased he lowered his eyes. His time was carefully apportioned. . . . There are many stories illustrating his gentleness and tenderness of feeling. . . .'

This is not the place to enter into the reasons that made the medievals and other Catholic writers dismiss the Prophet (in terms of St Matthew 8, 15) as *pseudopropheta* and hypocrite, or the Protestant Reformers to denounce him as Anti-Christ. Christian writers in all ages have been aware of some spiritual greatness in Islam; what has traditionally marked their approach has been a reluctance to trace this back to its source in the Qur'ān and in the Prophet. Yet in the last resort we must respect the figure for whom so many good and religious men have felt a great veneration, who has moved the hearts of many multitudes to prayer. Muhammad is essentially a religious figure; from him flows a stream of worship, and a great devotion which it is as foolish as uncharitable to deride. Dr Watt's strength is never to forget this, even when Muhammad is furthest from the Christian ideal. The importance of his book is that it gives so full a picture of Arabia and of its Prophet with imaginative understanding but in contemporary and scientific terms; that it avoids either the attitude that cannot praise for fear of seeming to condone error, or the opposite excess of admiring without discrimination. It is compelling in its scholarship. Ricoldo da Monte Croce once conceded that the Islamic religion contains *multa utilia*. Dr Watt has at last shown us a view of its Prophet of which the same is abundantly true.