

REVIEW ARTICLE / NOTE BIBLIOGRAPHIQUE

Modern Challenges to Islamic Thought

Islamic revival in the Muslim countries is a highly controversial topic; and one can be distinctly tendentious about this phenomenon, depending upon the perspective one adopts. There is a whole range of possibilities that may be offered to explain this development, from the post-world war II decolonization to the Palestinian question, as well as the oil crisis and the Islamic revolution in Iran. The goal of this resurgence is to assert, it may be safely argued, the glory of Islam by emphasizing the classical religious values as formulated by the earlier jurists, in relation to the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet. In its political formulation, it is militant, authoritarian and deeply anti-Western.

The Muslim communities around the world are bewildered by the pressures of globalization. There is general agreement among them that the message of Islam is universal; the main question is how to make it meaningful in the context of modern times. Or, how best to adjust its value-system in a world which has progressed rapidly beyond the Industrial and the Social Revolutions which, of course, by themselves were a major turning point in the history of mankind. The roots of these changes are Western and modernity therefore has a distinctly Western orientation. How to

modernize without necessarily becoming Westernized is a dilemma that most non-Western countries are facing and it is a special challenge for the Muslim society as a whole.

Islam came into being as an innovative and a dynamic force, departing completely in the essential matter of the belief it professed (i.e. oneness of God, responsibility to do good deed, and to pursue equity and justice), and yet adapting to the institutional practices of the times where they did not conflict with the belief. Given that heritage, the question is how to build the new Muslim societies by incorporating modern innovations which have undoubtedly a universal appeal, such as the electoral rules and the parliamentary system, and the other elements associated with them including accommodation of dissent and freedom of expression. In any endeavour in this direction, contradictions are bound to emerge as possible solutions are identified.

The book by Monshipouri is a welcome contribution to this very important subject. He underlines this dilemma with reference to human rights. The subject is controversial and the main question is whether it is possible to refer to basic human rights independent of cultural-religious boundaries. The issue gets clouded by the fact that there is a vibrant cultural tradition associated with the West in general and especially with the U.S. as the dominant single power. Further complications arise in Muslim countries as they struggle between the classical sharia and the modernist thinking, especially when many aspects of the American life style seem to be in conflict with the moral values of Islam. Also, the mainstream Islamic thinking has as yet to come to terms with the phenomenon of civilizational pluralism. And, the question of the rights of the individual as a member of the community remains unresolved.

The author focuses on this problem with reference to what he calls Islamism that underlies the religious awakening in private lives, as well as political activism. The conflict in areas such as the status of women and the role of minorities in a Muslim society takes an intractable shape when it is asserted by the traditionalist ulama (the religious scholars) that the current practices are based on the laws of God.

In defence of these and other practices, it is usually asserted that they are rooted in the value system and a defined code of morality. But the appeal of cultural relativism is weak, says the

author, because both Islam and the western tradition show a common concern for humanity and that "social justice and individual freedom are two sides of the same issue" (p.26). There is no easy solution, however, in my view. A simple path leading to a possible confluence of the two different perspectives is not really in offing. The situation gets more compounded by the fact that the Muslim world is experiencing the rapid changes that are associated with international capitalism. All this brings with it tensions and crises, in the political field as well as in the realm of economic reform. I agree with the author, however, that it would be simplistic to regard this phenomenon as a clash of civilizations, because the "clash" is largely a result of misled Western apprehensions (p.66), highlighted by Samuel Huntington in his recent book on the subject.

The author seems to take the position that the Islamic scholars and the Muslim political leaders have frequently found themselves grappling with forces of modernity, so that a way could be established to participate in the global progress and still avoid some excesses of Western life style. The effort to define a Codex Islamicus of human rights, therefore, "can be viewed as a dynamic in this process of change" (p.66)

This optimism might be somewhat misplaced, because it is possible to argue that the traditionalists view the Codex Islamicus as a means to enshrine the traditional views under a new name. There is already a tendency among some Muslim countries to accept the guarantee for the rights of women but with a caveat such as "according to the Islamic standards" (mentioned by the author himself) or even a more categorical condition recently imposed by a country like Pakistan which suggests that the new human rights convention would be subject to the provisions of the constitution of the Islamic Republic.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first three chapters, Monshipouri examines the general principles with a focus on the Islamic dynamics and the issue of human rights. He is of the opinion that there is a broad understanding about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and, therefore, there are limits to the culturally determined conceptions. Also, apart from the UDHR, the other two documents on International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) provide the

means by which the cultural gaps can be narrowed from the point of view of an individual, irrespective of his religious/cultural identity. There may be reason for optimism in this regard, though the question of economic rights is often brought up as a counter to the UDHR in the North-South encounters.

In the second part of his book where he presents case studies on Turkey, Pakistan and Iran, there is an unmistakable mood of pessimism. The future of human rights in Muslim countries is intimately tied to the issue of what the author refers to as secularism versus Islamism. In his concluding remarks, however, he expresses his firm hope and belief that the Islamicists and the secularists have to find a way to coexist, and that Islamic ideals can be adapted to today's emerging transnational moral standards. "Such a goal requires a balance between faith and reason, not the dominance of one over the other" (p.235).

I remain sceptical about this scenario. There is no doubt that state-sponsored secularisation has its limits, as illustrated by the situation in Turkey. And in this case the human rights record of the secularists is nothing to be proud of. Turkey, however, presents only one example in the Muslim world with its unique commitment to secularism, and Egypt is perhaps another with its pseudo-secular leadership. In general, the Muslim leaders seek support from the Islamicists to promote their legitimacy, and in so doing they encourage the elements that advocate the supremacy of traditional sharia (Islamic jurisprudence) over modernity. The author assures us that the solution is not in trying to supplant faith because religion will continue to function as the main source of morality and will provide with social support in times of need and crisis (234), and that more lasting solution will emerge with the development of a "dynamic interpretation that emphasizes spirituality of intent over the sanctity of the text" (234). I hesitate to concur with this statement, as there seems to be no prospect for this to occur in the Muslim world in the near future.

The book is a bit terse in style but deserves a serious reading. It would have enhanced its theme if the author had allotted some space to examine specific human rights issues in order to demonstrate why, and why not, there is acceptance for them as being universal, or culture free.

The second book presents a discussion on the role of Muslim intellectuals in modern Indonesia. It is based on the research

initially done by the author during 1984-87 when he had an opportunity to reside in that country in connection with a lengthy assignment. The book had been completed before President Sukarno's resignation and the subsequent events following that resignation. The theme of the book has relevance for the current situation, especially with reference to the possible role of religion in the future of the country. The author is of the view that the thinking of Indonesian Muslim intellectuals, not always original, has nevertheless shown a remarkable adaptation to the national environment, and it has had a profound effect on that society.

Historically, Islam has been a very important factor in the growth of the sultanates that were scattered throughout Southeast Asia including the Indonesian archipelago. Merchants and itinerant teachers had introduced it, and its propagation was facilitated by the fact that it took cognisance of local customs and traditions, though there was resistance from the traditionalist Muslims to this "mix". The growing power of the Dutch became a significant challenge for the local population, and the fundamentalist thinking became a bulwark against the European influence. In general, however, the local rulers adapted to the new circumstances. Islamic activism, therefore, emerged in the form of non-government associations.

Islam remained an active force throughout the colonial period, with neo-Sufism as its main feature. It was "neo" because its goal was to bring about purification of Islam from foreign rituals. Two organisations are worth mentioning in this regard: Muhammadiyah and Sarekat Islam, the latter being prominent from 1912 to 1926 and the former has remained a premier Muslim association representing modernist Muslims in the country.

With the establishment of Independent Indonesia, the secular political movement under the leadership of Sukarno who, instead of emerging as a representative of Islam became the spokesperson of nationalist-socialist reform, bringing to bear upon his new role the weight of being a charismatic founding father of the nation. The Islamic groups were fractured during that period but were nevertheless strong, perhaps stronger than the communist elements. In the two alternatives between an Islamic state and a state based on secular politics, the latter was firmly established under Sukarno, with an accommodation for the religious factors in the new ideology of Pancasila for the country's identity. This

national slogan included belief in God but defined religion as a personal affair; the other principles enunciated in it were nationalism, democracy, humanitarianism and social justice. It is clear that in Sukarno's guided democracy, Islam was given a secondary and a cooperative; and good Islamic leaders were expected, in the national interests, to cooperate with the state

After Sukarno, this pattern continued. Military was an important player in the new regime but Suharto organized his political forces through his party, Golkar, with the leading elements in the party being the military and the modernists. The objective of the state continued to be expressed through Pancasila. Wherever the fundamentalist pressures arose, they were ruthlessly dealt with. A number of active Islamicists, however, associated themselves with the Dar al-Islam movements, which first emerged during the early fifties, local in nature but vigorous and persisting in West Java, Celebes and North Sumatra.

What then is in store for the post-Suharto Indonesia with reference to the role of Islam? The author could not have anticipated this question but subject matter of his book lends itself to this examination. His focus is on the writings of the Muslim intellectuals, consisting of 100-200 people located mostly in Jakarta, Bogor, Bandung and Yogyakarta. Of these he selected seventeen for his detailed discussion, though he made suitable references to others, wherever appropriate. These seventeen include ex-cabinet ministers, academics, technocrats, and journalists. They are all male, ranging from 35 to 67 in age. All have received formal Western-style education, most with a Master's, some with Ph.D.

Federspiel examines the views of these seventeen men with reference to two models of development: national model associated with the experience of secular growth in Southeast Asia, and Islamic Values model the objective of which is religious renewal. A clear majority among the seventeen seem to lean towards the latter model. There are differences among the supporters of this model, however, a majority clearly showing a tendency towards modernism.

The author has produced a useful book, but his message remains feeble, mainly because he has confined himself to a general discussion. What, for example, is the shape of the Islamic state in these writings, of the role of parliamentary democracy, of human rights, of economic and financial policy, especially in the

context of Islamic banking and finance, etc. Perhaps the scope of his discussion is limited by the fact that the Indonesian Muslim thought has not yet come to grips with these issues. There does not seem to be a concrete framework for the Islamic Values model. The roots of Islamic resurgence, however, do not necessarily lie in clearly defined blueprints about politics and the economy. What propels this militancy is the failure of the existing regimes to deliver on their promises about the well being of the common people.

These two books, singly and together, add a perspective on the continuing Islamic discourse.