

Reviews

Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2001), *100 mots pour dire l'Islam*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose

This is a book for the wider public. As we read it we learn a lot about the religion itself, about history, geography, the culture of peace that is one of Islam's foundation stones. This little 87-page book aspires to 'achieve its own objective by explaining 100 or so words and names briefly or at length, but setting itself reasonable limits' (p. 7). In the introduction the author confesses that 'to draw up the list of the various entries I also had to resort to what is almost . . . a game' (p. 6). Asking the uninitiated for some words that could portray Islam probably was like a game, but all the work was still to be done, that is choosing the keywords related to the history, geography and origins of the religion, proper names (for instance Muhammad), essential places (Mecca), beliefs and ritual. This glossary is a guide that might illuminate the minds of the uninformed so that they can on their own distinguish between the indispensable words (those that deserve to have a glossary entry) and those connected with their media and political uses in certain contexts (Islamist, fundamentalism).

The two maps at the beginning of the glossary have their own importance. The first gives an overall view of the number of Muslims worldwide and an idea of their distribution country by country (15% are demographically part of the Arab world). Fifty-seven nations belong to the Islamic Conference Organization, created in 1969. The second map shows the member states of the Arab League, which was founded in 1945 and has grown as time has gone by (now comprising 20 countries). The states belonging to it are not all Arab. Some ancient cultures (such as the Berbers) coexist with the Arabic language or yet again, as in Sudan and Mauritania, other problems exist: whole peoples do not speak Arabic and may be animists or Christians.

We discover from the glossary that the word 'Islam' has the root '*s.l.m*' which contains the notion of peace' and that 'the verb *aslama*', which is the origin of the word, means 'to give oneself to' (p. 44). Thus in its etymology Islam is a religion in which 'one makes peace with oneself in order to make peace with God'. When it came into being in the 7th century it seemed less like a new religion than a 'restoration . . . of the original monotheistic religion of the prophets which human beings had known' (p. 44). Jesus is one of those prophets and Muhammad is the last of the line. In giving themselves up to God the faithful do not make any distinction

Copyright © ICPHS 2005

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105050588

between those prophets. With Muhammad's teaching Islam is the monotheistic religion that has five pillars: profession of faith or *chahâda*, prayer (*salât*), alms to be given to the poor or *zakhât*, fasting in the month of *Ramadân*, and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*) for whoever can afford it and is in good health.

In the glossary some entries cannot fail to arouse the reader's curiosity. For example the word '*femmes*' (p. 34) encapsulates a whole history and a whole tradition in the Koran, which takes the word as the title for *surah* 4. The author explains how that *surah* deals with the question of the non-existent rights of women in Arab society in the Prophet Muhammad's time. Men and women are ontologically absolutely equal, being created from a 'single soul'. The *surah* also covers the question of marriage and inheritance, and the number of wives being restricted to four, provided 'they are loved and treated equally'. Other verses, as the author reminds us, speak of the 'the right way to dress' (pp. 36–7). This right way makes us think of the 'veil', which translates two words, *khimâr* and *julbâbi*, but Muslim women dress differently 'depending on cultures and customs . . . though everywhere there remains the idea that the garment, as indicated by verse 59 of *surah* 33, is a form of protection for the person' (p. 37).

In addition we learn that the word *salâm*, peace (p. 71), is much used in Islam; it is 'one of the beautiful names of God (Allah)' and thus is 'the basis for the Muslim salutation: *assalâmu aleikum*, that is "peace be with you"'. The uninitiated can learn a great deal from the detailed analysis of the word *soufisme* (pp. 73–7). Indeed Sufism is 'the Muslim form of mysticism' and also 'an experience and not a theory', 'the experience and realization of the idea that human beings must fulfil themselves in the light of God by working on themselves and on the passions that distract them from what they should be' (p. 74).

This book is a guide that opens doors for the uninformed to enter into the universe of Islam.

Extracts

Mecca: *The history of this sanctuary's foundation is first of all the story of Agar and her son Ismael, whose father was Abraham. When Sarah, mother of Isaac, persuaded her husband Abraham to send away his eldest son with Agar his mother, Abraham entrusted them to God, who led them to this place, which was to become Makka (Mecca). When the child almost died of thirst in the desolate place where they were, to the great despair of his mother, who in her confusion was wandering back and forth between two little hills, divine compassion was shown to them in the form of the appearance of a spring called Zemzem. Later Abraham came to visit them and had the site revealed to him, near the well of Zemzem, where he was to build a sanctuary to God. So Ismael and he raised the Holy House in the form that gave it its name Ka'bah, which means 'cube'. On one of its corners Abraham placed a celestial stone which one tradition tells was blackened by the sins of Adam's descendants. Then with divine inspiration Abraham established the pilgrimage rites (Hajj) that were later drowned for centuries in the cult of idols, which preserved the pilgrimage tradition. These rituals handed down from Abraham are thought to have been restored by Islam: they consist of walking round the Ka'bah, kissing the black stone each time you pass it, and repeating Agar's con-*

fused to-and-fro between the two hills of Safâ and Marwah; the rites also include stoning columns representing the devil and his temptations, gathering at Mount Arafâ for a day of prayers with the pilgrims all wearing, from the start of the rites, the two pieces of cloth that show their detachment from the world and express the declaration they have repeated ceaselessly since they began wearing this sacred clothing (irham): 'Here I am, completely Yours, Lord, here I am, completely Yours' (pp. 57–8).

Muhammad: Muhammad is thus, according to the words of the Koran (surah 33, verse 40), 'the Apostle of God and the Seal of the prophets'.¹ He was born in Mecca in 570 . . . his father died before he was born. His mother also departed this world, leaving him completely orphaned at six years of age . . . His paternal grandfather then took him under his wing and shortly before he died handed him over to his uncle Abu Tâlib. It was this poor uncle who raised him and, after he had often tended sheep and goats for his living while still a child, it was this uncle who introduced him to travelling in the caravan to trade . . . As a young man his reputation for scrupulous loyalty (he was given the nickname Al Amîn, 'the trust-worthy') attracted confidence . . . And a rich widow of about 40, Khadidja, employed him in her service before expressing the wish to marry this man in whom she found the greatest human qualities. He was in his 25th year when they wed . . . Dissatisfied with worshipping idols, Muhammad had become accustomed to go on long spiritual retreats in the cave on the outskirts of Mecca. It was during one of these retreats, in his 40th year, that he had the vision of the Angel Gabriel, come to tell him of his mission: to be the prophet of the one God . . . Fearful and thinking he was being set upon by mischievous spirits, Muhammad ran to seek refuge with Khadidja, who reassured him . . .

The victory of the new religion over the cult of idols resulted in the idols being destroyed: now the Ka'bah with its black stone, towards which Muslim prayers are directed throughout the world, was restored to monotheistic worship and was henceforth to be alone the object of Muslim pilgrimage . . . In order to establish forever its rites [of the new religion] for the followers present, in the tenth year of Hegira, or 632, Muhammad led what is called the 'farewell pilgrimage', reminding Muslims of Abraham's legacy and giving them the Koran and his own conduct as their inheritance . . . Then he revealed the final verses of the Koran: 'When God's help and victory come, and you see people embrace God's faith in multitudes/ give glory to your Lord and seek his pardon: He is ever disposed to mercy' (pp. 62–7).

Note

1. The English version of the Koran used here is the revised translation by N. J. Dawood (1990), Penguin Books.

Tanella Boni
Université de Cocody, Abidjan
 Translated from the French by Jean Burrell