AFRICA AS THE THEATRE OF CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH ISLAM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The nineteenth-century encounter between Europe and India was notable for the long and close engagement of Christianity in its Western form and the traditional religious culture of India, with momentous consequences for both. The missionary impact, more than any other single factor, led the West into realms beyond all its previous experience. The nineteenth century encounter with Islam, by contrast, was often shaped, not in the sphere of active engagement between Christian and Muslim, but by factors arising out of the long past histories of Europe and Asia, and in settings where genuine inter-religious exchange was well nigh unthinkable. In the meeting with India, Europe was aware of its substantial ignorance and the missionaries succeeded the early humanists of the East India Company as its sensors. In the meeting with the Islamic world, Europe, while sometimes changing its mind about Islam, believed it already knew all that was necessary, and the missionary was generally marginal in compiling that corpus of knowledge. It is the purpose of this paper to suggest that Africa was a partial exception, and to explore some of the ways in which West Africa, in particular, was a theatre of Christian Muslim engagement and impinged on the changing debate in Europe.

Some detest the Persians because they believe in Mohamed; and others despise their language because they do not understand it.¹

Thus, Sir William Jones, the great impresario of Sanskrit studies who handled the Hindu classics as his Western contemporaries handled those of Greece and Rome, explained the neglect in his circles of Persian, the other great language of the Moghul Empire. The emotional charge, in his words is evident; as Muslims the Persians ‘believe in Mohamed’,

and to eighteenth-century Englishmen that is detestable. Behind that detestation lie centuries of hostility and terror. The contemporary folk image of Islam is evoked by Robert Burns, who describes the scene as the Devil comes into an Ayrshire town and marches off with the hated revenue officer. All the women of the town delight in the deliverance, crying ‘Auld Mahoun’, I wish ye luck o’ the prize, man’. In eighteenth-century Scotland, that is, the Prophet’s name was a demotic periphrasis for the Devil.

It was not only old ladies in Scotland who made the equation. The life of Muhammad best known to most educated people of the time was still probably that included in the work of Humphrey Prideaux, the title of which tells its own story: The true nature of imposture fully displayed in the life of Mahomet; with a discourse attached for the full vindication of Christianity from this charge. Prideaux’s book, first published in 1697, was being reprinted as late as 1808, and someone thought it worthwhile to produce an American edition in 1798. Muhammad was above all the great imposter, or, in Charles Wesley’s phrase ‘The Arab thief, as Satan bold’ whose doctrine should be chased back to hell.

There were not many reasons, even worldly ones, to take up the study of Arabic, the necessary prelude to any deeper engagement. Sir William Jones, enthusiast for languages as he is, urges Arabic only for those of his Company’s staff who wish to become eminent translators. For all ordinary purposes, Persian would serve; and diligent use of his grammar for a year should enable the student to read and reply to any letter he might happen to receive in that language from an Indian prince. It is noteworthy that when Dr. Johnson and Boswell set up in imagination an ideal university, with chairs held by their learned friends, they thought of appointing a Professor of Sanskrit (Jones) but no Professor of Arabic.

Nevertheless, Arabic as a field for the learned never quite died out, just as the presence of the emotional charge which could produce detestation of Islam did not inhibit the activities of the Levant Company and other trading ventures in the Muslim East. An Arabic Psalter was produced in 1724 and a New Testament and a catechism thereafter by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; but these were intended for use not among Muslims but by Eastern Christians, and the main burden of translation was borne by a Syrian Christian. One of the correctors employed for the New Testament was the lawyer George Sale, who became the earliest major interpreter of Islam to the English-speaking world. Sale’s Koran, with its massive notes, was the standard English version for a century and a half. How unusual was such activity