

## ISLAM IN ALBERTA

A. CAMPBELL BALLANTINE

THE most wildly imaginative poet (be he of Baghdad or Bragg Creek) who ever dipped his pen to praise the brunette beauty of an Arab maid told no more than the truth. Travel in a camel caravanserie from oasis to palm-planted oasis if you must, or if you are under the Hollywood influence, or if you like it that way; yet no further from your door than Edmonton, Alberta, there is a colony of Arab settlers whose first Canadian-born generation is already arriving at lovely womanhood and robust, virile young manhood.

The circle is not difficult of ingress, for our Arabs are not a clannish folk, shyly segregating themselves from their Canadian neighbours, but rather taking part in the nation's cultural, commercial and (to an important extent) agricultural life.

It is, in fact, the absence of any tendency to cluster in colonies that makes the Edmonton Arab community unique. Elsewhere in Canada one may, every now and then, come across a nomadic Syrian "folding his tent," more or less literally, "like the Arabs" as he peregrinates from one Prairie village to another, or pauses at a wayside farm to peddle his simple wares, or to barter some portion of his stock in trade for a wholesome meal. In the retail heart of some large community there may be a well-to-do Levantine driving a brisk commerce in costly rugs or hammered brassware brought hither from the bazaars of Baghdad or the market places of Aden. But only in Edmonton has a Canadian experiment been attempted in Arab communal life, practising what is best of the Arab tradition, preserving all that finest of Arab culture, but also taking always the best of the Canadian way and imparting it to sons and daughters. It ought not to be thought false to any other faith to be prepared to concede, as Rev. W. A. Mansur of Omaha, has conceded, that, as prophet and teacher, Mohammed stands "as one of the greatest benefactors of the human race," who "proclaimed the One-ness of God," who "led the final assault against idolatry . . . brought a better way of life for the untold masses of many nations" and "thrilled the soul to a higher plane."

In Alberta, naturally a good many Arab customs have been voluntarily submerged. Some the Canadian climate does not invite. Some have been recast to harmonize with the Canadian scene, some modified so as not to offend Western usage or at times to conform to Canadian law. To answer the question

which you, reader, have just asked: No—no Canadian Muslim has more than one wife.

If in the practice of their own manners or native culture they confine themselves more to themselves than at other times, it is not to embarrass their Western friends rather than with any intention of remaining aloof. One does not weary a new-found friend with the hereditary photo album and all its intimacies. Young Arabs are to be found in the ballrooms, the cafés, the golf courses and the tennis courts. A young violinist of no mediocre talent, Mr. Ameen Gamun, is *chef de musique* of a popular orchestra at an Edmonton radio station. Only in their religious life are the Alberta Arabs somewhat necessarily apart.

The centre of this phase of their life is the Mosque of El Rashid, dedicated to Haroun El Rashid who was Caliph until deposed by the Seljuk Sultan, Mas'ud, when he took Baghdad in A.D.1136. This is the only mosque in Canada, the star and the crescent which crown its twin minarets gleaming bravely in Alberta's far-famed sunshine. It is the only mosque on the American continent built and consecrated exclusively as such; for though there is a mosque in Detroit, one at City Rapids, Iowa, and another at Ross, N.Dak., these are all "made-overs" from buildings formerly used for other purposes. But a Muslim jewel of great price is shortly to be built at Washington, D.C., where funds subscribed by the treasuries of Arab states, augmented by a gift of \$100,000 from the private fortune of Egypt's King Farouk, will make possible a mosque inferior to none in the Western world.

The Mosque of El Rashid was begun in July, 1938, and opened in December of the same year, at a cost of \$15,000. A modest enough sum, to be sure, but it was raised by voluntary gifts unsupplemented by any outside source at a time when the entire colony consisted of only forty Arab men, women and children or, at the very most, ten families. That a proportion of these were Christian Arabs did not debar their contributing with liberality toward the building of the mosque. The generosity of their contributions, when we bear in mind that there are no "money-eyed" people amongst them, may be inferred from these figures. That congregation now consists of a little more than two hundred, or about one-fifth of the Muslim population of this country.

The project had its genesis in the desire, particularly among the younger, Canadian-born generation, for some sort of community centre where dances could be held, bridge played, and activities of the kind promoted.



Devotion to Islam, then as now, was fervent, so from the community hall idea it was but a short step to a project which would combine that function with that of a place of worship. But this did not appeal to the elders who argued, in effect, that whether or not Islam and snooker-pool were compatible, the two would be incongruous companions under a common roof. And, furthermore, if the choice had to be between the religious and the secular, the former had first claim. So, for the time being, the community hall scheme was abandoned and all the Muslim effort was concentrated, first, on the formation of the Arab Muslim Association, brought into being in 1937 at the home of Mr. Ahmed Terrabin, and a committee was formed composed of Mr. Ali Younis, Mr. Derwish M. Teha, Mrs. Hilwie Hamdon and Mr. Sam Asif. These took the material affairs of the new congregation in hand under the spiritual leadership of Imam Najeib Ali Younis. Today things temporal are cared for by a board of directors of which Mr. Teha is president, Mr. Ali Kaziel vice-president, Mr. Sam Asif secretary and, *ex officio*, the Imam who has untiringly presided over the devotions and benevolently cared for the souls of the faithful since the beginning.

In the Arab world the imamate is usually hereditary, passing from father to son or sons, though this does not absolve the young candidate for the sacred office from an exacting course in Islamic faith and theology. In the great mosques of the Near and Far East the Imam is appointed by the Caliph, but in smaller mosques built by local communities the community, as at Edmonton, chooses its own Imam. The Mosque of El Rashid had no hereditary imamate. The Imam Younis's qualifications for his pastoral duties, which he assumed unhindered and unbewildered by the dialectic of theology, were a clear, irresistible call to the service of God and humanity, his devotion to the faith, and the ardent warmth of his religious emotions.

Whether publicly at the mosque or privately in his home, the Muslim worships five times a day—at dawn, just after noon, just before sunset, just after sunset and just after the day has closed. These acts of daily worship constitute together one of three obligatory religious practices instilled into young Alberta Arabs. The other two are recital of the creed and the fast in the month of *Ramadan*. It might be unfair not to credit them with scrupulous observance of the fourth religious practice, which is the giving of alms. In Muslim countries there is a recognized scale of tallage in animals, grain, fruits or other product of one's means of livelihood, and at one time these were devoted to

the building of mosques. In later times large sums have been distributed as charity to deserving causes or needy Muslims. Considering that the Mosque of El Rashid was built by ten Arab families and is still supported by fifty families or fewer, it cannot be said that the fourth obligation is neglected.

Some of the older, immigrant generation of the El Rashid assembly have, in younger days, fulfilled the fifth obligation, which is the Pilgrimage to Mecca. It is the *desideratum* of the younger generation. The difficulties created by distance are apparent, especially in a community whose members are at best of only moderate means, but the Islamic law qualifies this obligation by "if he is able"—able, that is, to maintain himself during the journey and return, and to support his family during his absence.

Besides their private devotions, the congregation of El Rashid gather for public worship at the mosque each Friday, the Muslim Sabbath or *yaum al-jama*. Facing the *quibla*, the direction of worship indicated by a draped niche in one of the walls—in this case the south-east—toward Mecca—the worshippers take part, with the time-honored ceremonial prostrations, in the prescribed liturgy, and hear portions of the *Qur'an* read by the Imam from the *minbar*, a lectern or small pulpit which only the Imam may ascend.

Muslim tradition is honored also in the observance of the great festivals (of which the chief is the anniversary of the Birth of the Prophet, occurring on the 13th of March) and fasts, of which the principal is Ramadan "wherein the *Qur'an* was revealed." This is a really exacting fast, requiring complete abstinence from all food and drink from sunrise each day until the first pale star appears in the sky. Its occurrence being set by the uncorrected lunar calendar, Ramadan, originally the ninth month, now falls at all seasons of the year in turn.

The Muslim's devotion starts in the home. Before setting out for the mosque there is preparation by ceremonially washing the face, hands and forearms and the feet. From then until after worship there is no contact with the opposite sex; a Muslim man and woman meeting will not so much as touch hands until their worship has been completed. In the mosque, which they enter by separate doors, even on a secular errand, they are separated by a curtain and meet again only after their devotions.

The Muslim reasons that the principles of his faith are the principles of health—health of the body, of the emotions, of the soul. It is not enough for



him to think of cleanliness as *next* to godliness; it is an integral part of godliness. External cleanliness is first assured, as has been explained, by washing—a prelude as essential to the Muslim's prayers as confession and absolution are to the Catholic's mass. Inner cleanliness is found through attention to diet, and though the Muslim is not strictly vegetarian like his Buddhist brother, heavy meats such as pork are strictly tabu.

Islam knows alcohol only as an Arabic word. As says Lucifer in Longfellow's *The Golden Legend*, offering his potion to the suffering Prince:

'Tis alcohol in the Arab speech  
Of him whose lore I teach.

Yet although *al-kohl* was an Arab discovery, it was originally an antimony power used to blacken the eyebrows. Not until later did it come to mean any product of distillation, and in this sense the word found its way into Western vocabularies and the product into Western wine cellars. But as a beverage it is not used by the truly faithful of Islam. Their drink is coffee.

Black coffee *a l'Arabe* can be truly called "the cup," in old Omar's language, "that clears today of past regrets and future fears." When the Arab hostess "brings on" the coffee, the guest begins to understand why the Muslim has no taste for less palatable and more harmful stimulants.

For their devotions within the mosque there are two large prayer rugs, one for men and one for women, upon which one does not tread until one has removed one's shoes. A really orthodox Muslim—a "spike", to borrow an Anglican colloquialism—will not even enter the mosque except shoeless.

The same separation of men and women is observed at the burial of the dead. Within the mosque a convenient chamber is equipped for washing the dead before interment—men's bodies by men, women's by women—and no true Muslim will permit his dead to fall into the hands of an infidel undertaker. The word "infidel," by the way, is not used in any objurgatory sense, but merely as a convenient term for distinguishing between Muslims and others, as one would say Jews and Gentiles. Nevertheless, probably no well-mannered Arab, sensitive of being misunderstood, would use the word in the presence of a Christian friend.

Even in marriage the lovers do not come together until the wedding feast. Having secured consent of the young lady's parent or guardian—and, of course, of the lady herself—and

a dowry usually having been agreed upon, the bride-to-be enlists the services of a brother or male friend or relative to act as her proxy at the betrothal ceremony. This is solemnized by the Imam according to time-honored formula in which the bridegroom joins hands, not with his bride, but with her male proxy. Sometimes even the bridegroom himself may not be present in person but represented by a designated friend, as a Western might invite a friend or neighbour to "stand up" with him at his wedding. The marriage feast, which may go on for several days, is held later, and it is not until now that the betrothed pair meet again. Actually it is at these festivities they become man and wife, for there is no further ceremony.

It might be asked how a marriage ceremony differing so essentially from Western usage stands up under Canadian law. But who is to say what makes a difference between one custom and another "essential"? Is the difference actually more radical than that between the rich ritual of the Catholic Church and the simple but equally binding ceremony at a registry office? The test of any marriage ceremony, or even absence of ceremony, would seem to be whether the man and the woman feel bound by their vows; but to conform with Canadian law the candidates in matrimony must secure the usual license, and the Imam himself must be licensed to solemnise marriages, just as any other pastor, according to prevailing law.

No one could accuse the Arab of ignoring his citizenship of the land of his birth. But it would be the opposite of truth to say that our Arab settlers are not proud to be Canadians:- that pride they assert with emphasis, and the British Empire knows no more loyal sons and daughters. But the Muslim thinks less in terms of nationality than in terms of faith; the Persian does not distinguish sharply between himself and the Syrian, or the Egyptian between himself and the Saudi Arabian. Such distinction as there is is more nearly analogous to that between the Canadian and the American. In a very real sense Islam is indeed the tie that binds. Only in comparatively recent years Turkey has developed a nationality consciousness, supposed by some to be one of the advantages learned by contact with the West, but viewed with marked displeasure by the Arab world. A Pan-Turanian movement has developed amongst large numbers of Mussulmans who think first as Indians. More recently still, the world has witnessed, in Aserbaijan, the sorry spectacle of Muslim sheeding Muslim blood—the more distress-



To put it briefly, the Muslim thinks of Islam as a brotherhood which transcends nationality, even his own. This very circumstance has been the source of no little irritation to the Pan-Turanians of India, who have found it hard on that account to inflame what they consider an adequate sense of nationalism amongst millions of Indian Mussulmans.

Muslim missionary enterprise is well known, but the Canadian Arab is not out to proselytise his neighbors. He would be well content if he could "sell" them his own ideal of a brotherhood of all men of good will, of sonship of God as something more than distinctions of race, of nationality, even of religion when it comes bearing labels. Given such a concept, universally accepted, would there, in such a world, be a place for war?

---