BOOK-REVIEW

BY: ZIAUL HAQUE


As the title suggests, the book under review is a serious and incisive study in understanding the nature and meaning of various Islamic concepts, beliefs and institutions. The main quality of the book and its interpretation of Islam is its humane approach and method. Dr. Smith is a renowned scholar of Islamics and comparative religion, and he studies Islam as an important part of the broader religious experience of mankind. He has remarkably underlined the inter-dependence and inter-connection of man’s religious experience. Freshness and lucidity of expression, powerful sweep of ideas, disarming humility and wisdom are the chief characteristics of the book.

However, as the general aim and method of the book is dispassionate objectivity within the intellectual framework of Orientalism and its categories of thought and sensibilities, many conclusions and bold discoveries of the author will not be accepted by the Muslim orthodoxy in general in whose eyes radical conclusions reached by the outsiders are always suspect.

The book under review comprises in one volume a selection of articles and addresses by Dr. Smith: some articles were previously published in various journals and some are being published in this book for the first time. He is the author of several important books, including, Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis (1943), Islam in Modern History (1957—1977), The Faith of Other Men (1962—1972), and Faith and Belief (1979). He is an ordained minister of the United Church of Canada. In the words of Dr. Jacques Waardenburg, the editor of the Religion and Reason series, “Professor Smith has never kept aloof from intellectual and moral engagements.” The main interest of the author centres on the relations between different religious communities, and the emergence of socio-religious movements. The book constitutes an important contribution to Islamics in the series on Religion and Reason: Method and Theory in the Study and Interpretation of Religion, the aim of which is to publish the results of research in the field of religion, religious change and methods and techniques of religious interpretations. The general hypothesis of such an approach, it appears, is that religion is a sociological/human phenomenon which grows, changes, assimilates extraneous elements into it, and decays. It has, in general, two aspects, eternal or transcendent, and mundane or historical-sociological. The book under review explores in depth these two dimensions of the Islamic religion and offers new and bold interpretations of its theological concepts and social/historical themes.

The book consists of four parts. Part one contains general topics of ‘Islamic History as a Concept,’ and ‘the Shahādah as Symbolic Representation of Muslim’s Faith.’ Part two
contains specific presentations, such as Islamic Law and its Sources, Shari'ah, Faith in the Qur'an and its relation to Belief, and Faith in Later Islamic History. Part three, in particular, deals with the problem: 'Islam in the Indian Context;' and Muslim-Hindu Relations. Part four discusses in brief the 'Muslim-Christian Relations.' The last part of the book gives a complete list of the publications of the author, both books and articles.

In the first article (which he originally gave as an address to the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in 1975): 'Islamic History as a Concept,' Professor Smith elaborates on the terms of 'Islamic' and 'History' and warns his fellow Orientalists of the danger and pitfalls of subjecting the data of Islamic religion, society and history which they study, to the ideational patterns of their own limited vision and Western categories of thought to which they have long been conditioned, ultimately giving distorted and biased conclusions about Islam and Islamic history and culture. This is generally true of a number of Orientalists who have been serving the global interests of Western imperialism. Of course, there are exceptions. Dr. Smith observes that the Western scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries understood mankind's religious life very inadequately. The modern concept of history current in the West consequently tends to neglect the religious, the spiritual and the transcendent factor altogether. This is because of the ascendancy of secular thought in the West which had severed social and natural sciences from religion and theology and had ultimately subjected all social subjects, factors and areas of law, economics, culture, politics, history and religion to the intellectual rigours of scientific method. This pure scientificism, according to Professor Smith, bypasses the inner transcendent religious experience of human beings — therefore the misunderstandings about Islamic and other religions which are based on a religiously-transcendent faith.

For Professor Smith every human life and every human creation has a timeless or transcendental dimension; and human history constitutes an interplay between the temporal and the timeless, between the mundane and the eternal. “We are conditioned,” says Dr. Smith, “by our past and by our environment; that is, by mundane history. Yet we are not altogether determined by them by it. The minority of thinkers who disagree with this do so out of dogmatic preconviction, not on the basis of evidence. To be a human being means to be partially open to sources of inspiration, aspiration, courage, loyalty, love, imagination, obligation, rationality, integrity, not given in one’s mundane environment.” (p. 10).

Dr. Smith suggests three levels or modes at which Islamic history must be approached and understood. First, Islamic history is a framework within which Muslims have lived — to be conditioned and yet not finally determined by it. Therefore it is a fallacy, Dr. Smith thinks to take religion as one of the factors in human life. For him Islam is general and it comprehends all human factors and not only religious. Islam is the coherence of diverse elements.

“The Qur'an, the law, the mosques, the poetry of the Sufis, the adhān and all the rest would have had but minor significance were it not that they enabled Muslims to deal with other matters, from medicine to military defeat and from economics to ecology, in the particular ways that they did deal with them — ways that are Islamic history.” (p. 16).
The second level, according to Dr. Smith, ist that the Islamic history can be seen also as the goal of the Muslims' lives. Islamic history has been Islamic in intention as well as in background (p. 17) The third level pertains to the notion of Islam which is for him also more than any historical phenomenon. For Professor Smith man and his history are much more profound categories than is science. As science has developed historically, its truths are historically relative, and that the role of science will change. (p. 21).

This discussion about the nature of Islamic history is overloaded with abstract and vague phraseology. Although Dr. Smith employs the scientific method of making probable hypotheses and then confirming them by evidence to understand a particular religion and its thought pattern, he denigrates science by his remark that the truths discovered by science are only historically relative. In the opinion of the present reviewer, science in its practical form, in its discovery of new knowledge, is the application of reason on nature and society and the discovery of truth, or relative truth, is conditioned by the circumstances, resources and capacity of the scientist who reveals a new fact of life. This is the way science and human civilization have progressed throughout the modern period.

The section on 'Specific Presentations' is more detailed and more technical, as it directly deals with some central conceptual problems of Islamic religion and Islamic law. In the well-written excellent essay on "the Historical Development in Islam of the Concept of Islam as an Historical Development" Dr. Smith explains that the word 'Islam' is used in at least three different ways relating to three different things. First, Islam as the personal, transcendent faith of a person. Second, the ideal Islam (as contained in the books of Islam). Third, the institutionalized actual Islam, the historical and sociological phenomenon. The concept of Islam as a religious system, and especially as an historical system is a predominant and relatively modern concept. A similar development has taken place in other religions also. A long period of man's religiousness has produced, in all religions, a self-conscious systematization. "An active practice and faith become a definable pattern: the personal experience or belief of individual or group is abstracted and generalized into concepts as an independent entity; that is, it is reified.'

Dr. Smith does not, however, go deeper into this process of reification which occurs in all religions and religious communities. Does this reification of religious concepts into abstract notions, it may be asked, also become a fetish? What will be the sociological consequences if religion is stretched further and forced to do the impossible task of social and natural sciences, if such a reification is taken too far as a political instrument? Obviously such questions could not fall within Dr. Smith's purview.

While making a study of the history of the word 'Islam', Dr. Smith says that the word 'Islam' used in the Qur'an is generally a verbal noun, a masdar and cannot have any systematic and institutionalized sense; as, for example, the Qur'anic verse (3:19): Inn al-dīnā 'inda-llāhī-l-islām may be read so as to mean the essential religious truth that "the proper way to worship God is to obey Him" (p. 47). To reach such an astounding conclusion the author uses the titles of the classical books. He tells us that the earlier titles use the word
'Islam' or *imān* in the sense of personal religion, i.e., an action of submitting to God. The interpretation of Islam in terms of an organized system belongs to later times. This sounds contradictory with his earlier statement that Islam comprehends all factors in human life.

Dr. Smith believes that a religion and therefore religious history and human history cannot be properly understood without an 'effective awareness of its transcendent dimension.' The general method of Western Orientalists in approaching Islam as an historical phenomenon within the mundane empirical world, according to Dr. Smith, is objectionable. The Muslims have now adopted this erroneous method of interpretation under western impact, and consequently the transcendent aspect of Islam has been shelved. Dr. Smith must also be aware of the logical result of the political process in many Muslim societies where socialization of Islam has been attempted, i.e., more emphasis has been laid on law and economics and the transcendental/moral aspect has been relegated to the background removing man away from his God and enveloping him in legal and economic intricacies. In the words of Professor Smith:

"To sum up, then, one may say that to an outsider it would seem that there has been a tendency over the centuries and especially in modern times for the connotation of the word 'Islam' gradually to lose its relationship with God, first by shifting from a personal piety to an ideal religious system, a transcendent pattern, then to an external, mundane religious system to the civilization that was its historical expression" (p. 64).

In another article "Islamic Law: *Shari'ah* and *Shar"", after surveying the books of some *Mutakallimūn* up to fourth century A.H., Dr. Smith concludes that the concept of *Shari'ah* was not 'basic or central or emphasized as a concept in Islamic thought during these centuries (p. 95). Elsewhere, he calls this 'an exciting discovery': that the concept of *Shari'ah* was 'introduced' late in Islamic history, after the fall of Baghdad, as part of the reifying process of thought. (p. 223). He thinks that the rise of a concept law "may be correlated with a decline, if not of Islamic civilization, anyway of the vigour of its intellectual and religious life" (p. 100). While the central fact of pristine Islam as a religion is the idea of moral responsibility, the concept of *shari'ah* in terms of law is its result and not its cause. Law is the sociological or mundane product. (p. 109).

The hypothesis that the concept of *shari'ah* in the sense of law is a late product (of 5th and 6th centuries A.H.) although not adequately confirmed by the evidence which Dr. Smith adduces from the books of *Mutakallimūn*, is, nevertheless, a suspect discovery which still needs further substantiation.

Faith is mankind's most important quality and therefore a highly significant central theme for all world religions. In his three articles on faith in the Islamic religion (pp. 110—173) Dr. Smith gives a brilliant exposition of the doctrine of *Imān* (faith). He defines faith as that appropriation of truth by the heart that comes to the point of decision and compliance. With *imān* one passes from the psychological state of awareness or knowledge to engagement or action.
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In the article: “Faith in later Islamic History; the Meaning of Arkân” Dr. Smith gives a novel interpretation of the formula: ṭasāq bi-al-janān, wa ʾiqrār bi-al-lisān, waʾamāl bi-al-arkān. He says that arkān here does not mean ‘pillars of faith’ but limbs of the human body” (p. 165). According to him, the classical writers, including Ghazzâli, understood aʾmāl bi-al-arkān to mean aʾmāl bi-al-jawārih. Arkān meant limbs of the body.

But this needs a thorough research. Merely interpreting a few theological terms and words in a certain, although plausible, way is not enough. By arkān the Muslim scholars, classical or modern, have in general, meant five pillars of faith (including shahādah). For the sake of certainty this problem must be investigated in its linguistic, theological, historical and sociological aspects.

Part three of the Book deals with a specific problem: “Islam in the Indian Context: and Muslim-Hindu Relations.” In the article, ‘the Crystallization of Religious Communities of Mughul India,’ Dr. Smith explores the religious, political and sociological developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries India.

In the historical processes Islamic orthodoxy, in Aḥmad Sirhindi’s revival movement was asserting itself. The triumph of Awrangzeb over Dara Shikoh, the founding of Farangi Maḥall at Lucknow in 1698 and the establishment of Dars-i-Nizāmi curriculum and Fatāwa-i-ʾĀlamgiri, were all social expressions of earlier religious movements.

The main thesis of this section of the book is that with the arrival of the Muslims in India in 1001 A. D. and their founding in theory and practice of a religiolusly closed community, “organized, systematic, and formal with boundaries, began a process of crystallization among the non-Muslim groups in the country” (p. 196). Elements of Hinduism existed throughout centuries but organization and systematization of those elements into a self-conscious coherent pattern is a modern and new development which came in response to the fundamentalist assertions of Muslim orthodoxy. The Sikh religious community also crystallized in response to Muslim community’s challenges and pressures.

Professor Smith traces the emergence of ‘ulama’ as a class in modern Indo-Pakistan in the political context of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when an Islamic reaction was taking place against the syncretist tendencies of Akbar’s religious policies. Some Muslims saw this unified religio-political process a dangerous blow to Islam. Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (c. 1563—1624) played an important role in propagating neo-classicism in Islam.

He rightly thinks that the madrasah or seminary of Deoband established in 1867 produced modern ‘ulama’ who were devoted to the cause of Islam and the independence of India. At a time when traditional Muslim educational system depended for its economic existence on feudal land endowments, the Deoband madrasah refused to take any help from the landlords, the government: it depended on people’s support. This fact made the madrasah politically independent.
In his article: "Some Similarities and some Differences Between Christianity and Islam," Dr. Smith makes comparisons between some Muslim and Christian ideas and institutions, like mosque and church, the will of God, Trinity and Ninety nine names of God, *huda* (guidance) and Holy Spirit etc. He thinks that such similarities or differences are not as great as might appear. This is not true. Islamic concepts and institutions are peculiar to Islam and its tradition. The Qur'ān vehemently rejects the Christian concept of Trinity. The concept, therefore, has no resemblance to the concept of ninety-nine names of God in Islam.

Dr. Smith's work constitutes a serious effort, first, in understanding some specific problems of faith and belief in Islam, and second, in relating the Islamic religious concepts to the concepts of other world religions and religious communities — thus showing that Islam can be better understood in relation to other religions, for religion is a universal experience of all mankind.

The book will undoubtedly enrich the material of Islamics and shall furnish guidance to students of Islamics and religion with regard to the general methodology and contents. This book reveals the most courageous, vital and recent ideas of Dr. Smith.

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