BOOK REVIEWS


John Esposito, in his book Islam and Politics traces the development of Islam from its origins, varying streams of tradition and special-interest groups. He has drawn a coherent picture of the Islamic blend of religion and political theory. He lays out, lucidly and concisely, the origins and evolution of Islam, beginning in the seventh century, and its rapid diffusion from Morocco to China. He describes the subsequent modernist-revivalist controversies which have for years divided Muslim thinkers and caused sharp rifts among them in Egypt, Turkey, North Africa, Iran, Libya, India, Pakistan and elsewhere. The vignettes on past and present Islamic leaders in these countries illumine their philosophies, objectives, and also their divergences. Viewed in this backdrop, he assesses the role of Islam in the contemporary Middle East and sets forth the issues that Muslim leaders must face in today's world.

A review of the role of religion in politics and society in early Islam reveals a rich and complex history. The author believes that Islam proved to be a faith in which religion was harnessed to political power. The Islamic community was both spiritual and temporal, mundane and other-worldly. Religious faith and ideology provided the ideological and motivational glue that united Arabian tribes and inspired and gave direction to the early period of expansion and conquest. Religion provided the world-view, the framework of meaning for both individual and corporate life. Whether under the Righteous Caliphs or Umayyad and Abbasid rulers, the ideological foundation of the community/state was Islam. This ideal provided the Islamic paradigm which inspired subsequent generations, from pre-modern revivalist movements to contemporary political activists, who would seek to emulate and realize an Islamic religio-political vision.

Esposito is of the view that the evolution of nationalism in the Muslim world provides forceful examples of the role of Islam in mass mobilization and socio-political change. The twentieth century brought the Islamic world to a political crossroads. After a long period of colonial rule, Muslims mounted a series of efforts to respond to the political and cultural dominance of the West. Given the centuries long history of Islamic power as well as its continued presence and strength in the lives of the Muslim masses, Islam played an important role in Muslim reaction and response to Western imperialism. It inspired the development of Islamic modernism and contributed to Muslim independence and nationalist movements. Appealing to their Islamic legacy and heritage, Islamic reformers attempted to restore Muslim pride and self-confidence, to revitalize the community politically and socially. Their brand of Islamic reform called for a new interpretation, a reformulation of Islam which reasserted the compatibility of Islam and modernity; reaffirmed the comprehensiveness and relevance of Islamic ideology to politics, law and society.
During the post-independence period, newly emergent Muslim states faced a formidable task. For most, the process of modern nation building followed a long period of colonial political and military domination and economic dependence. Their recent Western colonial experience had been preceded by a centuries-long Islamic past. For modern elites their Islamic heritage was, though perhaps still valid for spiritual life, no longer relevant to the needs and requirements of modern politics and society, since modernization and industrialization had originated in the West, Western nations had several centuries to grapple with questions of religious reform and modern nation-building. Issues of national identity and ideology, the development of appropriate institutions of government and law were hammered out, if not fully, then, at least adequately.

The 1970s proved an explosive and turbulent period in the history of Muslim politics. Seemingly stable governments were deeply shaken and several Muslim rulers forcibly removed from office through Coups D'état or assassination. While such events were in themselves not all that unusual, the substantial re-emergence of Islam's role and function in politics was surprising to many. Islamic ideology, symbols, religious leaders, and organizations took on a level of importance that moved Islam from the periphery of political life to centre stage. Islamic activists used Islam as a measuring stick against which established governments were judged autocratic, politically corrupt, economically unjust and spiritually and morally debilitated.

While the 1970s may be viewed as a time of renewed Islamic power and pride, the appeals to Islam and the very form of the Islamic alternative itself varied significantly. Similarly, implementation of Islamic alternatives in countries like Libya, Pakistan and Iran raised many issues.

The author is convinced that in many parts of the Islamic world, Muslims stand at crossroads. The political legitimacy of many Muslim governments is far from established. To the extent that incumbent governments fail to satisfy the political and economic needs of their societies, they remain in a precarious position in which stability is generally based on authoritarian rule and force. If Muslim governments strive to achieve a new synthesis between the demands of modernity and their Islamic tradition, then a broad range of possibilities stretch out before them. While the outcome may vary from country to country depending upon political, social, and economic variables, the process itself is inevitable because it involves national identity as well as religious understanding and commitment.

COLONEL (RETD)
GHULAM SARWAR