BOOK REVIEW

Title: An Introduction to the Religion and History of Islam (pp. 166; main text 131 pp.)

Author: Dr. Ikenga R.A. Ozigboh, Department of History, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Publishers: Fourth Dimension, Enugu, 1988.

Islam is one of the leading religions in the world today. There is hardly any country of the world of some significance where the adherents of the faith are not founded in large numbers. In certain countries, notably the Arab states, Islam is a state religion which governs the day-to-day lives of the citizens. Adherents of this faith number in tens of millions all over the world. They are among the most fanatical and ardent of religious believers. Christianity and Judaism predated Islam by centuries. However, from the beginning, muslims have believed that christians had polluted the message of the prophets such as Moses, Abraham and Jesus Christ. Islam is, therefore, the final religion ordained by God to right the perversions of christianity. The Quran is a verbatim reproduction of the word of God delivered through angel Gabriel to Muhammad, the last of the prophets of God.

On the other hand, from the beginning, christians have seen their own religion as the only path to the spiritual salvation of mankind. Islam was caricatured as a movement for obtaining earthly power, wealth and glory. Understandably, christian-muslim relations have been a ceaseless hostility and mutual distrust. Christian-muslim antagonisms and collisions have been manifestly serialised in Nigeria in recent times with muslims waging mini-jihads and riots against christians. Dr. Ozigbo argues that religious parochialism is borne out of ignorance. If Nigerian christians were exposed to the religion of Islam, these animosities would hardly have existed. But to understand Islam one must understand its history and

civilization. For Islam is not just a religion, it is also a culture, some people's way of life. Accordingly, Ozigbo titles his work An Introduction to the History and Religion of Islam. He addresses the book "primarily ... to Christians in need of a reliable, objective, ... exposure to the basic principles, history and institutions of Islam". The key words here would be Reliable and Objective.

This ... Introduction is a saga of rolling human action and experience at its best; some-times almost at its worst. It is like an open book: on the right hand page is a scenario of human action inspired by pure spiritual favour; then the verso reveals the wolf in man. The setting is the then little town of Mecca. Abdul-Qasin Muhammad, popularly known as Muhammed, was
born there in 570 AD. From there, the story unfolds concentrically till virtually the entire world is roped in. The story begins with the upbringing of Muhammad, his marriage to the widow Khadijah, Muhammad's disenchantment with the religious and social landscape of Mecca. This resulted in his hijra to Medina and the launching of a new religion. The key word of his new faith was Salam/Sulama, that is complete surrender to the will of God.

The civil authorities hounded Muhammad; Jews and christians refused to acknowledge him as a prophet. The christians were disenchanted with him for rejecting Jesus Christ as divine and son of God. In the confrontation which became inevitable, a chain of military successes attended Muhammad and his followers. By the time he died, a decade after the hijra (622-632), Muhammad had stamped his new faith firmly in Arabia. By that time too, he had enunciated through speeches, preachings and deeds what have come to be regarded as the fundamentals of the Islamic religion.

Islam is a personal as well as a corporate religion, requiring of its adherents complete surrender to God. All who confess it form a community

jamma, whose entire life and living are conducted according to the precepts of the religion. These precepts are revealed in the Quran, "the direct divine revelations made to Muhammad" and the Sunna/Hadith, the recorded deeds and utterances of the prophet not directly and manifestly reflected in the Quran. Jesus spoke God's word but the final and complete revelations came to mankind through Muhammad. Then there are the Five Pillars of Islam which are the religious duties of and ethical demands on muslims. The pillars are profession of the Islamic faith (Shahadah), the statutory daily worship (Salat), the compulsory alms tax (Zakat), the Ramadan fasting (Sawn) and pilgrimage to Mecca which a muslim should perform at least once in a life time, but preferably yearly. There is also the Sharia, a sacred code of proper muslim behaviour.

In the years that followed Muhammad's death, muslim expansion assumed hurricane propositions. By mid 10th century, Islam had swept through the entire area astride the Nile and the Oxus rivers. In 1453 when the Ottoman Turks took Constantinople, the great capital city of Eastern Christendom, Islam was riding at its highest crests. Before then, the Mongols had stamped the religion on China and India had long fallen to the Great Moghuls.

The age of expansionism brought the best and the worst in Islamic religion and civilization. There were truly pious and inspired muslim leaders such as Caliph Umar, "the Saint Paul of Islam", who devoted their lives and energies to the cause and glory of their faith. Under the Abbasids, muslim civilization reached its apogee, making major contributions in various fields of human endeavour: science and medicine, mathematics, communications science, the arts and culture, economics and business, etc. On the reverse side of the picture, we find the flush of pious motivation progressively being subdued by greed, vaulting political ambition and several other mundane attractions. By 1500, the Prophet's dream of the political unity of muslims had dissolved. The muslim world has since been

dominated by two mutually antagonistic sects - the Sunni and the Shiite. The mongols were ruthless and took especial delight in senseless massacres, respecting neither age nor sex.

Internal feuds within the muslim community sapped the vitality of Islam; this at a time when christian Europe was gradually bracing itself to dominate the world. The Industrial Revolution in Europe turned the table militarily, politically, economically and technologically against the muslims from the 18th century. Even muslim elite became fascinated by western culture, consumption habit and political system. Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion and brief occupation of Egypt, 1798-1801, was a fore-taste of the twilight that befell Islam. Egypt was the pride of Islam. In the early 20th century, Europe had colonised practically all of Islamdom. A new chapter in christian-muslim relations was opened: christian Europe left supremely confident and contemptuous of the muslim world; the muslim world was in disarray and burdened by inferiority complex. After World War II, the muslim countries regained their independence and freedom to chart their path of development. In this process, the possession and near monopoly of the world's petroleum resources - the Black Gold - by Arab countries has been of immense significance. The Arabs on several occasions have successfully used petroleum as a critical trump card in world politics and international relations. All the same, the superiority of the west in technology means that things can hardly be the same again in the relations between the world of Islam and Christian Europe.

The last chapter of the book deals with Nigeria, thus reversing the order of charity which begins at home and ends outside. Islam infiltrated here in the 11th century, making steady progress from then. It was in the 19th century though, that Usman dan Fodio's jihad transformed the religion from relative obscurity to the forefront in Nigeria's religious configuration. Fodio's jihad was something of a replay of the activities of Prophet Muhammad himself: Fodio was a learned and pious muslim. He

condemned the loose religious and social life in Gobir and won popular support. But officialdom threatened him with brimstone. He staged a hijra. A holy war ensued. The jihadists emerged victorious and built a caliphate. Colonial rule is imposed and seemed likely to humble the pretensions of Islam. But no: the colonial administration pursued a policy which created the most conducive atmosphere ever for Islam to flourish. With the outcome of the Biafra-Nigeria conflict, Islam mounted a recrudescence of extremism and intolerance in which christians have become the punching bag.

Dr. Ozigbo has remarkably made a long and tortuous story short and simple without unduly smothering complexities. His breadth and depth of reading are impressive. So also his objectivity and even-handedness. His literary style is crisp and a delight. He has not gone into academic argumentation on the validity or otherwise of the assumptions or claims of Islam. Thus, there are no Satanic Verses to prompt muslim leaders to put a price on Ozigbo's skull as is the case with Salman Rushdie. The dates in the book may seem too many, but they do not seriously impede reading and comprehension. For a book of 151 pages, ten maps may appear superfluous at first sight but they present a graphic and visual message about the fortunes of Islam over time and space. Chapter 4 could have been merged with chapter 2 or come up as chapter three, though admittedly this could have raised some chronological problems. The printer's devil tend to dog what otherwise is a job so well done. For instance, in page 143 alone, not less than six typos exist. All these are cosmetic aberrations, however. All said ... Introduction has achieved its stated objective, and much more. For muslims need this book as much as christians, the target of the author. There is very pressing need for a similar work to introduce christians to muslims.

Onwuka N. Njoku.