Muslims believe that God sent guidance to all people. If people were to objectively and impartially assess the simple message of Islam — the Shahādah — they will be convinced that Islam is calling them to what is laid down in their own texts, i.e. submission to the one God. The Prophet of Islam (peace be on him) has only testified to that universal truth and called all men and women to embrace. It will, however, be inconsistent for any person to accept the unity of God and worship none but Him, and then reject the messenger who came to proclaim and reinforce that message. In my view, Transcendence and Unity of God were never doubted or opposed by any philosopher belonging to the religious camp. In fact the cosmological, the ontological, the theological, the pragmatic, and the moral arguments all point to the unity of God, and philosophers and theologians have vigorously argued for its truth. Hence it is not understandable why these philosophers had any problem with acknowledging the Prophet of Islam (peace be on him) as the universal divine messenger who witnessed the same truth and summoned all to witness it. If revelation is admitted as a valid mode of knowledge about God, then why does the proposition Muḥammad is the messenger of God (the second part of the Shahādah) pose any problem to any philosopher, especially to a religious pluralist.

The religious pluralist's stance leads, however, to a paradox. On the one hand some pluralists admit the truth and validity of all religions in so far as their object of worship is God, and on the other hand, the Muslims, like the believers of other religions, are asked to acknowledge the validity of other faiths that do not fully subscribe to the doctrine of the unity of God and that one may worship none but Him. Islam cannot compromise on the unity of the Absolute or the Transcendent because this is the very core of Islam.

Arifa Farid


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Serious study of religious texts, perhaps mainly due to their terse, succinct and inspirational dimension, leads to flashes of variant meanings. This is specially the case when a scripture invites its followers to embark upon rational and critical analysis. On the other hand, there are religious scriptures which are considered either objects of belief or of essentially theological dogma due to their meta-historical nature. No wonder, many tend to spare subjecting the scriptures in which they believe to critical analysis.

The preoccupation of some Christian sects with this meta-historical understanding of the Bible did, perhaps, lead them to believe that the Biblical text has to be taken literally and cannot be rationally analysed. Such sects claim to be fundamentalists. The Qur'an, while claiming to be "a guide to mankind and also clear signs for guidance, and judgement" (al-Baqarah 2: 185), also invites its readers to use reason and engage in serious reflection in order to comprehend it well. This approach of the Prophet (peace be on him) and that of the later generations of mufassirîn (exegetes) in understanding the Qur'an was non-dogmatic and non-literalist. These exegetes looked into the prism of meaning in the Qur'an from different perspectives. For some the point of departure was lexicographical and philological analysis, for others it was literary analysis, and for still others, it was an attempt to derive legal injunctions from the Qur'an. There were others who concentrated on questions of a doctrinal nature. Thanks to this, there are hardly any two tafsîr which follow one and the same methodology and approach. The underlying reason for making an extensive use of rational categories to understand the Qur'an was to grasp the relevance of the Qur'anic guidance to human life and to conclude how it could be applied in different social, political, economic and cultural contexts.

Needless to say, perhaps, that the uniqueness of the Qur'anic revelation lies in its being the Word of the Almighty God, the only source of guidance in different stages of man’s history. It repeatedly talks about the message which was sent through the earlier prophets to humanity, emphasising that it was one and the same message from the same God, the Creator of all of humanity. However, due to historical reasons the earlier revelations could not be preserved in their original form. Had they been preserved, they would have addressed the same basic issues around which the Qur'anic revelation moves.

Farid Esack's Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism is an important academic endeavour which makes an effort to understand the Qur'anic paradigm in the context of the South African struggle for liberation from apartheid. The book is divided into seven chapters. Farid Esack begins by defining for himself the historic context in South Africa, where the Muslims
of the Cape played a leading role in the liberation movement. He also reviews the meaning and relevance of the hermeneutical method for Qur'ânic scholarship. His main contribution lies in identifying the hermeneutical keys in the Qurân. He also analyses the manners in which the various leading organizations and individuals sought justification of their struggle against apartheid through their understanding of the Qurân. Esack's critique appears to be directed mainly against the approach of the traditional 'ulamâ' in South Africa. This is a significant contribution by a person who, while being a product of this situation, makes an effort to justify his disagreement with the generally recognized Muslim religious authorities in South Africa.

The hermeneutical keys identified by Farid Esack are also of significance for understanding the message of the Qurân. However, the hierarchy of these keys calls for a review. According to the author, the first two keys are taqwâ and tawhîd. The second two keys are al-nâs (the people), and the marginalized (al-mustad'afûn fil-ârd), while the last two keys are justice ('adl and qist) and struggle (jihâd). In our opinion, any systematic study of the Qurân will indicate that tawhîd precedes all other categories while 'adl is the second most important primary category, the two of them being at the very top of the hierarchy of Qur'anic values.

The second two keys — al-nâs and al-mustad'afûn fil-ârd — create feeling as if the "marginalized" are not a part of "the people". This categorisation may lead one to think that 'adl and qist require some special kind of jihâd. The fact of the matter is that the realization of the Islamic system in space-time context is a continuous struggle. While one may appreciate Farid Esack's concern for the value of jihâd, it has to be understood in its wider connotation and not simply as confined to political protest and activism. The fact of the matter is that the first two primary values — tawhîd and 'adl — are so comprehensive that they practically take care of all human rights and obligations both towards God and His servants.

While Farid Esack may have reasons for launching his attack on the so-called traditionalists, his lumping together of Sayyid Abû'l-A`lâm Mawdûdî with fundamentalists and traditionalists is rather surprising. In the course of mentioning Mawdûdî he arbitrarily selects a passage from his Tafhîm al-Qurân to show that he reluctantly accepts the principle of contextualization of the Qurân (p. 54). He quotes Mawdûdî as saying about the Qurân that "its contents are, on the whole, vitally related to the taste and temperament, the environment and history and customs and usages of Arabia" (p. 54). The purpose of this selective reference is to affirm that according to Mawdûdî, the Qur'anic revelation is abstract unless it is understood in the context of the society in which it was originally revealed.
While practically every single *mufassir* of the Qurʾān has given due consideration to *ashāb al-nuzūl* — that is, the context of the revelation of the verses of the Qurʾān — this does not detract from the universality of the Qurʾān, nor does it make the Qurʾānic revelation context-bound. In fact it might be argued that what makes Mawdūdī and Sayyid Qūḥ more important among the contemporary *mufassirīn* is their concern for the universal application of the Qurʾān. This concern prompted Mawdūdī to go through a hermeneutic process which seems not substantially different from that to which William Dilthey alluded when he drew a line of distinction between "act meaning" and "action meaning". Mawdūdī tries to capture the *raison d’être* of the Qurʾānic revelation which leads to the second and more important systematic step of visualizing the attitude the Prophet (peace be upon him) and the Qurʾān would like the devotees of God to take in the changed space-time contexts. This is done generally through *ijtihād*. This approach of Mawdūdī is apparently neither fundamentalist nor traditional.

While benefiting from the hermeneutical models of Ricoeur and others, Farid Esack appears inclined to a systematic weaning away of the Qurʾān from its event of revelation in the space-time context. He also appears to subscribe to a gradual and contextual development of "the mind of the Qurʾān". Both these positions call for exercising utmost precaution lest one falls into the trap of Orientalism, Christian liberation theology or the reconstructionist approaches which have found their vogue in the Jewish and Christian studies of the Scriptures.

While the Jewish and Christian scriptures claim to be divine, the fact is that they bear the clear imprint of the scribes. The Qurʾān, on the other hand, stands as a category of its own by virtue of its being a verbal revelation rather than a mere inspiration, a scripture whose integrity has all along been maintained. Therefore, the Qurʾānic message is not conditioned by history. Its message, instead, has impacted on history. The modern Biblical scholarship with its demythologization of the New Testament represented by the works of Rudolph Bultmann and other later works like Paul Ricoeur’s *Essay on Biblical Interpretation* (London: 1981) prompts the students of Comparative Religion to apply the methodological tools developed by these scholars to *tafsīr*. In doing so, one often overlooks the substantial differences between the nature of the Qurʾānic revelation which is "God’s Speech" (*kalām Allāh*), and other scriptures. For these scriptures, even though they were "inspirational", remain works of human scribes.

The issue of Islam in a pluralistic society and the use of "traditional" interpretations of the Qurʾān to legitimize an unjust order, or the use of the Qurʾān to support religious intolerance are important issues and call for critical re-thinking. Nevertheless, the very assumption that Islam is essentially a "religion" meant for a monolithic society with Muslim majority
deserves to be corrected. That the Qur'ān essentially addresses the people of Arabia is also an assumption that deserves to be discarded.

On this count, Farid Esack says: "Muslims like others believe that a reality which transcends history has communicated with them. This communication, supposed or real, took place within history and was conditioned by it. Even a casual perusal of the Qur'ān indicates that notwithstanding its claim to be 'a guide for humankind' (2: 175) revealed by 'the Sustainer of universe' (1: 1), it is generally addressed to the people of Hijaz who lived during the period of its revelation. Muslim scholarship has generally been reluctant to explore this relationship and its implications for the generations of the Qur'ān as well as for its interpretation" (p. 53). This, in our view, underestimates the critical approach of many exegetes of the Qur'ān.

Farid Esack's interpretation of pluralism as "co-existence with freedom and absolute equality" (p. 174) and his assertion that "the preeminence of the righteous does not mean a position of permanent socio-religious superiority for the Muslim community. The Muslims as a social entity were not supreme to the others, for such a position would have placed them and their parochial God in the same category as others who were denounced in the Qur'ān for the crimes of arrogance and deserving to appropriate God for a narrow community" (p. 175). This appears to be a departure from the Qur'ānic teaching about Muslims that they are 〈khayra ummah〉 and 〈ummatan wasātan〉, which makes it incumbent upon them to stand up as witnesses of the truth. The distinction of Muslims lies primarily in the fact that they have been raised to uphold the truth.

One may not agree with Farid Esack on several issues, nevertheless he has addressed questions which are of contemporary relevance and need to be explored at length. However, Esack's statement that "Islam will continue to be shaped and reshaped by South Africa, a new South Africa, which is in ways the product of a contempt as well as a deep reverence for religion — a contempt for all experiences of religion that fostered and justified racial discrimination, exclusiveness, exploitation and oppressions" (p. 251) should be understood in the context of the deep frustration, humiliation and psychological oppression to which the people of South Africa were subjected. Nevertheless, the author's desire to subject Islam to South Africanization can hardly be condoned. The fact of the matter is that it is Islam which, in all ages and places, has reshaped socio-economic, cultural, intellectual and political ways of people, and not vice versa. Its value system is universal and cannot be subjected to the local culture and traditions of a people.

In his book Esack succeeds in stimulating discussion on several issues that Muslim intellectuals are facing today. It is not so much the answers
that he provides, but it is the importance of the questions which he poses that are an index of his contribution to the contemporary discourse on the relevance of the Qur'an to the concerns of to-day's men and women.

Anis Ahmad


The book, as its name suggests, is a short history of Bahá'ism, as also a brief account of Bábism from which it is claimed to have sprung. Its writer, Dr Peter Smith, is the Social Sciences Coordinator and teaches world history and sociology in the International Students Degree programmes (ISDP) at Mahidol University, Thailand. Like Qādianism, better known as Ahmadiyyah after the name of its founder, Ghulām Aḥmad, arose from the fold of Sunnīs, Bábism and Bahá'ism emanated from the fold of Shi`īs. While Ahmadiyyah, with its apparent Islamic trappings and the claim of its founder and followers to be part of Islam, claimed to represent "the true Islam" — a claim that the Muslim community did not accept — Bábism and Bahá'ism, according to their founders as well as followers, have claimed and are considered to be entirely new and independent religions which have nothing to do with Islam. However, as pointed out by the author of the book under review, "not only did Bábī religion emerge as a movement within Shi`ī Islam, but the Bábís and early Bahá'ís were almost all Iranians who had formerly been Shi`ī Muslims; the writings of the Báb (1817–50) — the founder of Bábism — and to a lesser extent those of Bahá'ulláh are pervaded by Islamic concepts; and many Bábī and Bahá'í practices bear an obvious resemblance to those of Islam" (p. 13). In fact, the word "almost" in this statement should better be removed in order to make it more accurate for the early followers of these two religious, all of them, were formerly Shi`ī Muslims.

The author has rightly added: "Resemblance and derivation are not the same as identity, of course, and to describe the Bahá'í Faith as a Muslim sect — as some writers are still inclined to do — is highly misleading, and as inaccurate as describing second-century Christianity as a Jewish sect". (Ibid).

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