British Muslim Heritage

Marmaduke Pickthall
a brief biography

'Action is the Life of all and if thou dost not Act, thou dost Nothing.'
(Gerrard Winstanley)

Before we consider the life-story of the British Muslim and Koranic translator, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, it is as well to recall that aspect of the practice of every believer without which there are only ashes: holiness of life. In the case of Pickthall, this was a luminous, steadily progressing reality which impressed all who came into contact with him. Even his unbelieving first biographer, Anne Fremantle, opined that 'had he changed from evangelical or even from high church Anglicanism to the Roman faith, doubtless the machinery of sanctification would have by now been set to work.' He was a man of discreet charity, the extent of whose generosity was only discovered after his death. He turned down lucrative and prestigious speaking tours and the pleasures of travel in favour of his last and, in his eyes, greatest project, acting as headmaster to Muslim boys in Hyderabad. He witnessed the dismemberment of his beloved Ottoman Caliphate while rejecting bitterness and calls for violent revenge, convinced that Allah's verdict was just, and that in the circumstances of the age, Islam's victory would come through changing an unjust world from within. Above all, he was a man who constantly kept Allah and His providence in mind.

Pickthall's humility did not prevent him from taking a rightful pride in his ancestry, which he could trace back to a knight of William the Conqueror's day, Sir Roger de Poictu, from whom his odd surname derives. The family, long settled in Cumberland, came south in Dutch William's time, and Pickthall's father Charles, an Anglican parson, was appointed to a living near Woodbridge in Suffolk. Charles' wife, whom he married late in life, was Mary O'Brien, who despite her Irish name was a staunchly nonconformist daughter of Admiral Donat Henry O'Brien, a hero of the same Napoleonic war which brought Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam's grandfather fame as master of *Victory* at Trafalgar. O'Brien, immortalised by Marryat in *Masterman Ready*, passed on some of his heroic impulses to his grandson Marmaduke, who throughout his life championed a rather Shavian ideal of the saint as warrior. It may be no coincidence that Pickthall, Quilliam and, before them, Lord Byron, who all found their vocation as rebellious lovers of the East, were the grandsons of naval heroes.

Marmaduke was born in 1875, and when his father died five years later the family sold the Suffolk rectory and moved to the capital. For the little boy the trauma of the exodus from a country idyll to a cold and cheerless house in London was a deep blow to the soul, and his later delight in the freedom of traditional life in the Middle East may have owed much to that early formative transition. The claustrophobia was only made worse when he entered Harrow, whose arcane rituals and fagging system he was later to send up in his novel *Sir Limpidus*. Friends were his only consolation: perhaps his closest was Winston Churchill.

Once the sloth and bullying of Harrow were behind him he was able to indulge a growing range of youthful passions. In the Jura he acquired his lifelong love of mountaineering, and in Wales

and Ireland he learned Welsh and Gaelic. So remarkable a gift for languages impelled his teachers to put him forward for a Foreign Office vacancy; yet he failed the exam. On the rebound, as it were, he proposed to Muriel Smith, the girl who was to become his wife. She accepted, only to lose her betrothed for several years in one of the sudden picaresque changes of direction which were to mark his later life. Hoping to learn enough Arabic to earn him a consular job in Palestine, and with introductions in Jerusalem, Pickthall had sailed for Port Said. He was not yet eighteen years old.

The Orient came as a revelation. Later in life he wrote: 'When I read *The Arabian Nights* I see the daily life of Damascus, Jerusalem, Aleppo, Cairo, and the other cities as I found it in the early nineties of last century. What struck me, even in its decay and poverty, was the joyousness of that life compared with anything that I had seen in Europe. The people seemed quite independent of our cares of life, our anxious clutching after wealth, our fear of death.' He found a khoja to teach him more Arabic, and armed with a rapidly increasing fluency took ship for Jaffa, where, to the horror of European residents and missionaries, he donned native garb and disappeared into the depths of the Palestinian hinterland.

Some of his experiences in the twilight of that exotic world may be re-read in his travelogue, *Oriental Encounters*. He had found, as he explains, a world of freedom unimaginable to a public schoolboy raised on an almost idolatrous passion for The State. Most Palestinians never set eyes on a policeman, and lived for decades without engaging with government in any way. Islamic law was administered in its time-honoured fashion, by qadis who, with the exception of the Sahn and Ayasofya graduates in the cities, were local scholars. Villages chose their own headmen, or inherited them, and the same was true for the bedouin tribes. The population revered and loved the Sultan-Caliph in faraway Istanbul, but understood that it was not his place to interfere with their lives.

It was this freedom, as much as intellectual assent, which set Marmaduke on the long pilgrimage which was to lead him to Islam. He saw the Muslim world before Westernisation had contaminated the lives of the masses, and long before it had infected Muslim political thought and produced the modern vision of the Islamic State, with its 'ideology', its centralised bureaucracy, its secret police, its *Pasdaran* and its *Basij*. That totalitarian nightmare he would not have recognised as Muslim. The deep faith of the Levantine peasantry which so amazed him was sustained by the sincerity that can only come when men are free, not forced, in the practice of religion. For the state to compel compliance is to spread vice and disbelief; as the Arab proverb which he well-knew says: 'If camel-dung were to be prohibited, people would seek it out.'

Throughout his life Pickthall saw Islam as radical freedom, a freedom from the encroachments of the State as much as from the claws of the ego. It also offered freedom from narrow fanaticism and sectarian bigotry. Late Ottoman Palestine was teeming with missionaries of every Christian sect, each convinced, in those pre-ecumenical days, of its own solitary rightness. He was appalled by the hate-filled rivalry of the sects, which, he thought, should at least be united in the land holy to their faith. But Christian Jerusalem was a maze of rival shrines and liturgies, where punches were frequently thrown in churches, while the Jerusalem of Islam was gloriously united under the Dome, the physical crown of the city, and of her complex history.

1897 found him in Damascus, the silent city of lanes, hidden rose-bowers, and walnut trees. It was in this deep peacefulness, resting from his adventures, that he worked methodically through the mysteries of Arabic grammar. He read poetry and history; but seemed drawn, irresistibly, to the Holy Qur'an. Initially led to it by curiosity, he soon came to suspect that he had unearthed the end of the Englishman's eternal religious quest. The link was Thomas Traherne and Gerrard Winstanley, who, with their nature mysticism and insistence on personal freedom from an intrusive state or priesthood, had been his inspiration since his early teens. Now their words seemed to be bearing fruit.

Winstanley is an important key to understanding Pickthall's thought. His 1652 masterpiece, *Law of Freedom on a Platform*, had been the manifesto of the Digger movement, the most radical offshoot of Leveller Protestantism. In this book, which deeply shaped the soul of the young Pickthall, Winstanley outlined what was to become the essence of Christian Socialism. The Diggers believed in the holiness of labour, coming by their name when, in 1649, Winstanley and a group of friends took over a plot of waste land at Walton-on-Thames, planting corn, beans and parsnips. This gesture was, Pickthall realised in Damascus, illegal in Christendom, but was precisely the Shari'a principle of *ihya al-mawat*, gaining entitlement to land by reviving it after its 'death by neglect'. The Diggers were held together, not by cowed obedience to a religious state, but by love among themselves, fired and purified by the dignity of labour.

It soon became clear to Pickthall that their Dissenting theology, which moved far beyond Calvin in its rejection of original sin and orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, and its emphasis on knowing God through closeness to nature, was precisely the message of Islam. This was a religion for autonomous communities, self-governing under God, each free to elect its own minister.

The God of the Diggers was a god of Reason – not the mechanical dictator whom Blake was to scorn as Urizen, 'blind ignorance', but reason as illuminated by God through the practice of the virtues and communion with nature. Superstition and priestcraft were abhorred. The Reason-God was immanent in creation, which, for Winstanley, as for Traherne and the Cambridge Platonists, was a blessed sign of God's nearness. Winstanley had dipped into the Hermetic wisdom of the age, and, like the Quakers with whom we was for a time associated, absorbed something of the spirit of Islam through the Italian esoterists Ficino, Bruno, and Campanella. It was not for nothing that the first English rendering of the *Basmala* was made by an enthusiastic Quaker, George Keith, who translated it as 'In the Name of the Lord the merciful Commiserator.' Somewhat later, Robert Barclay, the greatest name in English Quaker theology, borrowed extensively from Ibn Tufayl. By all these channels Islam had enriched and uplifted English Dissent.

Another Digger theme which attracted Pickthall was their communitarian optimism. Winstanley had written: 'In Cobham on the little heath our digging there goes on, And all our friends they live in love, as if they were but one.' The brotherhood of Muslims which he observed in Syria, the respect between Sunnis and Shi'is, and their indifference to class distinctions in their places of worship, seemed to be the living realisation of the dreams of English radicals at the time of Cromwell's Commonwealth. This theme of Muslim brotherhood was to be fundamental in Pickthall's later writing and preaching. No less important was the Digger rejection of traditional

Church exclusivism. Irrespective of creed, they thought, all men were candidates for salvation. Christ's sacrifice indicated, in its orthodox understanding, a meanness unworthy of a loving God, Who can surely accept the repentance of any faithful monotheist, whether or not he had been bathed in the blood of His son.

Oddly, then, Pickthall came home in Damascus. The picaresque adventures of his days in Palestine had given way to a serious spiritual and intellectual quest. Like Henry Stubbe, another Commonwealth dissident, he saw in Islam the fulfilment of the English dream of a reasonable and just religion, free of superstition and metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, and bearing fruit in a wonderful and joyful fellowship. As the *New Statesman* put it in 1930, reviewing his Koranic translation: 'Mr Marmaduke Pickthall was always a great lover of Islam. When he became a Muslim it was regarded less as conversion than as self-discovery.'

If this was his Road to Damascus, why, then, did he hold back? Some have thought that the reason was his concern for the feelings of his aged mother, with her own Christian certainties. This was his later explanation:

> 'The man who did not become a Muslim when he was nineteen years old because he was afraid that it would break his mother's heart does not exist, I am sorry to say. The sad fact is that he was anxious to become a Muslim, forgetting all about his mother. It was his Muslim teacher – the Sheykh-ul-Ulema of the great mosque at Damascus – a noble and benign old man, to whom he one day mentioned his desire to become a Muslim, who reminded him of his duty to his mother and forbade him to profess Islam until he had consulted her. '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.' […] If he had become a Muslim at that time he would pretty certainly have repented it – quite apart from the unhappiness he would have caused his mother, which would have made him unhappy – because he had not thought and learnt enough about religion to be certain of his faith. It was only the romance and pageant of the East which then attracted him. He became a Muslim in real earnest twenty years after.'

He left Damascus, then, without Islam. But jobs were beckoning. The British Museum offered him a post on the basis of his knowledge of ancient Welsh and Irish, but he declined. He was offered the vice-consulship at the British consulate in Haifa, but this was withdrawn when it was learnt how young he was. His family, and his patient Muriel, summoned him home, and, penniless, he obeyed.

He travelled back slowly, considering the meaning of his steps. As he left the sun behind him, he seemed to leave courtesy and contentment as well. The Muslims were the happiest people on earth, never complaining even when faced with dire threats. The Christians among them were protected and privileged by the Capitulations. The Ottoman Balkans, under the sultans a place of refuge for victims of church wars, had been cruelly diminished by crusade and insurrection, prompted, in every case, from outside. He saw the Morea, the first land of Greek independence, in which a third of a million Muslims had been slaughtered by priests and peasants. The remaining corners of Ottoman Europe seemed overshadowed by a similar fate; but still the people smiled. It was the grace of *rida*.

Back in London, Pickthall recalled his romantic duties. He paced the pavement outside Muriel's home in the time-honoured way, and battered down her parents' resistance. They married in September 1896, the groom having fasted the previous day as a mark of respect for what he still considered a sacrament of the Church. Then he bore her swiftly away to Geneva, partly for the skiing, and partly, too, to associate with the literary circles which Pickthall admired.

During his sojourn in the dour Calvinist capital, Pickthall honed the skills which would make him one of the world's most distinguished exponents both of novel-writing, and of the still underdeveloped sport of skiing. He began a novel, and kept a diary, in which, despite his youth, his mature descriptive gift is already evident. He wrote of

> 'a pearly mist delicately flushed from the sunset, on lake and mountains. The twin sails of a barque and the hull itself seemed motionless, yet were surely slipping past the piers. There was something remote about the whole scene, or so it appeared to me. I was able to separate myself from the landscape: to stand back, as it were, and admire it as one admires a fine painting. I crossed a bridge: starless night on the one hand: dying day on the other. There was a mist about the city: a mist that glowed with a blue spirit light which burned everywhere or nowhere, out of which the yellow lights looked over their dancing semblance in the water watchfully, as from a citadel. The distance of the streets was inundated with stagnant grey light, from which the last warmth of light had just faded. As I penetrated the city it had no other light than that which the street lamps gave it, and the glow from a lamp-lit window here and there. But the sky was still pale and green, with a softness as of velvet. The great round globules of electric light, rising up on the bridge against illimitable space, and their lengthened reflections, caught the eye and blinded it.'

But this landscape concealed a *tristesse*, the local mood that Byron had dubbed 'Lemancholy.' By morning, a thick fog

> 'hung over the city, like a veil on the face of a plain woman, hiding blemishes and defects, softening all hardness of outline, soothing with the suggestion of a non-existent beauty. It is a law of nature, as it is of art, that half-revelation is more attractive than nakedness. Unhappily there is another law which forbids a man to rest content until he has stripped his ideal and beheld it naked. Hence the end of most men's dreams is disappointment. And this disappointment is proportionate to what the world calls success.'

By the shores of Lake Leman, then, the novelist-in-waiting acquired his love of light, which later became one of the strengths and hallmarks of his mature prose. Here, too, he developed that sense of the fragility, even the unreality, of observed nature, and the superficial nature of man's passage upon it, which enrich his novels, and increased the readiness of his heart for Islam. In all these ways, his writing mirrored the sensitivity of the paintings of his great fellow-converts, Ivan Agueli, and Etienne Dinet. Agueli's tableaux have a Sibelian sense of misty timelessless; while Dinet's exuberant Algerian and Meccan paintings recall the Muslim sense that God is present in our daily joys: the utter ubiquity of the *qibla*. Pickthall's novels, at their best, resemble a marriage of the two styles, just as he found in Islamic faith the ideal which he had sought in Christianity: a medieval liturgy combined with a low ecclesiology, the hieratic dignity of Laud invigorated by the social passions of Dissent.

On the surface, however, his religious needs seemed to be satisfied by an increasingly high Anglicanism. He frequently fasted and took communion, and insisted (to the annoyance of his chapelbound in-laws) on the truth of the Apostolic Succession. Behind this, however, his notebooks indicate a robust willingness to accept and face doubts, and even a solid cynicism about the ultimate truth of God; he wrestled with these difficulties, seeking help in the secular philosophy of the day, eventually to emerge, as al-Ghazali had done, a stronger man.

Rare is the secular soul that can produce true literature; and Pickthall's youthful agonies over faith energise the first of his writings to see print: his short stories 'Monsieur le Président' and 'The Word of an Englishman', both published in 1898. The novel he had begun in Switzerland was never published: it is simple juvenilia, a laboratory experiment that in print would have done him no good at all. Sadly, his first published novel, *All Fools*, was little better, and contained morally problematic passages which were to saddle him in later years with the reputation of a libertine. Even his mother was disturbed by the most offending passage in the book, which used the word 'stays', an unmentionable item of Victorian underwear. The Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, to whom Pickthall unwisely sent a copy, was similarly agitated, and the young novelist lost many friends. Soon he bought up the unsold copies, and had them destroyed.

But by then he had already written much of the novel that was to catapult him to fame as one of the bestselling English novelists of the day: *Said the Fisherman*. This was published by Methuen in 1903, to spectacularly favourable reviews. A blizzard of fan-mail settled on his doormat. One especially pleasant letter came from H.G. Wells, who wrote, 'I wish that I could feel as certain about my own work as I do of yours, that it will be alive and interesting people fifty years from now.' Academics such as Granville Browne heaped praises upon it for its accurate portrayal of Arab life. In later years, Pickthall acknowledged that the novel's focus on the less attractive aspects of the Arab personality which he had encountered in Palestine could never make the book popular among Arabs themselves; but even after his conversion, he insisted that the novelist's mission was not to propagandise, but to tease out every aspect of the human personality, whether good or bad. As with his great harem novel, *Veiled Women*, he was concerned to be true to his perceptions; he would document English and Oriental life as he found it, not as he or others would wish it to be. The greatness of the Oriental vision would in this way shine through all the brighter.

His next novel returned him to England. *Enid* is the first of his celebrated Suffolk tales, reminiscent in some respects of the writings of the Powys brothers. It was followed by *The House of Islam*, which he wrote while nursing his mother in her final illness, and at a time when his life was saddened by the growing realisation that he would never have children. The novel is unsteady and still immature: still only in his twenties, Pickthall could manage the comic scenes of *Said the Fisherman*, but could not fully sustain the grave, tragic theme which he chose for *The House*, which described the anguish of a Muslim compelled to take his sick daughter to a Western Christian doctor when traditional remedies had failed.

This productive but sober period of his life ended in 1907. An invitation to St James's Palace to meet the wife of Captain Machell, advisor to the Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Fahmi Pasha, began with a discussion of his books, and led to an invitation to Alexandria.

Pickthall accepted with alacrity, and soon was back in his beloved East. In native dress again, he travelled through the countryside, marvelling at the *mawlid* of al-Sayyid al-Badawi in Tanta, and immersing himself in Arab ways. The result was a series of short stories and his novel *Children of the Nile*. It also offered an opportunity to help his friend James Hanauer, the Anglican chaplain at Damascus, edit his anthology of Muslim, Christian and Jewish tales, *Folklore of the Holy Land*.

1908 brought intimations of the collapse of the old world. At first, the Young Turk revolution seemed to presage a renewed time of hope for the Empire. Pickthall welcomed the idealistic revolutionaries, imagining that they would hold the empire together better than the old Sultan, with his secretive ways. Here, perhaps, is the essence of his apparent remoteness towards Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam. Quilliam had been a confidant of Abdul Hamid, 'the Sultan's Englishman', his private advisor and his emissary on sensitive missions to the Balkans. Quilliam knew the Sultan as Pickthall never did, and must have felt that his opposition to the Young Turk movement was fully vindicated by the disasters of the Balkan War of 1912, when the Empire lost almost all her remaining European territories to vengeful Christians. More calamitous still was the Unionist decision to cast in its lot with Prussian militarism during the First World War. Pickthall, too, became anxious for Turkey, seeing that the old British policy of upholding the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which had begun even before Britain intervened on Turkey's side in the Crimean War, and had been reinforced by Disraeli's anti-Russian strategy, was steadily disintegrating in the face of Young Turk enthusiasm for Germany.

Coup and counter-coup let much gifted Osmanli blood. The Arabs and the Balkan Muslims, who had previously looked up to the Turks for political and religious leadership, began to wonder whether they should not heed the mermaid calls of the European Powers, and press for autonomy or outright independence from the Porte. Behind the agitation was, on the one hand, the traditional British fear that, in the words of Sir Mark Sykes, 'the collapse of the Ottoman Empire would be a frightful disaster to us.' On the other were ranged the powers of bloodsucking French banks, Gladstonian Christian Islamophobia, and a vicious pan-Slavism bankrolled from the darker recesses of Moscow's bureaucracy.

Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam, that undying Empire loyalist, fired off a hot broadside of polemic:

> *'List, ye Czar of "Russia's all,"*
> *Hark! The sound of Freedom's call,*
> *Chanting in triumphant staves,*
> *"Perish tyrants! Perish knaves!"'*

Like Pickthall, he knew that the integrity of the traditional free lands of Islam was threatened not by internal weakness so much as by the Russian system of government, which, as Pickthall saw, 'must have war. War is a necessity of its existence, for an era of peace would inevitably bring to pass the revolution which has long been brewing.' The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, he knew, would plunge the region into disorder for an age. He had no confidence in the ability of Arab or Balkan peoples to recreate the free and stable space which the Ottomans, at their best, had supplied, and he lamented the Foreign Office's change of heart. 'An independent Turkey,' he opined, 'was regarded by our older, better-educated statesmen as just as necessary […] as a

safety-valve is to a steam-engine: do away with it – the thing explodes.' Lawrence and his Arab allies would soon demonstrate the truth of his predictions.

Pickthall was never fully at ease with the Unionists. In later years, he must frequently have wondered whether Quilliam's insistent conservatism, now to be manifested in support for the Liberal party of Old Turks, was not the course of a wiser head. Quilliam had lived behind the scenes at Yildiz Palace, and knew Abdul Hamid as few others had done; and he had trusted, even loved the man. The Young Turks promised a new dawn for Islam, the Caliphate and the entire Muslim world; but their Turanian preoccupations were liable to alienate the very minorities that they claimed to emancipate from the *dhimma* rules. Quilliam had urged the Sultan to allow the Balkan Muslims to retain their arms; the Unionists had disarmed them; and the results were to be seen in the tragic refugee columns that escaped the religious pogroms of 1912 and 1913.

As the dismal news rolled in, it seemed as though Heaven had finally abandoned the Empire to its fate. In England, Pickthall campaigned vigorously on Turkey's behalf, but could do nothing against the new Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, who was, as Granville Browne commented, 'russophile, germanophobe, and anti-Islamic.' He wrote to a Foreign Office official demanding to know whether the new arrangements in the Balkans could be considered to further the cause of peace, and received the following reply: 'Yes, and I'll tell you why. It is not generally known. But the Muslim population has been practically wiped out – 240,000 killed in Western Thrace alone – that clears the ground.'

While campaigning for the dying Empire, Pickthall found time for more novels. *Larkmeadow*, another Suffolk tale, appeared in 1911, and in 1913 he produced one of his masterpieces, *Veiled Women*. This follows *Saïd* in its realistic, often Zola-like depiction of Middle Eastern life, but now there is an undercurrent of polemic. Edwardian imperial convictions about the evils of slavery stood little chance against the charming reality of a Cairo harem, where concubinage was an option desired earnestly by many Circassian girls, whose slave-guardians thanked God for the ease of their lot. Lord Cromer, although generally contemptuous of Egyptian ways, made an exception in the case of slavery, an institution whose Islamic expression he was able grudgingly to respect:

> 'It may be doubted (Cromer wrote) whether in the majority of cases the lot of slaves in Egypt is, in its material aspects, harder than, or even as hard as that of many domestic servants in Europe. Indeed, from one point of view, the Eastern slave is in a better position than the Western servant. The latter can be thrown out of employment at any moment. […] Cases are frequent of masters who would be glad to get rid of their slaves, but who are unable to do so because the latter will not accept the gift of liberty. A moral obligation, which is universally recognised, rests on all masters to support aged and infirm slaves till they die; this obligation is often onerous in the case of those who have inherited slaves from their parents or other relatives.' (Lord Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, New York, 1908, II, 496-7.)

In its portrayal of the positive aspects of polygamy and slavery, *Veiled Women* was calculated to shock. It was, perhaps for this reason, one of his least popular works.

During the same period Pickthall contributed to the *New Age*, the fashionable literary magazine supported by Bernard Shaw, sharing its pages, almost weekly, with Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, and G.K. Chesterton. As a literary figure, if not as a political advocate, he had arrived.

Veiled Women gave him the fare to Istanbul. Lodged with a German lady (Miss Kate, Turkicised to Misket Hanum) in a house in the quiet suburb of Erenköy, he gathered material for his dramatic but sad *With the Turk in Wartime*, and his *The Early Hours*, perhaps the greatest of his novels. He also penned a series of passionate essays, *The Black Crusade*. During this time, despite the Balkan massacres, Christians went unmolested in the great city. He recorded a familiar scene at the Orthodox church in Pera one Easter 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 crozier; many people wounded, women in fits. The Turkish mounted police had to come in force to stop further bloodshed.' It was a perfect image of the classical Ottoman self-understanding: without the Sultan-Caliph, the minorities would murder each other. The Second Balkan War, which saw the victorious Orthodox powers squabbling over the amputated limbs of Turkey, looked like a full vindication of this.

Pickthall returned to an England full of glee at the Christian victories. As a lover of Turkey, he was shattered by the mood of triumph. The Bishop of London held a service of intercession to pray for the victory of the Bulgarian army as it marched on Istanbul. Where, in all this, was Pickthall's high Anglicanism?

It was the English mood of holy war which finally drove him from the faith of his fathers. He had always felt uncomfortable with those English hymns that curse the infidel. One particular source of irritation was Bishop Cleveland Coxe's merry song:

> *'Trump of the Lord! I hear it blow!*
> *Forward the Cross; the world shall know*
> *Jehovah's arms against the foe;*
> *Down shall the cursed Crescent go!*
> *To arms! To arms!*
> *God wills it so.'*

And now, in a small Sussex village church, Pickthall heard a vicar hurling imprecations against the devilish Turk. The last straw was Charles Wesley's hymn 'For the Mahometans':

> *'O, may thy blood once sprinkled cry*
> *For those who spurn Thy sprinkled blood:*
> *Assert thy glorious Deity*
> *Stretch out thine arm thou triune God*
> *The Unitarian fiend expel*
> *And chase his doctrines back to Hell.'*

Pickthall thought of the Carnegie Report, which declared, of the Greek attack on Valona, that 'in a century of repentance they could not expiate it.' He thought of the forced conversions of the Pomaks in Bulgaria. He remembered the refugees in Istanbul, their lips removed as trophies by

Christian soldiers. He remembered that no Muslim would ever sing a hymn against Jesus. He could stand no more. He left the church before the end of the service, and never again considered himself a Christian.

The political situation continued to worsen. Horrified by the new British policy, which seemed hell-bent on plunging the Balkans and the Middle East into chaos, the Young Turks strengthened their ties with Berlin. Meanwhile, the British government, driven by the same men who had allowed the destruction of Macedonia and Thrace, marched headlong towards war with the Central Powers. In August 1914, Winston Churchill seized two Turkish dreadnoughts, the *Sultan Osman* and the *Reshadiye*, which were under construction in a British yard. The outrage in Turkey was intense. Millions of pounds had been subscribed by ordinary Turks: women had even sold their hair for a few coppers and schoolboys made do with dry bread in order to add to the fund. But the ships were gone, and with them went Pickthall's last hopes for a peaceful settlement. The hubris of nationalistic Europe, the tribal vanity which she pressed on the rest of the world as the sole path to human progress, was about to send millions of young men to their deaths. The trigger was the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist, on the streets of Sarajevo.

The war had broken Europe's ideals, and the machines of Krupp lent new efficiency to her patriotic hatreds. The Hun reached the Marne, and English dowagers strangled their dachshunds with their own hands. It was no time to be a Turcophile. But Pickthall had found a new source of strength. The pride of human autonomy had been shown a lethal fantasy; and only God could provide succour. But where could He be found?

In 1913, Lady Evelyn Cobbold, the Sutherland heiress and traveller, tried to convert him during a dinner at Claridges, explaining that the waiters would do perfectly well as witnesses. He politely demurred; but he could marshal no argument against hers. What he had seen and described, she had lived. As an English Muslim woman familiar with the heart of Asia, she knew that his love for Islam was grounded in much more than a Pierre Loti style enjoyment of exotica. And so, on 29 November 1914, during a lecture on 'Islam and Progress', he took the plunge, joining countless others of his kind. From now on, his life would be lived in the light of the One God of Islam. Muriel followed him soon afterwards.

The war ground on, and Pickthall watched as the Turks trounced the assembled British and colonial troops at Gallipoli, only to be betrayed by the Arab uprising under Lawrence. Like Evelyn Cobbold, Pickthall despised Lawrence as a shallow romantic, given to unnatural passions and wild misjudgements. As he later wrote, reviewing the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom:*

> 'He really thought the Arabs a more virile people than the Turks. He really thought them better qualified to govern. He really believed that the British Government would fulfil punctually all the promises made on its behalf. He really thought that it was love of freedom and his personal effort and example rather than the huge sums paid by the British authorities and the idea of looting Damascus, which made the Arabs zealous in rebellion.'

While Europeans bloodied each others' noses, and encouraged the same behaviour in others, Pickthall began to define his position in the British Muslim community. The Liverpool congregation had lost its mosque in 1908, and Sheikh Abdullah had gone to ground in the

Turkish town of Bostancik, to return as the mysterious Dr Henri Marcel Leon, translator of Mevlevi *ghazals* and author of a work on influenza. There was a prayer-room in Notting Hill, and an Islam Society, a Muslim Literary Society, and also the eccentric Anglo-Moghul mosque in Woking. In all these institutions Pickthall assumed the role of a natural leader. He had no patience with the Qadiani sect ('I call myself a Sunni Muslim of the Hanafi school', he said in self-definition), but when Khwaja Kamaluddin, suspected by many even then of Qadiani sympathies, returned to India in 1919, Pickthall preached the Friday sermons in Woking. 'If there is one thing that turns your hair grey, it is preaching in Arabic', he later remarked, perhaps recalling the caliph Umar II's words that 'mounting the pulpits, and fear of solecisms, have turned my hair grey.' He preached in London as well, and in due course some of his *khutbas* found their way into print, drawing the attention of others in the Muslim world. In addition, he spent a year running an Islamic Information Bureau in Palace Street, London, which issued a weekly paper, *The Muslim Outlook*.

The *Outlook* was funded by Indian Muslims loyal to the Caliphate. The Khilafatist movement represented a dire threat to British rule in India, which had previously found the Muslims to be less inclined to the independence party than the Hindus. But the government's policy was too much to bear. On January 18, 1918, Lloyd George had promised Istanbul and the Turkish-speaking areas of Thrace to post-war Turkey; but the reality turned out rather differently. Istanbul was placed under Allied occupation, and the bulk of Muslim Thrace was awarded to Greece. This latest case of Albion's perfidy intensified Indian Muslim mistrust of British rule. Gandhi, too, encouraged many Hindus to support the Khilafat movement, and few Indians participated in the Raj's official celebration of the end of the First World War. Instead, a million telegrams of complaint arrived at the Viceroy's residence.

Pickthall was now at his most passionate:

> 'Objectivity is much more common in the East than in the West; nations, like individuals, are there judged by their words, not by their own idea of their intentions or beliefs; and these inconsistencies, which no doubt look very trifling to a British politician, impress the Oriental as a foul injustice and the outcome of fanaticism. The East preserves our record, and reviews it as a whole. There is no end visible to the absurdities into which this mental deficiency of our rulers may lead us. […] Nothing is too extravagant to be believed in this connection, when flustered mediocrities are in the place of genius.'

This bitter alienation from British policy, which now placed him at the opposite pole from his erstwhile friend Churchill, opened the next chapter in Pickthall's life. Passionate Khilafatists invited him to become editor of a great Indian newspaper, the *Bombay Chronicle*, and he accepted. In September 1919 he reached the Apollo Bunder, and immediately found himself carried away in the maelstrom of Indian life and politics. When he arrived, most of the *Chronicle*'s staff were on strike; within six months he had turned it around and doubled its circulation, through a judicious but firm advocacy of Indian evolution towards independence. The Government was incandescent, but could do little. However Pickthall, who became a close associate of Gandhi, supported the ulema's rejection of violent resistance to British rule, and their opposition to the growing migration of Indian Muslims to independent Afghanistan. Non-violence and non-co-operation seemed the most promising means by which India would emerge as a strong and free nation. When the Muslim League made its appearance under the very secular

figure of Jinnah, Pickthall joined the great bulk of India's ulema in rejecting the idea of partition. India's great Muslim millions were one family, and must never be divided. Only together could they complete the millennial work of converting the whole country to Islam.

So the Englishman became an Indian nationalist leader, fluent in Urdu, and attending dawn prayers in the mosque, dressed in Gandhian homespun adorned with the purple crescent of the Khilafatists. He wrote to a friend: 'They expect me to be a sort of political leader as well as a newspaper editor. I have grown quite used to haranguing multitudes of anything from 5 to 30,000 people in the open air, although I hate it still as much as ever and inwardly am just as miserably shy.' He also continued his Friday sermons, preaching at the great mosque of Bijapur and elsewhere.

In 1924, the Raj authorities found the *Chronicle* guilty of misreporting an incident in which Indian protesters had been killed. Crushing fines were imposed on the newspaper, and Pickthall resigned. His beloved Khilafatist movement folded in the same year, following Atatürk's abolition of the ancient title. Although he effectively left political life, he was always remembered gratefully by Gandhi, who was later to write these words to his widow:

> 'Your husband and I met often enough to grow to love each other and I found Mr. Pickthall a most amiable and deeply religious man. And although he was a convert he had nothing of the fanatic in him that most converts, no matter to what faith they are converted, betray in their speech and act. Mr. Pickthall seemed to me to live his faith unobtrusively.'

His job was gone, but Pickthall's desire to serve Islam burned brighter than ever. He accepted the headmastership of a boy's school in the domains of the Nizam of Hyderabad, outside the authority of British India. This princely state boasted a long association with British Muslims, and had been many years earlier the home of one of the most colourful characters in India: William Linnaeus Gardner (1770-1835), a convert who fought in the Nizam's forces against the French in 1798 before setting up his own regiment of irregulars, Gardner's Horse, and marrying his son to a niece of the Moghul emperor Akbar Shah.

In the 1920s, Hyderabad resembled a surviving fragment of Moghul brilliance, and the Nizam, the richest man in the world, was busy turning his capital into an oasis of culture and art. The appointment of the celebrated Pickthall would add a further jewel to his crown. Pickthall's monarchist sympathies were aroused by the Nizam, who had made his lands the pride of India. 'He lives like a dervish', Pickthall reported, 'and devotes his time to every detail of the Government.' It was his enthusiasm and generosity that enabled Pickthall to launch the journal *Islamic Culture*, which he edited for ten years, and which continues to be published in the city as one of the Muslim world's leading academic journals. Under his editorship, a wide range of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars published on a huge variety of topics. A regular contributor was Josef Horowitz, the great German orientalist. Another was Henri Leon, now writing as Harun Mustafa Leon, who contributed learned articles on early Arabic poetry and rhetoric, on Abbasid medical institutions, and a piece on 'The Languages of Afghanistan.'

Pickthall also directed the school for Hyderabadi civil servants, encouraging their attendance at prayer, and teaching them the protocols to observe when moving among the burra sahibs of

British India. Prayer featured largely in all his activities: as he wrote to a friend, after attending a conference on eduction:

> 'I attended prayers at Tellycherry. The masjids are all built like Hindu temples. There are no minarets, and the azan is called from the ground, as the Wahhabis call it. When I mentioned this fact, the reforming party were much amused because the maulvis of Malabar are very far from being Wahhabis. I stopped the Conference proceedings at each hour of prayer, and everyone went to the adjacent mosque. I impressed upon the young leaders the necessity of being particularly strict in observance of the essential discipline of Islam.'

In the midst of this educational activity, he managed to find time to write. He wrote a (never to be published) Moghul novel, *Dust and the Peacock Throne*, in 1926, and the following year he composed his Madras lectures, published as *The Cultural Side of Islam*, which are still widely read in the Subcontinent. But from 1929 until 1931 the Nizam gave him leave-of-absence to enable him to complete his Koranic translation. As he noted: 'All Muslim India seems to be possessed with the idea that I ought to translate the Qur'an into real English.' He was anxious that this should be the most accurate, as well as the most literate, version of the Scripture. As well as mastering the classical Islamic sources, he travelled to Germany to consult with leading Orientalists, and studied the groundbreaking work of Nöldeke and Schwally, the *Geschichte des Qorans*, to which his notes frequently refer.

When the work was completed, Pickthall realised that it was unlikely to gain wide acceptance among Muslims unless approved by Al-Azhar, which, with the abolition of the Ottoman post of Shaykh al-Islam, had become the leading religious authority in the Muslim world. So to Egypt he went, only to discover that powerful sections of the ulema considered unlawful any attempt to render 'the meanings of the Book' into a language other than Arabic. The controversy soon broke, as Shaykh Muhammad Shakir wrote in the newspaper *Al-Ahram* that all who aided such a project would burn in Hell for evermore. The Shaykh recommended that Pickthall translate Tabari's commentary instead, a work that would amount to at least one hundred volumes in English. Other ulema demanded that his translation be retranslated into Arabic, to see if it differed from the original in any respect, however small.

Pickthall published, in *Islamic Culture*, a long account of his battle with the Shaykh and the mentality which he represented. He included this reflection:

> 'Many Egyptian Muslims were as surprised as I was at the extraordinary ignorance of present world conditions of men who claimed to be the thinking heads of the Islamic world – men who think that the Arabs are still 'the patrons,' and the non-Arabs their 'freedmen'; who cannot see that the positions have become reversed, that the Arabs are no longer the fighters and the non-Arabs the stay-at-homes but it is the non-Arabs who at present bear the brunt of the Jihâd; that the problems of the non-Arabs are not identical with those of the Arabs; that translation of the Qur'ân is for the non-Arabs a necessity, which, of course, it is not for Arabs; men who cannot conceive that there are Muslims in India as learned and devout, as capable as judgment and as careful for the safety of Islam, as any to be found in Egypt.'

The battle was won when Pickthall addressed, in Arabic, a large gathering of the ulema, including Rashid Rida, explaining the current situation of Islam in the world, and the enormous possibilities for the spread of Islam among the English-speaking people. He won the argument

entirely. The wiser heads of al-Azhar, recognising their inability to understand the situation of English speakers and the subtle urgencies of *da'wa*, accepted his translation. The former Shaykh al-Azhar, al-Maraghi, who could see his sincerity and his erudition, offered him these parting words: 'If you feel so strongly convinced that you are right, go on in God's name in the way that is clear to you, and pay no heed to what any of us say.'

The translation duly appeared, in 1930, and was hailed by the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'a great literary achievement.' Avoiding both the Jacobean archaisms of Sale, and the baroque flourishes and expansions of Yusuf Ali (whose translation Pickthall regarded as too free), it was recognised as the best translation ever of the Book, and, indeed, as a monument in the history of translation. Unusually for a translation, it was further translated into several other languages, including Tagalog, Turkish and Portuguese.

Pickthall, now a revered religious leader in his own right, was often asked for Hanafi fatwas on difficult issues, and continued to preach. As such, he was asked by the Nizam to arrange the marriage of the heir to his throne to the daughter of the last Ottoman caliph, Princess Dürrüsehvar. The Ottoman exiles lived in France as pensioners of the Nizam, and thither Pickthall and the Hyderabad suite travelled. His knowledge of Ottoman and Moghul protocol allowed Pickthall to bring off this brilliant match, which was to be followed by an *umra* visit, his private hope being that the Caliphate, which he regarded as still by right vested in the House of Osman, might now pass to a Hyderabadi prince yet to be born, who would use the wealth of India and the prestige and holiness of the Caliphate to initiate a new dawn of independence and success for Islam. Delhi's decision to absorb the Nizam's domains into independent India made that impossible; but the princess devoted her life to good works, which continue today, even after her ninetieth birthday, which she celebrated in January 2004.

In 1935 Pickthall left Hyderabad. His school was flourishing, and he had forever to deny that he was the Fielding of E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*. (He knew Forster well, and the charge may not be without foundation.) He handed over *Islamic Culture* to the new editor, the Galician convert Muhammad Asad. He then returned to England, where he set up a new society for Islamic work, and delivered a series of lectures.

Despite this new activity, however, his health was failing, and he must have felt as Winstanley felt:

> 'And here I end, having put my arm as far as my strength will go to advance righteousness. I have writ, I have acted, I have peace: and now I must wait to see the Spirit do his own work in the hearts of others and whether England shall be the first land, or some other, wherein truth shall sit down in triumph.' (Gerrard Winstanley, *A New Year's Gift for the Parliament and Army*, 1650.)

He died in a cottage in the West Country on May 19 1936, of coronary thrombosis, and was laid to rest in the Muslim cemetery at Brookwood. After his death, his wife cleared his desk, where he had been revising his Madras lectures the night before he died, and she found that the last lines he had written were from the Qur'an:

'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.'

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