

AN OPEN-MINDED TURK ON THE FUTURE OF HIS RACE*

DEAR DR. ZWEMER:

My interview with the Mohammedan gentleman mentioned to you by Dr. Barton, was to me most interesting. I have had further conversation with this gentleman, and he has given me a more extended idea of the tract he has prepared for publication. Ilhami Bey is a man of education, keen in observation, and serious in his consideration of religious problems. Educated in Constantinople, he has travelled in various countries in Europe. In his travels he has studied the material, social and moral conditions of the districts visited, ever keeping in mind corresponding conditions in his own country (Turkey) for comparison. He became convinced that the *U'lema*—governmental officials and other educated leaders in the religious, social and intellectual circles—have absolutely failed in rendering the service that they should have rendered to the people of the country. There has been a semblance of imitation of European progress, but it remains a faint semblance, to grasp the meaning of which it is only necessary to contrast Paris or London and Constantinople to realize what five hundred years of Turkish domination means.

Yet the Turk is possessed of characteristics that would make for progress. He has manifested courage and prowess and industry. Why then has he not made progress? Why is he called the "sick man"? Ilhami Bey himself raises the question, and does not attempt himself to answer it in detail. There is a Turkish proverb, to the effect that one man can throw a stone into the well, but it will take

*I have put the report in the shape of a letter to you. I take it it is the situation and the idea of Ilhami Bey that you want—not the special shape in which I have put it.
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forty men to drag it out. If he can throw the stone in he indulges in the hope that it will arouse the forty men to investigation. "The probe must go deep in order to get at the source of the evil." "Why have the Turks failed to make progress?"

He confesses that his conviction, in harmony with many others, was that Islam was a powerful instrument in the hands of the Sultans for the progress and development of the country; but it was blocked by hindrances, such as the capitulations forced on Turkey by the European powers, and their interference in the affairs of the country. Though that interference was obnoxious and may have hindered in some respects it does not furnish an adequate reason for the lack of progress in so many things not affected by the capitulations at all. The fatalistic attitude, the satisfaction with things as they are, the absence of initiative, the lack of persistence in the execution of any enterprise, the lack of that stimulus necessary to success, seem to be characteristic of Islam. The question is not one of the comparative merits of Christianity and Islam. This is not an argument: it is the raising of a question; religion is an essential to a nation. Is Islam responsible for the backwardness of the Turks? This question should have serious consideration.

A glance at Turkish history shows that the absorption of the Turkish tribes was gradual. Toghrul Bey was not in his early career a Moslem. Even after accepting Islam they were not fanatical. The requirements of the religion were easy: the acceptance of one God, Allah, recognition of Mohammed as the prophet of Allah, and the performance of certain religious exercises. These conditions were very easy and would furnish the basis of the organization. This would become a common bond in connection with the levying of taxes, the building of prayer centres (mosques), the drafting of soldiers, etc., and Islam became the official religion.

In consideration of the question as to whether Islam

has benefited the Turk or not, there are three things to be considered:

(a) What has it done for the people who have remained in the tribal state—the nomads?

It is evident to all that the tribal conditions of six centuries ago persist to the present amongst those who live under tribal organization. No influence has been exerted in the bettering of social relationships, of purifying conditions of life, establishing community of spirit, and those things that make for higher civilization. Is this a question of race or climate, or is Islam responsible for it?

(b) Turning to the rural populations settled in towns and villages, it is seen that they are more given to religious exercises; they perform the *namaz* (prayer), keep the fast, go on pilgrimage in larger numbers, etc.: they are more consciously Moslem. But we shall find that the basal reason is to escape the "burnings of hell." The men have served in the army, are more amenable to control, and have a more definite idea of the religion of Islam than the people under tribal conditions; but illiteracy prevails, and there is a great lack of moral uplift. Consciences are undeveloped. Dishonesty, transgression of law and even crime, are matters of concern, not so much in themselves as in their detection. Avoidance of the effect of these things is a matter of moment. If escape from punishment becomes possible, the crime is of little account. Moral excellence is not of serious consideration. Benevolent action arises more from natural instinct than from religious impulse. Women are largely outside the pale of religion. Again the question arises, is this due to race, climate, or religion?

(c) The urban population in many places has taken on the semblance of culture, and conforms to many of the customs of European civilization; but the actual situation is no better as far as moral uplift and spiritual growth are concerned. In fact, city life is honeycombed with much of the worst of social immoralities, political corruption, business duplicity, and in the religious sphere,

materialism, infidelity, agnosticism, etc. The people are in the condition of a man in a tractless forest without a guide. Where there is religious conformity, it is on the ground that the formal performance of religious requirements covers the immoralities of life.

Religion should be a restraint, a guide, an inspiration—never a scourge. It should be a stimulus to intellectual activities, a deepening of the benevolent sentiments, a spur to awakened conscience, a guide to moral and spiritual growth. Islam lacks philosophic insight. It has not been a mental stimulus. It is neither a spiritual guide nor moral restraint in the midst of these evils. Does not the condoning of cruelty and massacre, as for instance in the case of the atrocities perpetrated on the Armenians, impeach Islam?

Virtue in Islam consists in scrupulous conformity with the religious forms and exercises. Of the five requirements only one is possible to any individual. Any one can repeat the creed, but it is not possible for every one to perform his *namaz* five times a day in perfect order, keep the fast, pay tithes, or perform the pilgrimage, as required. Inability to do these essential things breeds careless indifference which is deadening instead of life giving. It engenders moral obliquity.

Conquest cannot be considered as service to Allah. Had the Turk done less in the way of conquest and more in the material and moral development of the territory occupied, he might have profitably served his race and the world. But in this he has absolutely failed. Amongst the brain cells of the Turk the compartment of religion is empty. His future depends on the filling of that compartment of his brain with religious thought that is strong, restraining, inspiring for that which makes for moral and spiritual uplift, for development and progress. Can Islam do this?

A glance at his history. The claim is made that contact with the Byzantine civilization corrupted the Turk. If we study the history dealing with Islam, for the seven

hundred years previous to the advent of the Turk, we find this claim quite unfounded. The Turks have themselves to blame for their stagnation. They followed in the path of their predecessors. They have suffered and are suffering the consequences.

A glance at legal processes. The *Shari'at* (Sacred Law) does not secure justice or conserve the rights of the people. From the *Fatwa* there is no appeal, and it becomes in the hands of the religious officials a means of selfish ambition, and governmental oppression. It is more an instrument of oppression than protection. A notorious instance of this was the *Fatwa* given to Sultan Byazid in the field of Kossova, legalizing the murder of his brothers. The religious official was responsible for this and similar crimes.

Why should the Turk not stand strong against such things as the ambitions of the Sultans, the immoralities of Constantinople or the debaucheries of Europe? Because there was not virile strength and moral apperception enough in his religion to combat these things to any appreciable extent. There are two ways open to men: to struggle against evils and overcome them, or to become lethargic and indifferent to the havoc caused. The latter was the path taken by the Turk. It cannot be denied that he is a "sick man" and his malady is due to his religion.

A glance at the Khalifate. Has the Khalifate been of service to the Turk? The Turks were pastoral and had few ambitions when they came into Anatolia; but circumstances led them on to ambitious projects. They came into touch with Constantinople and began to covet it. Their ideas were not so much religious. Islam was only of secondary importance and only a means to an end. Massacres of both Moslems and Christians were political more than religious. Though the religious idea gradually grew, the great question was the conquest of Constantinople. Then, when Mohammed conquered and possessed Constantinople he was seized with the idea of becoming a world ruler, which idea he passed on to his suc-

cessors. To that end the Khalifate was a necessity, and Selim invaded Egypt and seized it for that purpose. The question was not so much Islam as yet, but conquest. Later the religious idea in connection with the Khalifate grew to larger proportions and became prominent.

Selim's invasion of Egypt cost him fifty thousand men—a great crime. The cruelty perpetrated was inhuman, though committed by a Moslem sultan against Moslems and against a Moslem ruler. It was a war for power, and so many of the faithful were slain—a sacrifice to ambition, a great disgrace. Why did Islam not prevent? Because it could not. It could only endorse. Selim, the first Ottoman Khalif, died as a morphine fiend. The influence of this on the common people must have been disastrous.

The successors of Selim went as far as Vienna. The Ottoman power rose to that point and immediately began to decline and has been declining ever since. It had not moral stamina enough to arrest the decay. Ottoman history is concerned only with the Sultanate; the nation is scarcely mentioned and there is manifest little or no movement or thought even for the betterment of the people as a whole. In the course of a few centuries some good influences for radical reform and permanent reconstruction should appear in the life of any people, but amongst the Turks none such do appear; the people exist for the Khalifate, not the Khalifate for the people.

The best thing for Turkey is to surrender the Khalifate, to work for regeneration, and to consider the way most suited for the proper development of the country and the peace and prosperity of the people. Great needs demand great deeds.

How can the Turks be freed from the present condition in presence of the Treaty of Peace? The Turks—not the people, but the ambitious demagogues and other leaders—were bound to the Germans and suffered with them. The Peace Treaty has been accepted. It is hard but beneficial. It would relieve the country from the crushing burden of armaments and many other things that

sap the life of a nation and retard progress. To make that progress possible what is necessary? The following four points are important and essential:

(1) Securing for the people the right and opportunity of untrammelled religious instruction.

(2) An effort should be made to develop a religious *entente*.

(3) Securing absolute freedom of conscience.

(4) The acceptance of a mandatory power to act in the interests of and be a guide for the government and people.

To accomplish this the Turks do not possess the religious instincts or traditions, much less the religious counsels or organizations necessary thereto. The Turkish sultans had no such ideals. They were as lions seeking territory to conquer and ever ready to spring forward to conquest. The Ulema and other leaders served the purpose of the Sultan without consideration of the people. The past six hundred years demonstrate that the Turks of themselves cannot make progress. The Magyars, the Roumanians, the Bulgarians and others, freed from Turkish domination, made advance. Compare Sofia and Adrianople—neighboring cities. If the Ulema, the Khojas and other leaders had been men of culture and education and serious and open-minded, they would have considered the needs of the country and would have introduced those changes necessary for the welfare and best interests of the people of the country in all phases of life. Six hundred years of this is sufficient. Now is the time to speak plainly. Now is the time to inaugurate those movements that will make for the peace and the best interests of all the people.

At this point of my interview with Ilhami Bey, I raised the question of ways and means. His answer was definite, with every mark of careful thought and appreciation of the seriousness of the situation that might develop. I give the gist of his reply, which might be considered as an appeal to the Turks.

Western Christianity stands ready to extend a helping

hand in accordance with the spirit and the broad basis of the teachings of the Messiah. What can be learned from history? For all these centuries glance at the history of India, Afghanistan, Persia, Arabia, Egypt, North Africa. Is there not demonstration enough that these Moslem countries have remained stagnant through all these centuries and why? Examine the physical, intellectual and moral and spiritual conditions. Injunctions against murder, robbery, intemperance, immorality, have been and are dead letters as far as the Turkish Sultan and other leaders are concerned. Turkish history recalls the lives of the Sultans, who are the heads of the religious communities. They have made the religion only a means to their own ambitions and the Ulema have been their servants. The common people have only been pawns on the chess-board in their game for conquest and domination by the house of Osman. Nothing has been done for the material, moral and spiritual reform and welfare of the people.

Is it not time for the Turkish race, possessed of excellent qualities that would make for progress if they had the opportunity and were properly led, to consider with deep seriousness this condition and seek a remedy? Open the windows and let in the light!

Must we not admit that Islam is too small a religion, too circumscribed, too formal? Must we not place the responsibility of our backwardness, and not only ours but the backwardness of Moslem lands, at the door of Islam? We are challenged for an answer. Should we not seek the reason in what appears to be the fact, that Islam does not furnish the high ideal, the inspiration to investigation, the desire for progress in the different phases of life, material, social and spiritual?

The holy Koran is in a language known to but comparatively few in the Moslem world; the repetition of its words, and other religious exercises enjoined, do not develop moral excellence, or, as history shows, an impulse for progress and human welfare. Is the assertion that the

Koran supersedes the Gospel tenable? Is it necessary that Allah should withdraw a revelation or substitute a different one already given? We recognize Jesus the Messiah of the Gospel as a prophet of God. Let us turn on what light He may give on the human problem. Let that stand which can give light and a lead.

Is it not a fact that what the Turk needs for his rejuvenation and progress is to be free from the incubus of the Khalifate and the granting of a free field to Western Christianity? Better that, with the preservation and rejuvenation of a race, than sealing its doom in the thralls of a religious system, that causes stagnation rather than progress, that has shown itself to be a burden rather than a help, that has been the cause of decay rather than a life-giving, inspiring power.

Should Moslems not consider whether Jesus the Messiah does not offer that which is necessary to the preservation of their right and furnish the ideas that would make possible growth in that righteousness, which exalteth a nation?

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This interview was exceedingly interesting to me as embodying the ideas that have occupied my mind for years. They set forth what appears to be the attitude of many thoughtful Moslems, and may well challenge the serious consideration of Western Christianity.

Yours very sincerely,

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