

BRITISH ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MAHDIST REVOLUTION

1881—1885

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The outbreak and success of the Mahdist Revolution, which, between 1881 and 1885, overthrew the Ottoman administration in the Sudan and established an indigenous religious state, became the subject of growing concern and controversy in contemporary Britain. This controversy about the revolution produced conflicting ideas and judgments. This essay attempts to analyse the dominant contemporary British ideas about the revolution, together with some of the prejudices and calculations that gave birth to and fostered these ideas.

Until the forces of the Egyptian Government under the British General, Hicks Pasha, were annihilated at Shaykan, in the Western Sudan, on the 5th of November, 1883 by the Mahdist forces, the Mahdist Revolution had attracted little attention in both public and official quarters in Britain. Up to that time Britain had no direct interest in the Sudan. However, by November 1883 British military control over Egypt had been established; and Britain, was, therefore, committed to defend Egypt proper and the Red Sea ports against any foreign intervention. Also, Hicks was an Englishman, and, although he was employed by the Khedive of Egypt, his defeat and murder was considered, by many British individuals and groups, to be an injury to the British pride and prestige and must, therefore, be avenged.

As a result of these fears and sentiments a dialogue ensued as to how should Britain deal with the Mahdist Revolution. Out of this discussion there emerged three possible lines of policy. The first was that of containing the Mahdist Revolution south of Wadi Halfa in the north and east of the Red Sea ports in the east. This was the policy proposed by

the Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone, and the majority of Liberal members of Parliament who had followed him. The second policy was that adopted by the Tory Opposition and the Liberal Imperialists. They argued in favour of confining the Mahdist Revolution to the Western Sudan and checking its advance in that part of the Sudan east of the White Nile. The third policy was that maintained by the Radicals. They defended the revolution and opposed any military attempt to crush or confine it.

It is necessary to keep in mind these three opposed lines of policy and the political group or groups that advocated every one of them, because, as we are going to see, every political group had chosen to propagate and defend the idea or idea that might support and further the policy they had taken.

Any contemporary discussion on the Mahdist Revolution had always started with an attempt to discover the causes that led to its outbreak. This will be clear to anybody who examines contemporary British literature on the revolution.

One idea, which was almost universally accepted, asserted that the revolution was brought about mainly by the atrocious misgovernment of the Ottoman rule in the Sudan. The idea loomed largely in all contemporary writings on the revolution. It is dominant in Lieut. Colonel Stewart's report. (1) The general impression given by this report was that the revolt was due in the first place to the venality of the Ottoman officials and their oppression of the indigenous peoples. (2) Lord Dufferin came to the same conclusion. (3) His report argued that the "disturbances" were to be attributed mainly to the misgovernment and cruel exactions of the local Ottoman authorities in the Sudan; and concluded that

(1) Lieut. Colonel Stewart was sent to the Sudan on an expedition of enquiry in December 1882. He stayed in the Sudan for about three months during which he was able to collect some information relating to the conditions in the Sudan.

(2) *Egypt* No. 19 (1883) No. 3 Malet to Granville, 20 Jan. 1883 enclosure No. 1; also *The Times* 24 Nov., 1883.

(3) Lord Dufferin was on a special mission to Egypt in the period Nov. 1882 to Feb. 1883; but he took advantage of his stay in Egypt to gather some information on the Sudan.

the Mahdi's chief strength was derived "from the despair and misery of the native population." (4).

Certain other individuals, who were considered to be the best living authorities on the Sudan, were of the same opinion as that of Lord Dufferin and Lieut. Colonel Stewart. Sir Samuel Baker had often asserted that the "rebellion" was brought about by the maladministration of the Sudan by corrupt and dishonest governors. (5) *The Times* correspondent in the Sudan, Frank Power, was convinced that it was the heavy taxation and the corruption in the administration that caused the "rebellion". (6) General Charles Gordon took the view that the "rising" was due to nothing but the rotten character of the Ottoman rule. (7).

The view was taken up by nearly every paper and journal that discussed the revolution. It was also current in Parliamentary circles. It was, perhaps, the only point on which both the Government and Opposition concurred. (8).

Recent historical research on the period of the revolution has shown that the corrupt and unjust Ottoman administration was one cause which had favoured the outbreak of the revolution. But, modern historians do not accept the view that it was the only or the principal cause, because to accept this idea is to deny or belittle other important contributory causes. (9).

(4) *Egypt No. 19* (1883) No. 39 Dufferin to Granville 2 April 1883.

(5) *The Times*, 27 Nov., 1883; also, Samuel White Baker, «Egypt's Proper Frontier», *The Nineteenth Century*, No. LXXXIX (July 1884), pp. 27-46.

(6) Frank Power, *Letters from Khartoum*, (London, 1885), p. 91.

(7) *Pall Mall Gazette*, 8 Jan. 1884; also, A. Egmont Hake, *The Journals of Major-Gen. C.G. Gordon, C.B. at Khartoum*, (London, 1885).

(8) For example see *Hansard*, 3rd ser CCLXXXIV, cols. 570-759, 12 Feb. 1884.

(9) P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898*, (Oxford, 1958), pp. 25-36; idem, «The Place in History of the Sudanese Mahdia», *Sudan Notes and Records*, XL (1959), pp. 107-12, idem, *Modern History of the Sudan* (London, 1961), pp. 75-78; G.N. Sanderson, *England, Europe and the Upper Nile*, (Edinburgh, 1965), pp. 15-16.

It is not difficult to explain why contemporary British opinion accepted uncritically this cause as the main one. It was the most obvious cause, and, as such, was considered the principal one for the outbreak of the revolution. Nearly every work written in English on the Sudan during the seventies had emphasised the evil character of the Ottoman régime in the Sudan. "There can be little doubt", wrote the Earl of Northbrook to the Earl of Granville, "in the minds of anyone who had read Sir Samuel Baker's Book, Dr. Hill's account of Colonel Gordon's work in the Sudan and Colonel Stewart's report that the Egyptian rule over the Sudan had been a great evil to the people of the country. (10) Thus, even before the outbreak of the revolution, European travellers and adventurers had succeeded in convincing the public that the Ottoman rule in the Sudan had been little better than "a chapter in the history of crime."

It had never occurred to contemporaries that the picture of Ottoman rule presented to them by the European writers who had travelled, or had taken jobs, in the Sudan was an exaggerated one. It was coloured in that manner in order to suit the selfish ends of those European adventurers, who, most of them, dreamt of being appointed governors in the Sudan. They had always asserted that the only way to establish "justice" and "good government" in the Sudan was to get rid of the Turkish governors and to replace them by Europeans.

However, judged by the administrative standards of its age or by the British administration in Ireland at the time, the Ottoman administration in the Sudan was not much worse. Recent scholarly work on the *Turkia* has made this fact clear. The latest objective and "scientific" account of the Ottoman administration, written by an Englishman, (11) is not entirely unfavourable to the Ottoman rule in the Sudan, and is certainly far less consorious than the writings and speeches of contemporary Europeans.

(10) Public Record Office, 30-29-139. Memorandum by Northbrook on the situation in the Sudan, enclosed in Northbrook to Granville, 29 Dec. 1883.

(11) R.L. Hill, *Egypt in the Sudan, 1820-1881*, (Oxford, 1959).

If public men of all shades of political opinion, all politically minded persons and all who were interested in the Sudan had attributed the outbreak of the revolution to the faults and misgovernment of the Ottoman administration, the logical step for all those men and groups should have been to sympathise with the revolution. This was hardly the case. Several political groups and individuals who had denounced the injustice, oppression and corruption of the "Turks" refused to think of the Mahdi's movement as a revolutionary nationalist movement against a corrupt alien rule.

It was only the Radicals, Mr. Gladstone and his Liberal supporters in Parliament and the anti-imperialists, who really adhered to the view that the Mahdist rising was a revolutionary revolt waged against an unjust foreign rule. The Radicals had taken this view from the start and they persisted in upholding it. They continued to defend their belief that the Sudanese were justified in launching their popular movement because of the bad and inefficient Ottoman rule. The Radicals had always portrayed the revolution as one of a struggle for national freedom. They expressed this sentiment in the papers, in Parliament and in public speeches.

Speaking in the House of Commons in February 1884, the Radical member Sir George Campbell described the Mahdi's movement as a popular revolution. (12) At a public meeting at Torpoint on 10th February, 1885, the Radical leader, Mr. Leonard Courtney declared his conviction that the revolution was simply an assertion on the part of the Sudanese of their will to be free, and that they were fighting for their liberties. (13) The Radical Lord Wentworth described the Sudanese as men fighting in defence of country, liberty, life honour and religion. (14) Other Radical members in Parliament, Sir Wilfrid Lawson, Henry Labouchere, John Morely and Lord Derby continued to defend the revolution as a struggle for liberty and freedom.

(12) Hansard, 3rd ser. CCXCIV, col III, 23 Feb. 1884.

(13) The Times, 11 Feb. 1885; also the Annual Register, (1885), pp. 22-3.

(14) Hansard, 3rd ser., CCCXXXV, 26 Feb. 1884.

The Prime Minister, Mr. Gladstone sympathised with this idea, and, at one time, was very enthusiastic about it. Mr. Gladstone's "curious instinct for Liberty" disclosed to him that the Sudanese were fighting for freedom and that the Mahdist Revolution was a movement which had as its aim Liberty. In a long memorandum dated 9 April 1885, circulated to the members of the Cabinet, Mr. Gladstone stated that he had from the first "regarded the rising of the Sudanese against Egypt as a justifiable and honourable revolt." (15) But, for one reason or the other, Mr. Gladstone refrained from expressing this idea in public until the 12th of May 1884 when Sir Michael Hicks Beach provoked him when the latter demanded that the revolution must be put down. Mr. Gladstone retorted that any war to put down or stem the Mahdi "would be a war of conquest against a people struggling to be free." (16) He would not be a party to such a war because during all his political life he had never opened his lips in favour of a domination such as that exercised by certain countries upon other countries, and he, therefore, declined to become a party to maintain the possession of the Sudan by the Khedive's government. (17).

These views of Mr. Gladstone were violently attacked by the Conservatives and Liberal Imperialists. They mocked and derided Mr. Gladstone's portrait of the Mahdist Revolution as one for freedom and liberty. Front-Bench Spokesmen of the Tory Opposition, Mr. Bourke, Mr. A.J. Balfour, and Mr. Ashmead-Bartlett ridiculed Mr. Gladstone's view. Mr. Ashmead-Bartlett declared that :—

"There never was a purer fiction for a greater effort of imagination than to describe as a war of freedom the movement of the fanatical, savage, cruel, bloodthirsty and barbarous chieftain. The war-like hordes from whom the Mahdi got his principal support had been slave-dealers in the Sudan for generations and General Gordon told us distinctly that

(15) British Museum, Add. Mss. 44769, *The Military Situation in the Sudan*, April 9, 1885; also John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, (London, 1909), Vol. 11, pp. 532-6.

(16) Hansard, 3rd. ser. CCLXXXVIII, 12 May, 1884.

(17) Ibid CCLXXXIV, cols. 715-16, 12 Feb. 1884.

this war of slave dealers, communists, and pillagers against established order and government was a war of one-third against two-thirds of whom were terrorized into submission." (18).

The Conservatives and the Liberal Imperialists could not have failed entirely to depict the nationalist character of the revolution because they had from time to time criticised the evil and tyrannical character of the Ottoman rule which led to its outbreak. If they had recognised that fact the logical conclusion would have been to acknowledge that the Sudanese were fighting a war of liberation. But such an admission would have forced them to throw off their imperialist designs on the Sudan. During the years 1884-5 the Conservatives and the Liberal Imperialists were strongly against the official policy of forcing the Khedive's government to abandon the Sudan and they demanded that at least that part of the Sudan east of the White Nile should be included in the British sphere of influence. But if they had admitted that the Sudanese were fighting for their liberty what justification or right had Britain to wage a war against a people fighting for freedom. It is interesting to see that even the Imperialists could not think of themselves being branded as enemies of freedom; and instead of exposing themselves to such a charge they denied and ridiculed the idea that the Mahdist Revolution had a nationalist character.

Not only did the Tories and Liberal Imperialists deny the nationalist character of the revolution but they did their best to blacken and traduce the general character of the revolution. Nowhere was this clear than in their attempt to discredit the revolution by describing it as a movement engineered and led by slave traders. They claimed that the Mahdi was a tool of the slave traders who were using him in order to gain control of the country.

This view had constantly been expressed in Parliament by the Tory and Liberal Imperialist members. The two figures who were most vehement in uttering it, and who

(18) Ibid., CCLXXXVIII, col., 248, 13 May, 1884.

tried, and did succeed in converting the House of Commons to it, were the Liberal Imperialist leader, W.E. Forster (19) and the Tory Mr. Ashmead-Bartlett. (20).

This last named hypothesis was soon adopted by the majority of the British. It was even dominant among these Britons who sympathised with the revolution. It gained such a considerable currency because persons who were supposed to have knowledge of the Sudan and its peoples defended it. General Gordon went as far as to accuse the Mahdi himself of being an active slave trader. (21) Sir Samuel Baker claimed that the "suppression of the traffic" was an incentive to rebellion. (22).

The Press had also taken up the idea. A large section of the Press claimed that the Mahdi was not the real leader of the revolution that bore his name. *The Times* held that the Mahdi was supported mainly by the slave traders and that the Ansar were "fighting in the interests of the great slave-owners and the slave-dealing chiefs." (23) Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine declared that slavery was one of the greatest motives for the outbreak and spread of the revolution as slavery was "ingrained in the nature of the Arab race." (24) The Anti-slavery Reporter, the organ of the Anti-slavery Society, had constantly asserted that the revolution was organised by the slave traders and that the success of the Mahdi was due to the support of the slave traders rather than to the religious zeal of his followers. (25).

This thesis was too easily and uncritically accepted because there had been some evidence that "among the Mahdi's

(19) Hansard, 3rd ser. CCLXXXIV, col. 941, 14 Feb. 1884.

(20) Ibid., CCXCIII, col. 1002, 4 Nov. 1884, also Ibid., CCLXXXVIII, col. 248, 13 May, 1884.

(21) British Museum, Add. Mss. 3447, General Gordon's Journal, Vol. 1, p. 45, also p. 55.

(22) Samuel White Baker, *The Sudan and its Future*, the Contemporary Review, XLV (Jan. 1884), p. 75.

(23) *The Times*, 8 Feb. 1883, also 29 Nov. 1883.

(24) Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, No. DCCCXXIII, (May, 1884), p. 675.

(25) Anti-slavery Reporter, 12 May 1883; also 19 March 1884.

first adherent" and for a long time "the backbone of his military strength were the tough and turbulent northern Sudanese frontiersmen who dominated the slave and ivory country of the Bahr al-Ghzal." (26) Also among the lieutenants of the Mahdi were such personalities as "Uthman Digna and Ilyas Pasha Umm Birayr, who had been slave traders and who were better known in Britain than the Mahdi himself. The Baqqara, who composed the backbone of the Mahdi's army, were suspected of being slave traders too. And, unlike "Urabi Pasha, the Mahdi was silent about the slave trade and slavery in his statements and proclamations. In 1882 "Urabi Pasha included in his programme of national reform the complete abolition of slavery in Egypt. (27). The absence of such an item in the proclamations issued by the Mahdi prompted the Anti-slavery Reporter to protest against such an omission. (28).

However, it was doubtful that even if the Mahdi had included in one of his proclamations an article against the slave trade and slavery this would have induced the Anti-slavery society and its mouthpiece, the Anti-slavery Reporter, The Times and the Liberal Imperialists, to change or modify their views of the Mahdist Revolution as one of slave traders and holders. For, when "Urabi Pasha and his National Party declared that their programme contained the suppression of the slave trade and the abolition of slavery, the secretary of the Anti-slavery Society, Mr. Allen, took the cudgels against them in The Times; it was an unheard — of thing, he said, that a Muslim reformer should "dare to strike at the roots of a time honoured institution." (29). The same charge would have been levelled against the Mahdi if he dared to come out against the slave trade and slavery.

(26) G.N. Sanderson, *England, Europe and the Upper Nile, 1882-1899*, (Edinburgh, 1965), p. 15-16 also P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State in the Sudan, 1881-1898* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 34-5; *idem*, *A Modern History of the Sudan, from the Funj Sultanate to the Present Day*, (London, 1961), pp. 78-9.

(27) Anti-Slavery Society Papers, Rhodes House, Oxford; Wilfrid Blunt to Allen, 17 March, 1882; also The Times, 25 March, 1882.

(28) Anti-slavery Reporter, 12 May, 1883.

(29) The Times, 31 March, 1882; also Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Gordon at Khartoum*, (London, 1911), pp. 98-99.

Recent historical studies on the Mahdia do not confirm this portrait of the revolution which represented it as a slaver's revolt. Some modern historians say that the attempts of the Government to suppress the slave trade formed an immediate cause of discontent. (30) Others think that these attempts of the Government were one of the principal causes leading to the outbreak of the revolution. But modern historians do not go as far as to accuse the Mahdi himself of being a slave trader or a puppet of the slavers; they do not see in the revolution a movement engineered and led by slave traders.

Thus, this image of the revolution was certainly a mistaken one. That an element which formed the Mahdi's revolutionary army had been slavers did not prove the point. It was not shown, and is still to be investigated, whether the ex-slavers who joined the Mahdi had done so out of a conviction that the Mahdi was going to allow them to continue their trade or because they genuinely believed in the Mahdi's religious ideas. Also it had not been shown what percentage of the Mahdi's supporters were slave traders and whether they continued to practice their traffic during the revolutionary period. There was some evidence to show that until the Mahdi's death in June 1885 everybody who had joined the Mahdi was engaged in the jihad (holy war) and it could hardly be expected that any substantial number of the Ansar were occupied in slave-raiding or trading.

One other hostile view of the Mahdist Revolution, which was dominant was that which represented it as an essentially destructive and anarchical movement and which claimed that if the Mahdi succeeded a deluge of barbarism would certainly and necessarily follow his success.

The idea was continued to be propagated by a large section of the Press. The Times stated that the revolution meant

(30) P.M. Holt, *the Mahdist State*, p. 25. Muhammad Fu'ad Shukri, *Mist wa-l-Sudan*, (Cairo, 1958), p. 276; Al-Shatir Busaifi «Abd al-Jalil, *Ma'alim Tarikh Wadi al-Nil*, (Cairo, 1957), pp. 163-5. Makki Shibaika, *Al-Sudan fi Qarn 1819-1919* (Cairo, 1947), p. 154.

"rapine, bloodshed and discord." (31) To the Anti-slavery Reporter the revolution was a reign of anarchy and barbarism. (32) In May 1884 the Pall Mall Gazette claimed that the revolution "was degenerating into anarchy". (33).

This view was enthusiastically defended in the two Houses of Parliament. Mr. Goschen, the leader of the Liberal Imperialists, saw in the revolution nothing but "anarchy and fanaticism". (34) The Whig leader, Lord Hartington's portrait of the revolution was that of a "power of barbarism and anarchy." (35) The leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords, Lord Salisbury, denounced what he called the "oppressive", "barbaric" and "fanatic" character of the revolution. (36).

What evidence did the propounders of this view have to present to the public to prove that this image of the revolution was a correct one ? They alleged that the Ansar had "massacred" the Ottoman garrisons at el-Obeid (al-Ubayyid), Berber, Sinkat and Khartoum, and "butchered Hick's army". Because of these massacres and "those horrible" and "unparalleled scenes of carnage and ruin", the revolution, they argued, degenerated into a bloodthirsty orgy, a reign of terror and the Ansar were but fanatics and cutthroats.

However, the revolution found those who were willing to defend it against this charge. The Radicals denied that the revolution was aggressive and anarchical. They retorted that whenever a garrison had surrendered there was no massacre and the soldiers were incorporated in the victors' army and that it was only when the British Government began to intervene and to send troops that such massacres took place. (37). Moreover, if massacres could prove that a certain people were barbaric, the same charge could be laid upon British be-

(31) The Times, 31 Oct. 1883; also 12 Dec. 1885.

(32) Anti-Slavery Reporter, 19 March 1884.

(33) Pall Mall Gazette, 6 May 1884.

(34) Hansard, 3rd. ser., CCLXXXVIII, col. 270 13 May. 1884.

(35) Ibid., CCXCIV, Col. 1702, 27 Feb. 1885.

(36) Ibid., CCLXXXVIII, col., 1324, 27 Feb, 1885.

(37) Ibid., CCLXXXV, col. 763, 7 March 1884.

cause British troops had massacred the Egyptians at al-Tal al-Kabir and the Sudanese in the Eastern Sudan. (38).

Recent research has shown that these alleged "massacres" of the Ottoman garrisons by the Ansar were exaggerated and it has been shown that the Mahdi and his generals tried their best, and did succeed to a large extent, to avoid fighting and bloodshed whenever it was possible for them to expand the revolution peacefully and without shedding blood; and that many of the garrisons which were thought to be "massacred" had capitulated, incorporated in the revolutionary army and subsequently played a very important part in the spread of the revolution. (39).

Until the defeat of Hicks Pasha the British failed to recognise the Mahdi as a religious leader or to see that the revolution was primarily a religious one. It was only after November 1883 that some Britons began to think of the revolution as a religious revolt.

The War Office was the first governmental department to speak of the revolution in religious terms. A War Office memorandum entitled "The Insurrection of the False Prophet" written in the Intelligence Branch on the 23rd of November 1883 considered that one of the principal causes of the "rebellion" was the "religious fanaticism of the native tribes of the Sudan". The document attributed this "religious fanaticism" to the fact that "for many years the creed of Mohamad had been making immense strides in Central Africa where it seems to have a particular fascination for the native races"; and as a result of this expansion of Islam in Central Africa "the idea of the regeneration of Islam by force of arms has gained a considerable hold among" the Muslims. This report considered that according to the intentions of the Mahdi as set forth in his various proclamations the purpose of the Mahdist Revolution was "to establish the

(38) Ibid., CCLXXXV, col. 372-5, CCCXXXIV, col. 909, CCXCIV, col. 1329, CCLXXXVI, cols. 780-1.

(39) P.M. Holt, *The Mahdist State*, pp. 37-97.

thousand years kingdom in Mecca and to convert the whole world". (40).

The Press was late in admitting that the revolution was religious. It was only in November 1883 that the religious element in the revolution began to be explored and analysed in the columns of the Press. The daily papers, as well as some of the monthly and quarterly periodicals, entered into a discussion relating to the religious aims and motives of the Mahdi. The whole idea of a "Mahdi" and the prophecies bearing on it were discussed and the conclusion was often arrived at that Mohammatd Ahmad was a "False Prophet."

However, the estimate of the revolution as a religious one varied between two extremes. One extreme was represented by General Gordon who maintained that it was an entire mistake to regard the Mahdi as in any sense a religious leader and he thought that the movement was not religious but an outbreak of despair. (41) The other extreme was represented by the anti-imperialist Wilfrid Blunt and the Radical peer, Lord Derby, who had constantly stated their belief that the Mahdia was a revolutionary movement for the regeneration of Islam. Blunt compared the Mahdi with Muhammad Abd el-Wahab, the founder of the Wahabi movement in Arabia. He considered that the Mahdi resembled is almost every particular the founder of the Wahabi movement in Arabia. Lord Derby considered the Mahdi to be the head of a religious war, or a "Mohammadan crusade" and declared his conviction that as far as the religious force of the revolution "there has been nothing like it, I will not say since the day of the Prophet and his immediate successors, but certainly since the Wahabi movement in Arabia". (42).

If Wilfrid Blunt and Lord Derby were able to see in the Mahdist revolt a revolutionary reforming Islamic movement, they were not representatives of the general trend of thought.

(40) War Office 106/221 «The Insurrection of the False Prophet», compiled in the Intelligence Branch, 23 November, 1883, p. 1.

(41) Pall Mall Gazette, 8 Jan., 1884. Ibid., 6 May 1884.

(42) Hansard, 3rd ser., CCLXXXIV Col. 642, 12 Feb. 1884.

Ignorance of the religious aims of the Mahdi and the religious principles behind the revolution might have contributed to the British failure to envisage the revolution in terms of a movement for the revival of Islam. Interest on the part of another section of the British — the interest being personal, financial or imperial — forced them to deny or belittle the religious character of the revolution because the public at large was reluctant to acquiesce in the plans and policies of interested groups if the execution of such policies would lead to a religious war which might have wider repercussions in the Muslim world. A war with the Mahdi might excite the religious feelings of the Muslims under the British Crown. The Radical leader Sir George Campbell gave the warning that "it would be monstrous for the Government of the Queen, who had so many millions of Mohammedan subjects to embark on a crusade against this Mohamedan leader." (43).

A fairly common view of the revolution was that it was fanatical. It was believed that the Mahdi and his supporters were fanatic Muslims; and that their fanaticism was fostered with their hatred of the Christians. This fanaticism bred in them a strong desire to exterminate the Christians and to propagate anti-Christian ideas. (44) The belief was widespread that this so-called fanaticism was directed not only against Christianity but also against western civilisation too. It was commonly believed that this fanaticism had given to the Mahdist Revolution its militancy, its aggressiveness and the enthusiasm for the propagation by force of arms the religious principles of the revolution. The general view was that it was this "fanaticism" that bred and fed what was thought to be the Ansars' desire to shed blood.

This supposed fanatical character of the revolution aroused strong feelings among the British; and was condemned by nearly everybody in Britain. Even Mr. Wilfrid Blunt and Mr. Gladstone, who generally sympathised with the revolution, did not approve of it. Mr. Gladstone disliked it be-

(43) Ibid., CCLXXXIV. col. 643, 12 Feb. 1884.

(44) H. Ganem, «Europe's Stake in the Sudan», The Fortnightly Review, CCIX (May 1, 1884), pp. 650-9.

cause he thought it generated bloodshed. Wilfrid Blunt hated it because he assumed it had converted the Ansar into being reactionaries. (45).

Dr. Norman Daniel thinks that at all times, to the British and French alike, "fanaticism" was an congenial and an endless source of suspicion. (46). I would add that. It was also an endless source of fear. Most resistance movements to European imperialism and encroachment on the Muslim world in the nineteenth century took a religious form because the leaders of such movements were well aware that the Muslims could be persuaded to rebel if their religious feelings were excited. Religion was a stronger appeal than nationalism; and national feeling found its expression in religious movements.

So the fear of the Ansars' "fanaticism" was as much as hatred of it. It was feared that this "fanaticism" might cause excitement among the Muslims in other parts of the world; and especially among the Muslims in India. The Muslims under the British Crown might be roused into rebellion and in this case Britain would be forced to enter into a struggle with "Mohamedan fanaticism".

There was not doubt that the majority of British thinking people, although they did not fully understand the religious nature and ideology of the revolution, they envisaged that it was this factor that gave to the revolution what they considered to be a reactionary, anti-Christian and anti-Western characters. However, the British failed to understand that the religious enthusiasm of the Ansar to which the British gave the name "fanaticism" was the main force that gave to the revolution its militancy and that moved the Ansar to fight with bravery which astonished both friends and foes.

(45) Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, *Gordon at Khartoum*, (London, 1911), p. 29.

(46) Norman Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, (Edinburgh, 1966), p. 418.

Few Britons held the view that the revolution was a reaction to the encroachments of Christian Europe on Muslim lands. Wilfrid Blunt was a strong advocate of this idea. He argued that the Mahdist Revolution, like that of "Urabi, began as a national rebellion of a people against long misgovernment, but later took a religious complexion when Christian Europe had intervened in support of the tyrannical Khedive Tawfiq against the people. (47) Had the Christian army been withdrawn from Cairo, Blunt argued, "the Mahdi's rebellion would have lost its fanatical *raison d'être*". (48).

The Fortnightly Review discussed this theme and concluded that one of the causes of the "insurrection" in the Sudan was the apprehension excited among the Muslims by already witnessed by Christian Europe. France had occupied Tunis and England entered into possession of Egypt and the canal. (49).

Although this last named hypothesis attracted few contemporaries, modern historians were decidedly against it. Professor P.M. Holt thinks that originally the reaction was not against Christendom or Europe or the West, but against the religious establishment in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. (50).

Professor Shibeika and Professor Sanderson were of the same opinion. They regard the revolution as a movement which was directed against the Turks in the first place. (51) In fact the writings and proclamations of the Mahdi support this modern view. The Mahdi had specifically stated that his revolution was against the Turks who changed religion and replaced it by Kufr. They annulled the laws of the Merciful and revived the ways of Satan after their own inclination. (52).

(47) Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, op. cit., p. 29.

(48) Ibid., p. 16.

(49) H. Ganem, op. cit., p. 654.

(50) P.M. Holt, «The Place in History of the Sudanese Mahdia», Sudan Notes and Records, XL (1959), p. 108.

(51) Mekki Shibeika, British Policy in the Sudan 1882-1902, (O.U.P. 1952), pp. 18-19. G.N. Sanderson, op. cit., p. 15.

(52) Mahdia 1-34-11 the Mahdi to the Negus Yohanes 1302-1884-5 (no date or month).

It is hoped that I have succeeded in surveying some of the British views about the Mahdist Revolution which were current in contemporary Britain. It is remarkable that every idea or hypothesis originated with, was propagated and defended by a certain individual or group of men. The distinction must be made among three groups. First, there were those who before November, 1883, campaigned for the containment of the revolution in the Western Sudan and checking its advance into the Northern and Eastern Sudan, and, who, after the fall of Khartoum in January 1885, demanded that the British Government should intervene to crush the revolution. This group included such individuals as Sir Samuel Baker, as well as the Tories and the Liberal Imperialists. The second party tried its best to establish the principle of non-intervention and ultimately did succeed. This group opposed any direct British intervention in the Sudan, was willing to accept the existence of a Mahdist state as long as it confined itself to the Sudan and as long as it did not endanger the security of Egypt, of the sea communications to India and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. This group included Mr. Gladstone and behind him the majority of the Liberal Party in Parliament and in the country. The third group, which was a minority compared to the first two groups, sympathised with the revolution and even welcomed its expansion in other parts of the Muslim world. This group, the Radicals, was against any British military intervention to suppress the revolution inside the Sudan or to check its advance into other Muslim lands. If we use modern terms the first group were imperialists or colonialists while the second and third groups were anti-imperialists. Each of the two camps, the imperialists and the anti-imperialists, thought that their policy and attitude were the right ones and the ones which would serve the interests of Britain. Those who were imperialists usually advocated British intervention to contain or crush the revolution; and in order to convince themselves, the British Government and the public of the soundness of their policy and attitude, they portrayed the revolution in very dark terms. It is interesting to realise that the most unfavourable images of the revolution were those con-

structed and preached by the Conservatives and the Liberal Imperialists. Almost never did they pass a charitable judgment on the revolution. On the other hand, the anti-imperialists, in order to justify their anti-imperialist attitudes, pictured the revolution in favourable terms.

So in both cases the influence of policy on ideas was clear. The ideas of each group were dictated by a pre-conceived policy. The policy was determined by interest.

Ignorance was also largely responsible for many of the erroneous views about the revolution. Most of the British failed to understand the revolution because of their ignorance of all that pertained to the revolution and its leader. All reports on the revolution that reached England were third or fourth-hand information. Their inadequacy, contradictory nature and their mixture with the personal ignorance, prejudice and self-interest of those who had communicated them, can hardly escape the eye of an observer at this distant time.

The British Government and public possessed no authentic knowledge of the real nature and progress of the revolution, or a correct picture of the Mahdi's character, his intentions and his motives. This was due to the total lack of any sort of contact between Britain and the Sudan during this revolutionary period. To come to an appropriate understanding of the revolution, the British needed to arrive at an accurate estimate of the Mahdi's character, his views and his intentions. But, this was a knowledge which no Briton or an European had completely, or partially, acquired in the life time of the Mahdi. Mr. Gladstone was annoyed at the fact that he and his government knew neither the Mahdi's disposition nor his power. (53) The Fortnightly Review complained of the "mysterious and distant seclusion of the Mahdi" and the "absence of precise information concerning his person and the extent of his authority". (54) Sir Charles Wilson who was, in November 1884, in Dongola, complained not so much of the paucity of information reaching them from the Mahdi's camp as of the quality of it, which was all about

(53) Public Record Office 30-29-127 Gladstone to Granville 18 Dec. 1883.

(54) The Fortnightly Review, No. CCIX, May 1, 1884, p. 674.

sickness and as such could never be of help to them in assessing the strength and intentions of the Mahdi. (55).

This ignorance was clearly responsible for much of the almost universal unreality of everyone's thinking. Because no European could go into the Mahdi's association and then emerge to tell the Western World who on earth was that mysterious figure, no one could have known what was going in the Mahdi's mind, what he was thinking or planning and what were his motives. In these circumstances anyone could make his choice of what he wanted to believe. Nor was it difficult for any Briton to choose an opinion that flattered his prejudices, his ignorance and self-interest. And, as we have seen, such opinions based on ignorance and determined by self-interest and prejudice were far away from the truth as revealed by recent research on the Mahdia.

(55) Public Record Office, 30-57-5 C. Wilson to Kitchener, Dongola, 23 Nov. 1884.