THE ROSARY IN ISLAM

IN studying the different religions of the world, we frequently make the remarkable discovery that peoples of diverse types and under totally different conditions, have certain religious rites in common, although they have never been in touch with each other. It may be that such similarity in practice is the result of the need of the human heart,—universally the same. But, on the other hand, the student can trace the onward march of religious ideas and customs from one nation to another, and see their final assimilation with religions which originally were quite beyond their horizon.

This is true in a special way of the rosary, which touched all three great faiths of the world and found a place in each. Its use arose in India, whence it came to the Christians of the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, perhaps through the medium of the Persian religion. When Islam crossed the borders of Arabia and entered the world of Hellenic-Christian culture, with its dogmatic and scholastic ideas, it met the use of the rosary, and adopted it, together with many other Christian practices.* This was not accomplished in a moment, but gradually, and in spite of many reactions against the innovation on the part of the orthodox Sunnis. During the Crusades, which brought the East and West into such close contact, the rosary found its way to the West, especially in Roman Catholic churches.

It is impossible to fix the date of the entrance of the rosary (*subha*) into Islam. Since Moslem traditions ascribe to Mohammed and his followers sayings in regard

* Cf., Becker, "Islam und Christentum," in *Der Islam*, January, 1913.

to customs belonging to a much later period, it is very difficult to settle questions of this kind. Indeed, we find in the traditions answers to questions which can only have been raised long after Mohammed's time when Islam came in close touch with the culture of other nations.

Those in favour of the rosary tell us—and we see clearly how the wish is father to the thought—that after the death of the prophet, one copy of the Koran and two rosaries were found among his possessions. This is, of course, untrue, since the Koran, as is well-known, was not collected until the time of Abu Bakr, and the story of Mohammed's use of the rosary is likewise an invention. We find, however, another tradition regarding a saying of the Prophet himself. It is related that when he saw some women counting their prayers with pebbles, he forbade them to do so, advising them to count the prayers only on their fingers. These traditions prove, however, that it must have been an easy matter for the rosary to find a place in Islamic thought. It was only natural that a ritualistic religion, such as Islam, should seek by counting the praises of Allah and Mohammed, to win favour with God. Long before the rosary appears, there are many traditions which recommend the counting of prayers and praises on the knuckles of the fingers. For this purpose a special name was given to each knuckle. The ones and tens are counted on the right hand, the hundreds and thousands on the left hand. Abu Daood relates in a tradition that Abdullah bin Amra ibn el 'Aas witnessed that the Prophet himself used to count his praises of God on his fingers. Rawiah gives a somewhat doubtful tradition that the Prophet said, "Be quiet and pronounce the praises and the mentioning of Allah and of His holiness, and do not forget them, or you will forget mercy. Count them on the top of your fingers, because they are responsible, just as if they really could understand. For the tops of your fingers will be witnesses against you on the Day of Judgment." From this practice it was only a step to the use of pebbles as a help in remembrance, and it is quite possible that the use of the rosary would have originated within Islam itself, without any outside influence. Abu Huraira recited his

Tasbih, *Takbir* and *Tahlil* (forms of ancient prayer rituals) with the help of small pebbles which he always wore in a special bag.

However, many of the influential people were utterly opposed to the practice. Abdallah, the son of the Khalif Omar, spoke harshly to one person who had adopted the custom, saying, "Do not do that ; it is from the devil." An orthodox pious Moslem who had been in a mosque, where small circles, each with a special leader, recited 100 *Takbirs*, 100 *Tahlils* and 100 *Tasbihs*, using pebbles in the ceremony, returned to his companions and told them what he had seen. Finally one of them, Abu Abd al Rahman, exclaimed, "Count your sins, and you may be certain that none of your good deeds will be lost. Woe unto thee, O congregation of Mohammed ! How rapidly goest thou down the way to the abyss of condemnation ! Here are still a great number of the companions of your Prophet, here are his clothes—they are not yet dust, his cups are not yet broken . . . There are many who pretend to do good, but they do not seize it. To them I say this word of the Prophet, ' There are some who read the Koran, but the word does not enter their hearts, and God is my witness, I do not know whether most of them are not among yourselves.' "

But in spite of such warning voices, the success of the innovation continued. About the third century of the Hegira we find the rosary in common use. It consists of a string of ninety-nine beads, each corresponding to one of the ninety-nine names of God. There is a story which is interesting, although there are some critical objections to it, that when the Abbassidian Khalif Al Hadi (169-170 A.H.) forbade his mother Chejzuran to have any further political intrigues, he said to her : " It is not the task of women to interfere in questions of government. Go, and occupy yourself with prayer and with your rosary."

It is certain that at first the rosary was accepted by the lower classes only, while the religious leaders of the people fought against its adoption. When the venerated ascetic Abu-l-Kasim al Gunejd (297 A.H.) was seen using a rosary, he was accused by his people, and defended himself in the following words : " I cannot give up a

thing which helps me to approach God." From this we see that the ascetics were also in favour of the rosary.

But all this opposition could not prevent the use of the rosary from spreading through private devotions to public worship in the mosques. Abu Abdullah Mohammed al Abdari (737 A.H.), a native of Morocco, protested earnestly against all the new features in Eastern Islam, comparing it with the comparatively pure Islam of his own conservative country. In his book, "Al Madchal," published in 1293 A.H. in Alexandria, he says: "Among the new customs the rosary must be mentioned. A special little bag is prepared to keep it, and a special reward is given to the servant who guards it and brings it, and to those who use it at the dhikr . . . There is even a special sheikh with the title of sheikh al Subha, and a servant called khadim al Subha. These are very modern things. It is the duty of the imam of the mosque to use all his power and influence toward suppressing these performances."

Even now the controversy is going on, and has received new life from the impact of Western thought upon Islamic ideas. There are now far other reasons than in ancient times. The progress of Christian civilization and Christian missions is a challenge to Moslems to cast aside extraneous elements and to lift Islam to a higher and more spiritual level than before. The editor of *El Manar*, which is published in Cairo, concludes an article on the subject in the November (1912) issue, as follows: "If you mention the names of Allah sufficiently, you need not count them. The counting draws your heart away from the One whom you wish to remember, and you cannot gain your object. This is that kind of dhikr of which the poet Muhid bin Arabi says: 'With the remembrance of the names of Allah your sins are multiplied, and your spiritual eyes and your hearts are blinded.'"

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