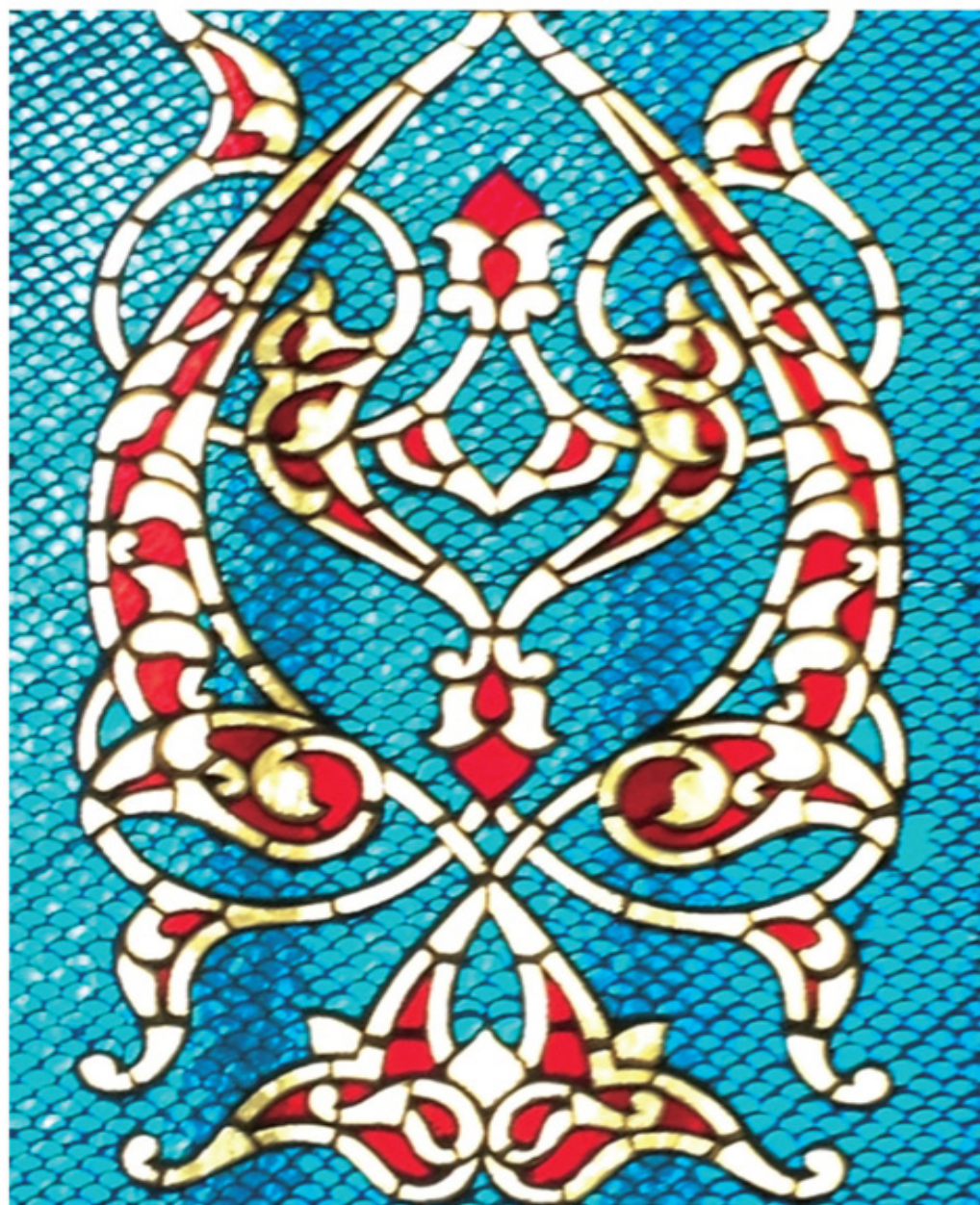


*Nabiyy-i Raḥmat*  
**Prophet of Mercy**

May Allah Bless Him and Give Him Peace



SHAYKH ABUL ḤASAN ʿALĪ NADWĪ

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# *Contents*

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

FOREWORD

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE AGE OF IGNORANCE

Religious Conditions

Social and Moral Conditions

Byzantine Empire

The Persian Empire

India

Arabia

Europe

The Era of Darkness and Depression

Worldwide Chaos

SELECTION OF ARABIA FOR THE PROPHET MUḤAMMAD 

Arabia's Era of Depression

The Need for a New Prophet

ARABIAN PENINSULA

The Land and its People

Cultural Centres

Ethnic Divisions

Linguistic Unity

Arabia in Ancient History

Earlier Revealed Religions of Arabia

MAKKAH BEFORE THE PROPHET 

Ismā'īl in Makkah

The Quraysh

Quṣayy ibn Kilāb


Banū Hāshim

Makkan Paganism  
The Elephants  
An Implicit Belief of the Quraysh  
Repercussion of Abrahah's Failure

## MAKKAH, THE PROPHET'S BIRTH PLACE

The Metropolis  
Reconstruction of Makkah  
The City State  
Commercial Operations  
Economic Conditions, Weights and Measures  
Prosperous Families of Quraysh  
Culture and Arts  
Military Prowess  
Makkah, the Heart of Arabia  
The Moral Life  
Religious Life

## FROM BIRTH TO PROPHETHOOD

ʿAbdullāh and Āminah  
Birth of the Prophet   
The Suckling Period  
Death of Āminah and ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib  
Abū Ṭālib becomes the Guardian  
Divine Tutelage  
Marriage with Khadijah  
Reconstruction of the Kaʿbah  
Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl  
A Mystifying Unrest

## THE DAWN OF PROPHETHOOD

Humanity's Morningtide  
In the Cave of Ḥirā'  
Back Home  
The Prediction of Waraqah ibn Nawfal  
Khadijah Accepts Islam

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and Zayd ibn Ḥārithah  
Abū Bakr Accepts Islam  
The Flower of Quraysh find Faith  
On Mount Ṣafā  
A Cogent Argument  
Beginning of Persecution  
Abū Ṭālib’s Anxiety  
Persecution Begins  
Ill-treatment of the Prophet ﷺ by his people  
The Suffering of Abū Bakr  
Quraysh in a fix  
Heartlessness of the Quraysh  
Ḥamzah Accepts Islam  
Proposal of ‘Utbah to the Prophet ﷺ  
Muslims Migrate to Abyssinia  
Quraysh pursue the Muslims  
Ja‘far’s portrayal of Islam and ignorance  
Discomfiture of the Qurayshite Emissaries  
‘Umar Embraces Islam  
Boycott of Banū Hāshim  
In the Shi‘b Abī Ṭālib  
Annulment of the Decree  
Death of Abū Ṭālib and Khadijah  
Sparkling symphony of the Qur’ān  
Journey to Ṭā’if  
The Ascension  
The Real Significance of the Ascension  
Obligatory Prayers  
Tribes invited to Islam  
The Risky Path to Islam  
The Beginning of Islām among the Anṣār  
First Pledge of ‘Aqabah  
The Reason for Anṣār’s Acceptance of Islam  
Strategic Importance of Madīnah  
Expansion of Islam in Madīnah




Second Pledge of ‘Aqabah  
Permission to migrate to Madīnah  
Unsuccessful Conspiracy Against the Apostle   
Prophet’s Migration to Madīnah  
The Strange Inconsistency  
The Moral of the Emigration  
Towards the Cave on Mount Thawr  
The Miracle of Love  
The Celestial Assistant  
The Most Critical Moment of Human History  
Lo! Allāh is With Us  
Surāqah Follows up the Apostle   
A Prediction  
The Blessed Host

#### YATHRIB BEFORE ISLAM

Difference between Makkan and Madīnan Societies  
Jews  
Religious Affairs of the Jews  
Finances  
Religious and Cultural Conditions  
The Aws and the Khazraj  
Physical and Geographical Conditions  
Religious and Social Conditions  
Economic Cultural Conditions  
Yathrib’s Advanced and Composite Society

#### IN MADĪNAH

How Madīnah received the Messenger of God   
The Mosque or Qubā’  
In the house of Abū Ayyūb Anṣārī  
Construction of the Prophet’s Mosque and Quarters  
Bonds of brotherhood between the Anṣār and Muhājirūn  
(emigrants)  
Covenant between the Muslims and the Jews  
The call to Prayer

Hypocrisy Rears Its Head in Madīnah  
Beginning of Jewish Animosity  
Change of the Qiblah  
Jews Give Offence to Muslims  
Permission to Fight  
Expedition of Abwā' and 'Abdullāh ibn Jaḥsh  
Fast made obligatory

#### THE DECISIVE BATTLE OF BADR

Faithfulness of the Anṣār  
Enthusiasm of the Youngsters  
Strength of the Contending Parties  
The Democratic Way  
The Apostle as a General  
Preparation for the Fighting  
an Entreatment to Beseech the Lord  
The True Position and Station of the Muslims  
The General Attack  
The First Martyr  
The Desire of Two Brothers  
The Great Victory  
Effects of the Victory of Badr  
Ties of Blood or Faith  
Treatment of the Captives  
Ransom of the Prisoners  
Other Expeditions  
Ka'b ibn Ashraf Meets His Doom

#### THE BATTLE OF UḤUD

Revenge: A Binding Obligation  
The Prophet takes the Position  
Enthusiasm of the Youngsters

#### MAPS

The First Phase of Action  
Martyrdom of Ḥamzah and Muṣ'ab ibn 'Umayr



Victory of the Muslims  
The Table Turns on the Muslims  
The loving Companions  
Muslims Regain Confidence  
The Exemplary Endurance  
Burial of Muṣʿab ibn ʿUmayr  
The Prophet's ﷺ Influence on the Womenfolk  
Devotion and Faith  
A Lesson for the Muslims  
Apple of the Eye  
Bi'r Maʿūnah  
Dying Declaration of a Martyr  
Expulsion of Banū 'n-Naḍīr  
The Raid of Dhāt ar-Riqāʿ  
Who Now Can Save You?  
Expeditions Without Fighting

#### THE BATTLE OF TRENCHES

Wisdom: A Lost Property of the Muslims  
Enthusiasm and the Co-operative Spirit  
Miracle Predicting a Bright Future  
Some More Miracles  
The Fiery Ordeal  
The Actual Fight  
The Ardent Zeal of Muslim Women  
Divine Succour

#### ACTION AGAINST BANŪ QURAYẒAH

Banū QurayẒah's Breach of Faith  
Banū QurayẒah Assailed  
Repentance of Abū Lubābah  
Truth in Action  
Decision consistent with the Law of Moses  
Benevolence and Largesse  
Expedition of Banū al-Muṣṭalaq and the Affair of *Ifk*

## THE TRUCE OF ḤŪDAYBIYYAH

Vision of the Prophet ﷺ  
Trip to Makkah  
Irritation of the Quraysh  
Love put to Trial  
The Pledge of Riḍwān  
Parleys, Conciliation and Accord  
The Treaty of Peace  
Exemplary Moderation and Prudence  
Treaty or Trial  
Faith put to Trial  
Ignominious Peace or Signal Victory  
Failure or Success  
The Treaty turns to Victory  
Khālīd ibn al-Walīd and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ

## LETTER TO THE MONARCHS

Letters of the Prophet  
Who were these Kings?  
Reaction of the Monarchs  
Heraclius and Abū Sufyān  
Who were the Arīsiyyīn?  
Letters to the Arab Potentate

## THE EXPEDITION TO KHAYBAR

The Divine Reward  
The Apostle ﷺ leads the Army  
The Victorious Commander  
ʿAlī faces the Jewish Warrior  
An Easy Reward  
I Did Not Come to You for It  
Religious Tolerance  
Arrival of Jaʿfar ibn Abī Ṭālib  
Another Conspiracy  
Effect of the Conquest of Khaybar  
The Spoils of Khaybar

Magnanimity of the Mūhājirīn  
The Missed Pilgrimage  
Rights of Women Restored

#### THE EXPEDITION TO MU'TAH

First Expedition to the Byzantine Territory  
Dauntless Warriors  
Action Starts  
Khālid Assumes Command  
A Glimpse of the Battlefield  
Ja'far at-Ṭayyār  
Words, Kind and Comforting  
Not Deserters but Warriors  
Subsequent Expeditions

#### THE CONQUEST OF MAKKAH

Background of the Conquest  
Dereliction of Banū Bakr and Quraysh  
Complaint to the Apostle  
Last Bid to Seek Justice  
Efforts to Renewal the Treaty  
Prophet preferred over Parents  
Abū Sufyān Bewildered  
Affairs of Ḥāṭib ibn Abī Balta'ah  
The Writ of Amnesty  
Abū Sufyān Appears before the Apostle   
General Amnesty  
Abū Sufyān Witnesses the Army  
Triumphant Entry into Makkah  
The Day of Mercy and Forgiveness  
A Few Skirmishes  
Ka'bah Cleared of Idols  
Princely Generosity  
Islam, the Religion of Monotheism  
The Prophet of Mercy  
Equality Before Law

Kindness to Enemies  
Hind Accepts Islam  
Inseparable Companions  
Sinner Turns into Saint  
All Traces of Paganism Erased  
Impact of Makkah's Conquest  
The Youthful Administrator

#### THE BATTLE OF ḤUNAYN

Assemblage of Hawāzin  
Not a Sign of Idolatry  
In the Wadi of Ḥunayn  
Rift Within the Lute  
Victory and Peace of God  
The Last Encounter  
In Awṭās 304

#### THE BATTLE OF ṬĀ'IF

Fugitives of Thaḳīf  
Siege of Ṭā'if  
Kindness in the Battlefield  
The Siege Raised  
The Spoils of Ḥunayn  
Love for Anṣār and their Selflessness  
Captives Released  
Loving Kindness  
The Lesser Pilgrimage  
No Complaisance to Idolatry  
Ka'b ibn Zuhayr accepts Islam

#### THE EXPEDITION TO TABŪK

The Time of Expedition  
Enthusiasm of the Muslims  
The army's Departure for Tabūk  
Demoralised Hypocrites  
Treaty of Peace with Aylah's Ruler

Back to Madīnah  
Funeral of a poor Muslim  
Trial of Kaʿb ibn Mālīk  
The Expeditions at a Glance  
The First Hajj



#### THE YEAR OF DEPUTATIONS

Arrival of Deputations in Madīnah  
The Apostle's conversation with a Pagan  
Commandment for Zakāt and Charity

#### THE FAREWELL PILGRIMAGE

Educative Apostle of the Pilgrimage  
Unique Record of the Farewell Pilgrimage  
A Synopsis of the Farewell Pilgrimage  
How the Pilgrimage was performed  
The Addresses of the Apostle

#### THE ETERNAL REST

Completion of the Apostle's  Mission  
Recitation of the Qur'ān and Devotional Exercises  
Ardent Desire for Nearness to God  
Beginning of the Illness  
The Last Army  
Keen Interest in the Detachment of Usāmah  
Solicitude for the Welfare of Muslims  
Indifference to the World and Wealth  
Anxiety for the Prayer  
The Farewell Speech  
Directions for Kindliness toward the Anṣār  
Last Look on the Muslims in Prayer  
Interdiction of Prayers at Sepulchres  
The Last Directions  
How the Apostle  left this World  
Bewilderment of the Companions  
The Brave Words of Abū Bakr

Oath of Fealty to Abū Bakr  
Burial of the Apostle

## WIVES AND CHILDREN OF THE APOSTLE

The Prophet's  Marriages  
The Prophet's Children

## CHARACTER AND FEATURES

Love of God  
Indifference to the World  
Natural Disposition  
Moderation and Seemliness  
The Prophet in His House  
Selflessness  
Instinctive Magnificence  
Mildness, Courtesy and Forbearance  
Modesty  
Courage and Shyness  
Mercy and Compassion  
A Comprehensive and Eternal Model

## MERCY OF THE WORLD

MAPS



INDEX

*The Age of Ignorance*

## RELIGIOUS CONDITIONS

**G**REAT RELIGIONS of the world had spread the light of faith, morals and learning in the ages past, but every one of these had been rendered a disgrace to its name by the sixth century of the Christian era. Crafty innovators, unscrupulous dissemblers and impious priests and preachers had, with the passage of time, so completely distorted the scriptures and disfigured the teachings and commandments of their own religions that it was almost impossible to recall the original shape and content of these religions. Had the founder or the prophet of any one of them returned to earth, he would unquestionably have refused his own religion and denounced its followers as apostates and idolaters.<sup>1</sup>

Judaism had, by then, been reduced to an amalgam of dead rituals and sacraments without any spark of life left in it. Also, being a religion upholding racial superiority, it has never had any message for other nations or for the good of humanity in general.

It had not even remained firmly wedded to its belief in the unity of God (which had once been its distinguishing feature and had raised its adherents to a level higher than that of the followers of ancient polytheistic cults), as commenced by the Prophet Abraham  to his sons and grandson Jacob . The Jews had, under the influence of their powerful neighbours and conquerors, adopted



numerous idolatrous beliefs and practices as acknowledged by modern Jewish authorities:

The thunderings of the prophets against idolatry show, however, that deity cults were deeply rooted in the heart of the Israelites, and it does not appear to have been thoroughly suppressed until after the return from their exile from Babylon. Through mysticism and magic many polytheistic ideas and customs again found their way among the people, and the Talmud confirms the seduction of idolatrous worship.<sup>2</sup>

The Babylonian Gemara<sup>3</sup> (popular during the sixth century and often even preferred to Torah by the orthodox Jewry) typically illustrates the crudeness of intellectual and religious understanding among sixth century Jews, with its jocular and imprudent remarks about God and many an absurd and outrageous belief and idea; beliefs and ideas which lack not only sensibility but are also inconsistent with the Jewish faith in monotheism.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity had fallen prey, in its very infancy, to the misguided fervour of its overzealous evangelists; unwarranted interpretation of its tenets by ignorant church fathers and iconolatry of its gentile converts to Christianity. The manner in which Trinitarian doctrine came to have the first claim to the Christian dogma by the close of the fourth century has been thus described in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*:

It is difficult, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to offer a clear, objective, and straightforward account of the revelation, doctrinal evolution, and theological elaboration of the mystery of the Trinity. Trinitarian discussion, Roman Catholic as well as other, presents a somewhat unsteady silhouette. Two things have happened. There is the recognition on the part of exegetes and Biblical theologians, including a constantly growing number of Roman Catholics, that one should not speak of Trinitarianism in the New Testament without serious qualification. There is also the closely parallel recognition on the part of historians of dogma

and systematic theologians that when one does speak of an unqualified Trinitarianism, one has moved from the period of Christian origins to, say, the last quadrant of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. It was only then that what might be called the definitive Trinitarian dogma 'one God in three persons' became thoroughly assimilated into Christian life and thought.<sup>5</sup>

Tracing the origin of pagan customs, rites, festivals and religious services of the pagans in Christianity, another historian of the Christian church gives a graphic account of persistent endeavour of early Christians to subsume the idolatrous nations. Rev. James Houston Baxter, Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of St. Andrews writes in *The History of Christianity in the Light of Modern Knowledge*:

If paganism had been destroyed, it was less through annihilation than through absorption. Almost all that was pagan was carried over to survive under a Christian name. Deprived of demi-gods and heroes, men easily and half consciously invested a local martyr with their attributes labelled the local statue with his name, transferring to him the cult and mythology associated with the pagan deity. Before the century was over, the martyr-cult was universal, and a beginning had been made of that imposition of a deified human being between God and man which, on the one hand, had been the consequence of Arianism, and was, on the other, the origin of so much that is typical of medieval piety and practice. Pagan festivals were adopted and renamed: by 400, Christmas Day, the ancient festival of the sun, was transformed into the birthday of Jesus.<sup>6</sup>

By the sixth century, the antagonism between Christians of Syria, Iraq and Egypt on the question of the human and divine natures of Christ had set them at one another's throats. The conflict had virtually turned every Christian seminary, church and home into a hostile camp, each anathematising the other and thirsting after its

adversary's blood. 'Men debated with fury upon shadows or shades of belief and staked their lives on the most immaterial issues',<sup>7</sup> as if these differences meant a confrontation between two antagonistic religions or nations. The Christians were, thus, neither inclined nor had time to set their own house in order and smother the ever-increasing viciousness in the world for the salvation of humanity.

In Iran, from the earliest times, the Magi worshipped four elements<sup>8</sup> (of which fire was the chief object of devotion) in the oratories or fire-temples for which they had evolved a whole mass of intricate rituals and commandments. In actual practice, the popular religion included nothing save the worship of fire and adorations of *Hvare-khshaeta* or the Shining Sun. Certain rituals performed in a place of worship were all that their religion demanded, for, after performing these rites they were free to live as they desired. There was nothing to distinguish a Magi from an unconscientious, perfidious fellow.<sup>9</sup>

Arthur Christensen writes in *L'Iran Sous Les Sassanides*:

It was incumbent on the civil servants to offer prayers four times a day to the sun besides fire and water. Separate hymns were prescribed for rising and going to sleep, taking a bath, putting on the sacred cord, eating and drinking, sniffing, hair-dressing, cutting of the nails, excretion and lighting the candle, which were to be recited on each occasion with the greatest care. It was the duty of the priests to compound, purify and tend the sacred fire, which was never to be extinguished, nor was water ever allowed to touch fire. No metal was allowed to rust, for metals, too, were hallowed by their religions.<sup>10</sup>

All prayers were performed facing the sacred fire. The last Iranian Emperor, Yazdagird III, once took an oath, saying: 'I swear by the sun, which is the greatest of all gods'. He had ordered that those who had abjured Christianity to reenter their original faith should publicly worship the sun in order to prove their sincerity.<sup>11</sup> The

principle of dualism, the two rival spirits of good and evil, had been upheld by the Iranians for such a long time that it had become a mark and symbol of their national creed. They believed that *Ormuzd* creates everything good, and *Ahriman* creates all that is bad; these two are perpetually at war and the one or the other gains the upper hand alternately.<sup>12</sup> The Zoroastrian legends described by the historians of religion bear remarkable resemblance to the hierarchy of gods and goddesses and the fables of Hindu and Greek mythology.<sup>13</sup>

Buddhism, extending from India to Central Asia, had been converted into an idolatrous faith. Wherever the Buddhists went they took the idols of the Buddha with them and installed them there.<sup>14</sup>

Although the entire religious and cultural life of the Buddhists is over-shadowed by idolatry, the students of religion have grave doubts whether the Buddha was a nihilist or believed in the existence of God. They are surprised how this religion could at all sustain itself in the absence of any faith or conviction in the Primal Being.

In the sixth century AD, Hinduism had shot ahead of every other religion in the number of gods and goddesses. During this period the Hindus worshipped 33 million gods. The tendency to regard everything which could do harm or good as an object of personal devotion was at its height and this was the impetus to stone sculpture with novel motifs of decorative ornamentation.<sup>15</sup>

Describing the religious condition of India during the reign of Harsha (606– 648), a little before the time when Islam made its first appearance in Arabia, a Hindu historian, C.V. Vaidya, writes in his *History of Mediaeval Hindu India*:

Both Hinduism and Buddhism were equally idolatrous at this time. If anything, Buddhism perhaps beat the former in its intense idolatry. That religion started, indeed, with the denial of God, but ended by making Buddha' himself the Supreme God. Later developments of Buddhism added other gods like


the Bodhisattvas and the idolatry of Buddhism especially in the Mahayana school was firmly established. Idolatry reached its peak in India until the word 'Buddha' became synonymous to the word 'idol' in some Eastern languages.<sup>16</sup>

C.V. Vaidya further says:

No doubt idolatry was at this time rampant all over the world. From the Atlantic to the Pacific the world was immersed in idolatry; Christianity, Semitism, Hinduism and Buddhism vying, so to speak, with one another in their adoration of idols.<sup>17</sup>

Another historian of Hinduism expresses the same opinion about the great passion for multiplicity of deities among the Hindus in the sixth century. He writes:

The process of deification did not stop here. Lesser gods and goddesses were added in ever growing numbers till there was a crowd of deities, many of them adopted from the more primitive peoples who were admitted to Hinduism with the gods whom they worshipped. The total number of deities is said to be 33 scores, i.e. 330 million, which, like the phrase "Thy name is legion", merely implies an innumerable host.<sup>18</sup>

The Arabs had been the followers of the Abrahamic religion in the olden times and had the distinction of having the first House of God in their land, but the long stretch of time from the great patriarchs and prophets of yore  and their isolation in the arid deserts of the peninsula had given rise to an abominable idolatry closely approximating the Hindu zeal for idol worship in the sixth century AD. They became progressively more idolatrous and made gods beside God, believing them to have partnership in the governance of the Universe. They believed that their deities possessed the power to do them good or harm, to give them life or death. The people sank into the worst form of idolatry, with each region and every clan, or

rather every house, having a separate deity of its own.<sup>19</sup> Three hundred and sixty idols had been installed within the Ka‘bah and its courtyard—the house built by Abraham for the worship of the One and only God. The Arabs actually paid divine honours not merely to sculptured idols but venerated all types of stones and fetishes: angels, jinn and stars were all their deities. They believed that the angels were daughters of God and the jinn His partners in divinity,<sup>20</sup> and thus both enjoyed supernatural powers whose mollification was essential for their well-being.

## SOCIAL AND MORAL CONDITIONS

This was the plight of great religions sent by God, from time to time, for the guidance of humanity. In the civilised countries, there were powerful governments and great centres of art, culture and learning but their religions had been garbled so completely that nothing of their original spirit and content was left in them.

Nor were there any reformers or heavenly-minded guides of humanity to be found anywhere.

## BYZANTINE EMPIRE

Crushed under vexatious and burdensome taxes levied by the Byzantine Empire,<sup>21</sup> the allegiance to any alien ruler was considered by the populace as less oppressive than the rule of Byzantium. Insurrections had become such a common feature that in 532 AD public discontent erupted in Constantinople in the *Nika* (win or conquer) revolt that cost 30,000 lives.<sup>22</sup> The pastime of the chiefs and nobles was to squeeze wealth, under various pretexts, from the harassed peasantry, and squander it on their pleasure and amusement. Their craze for merriment and revelry very often sank to the depths of hideous savagery.

The authors of the *Civilisation, Past and Present* have painted a lurid picture of the contradictory passions of the Byzantine society

for religious experience as well as its love of sports and recreation marked by moral corruption.

Byzantine social life was marked by tremendous contrasts. The religious attitude was deeply ingrained in the popular mind. Asceticism and monasticism were widespread throughout the empire, and to an extraordinary degree even the most commonplace individual seemed to take a vital interest in the deepest theological discussions, while all the people were much affected by a religious mysticism in their daily life. But, in contrast, the same people were exceptionally fond of all types of amusements. The great Hippodrome, seating 80,000 wide-eyed spectators, was the scene of hotly disputed chariot races which split the entire populace into rival factions of 'Blue' and 'Green'. . . The Byzantines possessed both a love of beauty and a streak of violence and viciousness. Their sports were often bloody and sadistic, their tortures were horrible, and the lives of their aristocracy were a mixture of luxury, intrigue, and studied vice.<sup>23</sup>

Egypt had vast resources of corn on which Constantinople largely depended for its prosperity, but the whole machinery of the imperial government in that province was directed to wringing profits out of the ruled for the rulers. In religious matters, too, the policy of suppressing the Jacobite heresy was pursued relentlessly.<sup>24</sup>

In short, Egypt was like a milch cow whose masters were interested only in milking her without providing her with any fodder.

Syria, another fair dominion of the Byzantine Empire, was always treated as a hunting ground for the domineering and expansionist policy of the imperial government. Syrians were treated as slaves at the mercy of their masters, for they could never pretend to have any claim to kind or considerate behaviour from their rulers. The taxes levied were so excessive in amount and so unjust in incidence that the Syrians very often had to sell their



children to clear the government dues. Unwarranted persecution, confiscation of property, enslavement and impressed labour were some of the common features of Byzantine rule.<sup>25</sup>

## THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Zoroastrianism is the oldest religion of Iran. Zarathustra, the founder of Zoroastrianism, lived probably about 600–650 BC. After it had shaken off the Hellenistic influence, the Persian Empire was larger in size and greater in wealth and splendour than the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire. Ardashir I, the architect of the Sāsānid dynasty, laid the foundation of his kingdom by defeating Artabanus V in 224 AD. In its prime the Sāsānid Empire extended over Assyria, Khozistan, Media, Fars (Persis), Azerbaijan, Ṭabaristān (Mazandaran), Saraksh, Marjān, Marv, Balkh (Bactria), Saghd (Sagdonia), Sijistān (Saeastene), Herāt, Khurāsān, Khwarizm (Khiva), Iraq and Yemen, and, for a time, had under its control the areas lying near the delta of the river Sind; Kachh, Kathiawar, Malwa and few other districts.

Ctesiphon (Madā'in), the capital of the Sāsānids, combined a number of cities on either banks of the Tigris. During the fifth century and thereafter the Sāsānid empire was known for its magnificence and splendour, cultural refinement and the life of ease and pleasure enjoyed by its nobility.

Zoroastrianism was founded, from the earliest times, on the concept of universal struggle between the *ahuras* and the *daevas*, the forces of good and evil. In the third century Mani appeared on the scene as a reformer of Zoroastrianism. Sapor I (240–271) at first embraced the precepts uttered by the innovator, remaining faithful to them for ten years and before returning to Mazdaism. Manichaeism was based on a most thoroughgoing dualism of the two conflicting souls in man, one good and the other bad. In order, therefore, to get rid of the latter, preached Mani, one should practise strict asceticism and abstain from women. Mani spent a number of years in exile and returned to Iran after the accession of

Bahrām I to the throne, but was arrested, convicted of heresy, and beheaded. His converts must have remained faithful to his teachings, for we know that Manichaeism continued to influence Iranian thought and society for a long time even after the death of Mani.<sup>26</sup>

Mazdak, the son of Baudad, was born at Nishapur in the fifth century. He also believed in the twin principles of light and darkness, but in order to put down the vileness emanating from darkness, he preached community of women and goods, which all men should share equally, as they do water, fire and wind. Mazdakites soon gained enough influence, thanks to the support of Emperor Kavadh, to cause a communistic upheaval in the country. People would enter into the house of a person, occupy his house and property, and he could not defend it.

In an ancient manuscript known as *Namah Tinsar* the ravages done to Iranian society by the application of the communistic version of Mazdaism have been graphically depicted thus:

Chastity and manners were cast to the dogs. They came to the fore who had neither nobility nor character, nor acted uprightly, nor had any ancestral property; utterly indifferent to their families and the nation, they had no trade or calling; and being completely heartless they were ever willing to get into mischief, to mince the truth, vilify and malign others; for this was the only profession they knew for achieving wealth and fame.<sup>27</sup>

Arthur Christensen concludes:

The result was that the peasants rose in revolt in many places, bandits started breaking into the houses of nobles to pray upon their property and to abduct their womenfolk. Gangsters took over the possession of landed estates and gradually the agricultural holdings became depopulated since the new owners knew nothing about the cultivation of land.<sup>28</sup>

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