

Soviet writing. The film is very long, and one staggered out feeling that one had undergone an experience of some magnitude, and this less because of the horror of the scenes of rape and murder than for the pitiful predicament of this family of five brothers and old mother, come up from the south to see what they can make of life in rich Milan, and finding that what they achieve is disaster.

There were twenty-eight films to be seen in the South Bank—films from East Europe, including Poland's extremely brave *Bad Luck*, with its gay criticism of almost everything; two social-realism Spanish films, films from the Far East, *Studs Lonigan* from America; two Russian films, both shown at Cannes, and a very odd production indeed from Greece in Michael Cacoyannis' *Our Last Spring* which was really very bad, and yet so intriguing that I feel I shall remember it long after I have forgotten much better works. Without the British Film Institute we might have had to wait months and years to see many of these, so let us be grateful to their enterprise whilst not overlooking their prejudices.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir,

I was much interested by Mr Avery's article on Christian Ideas of Islam in your issue of November, but I should like to put certain thoughts before your readers, whom I cannot expect to read my book, which he reviews.

About the medieval Christian attitude: the writers of that formative age are our masters in many ways; where we have an advantage over them is in not being bound by a political situation which forced them to concentrate on points of difference. In the case of Communism we are like them. We feel that it threatens, and we concentrate on its faults. Readers of *BLACK-FRIARS* in a thousand years' time may think that we were blind to truths that co-existed with error, but no one will feel superior to us for not seeing Marxist-Leninism altogether dispassionately. One contemporary interest in the study of the medieval approach to Islam lies in the light it sheds on the attitudes of good and intelligent men caught up in the antagonism of hostile cultures.

I think I must insist that we have to judge the reactions of a society by its literate and articulate representatives. Material on the popular view of Islam in the Middle Ages is limited, and so was that view; once it is stated, there is little more to say. It is the whole attitude of society that is interesting, and this by definition articulate people best reveal; but I cannot trespass on your space by summarizing what I have said in my book on the social psychology of prejudice, or of the effect on beliefs of personal situations of horrible difficulty.

The medievals are our masters in that they covered much of the field with intelligence, interest and, often, learning, which we need not, should

not and sometimes cannot supersede. What is, I believe, wrong, is to think that we can add or correct nothing; certainly the medievals would not think so. I personally get carried away often enough by the excellence of some things they say about Islam, and quote them at a length that may well bore those who are not interested in medieval modes of thought. Yet it would be very surprising if we had nothing to add. I have made some suggestions in my book of what might be done, and I have referred to what some Christians, and notably some Catholics, have already done; but now I would rather quote an outstanding Arabist and theologian of unimpeachable orthodoxy, Louis Gardet, who in his *Connaitre l'Islam* warns against the two extremes, the old polemic attitude and a new desire only to please. He suggests that three Christian-Islamic meeting-points may be desirable and possible: 'la culture comme valeur temporelle (disons, si l'on veut, la culture profane); le plan politico-social; le plan (temporal) de la culture religieuse'.

While we respect the medievals, we must remember Gardet's warning that there was often 'une certaine ignorance à demi voulue de l'Islam'. It is here that Mr Avery and I part company. It would be perverse to maintain that historical knowledge has not advanced since the Middle Ages, and it is a consequence of this that we must greatly modify our estimate of Muhammad. There simply is no evidence that Muhammad was the hypocrite that Christians traditionally took him to be. So far as the evidence suggests anything, it suggests the contrary; but the wise critic ignores a point on which there can be no proof, and from the examination of which no good can come. It seems to me that it is not helpful of Mr Avery to speak of Muhammad's 'borrowing from established religions the garb of valid revelation'. If he implies a deliberate deceit, that is unproven and unprovable; if not, he only adds a pejorative note to a statement that the Quran contains elements from other religions (as in effect it claims to do). Why add that pejorative note? The fact no one denies; or the fact that there is an authentically Islamic contribution which transforms those elements. A scholarly, charitable and fruitful contribution to Catholic thought, Father Moubarac's *Abraham dans le Coran*, says something new without in the slightest compromising orthodoxy. Modern scholarship recognizes that Judaic and Christian elements, unassimilated in their original meaning, are given a different significance in the Quran. (Catholic scholars recognize transformed pagan elements in the Bible, incidentally.) We should be poor Christians if we thought the Quranic significance a better one, but so we should be if we thought we had nothing to learn from it; and to deny the fact would simply be ignorance. For the Christian surely there should be no comparison between the two faiths: Islam is a great religion, Christianity the true one. The latter is not endangered when we recognize truths reflected elsewhere.

Mark of Toledo and other medieval authors were put off the Quran by a style alien to everything in their own upbringing, and its failure in translation to attract most European readers is, I suggest, because Arabic does not translate easily. But we can understand it, and I would always prefer an exposition to a new translation. Of course, in a way the Quran is confused; though I would hesitate to say so, because the unbeliever sometimes says

the same of the Bible. The real point is that to say so is to say nothing useful, when so much that is useful can be said. To Muslims the Quran is clear: Mr Avery speaks, and very well, of how it has moved him in an Eastern setting; but we have to think first of what it means to the Muslim in his everyday surroundings; I see, for example, tears in the eyes of an Iraqi clerk when he hears a cheap gramophone record of the sura *Miriam* (with its superficially erroneous but profoundly fine devotion to Mary and Jesus).

I am at one with your reviewer in his wish to see a book that will cover the whole ground of the comparative cultures of East and West, but in the present state of scholarship we must all wait for it. Not only I but many others are meantime contributing material, and any judgment of Islam should surely take into account the work of all these modern scholars, and of medieval commentators taken in their context and their full complexity.

It is worse than useless to revive ancient grievances—and Muslims, unhappily, have grievances as well as we. Nor, when we survey the modern world and compare the infidelity of Christian and Muslim nations alike, need either side boast. A distinguished Persian visitor to this country recently asked me, with some natural hesitation, whether I habitually went to church. When I said that I did, he sighed, and commented, 'I like people who believe'. This is a sentiment that I think it good to reciprocate. Of late years in Baghdad people have been going to the mosques who did not go before, and ordinary men respond with symbolic acts of belief to atheist propaganda (sometimes with danger of death). When we see little printed posters stuck up in the streets that assert, 'God is great', we cannot feel that we have no part in it. There is an obvious Catholic parallel in Eastern Europe. Surely we must add to our knowledge of what separates human beings an understanding of what unites us?

Yours sincerely,

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REVIEWS

THE CHURCHES AND THE CHURCH. A Study of Ecumenism. By Bernard Leeming, s.j. (Darton, Longman and Todd; 35s.)

Events are moving quickly in these days in regard to our attitude to our separated brethren. Pope John XXIII has made it very clear, in a number of pronouncements, that the ecumenical spirit of contact and understanding is a missionary and apostolic spirit, calculated to commend our Faith, which is the fullness of Faith, to our separated brethren.

This makes Father Leeming's new book, *The Churches and the Church*, particularly timely in its appearance. It is in fact the first of its kind in English, a fully documented handbook to Catholic Ecumenism, giving the history, growth, aims, difficulties and conflicts of the world-wide movement whose chief organ is the World Council of Churches. He treats the whole