

<sup>6</sup>I did not describe you as a "liberal Protestant", but merely said that on *this* one question I could only argue as if I were dealing with a liberal Protestant.' Correspondence reproduced in *The Tablet*, June 23, 1973, and *America*, July 7, 1973.

<sup>7</sup>Of course Bishop Butler didn't put it quite in this way. In fact he said that we could accept the definition of the Immaculate Conception even if our notion of original sin was foggy, hoping to understand it better later (*The Tablet*, April 3, 1971). But all our notions of original sin are a little foggy today and Rahner's attempt to provide an up-to-date interpretation of the dogma provides a distinctly dusty answer to seekers after enlightenment. Incidentally Küng has an amusing footnote on the way in which theologians rush forward with 'reasons of convenience' when confronted with the definition of a dogma which they had formerly questioned: 'Supposing the Pope were to define the immaculate conception of St Joseph, . . ., I have no doubt that modern Catholic theologians would be able to put up a spirited defence of the definition, based on reasons of convenience drawn from the present-day understanding of man and society. The reasons might be theological ("chosen foster-father"), ecclesiological ("patron of the Church"), moral-pedagogical ("exemplary paterfamilias and husband"), social-critical ("worker", perhaps "proletarian", and certainly "refugee"), and finally basically anthropological ("true human being and man of his time"). (*Fehlbar?* p. 375.)

<sup>8</sup>*Fehlbar?* p. 405.

<sup>9</sup>*The Tablet*, l.c.

<sup>10</sup>Karl Rahner, *Strukturwandel der Kirche*, Freiburg, 1972, p. 103. A translation of this book is being published by SPCK, London.

<sup>11</sup>'Christus oratione certe efficaci postulat pro Petro ut *primatus* indeficientem in fide firmitatem seu, quod idem est, infallibilitatem. Atqui praerogativae Petri, ut primatis, transeunt ad eius successores. Ergo. . . .' T. Zapelena, S.J., *De Ecclesia Christi, Pars Altera*, Rome, 1954, p. 204.

# Tea with Mr Taha

by Dennis Hickley

Mr Taha is a model of Muslim piety and exercises a strict control over his household. A family joke has it that he once suffered severely from scruples on discovering that he had eaten some jam which had become fermented. As a member of a distinguished landowning family of Azerbaijan he has never had to work and has spent most of his life as a kind of gentleman scholar, leading an austere existence and devoted to prayer and such pursuits as collecting Old Korans. My impression is that, through leading this withdrawn life, he has allowed himself to become an isolated personality. A timid and nervous man, with a thin ascetic face, he betrays a tendency towards extreme excitability when discussing matters that involve his deepest convictions. On one such occasion I noticed that his features became distorted by his attempts to control his feelings and the veins on his forehead stood out. His family commented on this to me afterwards and said that he had not spoken at such length nor so vehemently for many years. It was evident that though they obeyed him externally he sensed that they were not with him in spirit. Consequently

he no longer spoke about what was closest to him, which is to say that he hardly spoke at all. The visit of a Christian priest was like the breaking of a dam. Almost as soon as I arrived in Tabriz I was invited to his house—he is a relative of my Iranian friends—and hints were dropped that religion would be discussed.

We arrived at his house about the middle of the morning and after leaving our shoes at the bottom of the stairs were shown up to a long saloon which occupied a substantial part of the first floor, an arrangement which I understand is typical of the better class houses of Tabriz. The saloon has four large windows looking out over the garden which, during the hot hours of the day, are shielded by bamboo mats suspended from the exterior of the frame, so that however hot and glaring it may be outside, the room is shadowed and cool.

Everyone seated themselves round the walls of the room. I was placed near Mr Taha and small tables with plates of biscuits were set before us. Tea was brought—unlike Arab countries Iran is a land of tea drinking. The tea is served in the Russian fashion, from a samovar, and is drunk from glasses.

After an exchange of the usual courtesies and some personal information Mr Taha began explaining that in Islam it was necessary to follow a rule of life as laid down by a kind of spiritual director, called a mujtahid. In Iran the mujtahids are few in number and exercise an enormous influence. Mr Taha informed me that he followed a noted mujtahid who has several million followers, and lives at Qum, which he called 'The Vatican of Islam'. So far the conversation had taken place in French, since like most Iranians of the older generation Mr Taha knows French rather than English, but very soon his French broke down from lack of practice, he excused himself, and reverted to his mother tongue which is Azari Turkish. A lady who was present, and who speaks perfect English, then acted as interpreter. The reference to 'The Vatican of Islam' is to the holy city of Qum, which rivals Mashad as the country's principal religious centre. It is there that devout Iranian Muslims go to be buried, and it is noted for being a centre of religious conservatism, not to say obscurantism.

At this point we moved on to discuss the question of authority in religion. How, I asked, does one become a mujtahid? In his answer he explained that in Shi'a Islam, which is the state religion of Iran, religious authority is really vested in the Imams of the house of Ali, Mohammed's nephew, but in the ninth century the twelfth Imam disappeared in mysterious circumstances. He is believed to be alive but 'in concealment', waiting to appear and announce the news of the end of the world. At one time it was the Shah's responsibility to keep a horse saddled and ready for the reappearance of the hidden Imam, so that he could ride out and summon the peoples of the

earth to a final act of repentance before the last judgment. Meanwhile authority is in the hands of the mujtahids. To become one, one has to be recognized as such by one's teaching, way of life, the collecting of disciples and the judgment of the faithful. Finally confirmation by the Shah is necessary. The mujtahid is part guru, part canon lawyer and part moral theologian. He has to give rulings about particular actions and determine whether they are to be classified as obligatory, recommended, indifferent, reprehensible or forbidden.

I was interested in finding out about his attitude to mysticism. During my time in Iran I had heard disparaging references to dervishes, and the word 'dervish' (the Arabic equivalent is 'sufi') was often used to mean 'hippy' or 'drop out'. He was noncommittal about dervishes, but I sensed that he tended towards disapproval, so I asked him about the question of the transcendence and immanence of God. However, he did not seem to understand the question and replied by saying that God is everywhere. A few moments later the ladies of the household, who had divided their time between listening and attending to the kitchen, announced that lunch was ready. As soon as lunch was over and cleared away, a sheet was spread on the floor of the dining room, and a pillow, and I was invited to take a rest. When nearly two hours later we reassembled in the saloon and the samovar once more made its appearance, I realized from Mr Taha's purposeful air that he had been spending the time in his study preparing for serious business and was about to produce what he regarded as his big guns.

'In your Holy Book' he said, 'you have four accounts of the life of Jesus. Why have you chosen those four?'

In my reply I said that there was a difference between the Christian's view of the Bible and the Muslim's view of the Koran, despite the fact that both religions believed in revelation through a book. For the Muslim's view of the Koran goes far beyond anything which even a fundamentalist would hold about the Bible. For the Muslim the Koran actually is the word of God made book and corresponds, therefore, to the role of the person of Christ in Christianity. I spoke about the Church as a community and about the work of the Holy Spirit.

'Have you' he asked, 'ever read the Gospel of Barnabas?'

I thought he must mean the 'Epistle of Barnabas', but no, he meant the 'Gospel' of Barnabas. At that time I did not know there was such a thing as a 'Gospel' of Barnabas. It was found in the eighteenth century in Amsterdam in an Italian MS, and is probably a work of the late middle ages written by a Christian renegade. According to this work Jesus escaped from his enemies by being taken up into heaven while Judas was punished by being made to assume the appearance of Jesus. It was Judas who was crucified and Judas who was buried in the tomb. The 'Gospel' goes on to explain that

by this means God chose to punish the disciples for their inordinate love and adoration of Jesus by allowing him to be degraded and mocked in appearance, while in his wisdom God was preparing another plan, namely a revelation of the truth to take place at a future date through the agency of Mohammed. The 'Gospel' is thus made to corroborate what is written in the Koran, Sura 61, where it says that Jesus promised that another prophet would be raised up after him, namely Mohammed.

'Your Gospels must be false' Mr Taha went on, 'because they sometimes present Jesus in a bad light. Take the incident of the wedding at Cana. First of all Jesus is shown as being disrespectful to his mother (who is greatly venerated by Muslims) and then he changes water into wine, surely a terrible thing to do.'

I began by pointing out that in Christ's time there was no prohibition against drinking wine, but Mr Taha insisted that the mark of a true prophet is not to accept the customs of the time, but to summon men to a more exacting standard of behaviour. I said that in our religion all kinds of food and drink were good, provided they were not taken to excess, but the charge was difficult to answer in a few words since it involved two different views of the nature of Jesus Christ. Mr Taha realized we had hit against a serious doctrinal obstacle and it seemed as if he now realized that the matter was more complex than he had thought. There was a pause and then he suddenly asked me if I did not think that children should obey their parents in all things but then, sensing a possible threat if this manoeuvre failed of its purpose, he declared that I must be feeling tired, and I took this as a hint that he did not wish to continue. I thought I would end the discussion by saying a few words to the effect that God is a transcendent and mysterious being, that he is absolutely free and escapes from all the categories which we make about Him. This is an idea which readily appeals to Muslims, and Christians should never lose sight of it when discussing with them. This was confirmed by Mr. Taha's reaction. His face lit up and I realized that though the discussion itself had not been particularly valuable, he now recognized me as a fellow believer. He began speaking with fervour of what his faith meant to him, of the strength which it brought him, and of how it had supported him in his life. He became tremendously agitated as all his pent-up feelings tried to find expression. From this moment until my final departure from the house he spoke to me as to someone to whom he could express himself freely, and to whom he looked for support in a bewildering world. It was a strange position for a Christian priest to be in relation to a Muslim, and I was left wondering if this might not indicate a pattern for a new kind of relationship between Christians and Muslims in the future.