BOOK REVIEW


These two brief booklets represent the content of two speeches delivered by Dr. Taha Jabir al-'Alwani, President of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, in Herndon (Virginia, U.S.A.) and Rabat, Morocco respectively. Both deal with the same theme: the intellectual or epistemological crisis in the modern Muslim world, and solutions to the predicament.

In the first booklet, the author begins by discussing the modern intellectual and cultural encounter between the Muslim world and the West. He argues that the establishment of Western missionary and educational centres in the main capitals of the Muslim world, has led to a gradual collapse of "the Islamic cultural and intellectual citadels". [P. 1] As a result, the Muslim personality (al-Shakhshiyah al-Islamiyyah) has been greatly damaged in the wake of the collapse of its mental and psychological foundations.

The author proceeds to examine two questions: (1) intellectual [Western] invasion [al-ghazw al-fikri], and (2) the historical context in which modern Muslim culture and thought fell under Western hegemony. He contends that in respect to intellectual invasion, two trends of thought, deeply polarized and sharply divided, have emerged in the Muslim world. The first, a Western-oriented one, finds no problem whatsoever in borrowing from Western science, technology, philosophy and other humanistic and social disciplines. The second, an essentialist trend, opposes any borrowing or learning from the West, and argues on behalf of a historical, cultural, and intellectual specificity and distinction of the Muslim world. Al-'Alwani criticises both tendencies and calls for a "middle of the road" attitude which would learn from the West, without emulating it, and which would stand against any civilizational isolation, as suggested by the second trend.

As for the second question, the author lists three stages of interaction between the Muslim world and the West: (1) the stage of "shock and bewilderment," (2) the "post-shock" stage, and (3) the stage of religious revivalism or reawakening. The first stage was characterized by total intellectual and cultural Western hegemony over the Muslim world, and resulted in "psychological defeatism and despair". The second stage, however, was marked by new debates about modern-day problems and Islam, such as notions of Islamic democracy, socialism, and human rights. As for the third and present stage, Muslims are becoming more and more aware of the fragility and irrelevance of Western theories and paradigms. And, consequently, a new awareness has begun to emerge, focussing on the necessity of an Islamic conceptual alternative.
The intellectual leaders of modern Islam, al-'Alwani argues, have to be well-equipped, religiously and intellectually, in order to carry the *Ummah* beyond its present phase, and establish strong foundations of Islamic knowledge and practice. In other words, the Muslim *Ummah* has to rediscover its distinguished culture and mentality, conquer its psychological sense of defeat, and march toward the future with an open mind and feeling of certainty.

The necessity of an Islamic intellectual alternative is not more required anywhere than in the field of methodology. Al-'Alwani proposes the establishment of a sound Muslim methodology to be based on: (1) revelation, and (2) experimental reason. He rejects the Western secular notion of knowledge, which does not acknowledge revelation, and, in many ways, prefers the profane to the sacred. He also maintains that the contemporary Muslim intelligentsia has to tackle a number of old and modern issues afresh. One such issue is the revelation/reason dichotomy; another is casualty, and so on. All these issues, he tells us, point to a deep-seated intellectual malaise in the modern Muslim world: "The intellectual crisis, which we are experiencing, is a real one and [is to be] found in the sources and curricula, as well as in principal historical issues which have created bad effects in our mentality, temperament, and ways of thinking." [p. 31] Furthermore, a host of other problems have emerged in recent decades and they concern the humanities and social sciences. Therefore, the main question is: what is to be done?

Al-'Alwani proposes three interdependent solutions to the above question: (1) The Qur'an and Hadith have to be thoroughly re-examined, especially in light of the questions posed by the Western humanistic and social sciences. (2) The entire Islamic tradition, in philosophy, history, psychology, has to be probed in the light of modern disciplines and methodologies. (3) Finally, the Western tradition has to be carefully studied by modern Muslims.

Al-'Alwani's second booklet, *Outlines of a Cultural Strategy*, is an elaboration on the main themes discussed above. He maintains that the modern Muslim world is dominated by three basic conceptual approaches: (1) traditionalist; (2) Western-oriented, and (3) eclectic. He sums up his methodological concern as follows: "However, the traditional approach, in the manner in which it has become presented and applied, did not prevent the *Ummah* from falling into a state of decline and failure from which it is still suffering. Likewise, Western thought, also as it is presented and applied, cannot protect the *Ummah* from its inherent adverse, harmful, and even disastrous effects. Moreover, the advocates of the eclectic selective approach have not yet presented the details of this proposed blend, let alone tried to put it into effect. All this leads us to ask the wide-ranging question: is the *Ummah* going through a serious intellectual crisis, and, if so, what is the way out of it?" [p. 4]

The answer according to him, would be, to formulate an Islamic cultural strategy which would re-define "knowledge in terms of an Islamic epistemology and in a way that will be acceptable to Muslims every where". [p. 10]

How can one assess these above-mentioned thoughts and ideas? Undoubtedly, Dr. al-'Alwani discusses too many major problems which have been the bone of contention among the Muslim intelligentsia for several decades now. These problems are by no means novel or mysterious. And any fresh reflection on them must be very welcome. But my main concern about the author's discussion is that it lacks a firm historical, political, and social perspective. It is too intellectualistic and abstract, to put it differently. The crisis has never been intellectual or epistemological only, and a mere epistemological solution would not provide the way out. From this vantage point, a whole set of other issues have to be discussed and tied to the epistemological crisis. One of these, which is by now a historical given, is the Western military, political, social, and cultural colonialism that many Muslims were subjected to in the modern period. And related to it directly is the whole context in which the Muslim world lives nowadays, namely post-colonialism. The emerging Muslim states have not sharply reduced social and economic differences in their population. Wealth, money, and prestige—tangible and intangible—have been concentrated in a few hands. And the great Islamic principles of social justice, wealth-sharing, and *shûrâ* are not practised in a way as to ensure the material prosperity, social comfort, and political rights of millions of Muslims—women and men. Therefore, any discussion of "predicaments" or "crises", whatever their type is, should never obscure some significant facts: political and economic discrepancies, social gaps, and intellectual malaise.

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