BOOK REVIEWS


A major contention of this book is that Muslims have to interpret the central Islamic tradition, i.e. the Qurʼan and the Sunnah, in a way that sheds light on the exigencies of the modern world. To use a Tillichian language, Muslims, to be modern, must develop their brand of Islamic 'systematic theology'. This type of theology is especially needed in order to deal with the phenomenon of modernity. Akhtar defines modernity as "a specific socio-historical phenomenon with discernible features, sustained by determinably specific social and political forces" (p. 23). Philosophically speaking, however, modernity has fundamentally challenged theism and substituted a human order for a divine one. Secularization, as the institutionalization of a deep-seated consciousness of humanism and rationalism, has gradually, since at least the sixteenth century, pushed the religious world-view to the periphery. Akhtar argues correctly that one must relate to secular modernity as a world-wide phenomenon affecting not only Christianity but also the traditional religions, philosophies, and cultures of the Third World. As a result, Muslims are not immune to the challenges of secularism and modernism, as two major ideological currents in the Western world. In other words, Western modernity has become a Muslim problem as well, and on the basis of this premise, Akhtar argues that contemporary Muslims cannot escape the effects of modernity. They must deal with it, relate to it meaningfully, and go beyond it. And one way of doing that is to acquire a rationalist, critical, and, perhaps, sceptical perspective as a means rendering the colossal heritage of Islam in a familiar modern language, "Muslims have clearly failed to interpret and appropriate Islam properly for the needs of the modern age" (p. 213).

According to Akhtar, Islam, as a belief-system, has a lot to learn from the experience of present-day Western Christianity and its encounter with modernity. Because of this unique experience, modern Christian thought has developed remarkable levels of sophistication, that must be
appropriated by those Muslims who are baffled by the problem of secularization. Akhtar, however, criticizes the modern intellectual environment of the world of Islam, because, in his view, “Modern Muslim theology has in recent years been disguised largely by its refusal to take seriously the dangers of secular modernity” (p. 14). Few Muslim theologians, thinkers, and philosophers have been touched by modernity, or are aware of the challenges modernity has posed to theism in a general sense. And that is why the author theorizes that the Muslim community is, in general, poorly equipped for a confrontation with modernity. Because Islam and Muslims “cannot be frozen or arrested”, a look into the contemporary needs of the ummah is indispensable.

By and large, Akhtar defines modernity in a narrow sense only, as a humanistic challenge to theism. While I agree that the Third World in general, and the Muslim world in particular, cannot close their doors off to modernity and the West, a major task of the contemporary Third World and Muslim intelligentsia must be to develop a critical appraisal of the persistent, and even nagging presence of ‘Western hegemony’ in their countries. Nowhere in the book does the author see any correlation between Western modernity, colonialism, missionary activities, and the spread of Western culture under the auspices of imperialism. Modern Muslim thought has dissected its relationship to the West quite thoroughly, and, in the process, it has reflected the deep anguish and pain of the modern Muslim intelligentsia. I think that a de facto response to the challenge of colonialism, secularization, and modernity has been in the making since, at least, the late eighteenth century. A response to the challenge of modernity and its corollaries has not come from a few Muslim intellectuals only. What can we make of the phenomenon called “Islamic resurgence”? Hasn’t this movement been a political, religious, and intellectual response to the Western challenge? It is clear that as a collective phenomenon, Islamic resurgence cannot be read or understood in a monolithic fashion. One thing is clear, however. Islamic resurgence is a modern religious movement that is embattled with the present socio-economic and political order, which it attempts to abolish. It further considers this order to be a consequence of Western colonialism over many Muslim lands. The unsuccessful attempts of Islamic resurgence, except perhaps in Iran and the Sudan, so far, to transcend this order cannot be translated as a simple relapse into a pure and pristine Islam. Every ideology, sacred or secular, possesses an ideal world-view. The ideal is not sufficient by itself to interpret reality and the reasons behind the rise of modern social movements.

Akhtar is at times uncertain about the answers he gives to the question of modernity. And, therefore, in one chapter entitled, “The Silence of Allah”, he pleads helplessly for “God to reveal [H]imself again openly and
dramatically so that the autonomy of the secular outlook can be decisively destroyed" (p. 112). The different chapters of the book unfold two contradictory positions held by the author: (1) to appropriate the secular outlook, and (2) a plea for God to reveal Himself so that this outlook may be destroyed.

Generally speaking, the discussion of this book falls under the general heading of “Faith and Reason: Antagonism or Dialogue”. This is not, by any means, a new subject or discourse in the intellectual history of Islam, which was dominated, especially in its Medieval stage, by this perplexing issue. It is true that, in one sense at least, Akhtar is tackling the danger posed by rationalism to the metaphysical discourse of the three monotheistic traditions. But this must not be taken as a simple and straightforward antagonism between Reason and Metaphysics. It is, it seems to me, a conflict between an aggressive and hegemonic capitalist culture and world-view on the one hand, and the indigenous cultures of the Third World on the other. This antagonism reveals, no doubt, its intrinsically ideological character. In a real social sense, the issue ceases to be metaphysical or theoretical, but becomes one of a concrete nature: different tendencies, ideologies, and different intellectual proclivities compete in the contemporary social and political landscape.

In line with his advocacy of a more ‘modernist’ Islam, Akhtar spends quite a bit of time examining the impact of the Qur’ân, as the text per excellence in Islam, on Muslims. He argues for a scriptural criticism a la mode of critical Western treatments of the Bible. He contends that, “The modern task (for the Muslim) is to show that it [the Qur’ân] is potentially also a relevantly critical comment on modernity and the culture it has bred” (p. 57). Undoubtedly, the Qur’ân has held a highly distinguished place in classical and modern Islamic intellectual history. The rich exegeses, philosophies, ideas, and discussions revolving around the Qur’ân since the inception of Islam have only affirmed the Muslim commitment to matters of historical and social significance. In addition, the whole world-view of Islam, resulting from the creative interaction between the ideal and real, reflected real social and political concerns. And many a modern Qur’ânic exegesis has reflected these concerns as well. I think that the Qur’ân presents a highly-developed ‘critical mentality’, and that Islamic history possesses a rich tradition of critical theory, which should be rendered afresh. To assume, as many certainly do nowadays, that Islamic intellectual history has been a dull amalgamation of status quo ideas and half-cooked philosophies is naive at best. Therefore, one of the main points raised by Akhtar comes to mind: there is a “contemporary need for a textual criticism of the Muslim scripture—a ‘critical Qur’ânic scholarship’—in the larger attempt to make it relevant to modern man” (p. 66). This is, no doubt, the hope of many of
us. But to assume that "Muslims have refused to develop a critical Qur'anic scholarship" (p. 67) overlooks the whole critical tradition in Islam, especially the one relating to Qur'anic exegesis in both Sunni and Shi'i Islam.

In the last section of the book entitled, "Modernity and beyond", the author argues on behalf of an interreligious dialogue, especially between Islam and Christianity. Here he does not introduce new ideas. He reiterates the basic claims of his first chapter, namely that Muslims have a lot to learn from Christianity and its encounter with modernity. "We must live as faithful people; we must strengthen our style of dealing with modernity by living within the parameters of faith, by actively striving for a genuine religiosity that seeks and finds resources for honest, including intellectually honest, living in a difficult age" (p. 213).

A main conclusion of the book is that believers of all faith traditions must be faithful and modern simultaneously. It seems to me that this 'dual attitude' falls short of even describing the tasks awaiting the contemporary Muslim intelligentsia. One of the main tasks is to definitely go beyond this simple dichotomy and offer solutions to the problems of culture, poverty, and dependency. It is true to assume that Muslims cannot escape the challenge of modernity. But the task of the Muslim intelligentsia, especially the one that has appropriated a fair amount of knowledge of Western intellectual history, must grasp not only the challenge and potential of modernity, but also come to grips with the rich tradition of criticism, humanism, and revolution in Islam. That is when the contemporary Muslim intelligentsia can develop a critical theory of history, society, and religion, and be in a position to fathom the depth of the challenge of the West.

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