BOOK REVIEW


This is a welcome contribution to the biography of the Prophet. Writing the life of the Prophet has become commonplace. But works, authentic, concise and comprehensive, are rare on the subject. This book presents a vivid picture of the personality of the Prophet in the light of the rise of Islam, his mission and the beliefs and practices of religion. The author refutes frequently the charges levelled against the Prophet and his mission by the opponents.

The book is divided into twelve chapters along with a foreword by Professor Humayun Kabir. The author first traces the historical antecedents of the Prophet, discussing his early life and efforts to propagate Islam at Mecca and Medina. He then briefly surveys the fundamental doctrines of Islam and its religious practices. He also throws light on the spiritual bases and the ethical code of Islam, 'Personal life, traits and practices of the Prophet' and 'achievements and contributions', are the last two important chapters of the book.

In his foreword, Prof. Humayun Kabir has shown that the most significant thing about Muhammad is his essential humanity to which the Qur'an bears clear testimony. He maintains that the greatest contribution of the Prophet to the religious thought is his emphasis on reason and education. Justifying the finality of the prophethood he remarks, ".....earlier religious enunciations were based on faith and authority and demanded constant revision. The enunciation of faith in the Qur'an is based on reason which contains within itself its own corrective principles and hence requires no fresh enunciation" (p. VI). This is a mere proposition and statement for which Professor Kabir does not provide any evidence. Further, he fails to give us in detail the 'corrective principles' contained in the Qur'an which make it eternal. Islam gives us a number of beliefs which are based on faith and authority and we can hardly justify them on the basis of pure reason. Reason and religion are two parallel approaches to God. If religion too stands on pure reason, and not on faith and authority, then there should be no distinction between the teachings of a prophet and those of a philosopher. The Qur'an, of course, exhorts man to exercise reason to understand the faith but does not make it the only basis for the faith.

In his preface, the author mentions the purpose of writing this book in the following words:

"The main purpose of the book as mentioned earlier is to study the personality of the Prophet and his teachings, which provide a complete code for the brotherhood of man and a profound message of peace, toleration, good-will, amity and humanism, so much needed by this strife-ridden world." (p. x). It is not perhaps correct to say that the personality of the Prophet and his teaching provide a complete code, because code is defined as (1) one of the systematic collections of statutes made by the later emperors especially the code of Justinian-Roman Law; (2) hence, a digest of the laws of a country." (The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary). In this sense the Prophet did not leave for us a code except the Qur'an which cannot be called a 'code'. Instead, we should say that the life and the teachings of the Prophet provide basic values and source-material to formulate a code in different conditions.
The author deals with the message and the mission of the Prophet at length, and has succeeded in showing on the basis of the Qur'ān that “the mission of the Prophet was to proclaim the unity of God and the unity of man and to guide mankind to the path of virtue and piety. (p. 55). He very aptly refutes the charge that Islam was propagated by force. Replying to the critics he observes: “Hostile critics fail to appreciate that a religion which has such enormous following and is gaining more and more adherents every day, could not have spread through aggression but only on the basis of its own sterling merits. (pp. 62-63).

The author studies in detail the concept of God in Islam, particularly the unity of God, basing himself mostly on the Qur'ān. He points out that the followers of various religions other than Islam were led astray with regard to this concept for three main reasons. They are: (1) the use of symbols, (3) the separation of attributes from the Entity and treating them as entities by themselves, and (3) the attempt to reconcile the duality of God and the fact of evil. (p. 72). Further, he seeks to prove the belief in the transcendence and immanence of God in Islam on the basis of Qur'ānic verses. (pp. 77-78). But he fails to explain this contradiction.

Discussing the religious practices of Islam, the author attempts to rationalise them because they are generally considered only as rituals. About these practices severely he says: “These prayers are no ritual but a soul elevating experience” (p. 86). “One month’s fasting is a rigorous spiritual exercise calculated to help man in this struggle. Fasting means not only abstaining from eating and drinking but also control of passions and carnal desires, and the subordination of one’s animal nature to reason and the spirit” (p. 87).

“If belief is a spiritual duty, and prayer and fasting and Haj are bodily duties, the payment of Zakāt is a fiscal duty.” (p. 88). “Haj is not a ceremonial on a grand scale but its essential purpose is remembrance of God. Literally Haj means an effort. In essence it means a great effort for assimilating oneself with the will of God” (p. 88). Rationalising the rituals and religious practices is of course important. But what is more important is to emphasise the fact that these are the divine commands. One should follow them not because of their value and ratio but because they are duties imposed by God. Further, rituals constitute a component part of religion. They can hardly be explained in terms of reason.

Under the caption ‘Spiritual bases of Islam’ the author makes an analysis of the moral qualities like piety, sincerity, trust in God, patience and thankfulness. According to him, the spiritual edifice of Islam stands on these fine qualities. Out of these qualities he gives prominence to piety (taqwā). Discussing taqwā he remarks: If the sum total of the Prophet’s teachings were to be expressed in one word, that word would be taqwā or piety. According to the Prophet piety is a state of conscience which, imbued with a living sense of the omnipresence of God, strengthens the discernment of right and wrong, stimulates the doing of good deeds, and inhibits man from doing evil deeds.” (p. 94). The author attempts to present the concept of ‘ibādat (worship) in Islam in a wider sense. According to him, all acts of Muslim, whether religious or temporal, if they fall in line with the divine prescription, and the ethical code, can be given spiritual touch and raised to the status of worship.” (p. 99). But one might ask: what shall we say of the acts which are indifferent, i.e., which fall neither under ‘prescription’ nor under ‘prohibition’? Are they too worship? By making such statements one severely confines the liberty given by Islam.
‘Achievements and contributions’ is the longest chapter of this book. In this chapter the author discusses Islam’s contribution to (1) the realm of belief and thought, (2) education, learning and science (3) political thought (4) social and economic system, and (5) culture and civilization. Appreciating Muslims’ contribution to science the author remarks, “Science owes a great deal more to Arab culture, it owes to it its very existence. Science is the most momentous contribution of Arab civilization to the modern world” (p. 157). This might be true in a sense, but it should be noted that the modern world has developed science and technology to such an extent that it is difficult to compare it with Muslim Science. Muslims eulogize their past perhaps to hide the ugly realities of the present. But to be realistic one should be self-critical. The author also presumes that Muslims owe their progress in physical sciences to the teachings of the Qur’an. The Qur’an, according to him, exhorts Muslims “to exercise intellect to acquire knowledge by study of Nature and history etc.” (p. 158). It should be remarked that the object of the Qur’an in stimulating the study of the universe and nature was not to develop Science but to enable man to understand his Creator.

Analysing the political doctrine in Islam, the author points out that sovereignty belongs to God. The caliph, according to him, is a representative of the people, “subject to the same laws as the people,” and can be deposed if he fails to observe them” (pp. 167-68). This might be theoretically true. But in practice we find that ‘Uthman the third caliph, when he was asked by the people to abdicate, is reported to have said, “I cannot put off the robe (of the caliphate) which God bestowed on me.” The author is perhaps aware of this conflict between theory and practice in respect of political doctrine. Hence, he himself removes this misgiving by saying: ‘When any Muslim ruler, for reasons of state and otherwise, deviated from the principles, it was his personal fault and no blemish on Islam (p. 171).

The author also makes a survey of economic system in Islam. He thinks that Islam has bridged the chasm between the rich and the poor by enjoining the payment of zakāt, law of inheritance, and by fixing moral responsibility upon the well-to-do to take care of the poor, the orphans and the widows. This he proves on the basis of the Qur’an (p. 179). The poor, according to him, have not been left to the ‘vagaries’ of charity, since the state is responsible for them. Again he is of the view that “Islam does not prohibit accumulation of wealth by honest means nor does it curb initiative and enterprise but it prohibits exploitation and frowns upon niggardliness and hoarding on the one hand and places wholesome restraints on the other (p. 180). The reviewer is of the opinion that Islam basically aims at maintaining social justice and uprooting the chances of economic exploitation. It does not give us a pre-planned, well calculated, fixed and detailed economic system for all times. On the contrary, it does provide us with such values as can be developed into an economic system according to the varying circumstances. The permission of private property and free enterprise can be withdrawn if they become a source of exploitation and social injustice. This, however, depends on the situation. Further, the principle that a part of property be taken from the rich and returned to the poor guarantees the survival of the poor as a class in the society. Islam, of course, tolerated this state of affairs in the early stages as a makeshift, but it does not want in principle to pamper to the class of the poor permanently. Social justice demands that the means of production should be controlled in such a way that each and every member of the society except disabled persons, can live a happy life by their own earnings instead of depending on the charities of the rich. ‘Charity’
or moral responsibility to take care of the poor is not the solution of the problem, as suggested by the author.

In conclusion the author has shown that the Prophet enunciated two remarkable principles: (1) that no man was inferior to anyone else except to the Being Who brought him into existence; (2) happiness in any form is not possible for man unless he works for it. Further, he observes that by having belief in God and by righteous living a Muslim should present to the mankind the picture of a single family, the family of God (p. 205).

It appears that the author is ignorant of the Arabic language because he frequently pronounces the Arabic names and books incorrectly. A list of such mistakes in the book is given below.

Hilf ul Fadul, p. 7 (correct; Fuqūl). Iben-ul-Atmir, y. 15 (Ibn al-Atḥīr), Tighlab, p. 21 (Banū Taghlib), Zārqānī, p. 25 (Zurqānī), Ramzan, p. 27 (Ramadān), Obaidah, p. 27 (Abū 'Ubaydah), Ikramah, p. 31 ('Īkrīmah). Ohad, p. 33 (Oḥud), Jamadi, p. 47 (Jumādā) Umme Ḥabībiya, p. 187 (Ummī Ḥabībah). Asābah by Ibn Hajar, p. 55 (Iṣābah), tribe of Ghaffār, p. 56 (Ḫīfār), Masaab bin Amīr, p. 57 (Musa'ab b 'Umayr), Jazia, p. 58 (Jizyāh). Muwatta by Imam Malik, p. 120 (Mālik b. Anas), Abdulla bin Amroo, p. 120 ('Abd Allah b. 'Amr). These serious mistakes of Arabic names bring a slur on the merit of the book. Besides the author has not followed any standard and consistency in transliterating the Arabic names. Printing mistakes are also frequent in the book.

Apart from these shortcomings, the book presents an authentic account and orthodox point of view about the life and mission of the Prophet. It is based on the secondary sources, as is obvious from the bibliography. The book, though not a scholarly research work, can be strongly recommended for general readers.

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