

Pickthalls Islamic Writings before Declaration of Islam

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Abstract:In the literary world the introduction of Marmaduke William Pickthall is as a translator of the Holy Qur'ān. But other than this service he has been a prolific writer as novelist, short story writer, journalist, and an Islamist. In his writings before embracing Islam he not only criticizes Christianity but highlights many prominent aspects of Islam. Particularly the definition of progress and the position of woman in Islam. Pickthall wrote in English but his translated articles were also published in some Urdu periodicals of the sub-continent.

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Marmaduke William Pickthall was born on¹ 7th April, 1875, in Cambridge Terrace, W.2 London. His father Charles Grayson Pickthall (1822-1881) and grandfather Thomas Pickthall, were both clergymen.² When Marmaduke Pickthall was six months of age, he fell ill of measles³ which was complicated by bronchitis.⁴ During this illness, as a part of treatment, he was circumcised.⁵ This surgery made his conversion to Islam less painful at the age of 42. He started speaking at a very early age as compared to other children. Marmaduke Pickthall's mother declared him, born with an Eastern mind. He liked to play alone, remain quiet and self absorbed. He got admission in Harrow Public School⁶ as a day boy in January 1889. Geography and languages were his favourite subjects, cricket and football were his games. Winston Churchill⁷ (1874-1965) was his best friend. After leaving the school in 1890 he went to Neuchatel

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(Switzerland) for French and Florence (Italy) for Italian languages. During this journey he also learnt Welsh language.⁸ He polished his German and Spanish⁹ as well.¹⁰

Before the completion of his teen, Pickthall visited Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine and developed interest in Arabic language and the teachings of Islam. He was especially interested in Arabic but later on he learnt Turkish, Persian and Urdu. He studied Islamic literature present in these Eastern languages.

Pickthall has been a prolific writer all through his life. The range of his subjects was very vast. Novel, short-stories, politics, religion (particularly Islam) has been his favorite subjects.

His writings on Islam started in the mid of 1916. His first writing on Islam was “**Islam and Progress**”. This article appeared in five installments. Every installment had its own sub-heading. The title of the part “I” was “The Priesthood of the Human Mind”. In this writing, Pickthall answered the following questions.

As compared with Christianity, Islam is a religion essentially unprogressive, and to some extent, degrading to the human intellect?

He answered this question with a statement that, It would be a mistake to suppose that Islam itself is unprogressive in the modern meaning of the word.¹¹ Then he argued that in Islam free thought has been accepted as a principal, it means that Islam promote free-thought whereas Christianity snub it.¹² He supported his argument by the number of traditions from the collections of *Ahadith*, and verses from the Holy Qur’ān. Then he forcefully declared that:

“No fresh discovery of science can shake the faith of the true Muslim.”¹³

The discussion was concluded at the statement, that Islam is more, progressive – than any other religion of the world.¹⁴

Part II of this article was entitled “**The Position of Woman**”. This article was started with a novel statement which reads as:

“It has been said that the Islamic view of woman is a man’s view, while the Christian view of woman is a woman’s view.”¹⁵

Then a statement about the Holy Prophet was also a new for the West, particularly from the pen of (apparently) a non-Muslim writer:

“The Prophet of Islam was perhaps the greatest feminist the world has ever known.”¹⁶

He supported his point by the number of verses of the Holy Qur’ān and saying of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting). Under the verse 51 of the 33 *surah* (*al-Ahzab*, The Clans), he gave the following footnote:

“This command is addressed to the Prophet, whose privilege was to have more wives than was permitted to his followers. As the head of the state he used this privilege to cement alliances with different tribes, and so advance the cause he served.”¹⁷

Pickthall refuted the false allegation by Christendom on the Muslims – “that Muslims hold that women have no souls.”¹⁸ He refuted this false assertion with the support of verses of the Holy Qur’ān and *Ahadith*. He said, according to my study, the *Qur’ān*, *Sunnah* and works of Muslim authors, are devoid of such doctrine.

“There is no hint of such a doctrine in the Qur’ān or the Sunnah or in any Muslim author that I know. They expressly say: “Men or women, those who do good works and are believers, shall enter into paradise and shall not be frustrated of one tittle of reward.”¹⁹

Comparing the Western and Islamic world with respect to the rights of women, he wrote:

“In the West, until recent past, married woman had no rights of property; whereas in all Islamic lands they had enjoyed full rights of property since the time of the Prophet”.²⁰

“**Fatalism**” was the part III of “**Islam and Progress**”, in this essay, after a number of quotations from the sayings of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) and verses from the Holy Qur’ān, he concluded that:

From these quotations we come to know that the desire of wealth for its own sake or for purely selfish objects is abhorrent to the Spirit of Islam, which is a spirit not of competition but of brotherhood. Money-making is a fault of character. While the desire of Muslims to live and let live is a strength of character.²¹

Above conclusion is very impressive, considering that it was from the pen of a Christian writer:

Commenting on war, Muslim World, and Christian Subjects, he wrote thought provoking lines. For the last two centuries Muslims remained busy in war, defending themselves from Europeans, due to this reason:

“They have not had anytime to devote to commerce or the works of peace; whereas their Christian Subjects, exempt from military service, have been able to devote themselves continuously to the peaceful art of self-advancement.”²²

“The Command to kill” was the IVth part. In this part he discussed the charge against Islam that it has the faith to bloodshed in the cause of right. Pickthall commented on this blame as:

“War is recognized by the Qur’ān as a fact of human life, and rules are laid down for its conduct by believers. There is also a definite command to kill those tribes or individuals who persecute the Muslims or strive to work sedition in the body of Islam.”²³

He supported his stance by a number of verses from the Holy Qur’ān, including وَالْفِتْنَةُ أَشَدُّ مِنَ الْقَتْلِ²⁴

“Sedition is worse than killing”²⁵

Then Pickthall mentioned that the Holy Prophet got the surname of ‘*El Amin*’ from his countrymen which mean ‘the trustworthy’. He also wrote the fact that he (upon whom be peace and greeting) started his mission purely on non-violence bases.

“He did not resist evil by force, but bore with insult and persecution, commanding his followers to do the same.”²⁶

By touching the prominent features of Holy Prophet’s life, Pickthall came to the battle of Badr, and wrote:

“The location of Bader is 36 miles from [Madinah] and 110 miles from Mecca. The locality shows that the Prophet fought in self-defence on that occasion.”²⁷

Here Pickthall reached somewhat unorthodox conclusion but remained close to the reality. He wrote:

“In fact, Muhammad had obeyed the Christian rule of conduct in adversity until he realized from harsh experience that it was impracticable save by recluses, and perceived that far from conducing to the extermination of his pure religion.”²⁸

He elaborated a point in the footnotes as:

“Cruelties were ordered just in retaliation, because it was the language understood by the enemies ²⁹.”

He further elucidated:

“After the battle of Ohod, when the women of the Koreysh made necklaces and bracelets of the ear and noses of the fallen Muslims - atrocities of which Muhammad was an eye-witness – Similar practices were ordered against the Koreysh. “But the gentleness of the Prophet’s nature conquered the bitterness of his heart” and the command was never put in force.”³⁰

On elaborating an important principle of Muslims warfare he wrote:

“Neither massacre nor any harshness towards non-combatants is allowed in Muslim warfare. These horrors are Byzantine, and have been practiced by the unenlightened Muslims in retaliation, which the letter of the Qur’ān permits only in the event of sedition and treachery.”³¹

Comparing Islam with other religions of 7th century A.D., Pickthall gave two short but very important statements, on a same page

- I. “Muhammad preached those principles of equality which are only half realized in other creeds.”³²
- II. “Islam offered its religion but never enforced it.”³³

The second statement referred to the democratic mood of Islam, which is confirmed by the following verse:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion.”³⁴

Remarking on the popular western notion that ‘Islam is the religion of Sword’ he wrote:

“[It] is only to say that it regards war as one of the affairs of life, as important as it is terrible, and includes it in the purview of religion, imposing rules for the believers to observe it.”³⁵

He criticized Christianity, and wrote:

“Christianity did not profess to deal with international morality, and so left its followers groping in the dark.”³⁶

At the end of this essay Pickthall considered himself a member of Christian Community, as he wrote:

“In the seventh century of our era.”

“Our” in this statement included him in Christian people.

“The Brotherhood of all Believers” was the last essay of ‘Islam and Progress’ series. In this essay after quoting a number of sayings of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) about brotherhood, Pickthall pointed out:

“There is nothing remarkable to the mind of a Christian student in such words as the above, which have their counterpart among the scriptures of his own religion.”³⁷

Acknowledging the superiority of Islam over his parent’s and his own religion, Pickthall wrote:

“This religion has succeeded, where Christianity has failed, in uniting men of different colour happily and equally in one society. White, black, brown, yellow peoples intermingle in its mosques and palaces, fraternize and intermarry without bad results.”³⁸

He compared the society of United States of America with Muslims Society in such words:

“The United States of America have been called the crucible of nations, and in truth have they assimilated many peoples of one colour, but the black, the brown, the yellow races have been jealously excluded from the mixture. Their work is therefore not to be compared with that of EL Islam.”

Pointing towards a unique feature of Muslim Society – respect of *Sadaat* -Pickthall wrote:

“The only aristocracy of birth properly recognized in the Muslim brotherhood as apart from dignity of place and power is descent from the Prophet. Yet many of the descendants of the Prophet are today in poor positions; so that it is no unheard-of thing for a wealthy merchant or a high official to address the beggar who implores his alms or the street hawker of whom he buys a handful of Pistachio nuts as “Ya Emir” (O Prince), when the latter is descendant of the Prophet recognizable by his turban. In Islam it is no insolence for a trusted servant addressing his master privately to say, “YaAkhi” (My brother).”³⁹

After giving most of “The last address of the Holy Prophet” (upon whom be peace and greeting) which is infact a charter of Human rights’ Pickthall applied it to the present Muslim Society and wrote:

“Faults in the Muhammadan body are not difficult to find; but this at least may be said, that in no part of the world does there exist a Muhammadan Society in which men are equal to those whom they employ, indifferent to their parents, systematically dishonest to one another, or socially oppressive to the poor,... it is not Muhammadan law that we should admire, but the observance by Muslims of their own freewill of those social duties which Christians will not perform save at the end of a policemen’s truncheon⁴⁰”.

The article “**Islam and Progress**” appeared first of all in French in “*La Revue Politique Interantionale*” Lausanne, Switzerland. In English it was published in weekly, The New Age, London, under five sub-headings, in four appearances, from July 6, 1916 to August 3, 1916.

The issue published on July 6, 1916 had sub-heading, “**The Priesthood of the Human Mind**”. It had more than ten sayings of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) and few verses of the Holy Qur’ān, but no reference had been given for the sayings of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting). As for as Qur’ānic verses are concerned, one verse was referred to *Surah Al-e-‘Imran*, but the verse number was not mentioned which is obviously an incomplete reference. The transliteration of *Surah*’s name was also not up to the mark. It was spelt *Alu Imran*, which is incorrect by all standards. The IInd and IIIrd part “The Position of Woman” and “Fatalism” too did not have any reference of *Ahadith* or verses from the Holy Qur’ān. Both of these appeared in the same issue of July 13, 1916. In July 20, 1916 number, the IVth part of “The Command to kill” appeared. It also did not have any reference from any source. The same fashion continued in Vth part i.e., “The Brotherhood of all Believers.”

The same article appeared in English in the two issues of monthly **Islamic Review & Muslim India**, Woking, England, in August and September 1917. In August number first three parts and a page of part IV

appeared. In part I the initial sub-heading ‘The Priesthood of the Human Mind’ was deleted. After a number of *Ahaditha* footnote informed us ‘sayings of Muhammad’, neither the name of the collection or the Kitab nor the chapter’s name is mentioned. The transliteration of Sarah’s name showed improvement, but all the verses are not referred to *Surah*’s name, number and verse number.⁴¹

In the IInd part, the last part of verse وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَلِيمًا⁴² is translated as:

“He is wise and good”⁴³

This is far from the original text. Yet another mistake is that the attributes of Almighty Allah should be written with capital letters, but here this condition is not met with.⁴⁴

In September 1917 number, many references were made in the footnotes but the references of *Ahadith* were without book’s and chapter’s name and Hadith number and Arabic text. The references about Qur’ānic verses were not the same throughout, at one page just *Surah*’s name was mentioned and another place *Surah*’s number was considered enough.⁴⁵

1. *Surah al-Hajj* was spelt as ‘El-Haff’
2. *Surah al-Baqarah* was spelt as ‘El-baqar’
3. Verse number was not mentioned anywhere.
4. Many verses remained without any reference.

In the light of above discussion, it can be said that many developments might be due to the editor of “Islamic Review & Muslim India” and mistakes might be due to the inefficiency of proofreading. The text of the Holy Qur’ān is not viewed anywhere in “The New Age” or Islamic Review & Muslim India’s articles of Pickthall.

“**Islam and Progress**” also appeared in Urdu translation in monthly *Isha’at-e-Islam*, Lahore. It was, infact, the Urdu edition of “Islamic Review and Muslim India”, Woking. It published the five parts of Pickthall’s article with the same headings. But unfortunately the name of translator is not mentioned anywhere in the number. The first three parts and a portion of the fourth part were published in the same issue⁴⁶ of

November 1917. The latter portion of part IV, and the fifth and last part of this article was appeared⁴⁷ in December 1917. In Urdu translation of Pickthall's article, Qur'ānic text, name of the *surah* and verse number are also maintained. Sometime, the text of the sayings of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) is also seen, but reference to the collection, book, chapter and Hadith number is not mentioned anywhere.

This improvement may be due to the efforts of editor, translator or of both. In the Urdu monthly "*Isha'at-e-Islam*" December issue it is mentioned that the writer of this essay is not a Muslim.⁴⁸

If we see this statement critically we come to know that, it is true, when Pickthall wrote this article, he was not a declared Muslim but when the issue of *Isha'at-e-Islam*, December 1917, came Pickthall had embraced Islam i.e., in November 1917.

In this essay Pickthall touched many aspects of Prophet's (upon whom be peace and greeting) life, one of them was few charges by orientalist leveled against him.

1. Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) said that an angel talked with me. According to Old Christians, an angel may not talk to anyone, who is a non-Christian. So, Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greeting) was a liar because he claimed, talking with angel Jibraeel. (upon whom be greeting)
2. Muhammad did not know many scientific happenings of the modern age.
3. Muhammad used to talk in the language of his time and of his people.

These were the gravest charges leveled against Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greeting). If all these charges are considered correct, it can be deduced that the prophet was a human being like us. But his own claim for himself was not more than this fact that,

"I am only a mortal like you."⁴⁹

There is a common misconception in Christendom that the Muslims worship Muhammad (upon whom be peace and greeting), or Muslims considered Muhammad as deity as Christians considered Christ. And due to these self-assured allegations they called, the truest man on earth, a liar.⁵⁰ He may be taken as a liar, if he had claimed that, I am a god, but he always asserted that I am one of the humans, Prophet of Allah, His slave and the first believer. When Muhammad's son Ibrahim (upon whom be peace) was died at the age of 18 months, there coincided a complete eclipse of sun. If prophet had been an ambitious person, he might have exploited it for his purpose, but he was a true Prophet, so he said, Sun and Moon are the signs of Allah, they are not eclipsed due to anybody's death or life. Here Pickthall remarked:

“There is not a single sign of liars in Muhammad's character.”⁵¹

In this essay he also narrated few examples of the kindness of Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting).

1. He forgave the woman who served him the poisoned meal.
2. He never uttered a harsh word to his servant *Anas* (may Allah be pleased with him) (d.93A.H) during ten years of his service.
3. He forgave the wife of *Abu-Sufyan* (565-653) (may Allah be pleased with him), *Hind*, who chewed the liver of Prophet's uncle, *Hamza* (may Allah be pleased with him), after the battle of *Uhud*. (623/2 A.H)

Here Pickthall asserted that the characteristic of the Prophet which make me his fan is his gratitude. This quality is absent in most of the great people.⁵² Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) remained thankful to his first wife – *Khadijah* (68-3 B.H) who died before migration to *Madinah* – till his death. Here Pickthall gave a recommendation:

“I am recommending it strongly, that all who are in ambiguity about Prophet's character should read the Prophet's biography. If we look at the kind attitude of

Muhammad, we come to the point that he was a greatest feminist of the human history.”⁵³

The Muslims of *Madinah* were named as *Ansar* which means ‘helpers’ also shows the sense of gratitude from Prophet’s side. When some disinformation was going to poison the minds of some youth of *Ansar*, Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) – at that very time showed his gratitude towards *Ansaras*:

“I will never leave you alone, if whole of the human race go to one side and Ansar choose the other, I will opt the Ansar’s way.”⁵⁴

This essay is a scientific answer of the following objection:

“The belief in one God is enough. There is no need to believe implicitly and for ever in the teaching of a particular prophet.”⁵⁵

Replying above objection, Pickthall presented the following statement:

There are two functions of a true religion, one towards God, the other towards mankind, and only in Islam are both fulfilled.⁵⁶

Then in support of his statement he brought a verse from the Holy Qur’ān, but without the name or number of *surah*, verse number and text is also absent. The translation of the verse is:

“God is the Lord of Heaven and Earth.”⁵⁷

About Christ, Christianity and the Bible, he wrote:

“He was a Prophet of the truth, but gave no practical example to the run of men,...His followers, regarding him as God incarnate, have used another of his sayings, “My Kingdom is not of this world”...Jesus did not regard himself as God, that the words mean only that the reward he sought was not of this world.”⁵⁸

But in this quotation, he has not given any reference to the Bible the verses are quoted whereof. About Jews his statement is very much to the point.

They possessed the consciousness of God’s Kingdom upon earth, but they restricted it to their own race.⁵⁹

About the *Qur’ān*, the Prophet of Islam and his *Sunnah*, he wrote:

“The two [*Qur’ān&Sunnah*] appear to me to be inseparable... And his example grows more luminous from age to age. If he had never lived, religion would be still for everybody an affair of gross superstitious observance or vague fruitless theory... He was a man like other men, and yet with God’s assistance he achieved a work beyond the power of men;⁶⁰

Explaining the saying of Sayyedah Ayesha (may Allah be pleased with her)

فَإِنَّ خُلُقَ نَبِيِّ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ كَانَ الْقُرْآنَ⁶¹

“Fa inna *Khulqo Nabi allah Kana al-Qur’ān*”, he wrote:

“His character is the Qur’ān.”

“In his praying for the forgiveness of his enemies after their persecutions had reached the utmost limit, while other Prophets, Noah and Moses, prayed for the destruction of their enemies.”⁶²

He quoted many saying of the Holy Prophet (upon whom be peace and greeting) in this article:

الدنيا مزرعة الآخرة⁶³

The world is the field for the hereafter.

وإِمَامَتِكَ الْأَذَى عَنِ الطَّرِيقِ صَدَقَةٌ⁶⁴

Its an act of goodness to remove a hurdle from a path

اعقلها وتوكل⁶⁵

Try hard then trust in Allah

الكاسب حبيب الله⁶⁶

A labourer is a friend of Allah

لو وزن مداد علماء على دم الشهداء لرجح مداد العلماء على دم الشهداء⁶⁷

The ink of the scholar is more holy than the blood of the martyr.

أَبْغَضُ الْخَلَائِلِ إِلَى اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ الطَّلَاقُ⁶⁸ (Abghaz – al-Halal)

The most disliked action near Allah is divorce in lawful actions.

طلب العلم فريضة على كل مسلم⁶⁹

To obtain education is incumbent upon every Muslim, male and female.

References and Endnotes

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- 3 Measles is a disease caused by a virus (ed.) Paul Singleton and Diana Sainsbury, Dictionary of Microbiology, (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1981) p.237
- 4 Bronchitis is inflammation of the bronchi (medium size airways) in the lungs. It is caused by virus or bacteria persistent cough is the main symptom, op. cit., p.61
- 5 Circumcision is a surgery that removes some or the entire foreskin (prepuce) from the penis, (Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English language, unabridged, (Simon and Schuster, USA, n.d.) p.328
- 6 Harrow School (Originally: the Free Grammar School of John Lyon, Generally Harrow) is one of the world's most famous schools. It is located in Harrow on the Hill in the London Borough of Harrow. It was founded in 1572. Seven former British Prime Ministers, most notably Winston Churchill, and the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru were old Harrovians. (Wikipedia)
- 7 Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill (1874-1965) British Prime Minister for two terms, 1940-1945 and 1951 to 1955. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953 for his historical writings. (Wikipedia)
- 8 Welsh is a member of Brythonic branch of Celtic language spoken natively in Wales. Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English language, unabridged, (n.d.) p.2078
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