

Tory Muslim: The Conversion of Marmaduke Pickthall

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In a series of lectures at Harvard University in April 1961, medieval historian R.W. Southern said that for much of Western history, especially during “medieval Christendom,” the “existence of Islam,” was a “problem at every level of experience” (Southern 1962:3). He elaborated upon the practical and theological challenges of Islam:

As a practical problem it called for action and for discrimination between the competing possibilities of Crusade, conversion, coexistence, and commercial interchange. As a theological problem it called persistently for some answer to the mystery of its existence: what was its providential role in history—was it a symptom of the world’s last days or a stage in the Christian development; a heresy, a schism, or a new religion; a work of man or devil; an obscene parody of Christianity, or a system of thought that deserved to be treated with respect? (1962:3)

As the twentieth century drew to a close, just prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington echoed Southern’s assessment, noting that “The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy” (Huntington 1996:209). “Each has been the other’s Other,” Huntington wrote (1996:209).

To many Western minds subconsciously imbued with what Cambridge historian H. Butterfield labeled the “Whig Interpretation of History” (Butterfield 1950)—in which history moves in sync with a Christian, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon drumbeat, progressing along a path toward greater freedom of conscience, political liberty, and capitalist economic organization — Islam has seemed to traverse through time going in the opposite direction. Both of Bernard Lewis’s recent books, *What Went Wrong?* (Lewis 2002)

and *The Crisis of Islam* (Lewis 2003) encourage this viewpoint, at least implicitly.

Western minds often view Islam not only as anti-progressive, but as inherently violent. As Yasin Dutton has written, “the claim has often been made—even if only to counter it—that Islam spread by the sword” (Dutton 1999:157-158). Frederick Denison Maurice, for example, wrote in his 1892 book, *The Religions of the World*, that “It has been proved that Mahometanism [*sic*] can only thrive while it is aiming at conquest” (Maurice 1892:28). Dutton argues that the “simplest answer” to this oversimplification is that “Islam spread not so much *by* the sword as *with*, that is, alongside the sword” (Dutton 1999: 158). Similarly, Nehemia Levtzion has observed that although “military conquest did not in itself bring about conversion to Islam,” it paved the way for the “colonization of the conquered lands by nomads and the evolution of a Muslim government and Islamic institutions” (Levtzion 1979:7).

Regardless of how one describes the usual macro-pattern of the conversion of entire cultures to Islam, conversion can also be an individualist micro-phenomenon. Novelist Marmaduke Pickthall’s conversion from Anglican Christianity to Islam in London in 1917 defies any facile generalizations. His friend and biographer Anne Fremantle wrote in her 1938 book, *Loyal Enemy*, that Pickthall “did not become a Muslim until the behavior of Christian Europe forced him to it” (Fremantle 1938:102). If there was a sword involved in Pickthall’s Islamic conversion, it was not wielded by any stereotypical marauding “Muhammadan,” but by what he considered to be the mistaken behavior of his beloved British Empire.

A pivotal turning point in Pickthall’s life took place on November 29, 1917, when he was thirty-two, at a gathering of the Muslim Literary Society at London’s Muslim House. Pickthall—the classmate of Winston Churchill at Harrow, the son and grandson of English clergymen, the step-brother of two Anglican nuns in South Africa, and the author of fourteen popular novels and hundreds of articles and essays—stepped to the podium and delivered an *apologia* for his conversion in the form of a lecture entitled, “Islam and Modernism” (Pickthall 1918a:5-11). This address concisely states many themes that he had expressed in the past and would repeat in the future, encompassing his critique and rejection of Christianity, his embrace of Islam, and his call for Muslims to live according to the Islamic ideal. It reflects his own interior intellectualized approach to his new faith, and hints at the external socio-political factors that led him to spurn the faith of his fathers.

After some initial pleasantries Pickthall begins his lecture by defining modernism as “the attempt within the various religious bodies of recent years to criticize their doctrines in the light of modern scientific thought, and yet present the semblance of belief” (1918a:5). He asserts that “many Christians” have “discarded literal belief in the Bible, and even will admit in private talk a doubt of Jesus Christ’s existence. And yet, he notes, they obey the Church’s rules, accept its dogmas, and profess belief in Christianity in some peculiar, esoteric sense.” “[M]odernistic Jew[s]” have also discarded ancient beliefs “while still venerating the *atmosphere* of Judaism(1918a:5 *Italics mine*).”

Pickthall suggests that some of these modernist Christians might well ask an agnostic: “Why do you leave us? It is possible to doubt and yet believe” (1918a:5). He notes that this “strange theory” of doubting doctrine while clinging religious ambiance is widespread and “comfortable” because it enables its adherents “to tolerate all kinds of new developments.” For Pickthall, “The hope of Christian Europe” is not this sort of half-hearted doubter, but “the honest doubter, the real seeker after truth, and not the man or woman who thus drugs his conscience.” The “theoretical” good which results from this hope in honest doubt is free thought. But he says, “the evil comes from the lack of a religious, guiding and controlling principle.” He critiques the way such a lack of clear principles has influenced the way the Church in the West has used and viewed power in the past and in the present:

The Christian Churches have lost all control; you can see that. And when they had control, they were renowned for their intolerance and selfish greed. Europe claims to control the destinies of all the world, yet is itself without control (1918a:5).

Pickthall then declares that Europe is in this sorry state “For lack of a thinking head, for lack of a religion which a modern man of reason can believe, for lack of a belief in the Sovereign of the Universe to whose judgment we have all to bow” (1918a:5).

The religion that people need, Pickthall says, unsurprisingly, is Islam, which is, and has been the “one true religion, just as there is, and always has been only one true God.” Other religions “are fantasies of men who went astray.” He then repeats the Muslim perspective that Islam recapitulates and reprimatinizes the true essence of Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism:

It is the religion of Abraham and Moses and Jesus—aye, and Buddha, I believe, and all those ancient teachers whose followers now worship idols. It is the religion of Muhammad—El Islam. Allah is the God not of a particular nation, as the Jews believed, nor of mankind only, as many other religious people seem to believe; He is the God of all creation, of all life (1918a:5, 6).

Pickthall then recited from memory passages from the Qur-án that supported his point.

The report about his speech in the *Islamic Review* said that the large audience, “consisting chiefly of Indian Muslim Students,” listened to Pickthall in “rapt silence” (*Islamic Review* 1918:3,4). The review noted that Pickthall’s “intonation of suitable verses from Holy Qur-án in the original text to illustrate the beauties of Islam, with which he frequently punctuated his most learned discourse, threw those who were not used to listening to such recitations from a Western’s lips into ecstasies” (1918a:4).

Princeton University’s Oriental History professor Philip K. Hitti wrote in his 1943 book, *The Arabs: A Short History*, that Christianity never “caught hold of the Arab imagination” — perhaps because many Arabs viewed the languages of the Christian sacred texts to be ineloquent (Hitti 1996:25-27). “The beauty of man,” Hitti quotes an Arabic adage, “lies in the eloquence of his tongue” (1996:26). Hitti suggests that “[t]he triumph of Islam was to a certain extent the triumph of a language, more particularly a book,” whose aesthetic and “miraculous character” provided Muslims the “strongest argument in favor of the genuineness of their faith” (1996:27). The linguistic beauty of the Qur-án—which Pickthall would later translate—was certainly an attraction for him, a linguistic prodigy who was fluent in English, French, Arabic, Latin, and Turkish, and who had studied Italian, German, and Spanish.

His quotations from the Qur-án in this address often seem to be celebrating the aesthetic, poetic beauty of these scriptures as much as the truth of the propositions that his references are intended to support. For example, after quoting the verse: “There is not an animal upon the earth, nor a creature flying with wings, but is a people like unto you. We have neglected nothing in the Book (of our decrees). Eventually to their Lord they will be gathered,” Pickthall remarks: “Compare that text with the words of the Gospel concerning the price of sparrows, and tell me which is nearer to the truth revealed by modern science” (Pickthall 1918a:6). He continues: “upon every page of the Qur-án the Muslim is adjured to study the phenomena and laws of nature, as the signs of God and proofs of His existence.”

Pickthall then reiterates his theme that Islam has no dichotomy between nature and faith: “Now there are many people here in England who will tell you: ‘We believe in the God of nature, not the Church’s God.’ In El-Islam there is no such distinction to distract men’s minds” (Pickthall 1918a:6). He recounts the resilient beauty of nature: “How benevolent, how sweet, appears the natural order, with all its incidents, including death, compared with the unholy din and bloodshed raging out in Flanders—God’s providence compared to that of men.” Yet, even as World War I continues, “grass will grow again upon the battlefields, and wild flowers bloom upon the craters formed by bursting shells.” Man’s brutality cannot change God’s laws. He avers that people who say they believe in the God of nature actually make nature God, without seeing evidence “of the mighty Lord of Heaven and Earth, the Creator, Guide, and Judge of all.” “They would deny that God bears any intimate relation to each human soul,” he says (Pickthall 1918a:7).

Pickthall says that Islam makes clear the connection between nature, experience, and faith: “[I]t seems to me that although men are astray, and have been taught to set up sacraments or fetishes or idols between them and God, yet when they do lift up their hearts above these things in sincere worship, and do good works, the Lord of Heaven and Earth befriends them.” Islam “enables us” to “detect” “false religious enthusiasm” and provides rules “to keep man’s reason clear and healthy[.]” Things that obscure reason should be avoided, such as “music, incense, pictures, statues” which “are not to be regarded as a true approach to God.” He celebrates Muhammad’s enduring message:

Our Prophet (may God bless him!) did not found a new religion; he recalled men to the truth. And the truth in El-Islam remains unchanged until this day, exactly as he established it. The service in that glorious cathedral the Suleymanieh at Stamboul”—[referring to Istanbul’s immense Mosque of Sultan Suleyman]—“is exactly as it was in the little enclosure at Yathrib where the Prophet preached, leaning against a palm tree (Pickthall 1918a:8).¹

¹ See, *Istanbul* (2001), 77. “The interior is truly overwhelming in the grandeur of its proportions, the austerity of its aspect, the absence of any excessive ornamentation. Almost square, it is dominated by an enormous dome on a drum, 53 meters high. One hundred and thirty-eight windows flood the hall with variegated light” illuminating “white-ground ceramic tiles with flowers and leaves in turquoise, blue, and red.”

Pickthall then expresses the climactic central thesis of his address:

The aim of modernism in religion, if it is to be of any use, should be to reduce religion to the simple truth—I mean a creed which still can stand the test of man's experience; and any man who does that earnestly, and in a spirit of devotion, will certainly become a Muslim though he may not know it.

But Pickthall does not end with this grand crescendo of praise for Islam. He now turns his attention to its reform. The London *Times Literary Supplement's* review of Anne Fremantle's biography of Pickthall—which went through three printings, suggests that she overstated her regard for her friend, and almost adopted father, by comparing Pickthall to the Protestant Reformers.² She wrote, for example, that “When the history of the Reformation of the Mohammedan world comes to be written, Marmaduke Pickthall will be its Morning Star, for that reformation is as without barriers of race as the one whose leaders were John Knox from Scotland, Calvin of Geneva, Huss of Bohemia, and the German Luther” (Fremantle 1938:370). Fremantle may have been, in fact, mirroring Pickthall's own self-image as a reformer of Islam.³ So, at this point in his address, he artfully shifts his discussion, stating, “The next thing which I have to say is not so pleasant” (Pickthall 1918a:8).

He remonstrates his Muslim audience: “We need a fair example of Islam in practice in a modern setting.” He recognizes the current “anxious time,” but states confidently, “no earthly power can rob us of the chance of setting an example of Islamic conduct, personally and collectively, in daily life.” Much of the rest of his talk suggests that Muslims have not been behaving properly. He says:

² “Biographical: Marmaduke Pickthall.” Review of *Loyal Enemy* by Anne Fremantle, *Times Literary Supplement* 7 January 1939, 6.

³ Pickthall actually asserts in a 1919 article in the *Islamic Review* challenging an English movement “in favour of the re-conversion of St. Sophia at Constantinople from a mosque to a church” that both the European Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation were traceable to Islam's influence. (Pickthall 1919b:123). He states: “But the influence of Islam traceable in the Renaissance as well as in the Reformation did help to liberate the thought of Europe from its stupefying bondage to ecclesiasticism” (1919b:126).

And shall I tell you what, in my opinion, is a leading cause among the causes of the kind of lethargy which fell upon Islamic peoples for so many years? Islam makes people happy. The triumph of Islam in any country means the happiness of the majority. And in happiness the Muslims gave up striving to a great extent. And so the discontented and unhappy peoples overreached them. They forgot the words of the Qur-án: “Verily with difficulty there is ease. And when thou art relieved, still strive and seek to please your Lord (Pickthall 1918a:9)”

He urges his listeners to make the “Muslim brotherhood” the “kingdom of God on earth.” He urged them to live according to Islamic law:

The law which is contained in the Qur-án and the teaching of the Prophet is *the* moral law—you cannot get behind it or beyond—the only law to be obeyed by men of every clime who in seeking human happiness and human progress would draw near to God; in which the duty towards God and the duty towards the neighbor, the two aspects of religion, are completely harmonized. This has been admitted, not by Muslims only, but by Christians and Jews also, who have studied it (Pickthall 1918a:9).

At this point he condemns Muslims who have too much concern with the letter of the law and not the spirit. Their intellectual laziness leads them to accept “verdicts of some Sheykh-úl-Islam or Muhtahid” (Pickthall 1918a:10). They substitute thinking in favor of charms and talisman “rather than an inspiration and a light to the intelligence.” “But, thank God, I have also seen the change beginning, and that is why I am so full of hope in these dark days” (Pickthall 1918a:10).

He attributes the problems Muslims face to this “decay of education,” “That spirit of contented brooding on the letter of the law is to some extent the cause of all our present troubles, which are truly of a nature to disturb the minds of Muslims.” No wonder “superficial thinkers,” upon seeing “so-called Christendom[s]” material success, end up being “influenced by its standards” so that they come to believe that the “Islamic dispensation is old-fashioned and unequal to the burden of these days” (1918a:10).

“But look a little deeper,” he urges, and “you will see that the law of El-Islam is acknowledged as the only moral law which makes for progress, by the admissions of its very enemies.” He suggests that “boiling underneath the surface here in Europe” are the results from the failure to abide by Islamic law: labor unrest and widespread divorce. Moreover, he declares that

these ills are spreading “because the present order of society is based on usury” (1918a:10).⁴ He applauds alcohol prohibition campaigns, which, in the United States, culminated in the U.S. Constitution’s Eighteenth Amendment, ratified in 1919.⁵ He says sarcastically, “They are the very latest thing in Christian progress!” (Pickthall 1918a:10). He notes the “small and timorous” beginnings of international law in order “to fix some limits for the cruelty of Christian warfare.” “Are these in fact a tribute to the sacred law?” he asks, “And what could have saved this so-called Christian civilization from disaster?” He proclaims, “Islam is able to assume the burden of these days, and no other religion is able.”

Pickthall concludes his lecture with a call for Muslims to live according to Islamic law so that their example will convert others. He praises the strict discipline that builds the Muslim brotherhood: “The ablutions, the hours of prayer, the fast of Ramadan, the pilgrimage—have any of them any value in themselves, or towards God?” (Pickthall 1918a:11). “By them our minds and souls are brought into a fit condition to receive spiritual blessings,” he writes. Such discipline is what would most appeal to “the best type of European.” He then recounts the story he had heard about German and Russian soldiers, “soldiers on both sides,” who were “converted to Islam by the example of their Muslim comrades.” He concludes:

Could anybody be converted by the kind of Muslim who neglects his duty, and makes out his religion to be something very like the religion of any one else? Islam, though Muslims were to lose temporal power, could still conquer the world by high example. Let that be our Jihad. And it is true Jihad; for did not the Prophet say: ‘The greatest

⁴ Max Weber discusses the relationship between a religious group’s acceptance of usury and the “attitude of religious ethics toward the imperatives of rational profitmaking” in his massive “Sociology of Religion” almost as a religious rationality index. See, Weber 1978:584, 585-589. Ernst Troeltsch, Weber’s University of Heidelberg colleague and friend, similarly includes a discussion of various Christian religious groups’ attitudes toward usury, culminating in its acceptance in Calvinist Ascetic Protestantism. See, Ernst Troeltsch 1992: I: 250, 320, II: 556, 643. Protestant Reformer John Calvin was the first Christian theologian to allow the charging of interest for loans, thereby casting aside the anti-usury prohibitions of Luther, Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, and parts of the Old and New Testaments. Cf. Nelson 1949, Schulze 1985.

⁵The U.S. Constitution’s Eighteenth amendment was repealed by the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933.

Jehad is that for the conquest of self? It is not an impossible task. It is not a task beyond the strength of common men; for the demands of the religious law are purely reasonable (1918a:11).

At the speech's end, the spellbound audience listened to Pickthall recite the Qur-án, in Arabic, of course. "With his hands folded on his breast, and an expression of serene contentment on his face, he recited that famous prayer which concludes the second chapter of the Holy Qur-án. When he sat down, every one of his hearers felt that they had lived through, during that one short hour, the most remarkable period of his or her life" (*Islamic Review* 1918: 4). He soon "took on the name Muhammad and immediately became one of the pillars of the British Islamic community" (Clark 1986:39).

Presumably the readers of the *Islamic Review* knew "that famous prayer which concludes the second chapter of the Holy Qur-án." The context of the address as a public statement of Pickthall's conversion to Islam might suggest that he might have then performed what scholar of Islam J. Dudley Woodberry describes as the "indispensable action of conversion," a confession of faith in the words: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God." This summary of Islamic faith is known as the "*shahada* (witness)" (Woodberry 1992:22, 23). As Woodberry notes, the *shahada* did not develop into its "liturgical form" until later in an early biography of Muhammad written in the eighth century, C.E. (1992:25). Yet, there are elements of the *shahada* throughout the Qur-án, "e.g., 2:255/256; 27:26, 28:88; 7:158/157." If Pickthall did not pray the *shahada*, which biographer Peter Clark implies (Clark 1996:39), the English convert's closing prayer may have been the words which do literally end "Surah 2": "Our Lord! Condemn us not if we forget, or *miss the mark!* Our Lord! Lay not on us such a burden as You did lay on those before us! Our Lord! Impose not on us that which we have not the strength to bear! Pardon us; absolve us and have mercy upon us. You are our Protector; grant us victory over the disbelieving folk" (Pickthall 1999:43). This Surah's implicit theme of praying to *hit the mark* as Muslims did in the past is consistent with the Pickthall's admonishment that Muslims should, by their own example, "once more take the lead in human progress (Pickthall 1918a:8)."

Pickthall's conversion to Islam in November 1917 ended an emotional and spiritual crisis that he had been experiencing for several years (Clark 1986:42). He attended his last Anglican service in 1914. During a service in his Sussex parish, he became angry when the congregation began singing

Charles Wesley's hymn "For the Mahometans." The text of this hymn is as follows:

The smoke of the infernal cave,
Which half the Christian world o'erspread,
Disperse, Thou heavenly Light, and save
The souls by that Impostor led,
That Arab-chief, as Satan bold,
Who quite destroy'd Thy Asian fold.
O might the blood of sprinkling cry
For those who spurn the sprinkled blood!

Assert Thy glorious Deity,
Stretch out Thine arm, Thou Triune God!
The Unitarian fiend expel,
And chase his doctrine back to hell (Manning 1942:17).

Bernard L. Manning, "Fellow and Bursar of Jesus College, Cambridge," wrote in his book, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, that Wesley "has given a vivid and a true picture of the devastation wrought in the Christian East by Islam" (1942:17). Pickthall obviously did not agree with Manning. When the music began, Pickthall "slipped quietly from the Church and from Christianity" (Fremantle 1938:227).

Fremantle writes that when Pickthall heard the preacher in the Sussex church refer to Bulgaria's advance against Turkey in the early stages of World War I as the advance of "Christian souls" over the "Turks as Satan," an opposite perspective was evoked in his mind: "Remembering turbans set low to cover scars where ears had been, the full horror of the Carnegie Commission's report on Muslim areas devastated and their populations destroyed entirely by Christian men, Marmaduke felt unable to rise when Wesley's hymn was sung" (1938:227). This divergence between Pickthall's own thinking and prevailing English attitudes toward both Islam and the Ottoman Turkish Empire had evolved ever since his first visit to the Middle East following his time at Harrow over two decades earlier.

Pickthall's father died when he was six years old in 1881. At this time, his mother and brother moved from the idyllic country parish of Suffolk to Kensington in London. During his youth he was precocious in arithmetic and languages at his day school in Kensington, but he also went through

periods of distress, including bouts with bronchitis and a “nervous breakdown” (Clark 1986:8-9). After a “brain fever” at age eight, he lost his mathematical skills (1986:8-9). He later returned to Suffolk, where his father’s successor, the Rev. Beaufoy James Saint Patrick “gave him lessons in the classics and inspired an interest in astronomy and wild flowers” (1986:9). In January 1889 he entered Harrow as a day student, where he spent six terms. He was very shy. His 1919 book, *Sir Limidus*, chronicles his difficult life at the school. In 1890, his mother took him to Neuchatel, Switzerland, where he studied French; and Florence, Italy, where he studied Italian. In 1892, Pickthall became a boarder at St. Catherine’s school in Broxbourne, where he set his sights on the Consular Service in Turkey. When he applied to the Foreign Service position, his test scores in Latin and four modern languages were the highest in his applicant group, but because of his poor performance on the arithmetic section of the qualifications exam, he came in seventh.

He later wrote, “I was in despair. All my hopes for months had been turned towards sunny countries and old civilizations, and from the drab monotone of London fog, which seemed a nightmare. . . . I dreamed of Eastern sunshine, palm trees, camels, desert sand, as of a Paradise, which I had lost by my shortcomings” (Muriel Pickthall 1937:138). His mother, sensing her son’s depressed state, came up with a solution. She suggested to him that he either could return to Harrow with the goal of heading to Oxford like his brother, or he could accompany a relative of her first husband, the Rev. Thomas Dawson, to Jerusalem, where Dawson was to become a chaplain to Bishop G. F. P. Blythe, the fourth Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. He took the travel option. His family justified the expense on the grounds that through it he “might eventually find some backstairs way into the service of the Foreign Office.” He wrote in his introduction to his 1918 book, *Oriental Encounters*, that upon his arrival in Egypt, his first destination, England and the Foreign Service lost its lustre: “For then the European ceased to interest me, appearing somehow inappropriate and false in those surroundings (Pickthall 1918b:2).”

Pickthall’s subsequent adventures in the Middle East are fascinating. They make up the stimulating content of his many books. Accompanied by a friend he met on the ship named *Sulayman*, he ended up traveling throughout the region “following the customs of the people of the land in all respects.” An English chaplain, James E. Hanauer, (whose 1907 book, *Folk-Lore of the Holy Land: Moslem, Christian, and Jewish*, Pickthall edited) taught Pickthall Arabic. Pickthall also befriended another native, an Ottoman soldier named Rashid, “who persuaded Pickthall to buy him out of the army and allow him

to be his servant (Clark 1986:11).” They traveled around Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria for eighteen months.

During his travels Pickthall frequented coffee shops and Turkish baths, and got to know native people, often living with them in their houses. He thus “acquired the vernacular without an effort, in the manner of amusement” (Muriel Pickthall 1937:138). Something unexpected struck him during these adventures — a surprise to which he alluded in his November 1917 London speech on “Islam and Modernism.” He later wrote: “I was amazed at the immense relief I found in such a life. In all my previous years I had not seen any happy people. These were happy people” (Muriel Pickthall 1937:139).

Peter Clark writes that for Pickthall, “It was the European with straw-coloured hair, red face, pith helmet and loud laugh who was out of place” (Clark 1986: 12). This contrast was evident when Pickthall visited Bishop Blythe in Jerusalem. Fremantle writes that “To Bishop Blythe, who had been expecting a Harrow schoolboy, Marmaduke, dressed in Arab clothes and cheerfully chatting in Arabic to the Palace servants, came as rather a shock” (Fremantle 1938: 58). Visiting Christians in Jerusalem, Pickthall “was shocked by the narrowness of Christianity” (1938: 59). As he witnessed the conflicts in the Holy City between “Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Orthodox, and Uniate,” Pickthall recalled the statement of Roman Emperor Julian—decried in history as “Julian the Apostate” (Cochrane 1957:261-291), “See how these Christians love one another” (Fremantle 1938:59).

As Pickthall grew in his love for Arab people, increased his knowledge of Arabic, and witnessed the snobbery and sect rivalries of Christians in the region, he developed a greater respect for Islam. Muhammad’s statement that “Difference of opinion in my community is a manifestation of divine mercy” and “Let there be no compulsion in religion” contrasted with what he discovered among Christ’s purported followers in Jerusalem” (1938:59). Fremantle states:

It was Christianity, that had driven so many of his contemporaries into the arid wilderness of Darwinian skepticism or Spencerian atheism, which finally led him to Islam. Partly his youth revolted against

⁶ Fremantle, of course, is referring to Charles Darwin’s controversial books *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) and Social Darwinist philosopher Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statics* (1851) and *Principles of Ethics* (1877). (See Cross 1997:451, 1528).

the prune-like consistency of mind of the good Bishop's satellites, but mostly his overwhelming sense of reality refused, in this holiest of all cities, either to limit the means of Grace or to arrogate to any one community the ownership of the places where that Grace had manifested itself most clearly (1938:60).⁶

In Damascus, the ancient Syrian city on the road to which the Apostle Paul, according to Acts 9, encountered Jesus Christ and converted from being a zealous Jewish persecutor of the early Church to being an eloquent spokesman for Christianity, Pickthall seriously considered converting to Islam. Increasing his mastery of Arabic, he grew to love the Qur-án, "the greatest poem, the most superb achievement of all Arabic literature (Fremantle 1938: 77)." While studying Arabic from Sheykh-ul-Ulema of Damascus' great mosque, Pickthall mentioned his desire to become a Muslim. The teacher, "a noble and benign man," reminded him that he should consult with his mother. As Pickthall later wrote:

"No, my son," were his words, "wait until you are older, and have seen again your native land. You are alone among us as our boys are alone among the Christians. God knows how I should feel if any Christian teacher dealt with a son of mine otherwise than as I now deal with you." Then, pointing to a candle burning near, he said: "Observe this fire. There is a shapely flame, the light that shines around us, and when I put my hand out, there is the heat as well. I blow, and all is gone. How many things? You answer three in one, I answer one. We both are right." (Fremantle 1938:81, 82).

The teacher's reference to the candle both implied the possibility of losing a religious flame that was hastily embraced and, perhaps, sought as well to allude to the Islamic rejection of the Christian Trinity. Pickthall recalled that if he had converted to Islam at that time he "would pretty certainly have repented it" because he "had not thought and learnt enough about religion to be certain of his faith." He recounted, "It was only the romance and pageant of the East which then attracted" him.

Pickthall considered buying property and settling in Beirut, but was blocked by the British consul General who, along with other British expatriates, had "supercilious scorn" towards him (Clark 1986:11). He soon fell ill with typhoid and was summoned home by his mother. Clark summarizes his time away from Britain in the Middle East: "The two years away determined the course of Pickthall's life. He left England a depressed boy, burdened with

a sense of failure. He returned a man, not confident but buoyant and with a distinct identity(1986: 11).”

Back in England, he recalled his adventures in his book *Saïd the Fisherman*, which became a great success, eliciting praise from H. G. Wells, among others. He also married an old sweetheart, Murial Smith, in an Anglican Church. For the next few years they would move around, living in Switzerland, Suffolk, and London, but his heart was in the Middle East. In 1904, he was invited by Lord Cromer, British pro-Consul in Egypt, to go to Egypt to explain “Egyptian psychology” to him. This invitation resulted from Pickthall’s widespread reputation for understanding the region. Indeed, as E. M. Forster wrote in 1921, Pickthall “is the only contemporary English novelist who understands the Nearer East” (Clark 1986:1). His 1908 book, *The Children of the Nile*, and his 1913 book, *Veiled Women*, resulted from “this Egyptian experience.” In 1908 he returned to Egypt, this time accompanied by Murial. He retraced his earlier steps through the region from Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem with his bride. In Jerusalem, they visited his friend *Sulayman*, who was nearly blind.

The next step in Pickthall’s path toward Islam was his trip to Turkey in 1913. Sociologist Robert Hefner’s observation that “in our efforts to understand conversion, we have to pay as much attention to the moral and political consequences of membership in a community as we do to its intellectualist doctrines” (Hefner 1993:121), illuminates the next step of Pickthall’s pilgrimage away from Christianity. Hefner’s study of “Christian Conversion in Muslim Java” begins with the statement, “Politics has always deeply affected Christian proselytization in Muslim Java” (1993:99). Expanding upon this theme that correlates the phenomena of religious conversion to the political environment, Hefner compares the origins of Christianity and Islam, noting, “Christianity originated at the margins of empire, indeed, originally at the margins of Judaism; Islam arose at the heart of an expansionist imperium” (1993:32). Hefner is referring to the fact that “Muhammad was,” as Bernard Lewis says, “so to speak his own Constantine” whose religious movement was initially combined with political power (Lewis 2002:98-99).⁷ The political milieu surrounding Pickthall’s conversion placed him squarely in the tensions between the political policies of an as-

⁷ Lewis additionally states that “In the religiously conceived polity that [Muhammad] founded and headed in Medina, the Prophet and his successors confronted the realities of the state and, before very long, of a vast and expanding empire” (2002:98-9).

endant imperialist Christian Empire—Britain, and a tottering Muslim Empire, the Ottoman Turks.

Like many high Church Anglicans, Pickthall was raised as a Tory, Britain's conservative party. English journalist Clifford Longley writes in his 2002 book, *Chosen People: The Big Idea that Shapes England and America*, that in English history, "it was the fate of the Tories (the American phrase Manifest Destiny captures the flavor of it) through two centuries to be the natural party of throne and altar" (Longley 2002:50). Pickthall recalled before his death, "Among the things I was brought up to admire was [Tory Prime Minister] Disraeli's Oriental policy by which England was to become the mentor to the Islamic world, to foster and assist its revival, using Turkey as interpreter and intermediary" (Clark 1986: 20). Says Clark, "A mutual sympathy between the Young Turks and Britain was a natural consequence, especially as the [1878] Treaty of Berlin, signed by Disraeli, was supposed to uphold Turkish territorial integrity" (1986: 20).

As Niall Ferguson details in his 2002 book, *Empire*, opposition Liberal Party leader William E. Gladstone "objected violently to Disraeli's foreign policy in the Near East" (Ferguson 2002:232-233). Gladstone criticized the government's involvement in the financing of the Suez Canal and "also accused Disraeli of turning a blind eye to Turkish atrocities against Christian communities in Bulgaria." Once in power himself, "Gladstone executed one of the great U-turns of Victorian foreign policy," and increasingly sided Britain with its former Crimean War adversary, Russia, in opposition to Turkey, its Crimean War ally. This change in policy adjusted European alignments as World War I approached, with disastrous consequences for the Ottoman Turks. Quoting Pickthall, Clark writes:

Under the influence of Gladstone, Britain repudiated [Disraeli's] policy, to the distress of Turks themselves. When this Anglo-Islamic policy foundered, when "England threw Disraeli's scheme with the old policy aside, it was at once picked up by Germany." Turks "only turned to Germany . . . after England failed them" (Clark 1986:29).

⁸ Besides Ferguson's volume, many other books detail the global plate tectonics of this era. See Howard 1998:3-9, 91-102; Freely 1998:281-98; Tuchman 1984:261 (In Gladstone's pamphlet "Bulgarian Horrors," he said that the Turk "was 'the one great anti-human specimen of humanity,' who had blackened Europe with his 'fell Satanic orgies, his ferocious passions, his daily gross and incurable misgovernment.'")

The power politics that took place between the various European powers and the Ottoman Empire in this era are intriguing and complex.⁸ Fremantle titled her biography of Pickthall *Loyal Enemy* because of his vigorous opposition to English Turkish policy.

Although he worshipped in the Crimean Memorial Church in Istanbul during his Turkish visit in 1913, he was increasingly upset by the hypocrisy of Christians. He found Western Christians in the Middle East to be “snobbish and sectarian” (Clark 1986: 36). He was troubled by the way native Christians would gain leverage over local Muslims by appealing to Western Christian powers.⁹ He was also troubled by the way European powers used “factitious feeling[s] of Christian brotherhood” (Clark 1986: 29) as ploys in their practice of *realpolitik*.¹⁰ After his death, the journal *Islamic Culture* republished excerpts of his “Letters from Turkey,” and editorialized that this sojourn became “the turning point of his life” (Pickthall 1937: 419-432). Meeting with Turks of all classes, Pickthall wrote to his wife that there is something “extraordinarily sweet and gentle” about the Turks that differs from the way they are portrayed in England: “I am quite sure that you will fall in love with the whole race” (1937:427). In contrast, the Christians fought one another. He writes that there was:

... a glorious row in the Greek Church at Pera on Good Friday; four different factions fighting which was to carry the big Cross, and the Bishop hitting out right and left upon their craniums with his crosier; many people wounded, women in fits. The Turkish mounted police had to come in force to stop further bloodshed” (1937:432).

⁹ Pickthall brilliantly, amusingly, and tragically captures this interplay between native Christians in Islamic lands, Western political powers, and naïve Western Christians, especially missionaries, all in relation to Muslims, in his 1916 novel, *The House of War*. He asserts in his preface that the term “House of War” formerly meant Christians who declined to embrace Islam when they were conquered by Muslims. “But the Christians of the Turkish Empire have now, for several generations, become a House of War in a much wider sense, a development to which the European missionaries, who come and go, have, often inadvertently, contributed,” he says (Pickthall 1916:-5).

¹⁰In the years preceding World War I, Pickthall disliked the way the British press focused on atrocities committed by Turks and Muslims in the Balkan states but ignored similar offenses committed by Christians in these regions. Russia had manipulated these tensions to end British support for Turkey. (Clark 1986:-29)

Pickthall not only wrote scores of articles that drew upon this visit to Turkey, but he also wrote the book *With the Turk in Wartime*, published in 1914.¹¹ Because of Pickthall's reputation as "a rabid Turcophile," he was perceived as a security risk, which "prevented him from being offered a job with the [English Government's] Arab Bureau in Cairo, a job that went instead to T.E. Lawrence"—later known as Lawrence of Arabia (Clark 1986:31). This Turkish period of Pickthall's life in which the "solidarity of Christendom" was united "against a Muslim Power," broke his heart and convinced him "that there were two kinds of Christianity: one, which would limit its benevolence to Christian peoples; the other, which regarded the world with all of its creeds and races as the theatre for Christian charity and Christian justice" (Muriel Pickthall 1937: 138). He believed that by siding against the Turks, England had cast away the "spirit of humanity and tolerance" of its Empire in favor of a fanaticism "which we blame so loudly when it appears in the more ignorant Mohammedans."

Of course, Pickthall would soon give up on the ideal of Christian charity, replacing it with the ideal of Islamic law—the *Shari'a*, the Muslim religious law or code "which was designed to determine morals, law, religious belief and ritual, marriage, sex, trade and society (Black 2001:9)." Pickthall rejected Western Civilization, too. Moreover, he argued after his 1917 conversion, in a sermon given at London's mosque, that "[t]he meek and gentle Prophet of Nazareth has no part in this dead failure of a civilization" (Pickthall 1919a:229). He asked rhetorically what Jesus has to do with "their commercial aims, their capital and interest, their crushing of the thoughtful in the race for wealth?" He declared: "On the authority of the Gospels no less than that of the Qur-án, I say that Jesus Christ himself will stand with us, the Muslims, on the Day of Judgment, against such Christians."

Islamic Review's memorial salute to Pickthall commits only one of its seven paragraphs to Pickthall's life *before* his conversion (K.S.M. 1936:298-300). In other words, Pickthall embraced his new faith wholeheartedly. He was active in London's Islamic movement, edited the *Islamic Review*, and often officiated "as Imam at the London Muslim Prayer House" as well as leading various prayer services, especially during Ramadan. In need of money and a new adventure, in 1920 he headed to India, where he served as editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*; and continued writing for London's *Islamic Review*. When the *Bombay Chronicle* was sold in 1924, the new manage-

¹¹ Clark includes a massive Marmaduke Pickthall bibliography at the end of his book, as well as succinct summaries of Pickthall's novels.

ment wanted him to take a hostile line toward Indian nationalist Mahatma Gandhi. He refused and resigned. He was then hired by the Nizam, the Muslim ruling family of Hyderabad, where he worked for the government and was appointed Principal of the Chadarghat High School for Boys.

While in Hyderabad, Pickthall also edited *Islamic Culture*, under Nizam patronage. With the Nizam's permission, in 1928 he took a leave of absence and began working on the project that would secure his place in the annals of English literature: he translated the Qur-án into English.¹² The *Times Literary Supplement's* review of the volume suggested that it should be called "something like the 'authorized' English version" and declared: "The whole is a fine literary achievement, a labour of love on behalf of the creed of the author's choice and adoption" (*Times Literary Supplement* 1931:202).

Pickthall retired from the Nizam's service in 1935 and returned with his wife to England. He had plans to write a novel on the Spanish Islamic period and, "above all," take a pilgrimage to Mecca (Clark 1986:68). On May 19, 1936, Pickthall died. The previous evening, according to his widow, he wrote down the words from the Qur-án, "Whosoever surrendereth his purpose to Allah, while doing good, his reward is with his Lord: and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve" (Muriel Pickthall 1937:142). The London *Times* praised Pickthall's style of writing that could "command irony and laughter" (*Times* 1936:18). "The consequence was that his books were to be enjoyed by the fair-minded in camps far different from that of the author." The obituary also noted that in a recent London lecture, he advocated a pro-Islamic policy for England. He "wished that England might again become the mentor and protector of Islam."¹³

¹² Because according to Muslim tradition, the Qur-án cannot be "translated" from Arabic, Pickthall's English translation was given the title "The Meaning of the Glorious Qur-án" and was published in New York by A.A. Knopf in 1930. His edition contained several innovations over earlier English translations. For example, instead of "Islam" and "Muslim," he translated them as "surrender" or 'submission,' 'those who surrender' or 'submit' (i.e. to Allah)." (Clark 1986:66). He also included many explanatory, critical, and historical notes. In 1953, the edition was issued as a paperback by the New American Library in New York. (Clark 1986:66).

¹³ When Pickthall lived in Bombay, he lived in the house in which novelist Rudyard Kipling was born. (Clark 1986:59). Although Pickthall revered and embraced the Islamic world, this statement in his obituary suggests that he retained a similar air of Victorian-era condescension toward non-Westerners that Kipling expressed in his 1899 poem "The White Man's Burden." (Kipling 1946:321-2).

As the twenty-first century proceeds under the cloud of global tension between the Islamic world and the Western world—led by the United States and Britain, but also involving internal conflicts with Germany, Russia, and France—Marmaduke Pickthall’s penetrating insights into the thinking of these same global players remain strikingly valid. Had the Ottoman Turkish Empire not been so recklessly dismantled, many tensions in the Middle East that linger today might not have occurred. For example, he thought that “if we cut off” the Turkish head of the Muslim world, “a hundred mad fanatic heads would rise instead of it, —a monster would be formed which would devour our children” (Muriel Pickthall 1937:140).

His rejection of Christianity in favor of Islam should serve as a powerful check on all forms of the Christian religion that disfigure Christianity into something grotesque, lest, to paraphrase Pickthall, they dishonor the Prophet, Priest, and King from Nazareth. Pickthall’s incredible intellect should also check the pretensions of the often-irrelevant scholasticism that exists in even the highest intellectual reaches of Protestantism, as well as in Roman Catholicism. A good place for Christians and anyone else to begin to sort out the complexities of the current Islam/West split in our contemporary world would be to read some of the many novels, articles, and speeches of Marmaduke Pickthall, not to mention his classic interpretation of Islam entitled *The Glorious Meaning of the Qur-án*. He may or may not convert us, but he will definitely sharpen our thoughts.

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