

SOME NOTES ON GEORGE FOX AND ISLAM*

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A few years after George Fox had launched the Quaker movement, some of his followers travelled to Ottoman Turkey and to Palestine in order to spread his message among the Muslims. The year 1657 saw George Robinson in Jerusalem, Gaza and Ramleh; a year later, Mary Fisher arrived in Constantinople and addressed Sultan Mohammed IV with words that won her respect but not converts. None of the missionaries succeeded in proselytizing the Muslims, but their concern about the spiritual welfare of Christendom's most feared enemies, at a time when the Ottoman empire was aggressively threatening Europe, reflects on the breadth of their religious sensibility.¹

Such breadth was inspired by George Fox himself who praised in his journal the effort in 1657 'over seas to Jerusalem'². Indeed, such was his enthusiasm for preaching to the Muslims that he acquired a copy of the Koran and studied it carefully. The version which he turned to, as his quotations from it reveal, was Alexander Ross's translation of 1649, and Fox so mastered it that he was able to use it with ease and accuracy.³ Unlike many of his contemporaries, Fox realized that no debate with the Muslims would be fruitful if it was based solely on Christian premises. It was not only important that he know his Bible well, but know and understand the text of his opponents.

The first address by Fox to Muslims came indirectly in 1673, in *An Epistle to all Professors in New-England, Germany and other Parts of the called Christian World. Also to the Jews and Turks throughout the World*. The treatise has nothing particular about Islam, but it is significant that Fox viewed the Muslims as part of his inter-religious audience. Indeed, for him to encompass the Turks among his hopeful congregation reveals an important departure from Restoration Church perspective: few if any contemporary writers thought of the Muslims as potential converts; even Cambridge Platonist and Latitudinarian theologians like Henry More and Isaac Barrow, along with Quaker writer Robert Barclay, declaimed against Islam and Muslims.⁴ While the Jews were of the tree that was to be grafted to the Christian body,⁵ the Muslims were

threatening Europe and were seen as infidels deprived of God's mercy.

Fox's opportunity to write directly to the Muslims came in 1680. In that year (and as early as 1678), some English men and women were taken captive in Algiers. A statement presented to Parliament described the plight of those captives, particularly the physical and sexual abuse to which they were being subjected:

[the English captives are] shut up in noisome places, commonly adding some hundreds of blows on their bare feet, forcing out the very Blood, and sometimes on the Back, sometimes on the Belly, and sometimes on them all... But above all, is their [Turkish] frequent forcing of Men and Boys by their execrable Sodomy, also their inhumane abuses and force to the Bodies of Women and girls, frequently attempting Sodomy on them also.⁶

Fox was appalled at such treatment especially that some of the captives were Quakers. Indeed, in the annual Meetings for Sufferings in England, reports had been presented from 1679 on about the plight of the captives both in Algiers and Morocco. Descriptions of torture, terror and sometimes death were repeatedly given.⁷ Deeply concerned, Fox decided to appeal to the Muslim monarch, and on 'the 16 of the fifth month, 1680', he prepared a tract *To the Great Turk and the King at Argiers* [sic.]. In it, Fox adopted an unusual criticism of the King: instead of simply decrying the savagery and brutality of the infidels, and showing how superior Christian values were, Fox tried to demonstrate that the King's ruthlessness fell below the moral laws of the Koran. Fox wanted to show the king that while he, the Christian, recognized the moral guidelines of the Koran, the king who was a "Mahometan" did not. Repeatedly, Fox affirmed to the king that sexual violence was against 'the law of the great god, and your own Alcoran'.⁸

By so stating Fox was breaking new ground in Christian-Muslim dialogue by positioning himself in the Muslim camp. He did not controvert with the king the legitimacy of the Koran, nor did he ascribe the violence of the captors to the degeneracy of their religion – attitudes which contemporary Christian writers upheld. Indeed, in the 'Needful Caveat' to the translation Fox was using, Alexander Ross had attacked the teaching of the Koran as 'A gallimaufry of errors' and 'Mis-shapen issue of Mahomet's brain'.⁹ Differently, Fox approached the Koran as the Muslims themselves viewed it – a message that finalized the prophetic sequence from Adam through Moses to Jesus and "Mahomet". He treated it without vituperation, and although he did not accept its

revelation, he presented it on a par with the laws of Moses, Jesus and “the great God”:

Mahomet saith, chap. 3. pag. 34 That Jesus said, *Who shall sustain the Law of God in my absence? and the Apostles answered him, We will sustain the Law of God in thy absence, &c.* And therefore why do not you believe in the Law of God, according to Jesus and the Prophets; for Jesus Apostles declared against such men as burned in their Lusts... and therefore you Turks that do such things, are Judged by the great God, and all his Holy Prophets, and Jesus Christ, and his Apostles, to Act contrary to Gods pure, just, holy, righteous Law, and they are Witnesses against you, as is also your own Alcoran.¹⁰

Having established his position towards the Muslim revelation, and with Ross’s translation at his fingertips, Fox turned to the ‘Chapter of Hegir’ and the account of Lot which treated of sodomy and its dire wages:

Now Mahomet saith in your Alcoran, chap. 15¹¹ pag. 161. *When the Messengers of the great Eternal God were sent to destroy the Infidels of Sodom, which came to Lot’s House, to see the Messengers: And Lot said unto them, I beseech you, defile not your selves with my Guests: Fear God, and dishonour not your selves, and how, that Lot said, behold my two Daughters, take them, and the inhabitants said, we do not hinder thee to lodg thy Guests: and how that the Inhabitants remained confounded in their Drunkenness, and that God overthrew the City, and turned it upside down, and caused it to Rain with Stones and Fire which utterly destroyed it, who were so impious...* Now how can you look up to the great God of Truth, and in your owned Alcoran and Scriptures concerning Lot, and suffer such impious abominable Actions, to be committed at Argier?

Fox copied nearly verbatim from Ross’s translation, and continued in this method of quoting and commenting on the verse till the end of the treatise. He was nearly always accurate in his chapter and page references, and the few mistakes that occur are a result of printing carelessness. He knew Ross’s Koran thoroughly and was comfortable in ranging through the interwoven and uncouthly translated text to find the appropriate references. He quoted verses from the intial long suras, as well as from the final short ones, and he integrated them into his discussion side by side with Biblical statements. Sometimes in his Koranic citations, Fox merged sentences, added by his own words or reorganized the syntax, but his purpose remained the same: to show the king of Algiers that he had broken away from the teachings of his own religion. The Koran, Fox asserted, did not condone such violence and the Turk thus stood condemned not from a Christian perspective, but from God’s Koranic revelation:

And Mahomet saith, *that God guideth not the Wicked*, chap 19. page 115. And again, he saith, *Alms is appointed for the Poor for them that recommend themselves to God, to redeem Slaves, and such as are in Debt*, in the same chap. p. 11. I say then, according to your own Alcoran, God hath not been your Guide to be so wicked.¹²

For Fox, the brutality of the captors was not a result of a false religion but of their disobedience to a religion that forbade inhumanity and unnatural violence. Fox drew a line between theology and believers, between Islam and Muslims: while he castigated the latter, he did not seize on the former. Indeed, he was fair enough to praise the Muslims when praise was their due: the Turks, he wrote, were more tolerant of Christians and of Jews than many European kingdoms, including England: ‘Where do you read,’ he addressed his countrymen in 1677, ‘that ever the Turks forced any Christians to observe any of their Holy-Dayes, Fasts or Feasts?’¹³ Fox shamed the Muslim captors for their treatment of the prisoners but praised Islamic tolerance. He did not ascribe the captors’ failures to their theology, for he knew that there was a similar gap between Christian ideals and human practices. He reminded the Algiers captives in a letter on 10 April 1683 that in the Christian monarchy of England, the Anglican establishment persecuted the Quakers, and told them that they enjoyed a freedom to worship among the Muslims which the Friends in England did not:

I think you have more liberty to meet there than we have here; for they keep us out of our meetings, and cast us into prison, and spoil our goods. And therefore prize your liberty in your meetings, and do not abuse it.¹⁴

Other Quakers also made similar observations at the Meeting for Sufferings.¹⁵ At such a juncture, Fox may have felt that it was better to be a Quaker among the Muslims than among Anglicans.

The next occasion in which Fox addressed Muslims occurred in a treatise written in 1683. As a result of the fall of Sultan Muhammad in 1687, Fox published the year after *An Answer to the Speech or Declaration of the Great Turk, Sultan Mahomet. Which He sent to Leopold Emperor of Germany. And is a Defence of the true Christian Religion against the said Turks Antichristian Speech. And A Testimony for the Lord Jesus Christ*. In this treatise, Fox eagerly engaged in theological discussion, for he wanted to refute the claim that Christians believed in a “Crucified God”.¹⁶ Nevertheless, he did not alter his approach to his opponent and as in the earlier treatise, tried to shame the Sultan by showing him how he had failed in his obedience to the Koran.

So according to your own Alcoran, you Turks, and all others that are Persecutors, who disobey the Law of Jesus, he will be a Witness against you in the day of Judgment; yea, I say against you Turks, and all other Persecutors upon the Earth.¹⁷

In this treatise, Fox advanced an evangelical strain by trying to preach the cause of Christ. And perceptively he realized that he could do so from within the Koranic context: he knew that the Koran not only held Jesus in high esteem, but viewed him as the prophet of the last judgement. As a result, Fox repeatedly quoted the above verse 'that Jesus will be a Witness in the day of Judgement against them that obey not his Law': he calculated that his best way to introduce Christ to the Muslims was not through the Bible, but from the Koran:

*And Mahomet in his Alcoran confesses, That Jesus Christ was not begotten by the will of Man, who was conceived of Mary, and that she should conceive, and bring forth without the touching of Man.*¹⁸

Fox proved his view of Christ to the Muslims from the words of their own revelation. Missionary activity did not need to exclude the theological belief of the addressees.

Fox's approach to mission was not based on undercutting the other's frame of religious reference but on recognizing that reference and using it for the Christian purpose. Indeed, in his evangelism to the Jews, the native Americans and the Muslims, Fox urged respect for the culture of the other community. Particularly in the case of the Muslims, Fox realized how importantly such respect extended to the Arabic language – the language of the Koran. In the above letter of 10 April 1683, he urged the captive "Friends" to learn 'the Turks, and Moores' language, that they might be the more enabled to direct them to the grace and spirit of God in them'.¹⁹ Indeed, as early as 1660, Fox had included Arabic among the languages to support his thesis on the dual and plural pronouns: that Arabic was the language of the Muslim enemies had not prevented him from studying it.²⁰ For him, evangelical activity involved the education of the missionary too.

George Fox exhibited charity to the Muslims and respect to the Koran. Although these attitudes were motivated by an evangelical drive, they stemmed from a sensibility in Fox which recognized the moral content of the others' religion and culture. Fox rejected vituperation and vitriolic superiority: in seeking to convert, he preferred to demonstrate the efficacy of Christianity not by denying Muslims their religious belief, but by showing how Christians, specifically Quakers, expressed in their lives the noble teachings of their faith. Fox tried not to

denounce but to shame the Muslims towards Christianity: thus, to the treatise addressed to the King of Algiers and the Sultan of the Turks, he appended a description by a fellow Quaker telling how the latter had nobly treated some Muslims after capturing them at sea.²¹ For Fox, the cause of Christianity among the Muslims was best served by the Quaker model of charity and by well-prepared theological dialogue.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* (New York, 1844), vol. I, 219–222; William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*. Cambridge, University Press, 1961, 2nd ed. 418–427.
- ² *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. Norman Penney, Cambridge, University Press, 1911, vol. II, 338.
- ³ *The Alcoran of Mahomet. Translated out of Arabique into French; by the Sieur Du Ryer, Lord of Malesair, and Resident for the King of France, at Alexandria. And newly Englished, for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities*, 1649.
- ⁴ See Henry Moore's attack in *An Exploration of the Grand Mystery of Godliness in The Theological Works of the Most Pious and Learned Henry More*, 1708, chs. VIII–X; and Isaac Barrow's sermon in *The Theological Works of Isaac Barrow* (Oxford, 1830), vol. V, 24 ff. Although Barclay quoted from the Muslim philosopher Ibn Tufayl, *Truth Triumphant* (1692), 362, he attacked Muhammad as a religious persecutor, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (New York, 1827), 506.
- ⁵ For the appeal to Jews, see Isabel Ross, *Margaret Fell* London, 1949, 89 ff. Fox also published numerous tracts addressed to the Jews.
- ⁶ Anonymous, *The Case of many Hundreds of Poor English Captives, in Algier* (1680), 1.
- ⁷ Kenneth Carroll, 'Quaker Slaves in Algiers, 1679–1688', *The Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, LIV (1982), 301–302. See also his 'Quaker Captives in Morocco, 1685–1701', in *JFHS*, LV (1983), 67–79.
- ⁸ George Fox, *To the Great Turk* (1680), 3.
- ⁹ *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, A2v ff. See also Ross's *Pansebeia* (1653), 120 ff.
- ¹⁰ Fox, *To the Great Turk*, 10; for Moses, 2.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3–4. The reference should be to chapter 9.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹³ George Fox, *The Hypocrites Fast and Feast not God's Holyday. Hat-Honour to Men Man's Institution, not God's*. (1677), 10.
- ¹⁴ *A Collection of Many Select and Christian Epistles, Letters and Testimonies in Works* (Philadelphia, 1831), vol. VIII, 236.
- ¹⁵ See the references to Moses Finch and Ephraim Gilbert in Carroll, 'Quaker Slaves', *JFHS* LIV, 307.
- ¹⁶ *An Answer to the Speech or Declaration of the Great Turk, Sultan Mahomet* (1688), 5.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.
- ²⁰ George Fox, *A Battle-Door for Teachers and Professors to Learn Plural and Singular* (1660), 77 ff.
- ²¹ See 'Postscript. Of George Pattisons taking the Turks about the 8 Month 1663', 15–20.