

Coercion and armed conflict or the threat of it, played a pivotal role in the rapid rise and expansion of Islam in Arabia, Syria, North Africa, Persia and Central Asia after the death of Muhammad

ISLAM, CONQUEST AND EXPANSION

By Paul Stenhouse

This is the sixth in a series of eight articles

IN APRIL 637 AD, less than ten years after Heraclius the Byzantine emperor restored the relic of the true cross to the newly rebuilt Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, Muslim Arab forces sent by Caliph 'Umar from remote provinces in Arabia, had captured the Holy City.

Damascus had already fallen in September 635 AD, and the Muslim armies had seized more than two-thirds of Byzantine territory by 636. They were to take possession of large swathes of the former Persian empire, capturing and sacking Ctesiphon its capital, from 637 to 644 AD.

Arab raids into Byzantine and Persian territory were nothing new. They had taken place on and off for centuries. These recent Muslim raids, however, seemed to have a life of their own, and

their momentum showed no signs of waning. The prospect of booty was a major incentive.

'Umar and his Arab forces were not unaware that the disastrous war between Persia and the Byzantine empire that ended in 628 AD and had lasted on and off for 126 years had left both empires exhausted militarily and economically and riven by discord among the ruling classes. Their much flaunted wealth and hapless citizenry were fruit, ripe for the plucking.

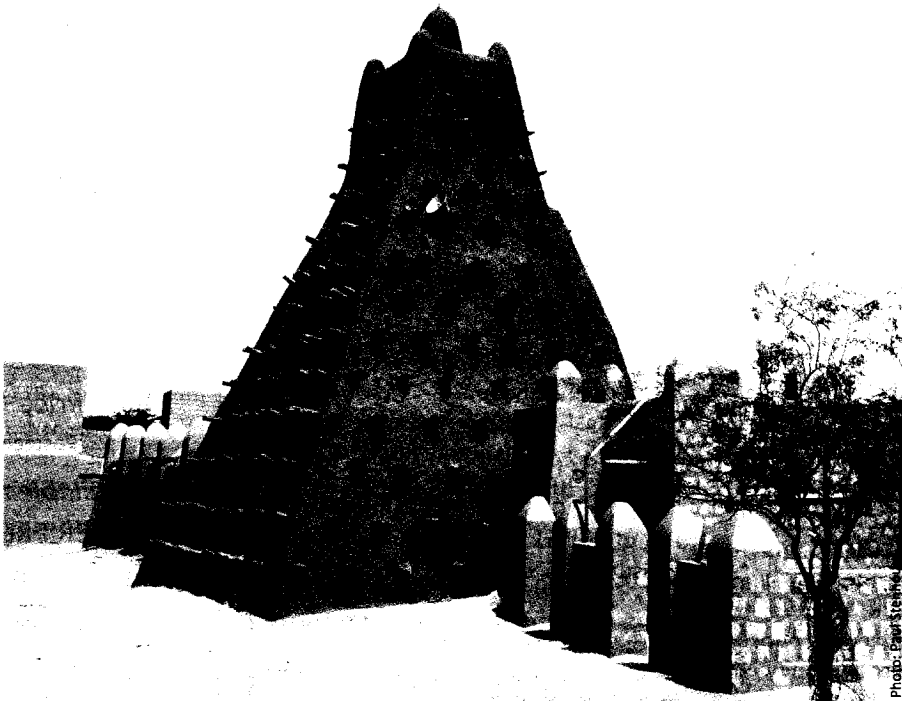
A Problem for Modern-day Muslims

Coercion and armed conflict or the threat of it, played a pivotal role in the rapid rise and expansion of Islam in Arabia, Syria, North Africa, Persia and Central Asia after the death of Muhammad. This cannot be denied without denying credibility to the bulk of Islam's historical and literary heritage.

Coercion and violence run like a *leitmotif* through the Qur'ān, and through the biographies of Muḥammad and his successors.¹

The same is true of the various histories of early expansionist Islam especially those by Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī [838-923 AD] from Tabaristan in Iran, and Aḥmad bin Yaḥya bin Jābir al-Baladhurī, [died 892 AD] also from Persia.²

Muḥammad, the early Caliphs who succeeded him as Princes of



Sankoré, one of Timbuktu's three mud-and-timber mosques, on the fringe of the Sahara in Mali.

Medina, and the Arab tribesmen who fought their jihads with such reckless abandon, were children of their times and of their desert milieu and tribal and nomadic customs.

Acknowledging this as an indisputable fact puts the violence of their eras in perspective, but as the noted Egyptian Arabist Father Samir Khalil Samir's comments, it also poses grave problems for 21st century Muslims – whether they live in Islamic societies or Western non-Muslim host countries that have welcomed them as refugees or migrants.

'Violence was definitely a part of the rapid rise and expansion of Islam. At the time no one found anything blameworthy in Muḥammad's military actions, since wars were part of the Arab Bedouin culture. Today the problem is that the fiercest Muslim groups keep adopting that model. They say: 'We have to take Islam to non-Muslims as the Prophet did, through war and violence,' and they base their statements on some verses of the Qur'^{ān}.'³

Some of the Muslim envoys sent to negotiate with the Persians, explaining who Muḥammad was, and what he taught, said:

'Some of us embraced Islam willingly; others as a result of coercion. ... One of the ideas that [Muḥammad] brought from our Lord was to wage war against those who were closest to us. We acted upon it among ourselves, and saw that there was no turning away from what he had promised us, or any revoking of it.'⁴

What these envoys referred to was not just *an idea* of Muḥammad. It was a key idea; crucial to his plan to capture Mecca. Many of the *Ansar* in Medina, Muḥammad's supporters among the Medinan tribes, were linked by family ties, trade, and the ancient pilgrim traditions, to friends and relatives in Mecca. And the *Muhajirun*, the Meccan emigrants, would have found it hard to use force against and to kill their relatives who would not give their 'Islam'.

Blood relationships were, for the Arabs, of all ties, the most sacred. The preaching of war as a sacred duty –

The Burden of Carrying the Keys

I DO NOT deny that I am guilty, for I see my torpor and my negligence. Perhaps my very recognition of failure will win me pardon from a sympathetic judge. When I lived in a monastic community I was able to keep my tongue from idle topics and to devote my mind almost continually to the discipline of prayer. Since taking on my shoulders the burden of pastoral care, I have been unable to keep steadily recollected because my mind is distracted by many responsibilities.

I am forced to consider questions affecting churches and monasteries and often I must judge the lives and actions of individuals; at one moment I am forced to take part in certain civil affairs, next I must worry over the incursions of barbarians and fear the wolves who menace the flock entrusted to my care; now I must accept political responsibility in order to give support to those who preserve the rule of law; now I must bear patiently the villainies of brigands, and then I must confront them, yet in all charity.

My mind is sundered and torn to pieces by the many and serious things I have to think about. When I try to concentrate and gather all my intellectual resources for preaching, how can I do justice to the sacred ministry of the word?

I am often compelled by the nature of my position to associate with men of the world and sometimes I relax the discipline of my speech. If I preserved the rigorously inflexible mode of utterance that my conscience dictates, I know that the weaker sort of men would recoil from me and that I could never attract them to the goal I desire for them. So I must frequently listen patiently to their aimless chatter. Because I am weak myself I am drawn gradually into idle talk and I find myself saying the kind of thing that I didn't even care to listen to before. I enjoy lying back where I once was loath to stumble.

Who am I - what kind of watchman am I? I do not stand on the pinnacle of achievement, I languish rather in the depths of my weakness.

— Pope Gregory the Great [ad 590-604], Homily on the Book of Ezekiel I, ii, 4-6.

jihad – sanctioned by Allah [Q 22³⁹; see 2¹⁶] gave Muhammad the leverage he needed to prevail upon his supporters to attack their kin, the pagan Meccans. They commenced in early 623 AD, with raids against Meccan caravans, seeking plunder, and culminating in the taking of Mecca itself in 629 AD.

Another side to 'Apostasy'

The so-called Wars of the Apostates, *ḥurūb al-ridḍa*,⁵ were waged by Muḥammad's first successor, Abū Bakr, allegedly to force back to Islam the 'apostate' Arab tribes – 'either a small group or the whole tribe apostatized from every tribe'⁶ – that objected to paying the alms tax

[the *Sadaqah*], and the wealth tax [the *zakaṭ*] imposed by Muḥammad. After Muḥammad's death they had felt free to withhold the tax and to withdraw *en masse* from Islam.

Abū Bakr, Muḥammad's first successor, would have none of it. He needed the tax to finance his Muslim army based in Medina. '[B]ecause of the fewness of the Muslims and the multitude of the enemy'⁷ he also would eventually need to re-insert the battle-hardened warriors who were disillusioned, and had withdrawn from Islam mainly because of the tax, into the small pool of nomadic fighters who had remained Muslims after the death of Muḥammad.

Abū Bakr made it clear that he didn't care whether the 'apostates' submitted – that is gave their *Islam* [submission] – 'willingly or unwillingly'; but submit they would, or face the consequences.

Some who submitted 'unwillingly' were among the number of those fighters who confronted the Persians. As the envoys said to Rustam, the Persian General: 'Some of us embraced Islam willingly; others as a result of coercion.'⁸

Abū Bakr was even prepared to launch a jihad or holy war against the 'apostate' Hadramis in Yemen, if they persisted in withholding the *Sadaqa* or alms tax.⁹

Conscription for taxation and later [from 636 AD] for military purposes, rather than *conversion* to Islam for their spiritual well-being, seems a more accurate description of what motivated Abū Bakr's zeal for compelling the 'apostate' nomadic tribesmen to submit, renounce their apostasy and pay their taxes; or suffer the consequences.

Philip Hitti in his *History of the Arabs* notes another motive for Abū Bakr's all-out attack on the apostates. By this show of strength he wanted to impress the Christian, Jewish and pagan Arab tribes that had withstood Muḥammad and his teaching until then, and win them over to submitting to Islam or at least accepting *dhimmi* status and paying the *jizya* or poll tax. This tax was exacted from adult male non-Muslims of military age. The *jizya* was a sign of a *dhimmi's* submission to the Islamic state and its laws.¹⁰

The allure of Booty – the spoils of War

Abū Bakr instructed Khalīd ibn al-Walīd nicknamed 'the unsheathed sword of Allah' [*as-saifallah as-sallīl*] to be firm:

'When you camp somewhere, make the call to prayer, and the *Iqāmah* [the 2nd call to prayer said in the mosque]. Then if the people make the call to prayer, and the *Iqāmah*, leave them be. But if they don't, then there is nothing to do but attack them. Kill them by every means, by fire or something like that. If they answer the invitation to submission, to 'Islam,' then question them. If they are prepared to pay the *zakat*, accept

that from them. If they refuse, all you can do is attack them without any more ado.¹¹

The Arab military force that Abū Bakr's policy of intransigence and brutality made possible, and that his successor 'Umar unleashed with such ferocity on the Byzantine and Persian Empires subsequent to the Wars of the Apostates which ended in March 633 AD, and the capture of Damascus in September 635, was lured mainly by the tales of booty to be had in the enemies' cities and treasuries.

The Arab raids that developed into an all-out war were not aimed principally at converting Zoroastrian Persians or Christian Byzantines, or pagan nomads to Islam. They seem to have been outlets for the warrior class of the nomadic tribes that had embraced Islam and were forbidden to fight one another. Apart from letting off steam, the main reason for them to fight was the hope of booty to be shared among the victors who survived. As the amount of booty grew, enthusiasm for yet more war, and therefore more booty, mounted.

Some of those who protested that they would prefer the Persians to convert to Islam 'to taking your spoils,'¹² were playing the *da'wa* card. For the invitation to accept Islam [*da'wa*] had to be made and rejected before the killing and booty-taking could be justified.

Conversion a Threat to the Exchequer

If Christians and Jews accepted Islam, they were exempted from the *jizya*, the poll tax paid by dhimmis to the treasury. During the time of 'Uthman, the third Caliph in Medina, Egypt's Copts who refused to renounce their Christian faith paid twelve million gold dinars¹³ in tribute. But by the time of Mu'awiya the first 'Umayyad Caliph in Damascus, after many Copts had become Muslims to avoid paying the tribute, the total income from Egypt fell to five million. And under 'Umar II it fell still lower.

Years later, from 699-701 AD, confronted by large numbers of so-called 'converts to Islam' anxious to avoid the tax, Al-Hajjāj bin Yūsuf, the tyrannical Governor of Kūfa in

Islam and Civil Society

ISLAM can only exist if it is the official Religion of the State. If it is reduced to the status of a free or individual religion, it will perish. It isn't, however, a State Religion as Catholicism was in France under Louis XIV. ... It is a Religion that excludes the State. It is eternal war. ... Islam is the most complete negation of Europe. It is fanaticism; it is disdain of science; it is suppression of civil society; it is the frightening simplicity of the Semitic spirit; it is the narrowing of the mind, closing it off to every subtle idea, to all rational research, to confront it with an eternal tautology: 'God is God'.

The future, Gentlemen, belongs to Europe; and only to Europe. Europe will conquer the world and spread its religion of laws, of liberty, of respect for men – that belief that there is something divine in the heart of humanity ... in a word we will pursue the nuance, the finesse instead of dogmatism, the relative instead of the absolute.

— Ernest Renan, *De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation*, 1862, Trans. Paul Stenhouse.

Iraq, simply changed the rules. The new Muslim converts in Iraq lost their exemption from the *jizya* tax. The importance of the tax was paramount. It took precedence over conversion.¹⁴

Persia on the Brink

Muslim envoys led by al-Mughirah, offered the Persians the all-too familiar options: Embrace Islam, or pay the *jizya*, the poll tax, or fight and be killed.¹⁵

'We call upon you to embrace Islam and to accept its authority. If you agree, we shall leave you alone; we shall return [to our country] and leave with you the Book of God. If you refuse, the only permissible thing for us to do is to engage you in battle unless you ransom yourselves by paying the poll tax. If you pay this, well and good, if not, then God has already bequeathed to us your country, your sons, and your property. Heed, therefore, our advice. By God, we prefer your conversion to Islam to taking your spoils, but we would rather fight you than make peace with you.'¹⁶

The Persian General Rustum whose counsel was spurned by his 27-year-old king Yazdajird III to whom he nevertheless remained loyal, was astute enough to identify the *real* reason, among all the good ones the envoys offered.

This is how he responded to the invitation [*da'wa*] extended by the

envoys, according to the Persian Muslim historian Al Tabari, [839-923 AD]:

'We did not treat you badly nor did we stop sharing our wealth with you [a reference to the Arab tribes that had been allies of the Persians against the Byzantines]. Time and again you were forced out of your country [and into ours] by drought and we used to provide you with supplies and send you back home. You used to come to us as labourers and merchants and we treated you well. After you partook of our food, drank our drink and rested in our shade you described this in favourable terms to your people, invited them to come and brought them to us. ... I know that only greed, covetousness and privation have caused you to do this. Go back this year, supply yourselves with provisions and you can return whenever you are in need, for I have no desire to kill you.'¹⁷

The spoils, however, were too enticing. And 'Umar would have suspected or hoped that the Persians did not have their heart in a fight. The response had already been given by the envoys: '[W]e would rather fight you than make peace with you'.¹⁸

Brave Rustam was slain, and the foolish young emperor took flight, only to be murdered ignominiously for his clothing and his jewellery in 651 by one of his own entourage, in a miller's hut in Merv, in remote Turkmenistan.¹⁹

ANNALS AUSTRALASIA

Australia's favourite Catholic magazine since 1889

*Give yourself and your family a treat
Subscribe to Annals Australasia
The best gift you can give yourself*

RATE WITHIN AUSTRALIA

\$33 for one year [10 issues – incl. GST]

\$60.50 for two years [20 issues – incl. GST]

ORDER FORM

To: *Annals Australasia* P.O. Box 13, Kensington NSW 2033

Please mail us *Annals Australasia* for 1 year 2 years

Name

Address

..... Postcode.....

Phone: ()

Payment [Please tick appropriate box]

- Cheque made payable to *Annals Australasia*
- Please accept \$..... as a donation to *Annals Australasia*
- Please debit my Visa/Master A/c with \$.....

____ / ____ / ____ / ____

Signature Card expiry Date.....

Name [block letters]

Heresy, Power Grabs and Blunders

The Persians, like the Byzantines, for all their dithering and internal dissensions, nevertheless made a brave show of defending themselves. That their defences proved ineffective was due, in no small part, to the fact that their subject peoples were tempted to view the invading Muslims as liberators from centuries of Persian or Byzantine oppression, especially from excessive taxation.

By the time the Muslim armies were confronting Byzantine and

Persian forces, both empires had seriously prejudiced their chances of survival.

The Byzantines especially had lost the confidence and trust of many of the Catholic or formerly Catholic Arab tribes that lived or moved along their borders, and who were their natural allies. Some of these Christian Arab tribes and their grievances were named and discussed in our first article [Annals 2/2015].

By their harsh treatment of tribesmen who were Nestorians or Monophysites, successive emperors, generals and patriarchs had lost

any slim hope they may have had of repelling the fanatical Muslim tribesmen who made up the armies of Abū Bakr, and ‘Umar.

Had Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, followed Belisarius’s example and treated these Arab tribes more justly, one can only speculate how successful his forces would have been in repulsing the Muslim invaders, as Khalīd ibn al Walīd moved into and against Roman Syria in 634.

Caesaropapism

A virulent infection that was eventually to lead the Byzantine Greeks into schism from the Catholic Church in 1054, and ultimately to destroy the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453, and that has continuing political and religious consequences in our 21st century, was what has been called ‘Caesaropapism’.

This awkward word aptly describes the inordinate influence that some emperors and imperial courts exercised in matters of Faith in the eastern Catholic Church. In practice, they denied that Rome and the Pope, the successor of St Peter, had any authority or responsibility over matters of faith in the eastern Catholic Church; or that the Pope had final authority in questions of faith; or that he was acknowledged to be the final court of appeal in the east as in the west.

The authority and role of the Pope of Rome was clear enough, however, to Eustathius, Bishop of the Saracens, who was one of the signatories, along with the Bishops of Phoenicia, to a letter written to Pope St Leo the Great regarding the murder of Proterius, the Patriarch of Alexandria, in 457 AD.

It was just as clear to Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria – *patriarchs* were still in the future – who wrote two hundred years before, to Pope Xystus, in 257 AD bringing him up-to-date on the heresy of Sabellius in Cyrenaica, in Libya. And when, on the death of Pope Xystus, Dionysius was himself delated to Rome by St Basil and some other bishops, Dionysius showed no resentment. He accepted the Pope’s right to judge him, but protested his innocence.²⁰ And was vindicated.

America and Islam

A POPULAR topic for discussion on Arabic TV channels is the best strategy for conquering the West. It seems to be agreed that since the West has overwhelming economic, military and scientific power, it could take some time, and a full frontal assault could prove counterproductive. Muslim immigration and conversion are seen as the best path. Saudi Professor Nasser bin Suleiman al-Omar declared on al-Majd TV last month, 'Islam is advancing according to a steady plan, to the point that tens of thousands of Muslims have joined the American army and Islam is the second largest religion in America. America will be destroyed. But we must be patient.'

— Anthony Browne, 'The Triumph of the East,' *The Spectator*, July 24, 2004.

This is not the place to explore this topic. Suffice to say that the refusal of some Byzantine emperors and patriarchs to acknowledge the primacy of Rome and the Pope in matters of faith, meant there was no brake on the madcap interference by numerous emperors, Heraclius among them, to resolve religious discord in the empire by supporting equally suspect theses and issuing edicts that exacerbated the discord.

The discord was further compounded and the Eastern Catholic populace even more confused by Arian Byzantine emperors, heretical patriarchs of Constantinople like Nestorius, and the Monothelite Patriarch Paul II; and Constantinopolitan Archimandrites like Eutyches, with his Monophysite heresy.

No wonder that when the integrity of the empire was threatened by a foreign army, both civil and ecclesiastical authorities in most provinces felt little or no loyalty to Constantinople, and were relieved to have seen the last of the Byzantines. Even, and at times especially, the military just faded away.

When the Byzantine garrison in Damascus abandoned them, the Damascenes capitulated. The grandfather of St John Damascene was one of the ruling class who opened the gates of the oldest occupied city in the world and accepted the terms of surrender laid down by the victorious Muslims in late 635 AD.

The terms concluded with the following reassurance that

presumably put the Damascenes' minds at rest about the newcomers' intentions: 'As long as they pay the poll tax [*jizya*], nothing but good shall befall them'.²¹

This sounded manageable; much less oppressive than the Byzantines !

Next Month: Islam's early contact with the West.

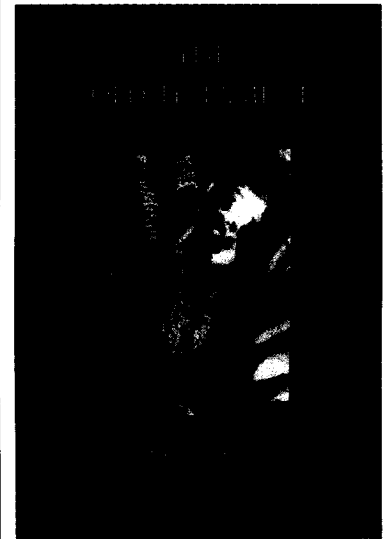
1. The first four Caliphs of Medina [632-661 ad], the Umayyid Caliphs of Damascus [661-750 ad], and the Abbasid Caliphs in Baghdad [750-1258 ad]
2. Al-Baladhuri took his name from a memory-enhancing drug called *Baladhur* that killed him.
3. Samir Khalil Samir *et al*, *111 Questions on Islam*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2002, p.66.
4. The History of Al-Tabari, 39 vols., vol xii, State University of New York Press, 1992, pp.79, 80; *Tarikh Al-Tabari*, 2 vols., Dar Ibn Hazim, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. i, p.1029, trans. Paul Stenhouse.
5. Cf. *Annals Australasia* 5/2015
6. *The History of Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol x, p.41; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed. cit., vol. i, p.872, trans. Paul Stenhouse.
7. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. x, p.14; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. i, p.863, trans. Paul Stenhouse.
8. See footnote⁴.
9. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. x, p.177. *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. i, p.918.
10. History of the Arabs from the earliest times to the present, Macmillan New York, 1968, p.159.
11. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol.x, pp.100-101; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, *ibid*, p.890.
12. cf. footnote⁶. See also *Al-Tabari*, vol.xii, p.75; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, *ibid*, p.1026.
13. I assume that this refers to millions of gold dinars. The Arabs before this did not usually deal in gold. Though Mecca's trade was estimated to be worth 300,000 gold pounds when Muhammad took it in 629 according to Albert Guillaume, *Islam*, Penguin, 1954, p.42. During the Khilafate of 'Umar the weight of 10 dirhams is estimated to have been equivalent to 7 dinars, i.e. one mithqal or 4.25 grams. See www.sunnahmoney.com/gold-dinar-silver-dirham/
14. Reinhart Dozy, *Spanish Islam*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1913, p. 123, and see pp.110-112.
15. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. xii, p.74; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, *ibid*, p.1027.
16. *Al-Tabari*, ed. cit. vol xii, p.80; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. i, p.1029.
17. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. xii, pp.76-77.
18. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. xii, p.80; *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. i, p.1029
19. Hitti, History of the Arabs, ed.cit. p.158
20. Michael Winter, *Saint Peter and the Popes*, London, Darton Longman and Todd, 1960, p.185.
21. See Al-Baladhuri, *Kitab Futuh al-Buldan*, translated by Philip Khuri Hitti, Columbia University, 1916 [reprint Gorgias Press, 2002] p.187.

From Chevalier Press

The Old Testament

MICHAEL FALLON, MSC

The term Old Testament came to be used by Christians to distinguish the inspired books of the Jewish faith from the writings of the New Testament that emerged within the Christian community in the first century AD.



Father Michael Fallon offers here an Introduction to the reading of books of the Older Testament – material he has been working on for over twenty-five years. Much of the material in this book can be found in the Introductions to the commentaries listed in the frontispiece. It is hoped that the reader will find it helpful to have the material available in a single volume.

Price \$30

[includes postage in Australia + GST]

Available now from
CHEVALIER PRESS PO Box 13,
Kensington NSW 2033

Ph: (02) 9662 7894, Fax: (02) 9662 1910
Email : chevalierpress@gmail.com

ASK FOR A LIST OF OUR OTHER
CATHOLIC PUBLICATIONS