BOOK REVIEW


Since the first appearance of Syed Ameer ‘Ali’s Spirit of Islam about three quarters of a century ago (1891), many modern scholars have made genuinely serious attempts to study Islam from an objective point of view. Among them Goldziher, Lammens, Margoliouth, Hurgronje, Iqbal, Guillumme, Hamidullah, Watt, Schacht and Gibb may be especially mentioned, whose outstanding contributions on the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be upon him!) and the doctrinal and historical evolution of Islam, seem to constitute intervening links between that challenging work of Syed Arneer ‘Ali and the present one by Dr. Fazlur Rahmān.

As a matter of fact, in spite of many drawbacks, Ameer ‘Ali conspicuously succeeded in setting up a new trend of historical research on Islam by his intellectual liberalism, objective outlook, analytical spirit, a comparative-interpretative judgment and, above all, by courageously grappling with the spirit of Islam vis-a-vis its formalism. These qualities are more or less shared also by Iqbal and Dr. Rahmān. Even a closer link between Ameer ‘Ali and Dr. Rahmān is to be found in their fundamental assumption that the Muslim orthodoxy, whether Shi‘i or Sunni, is but a historical development which can be re-examined, re-analysed, re-assessed, re-formulated and reconstructed in accordance with the spirit of Islam and the requirements of the time.

Dr. Rahmān holds that immediately after the death of the Prophet “no one person could claim authority except under the Prophet’s aegis,” that is to say under the authority of the Prophet’s Sunnah. The Sunnah was subsequently “expanded to include the precedents of the first four Caliphs” and “the agreements of the Companions” (p. 70). Then comes the concept of Ijmā‘ which subsequently entered into the formation of Sunni orthodoxy and the schools or Madhāhib. His relentless analysis leads him to believe in common with Ameer ‘Ali that “most dogmatic and theological doctrines that have arisen in Islam are ultimately of political origin” (p. 237).

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that the problems before Ameer ‘Ali and Dr. Rahmān were not the same. In the late 19th century the former found the Western scholars considerably appreciative of the ‘impulse’ provided by Islam for the intellectual development of the human race; “but its great work in the uplifting of humanity is either ignored or not appreciated, nor are its rationale, its ideals, and its aspirations properly understood” (Spirit, p. vii). Hence his quest for discovering not only the ideals and objectives of Islam but also for assessing its religious, political, literary, scientific, rationalistic, philosophical, idealistic and mystic ‘spirit.’ But as the Western scholars who are uppermost in his mind, had the temerity to disparage Islam, his work became more expository than analytical. Moreover, having drunk deep at the fountains of Western and Islamic learning, he also wrote in the contemporary apologetic spirit of his co-religionists and in the style of the Victorian romanticists of his time.

The problems which prompted Dr. Rahmān to undertake the present study are bound up with the question of a critical re-statement of Islam or in his own words, “an adequate presentation of Islam in terms that would be acceptable to and meaningful for
a modern mind” (p. 253), which is required by the pressing need for overhauling the worn-out medieval structure of Islam and resurrecting its eternal values and basic religious experience from the weight of historical particularity under which they are submerged (p. 254). But he is by no means blind to history. He would rather go all out in quest of taking lessons from history. With reference to the rise of mystic orders in Islam, whose spirit, according to his findings, had an internal Islamic growth but whose later development into brotherhoods and guilds was spurred by extra-Islamic, nay, in the last analysis, also by anti-Islamic impulses,—he says in his final conclusion:

“In carrying out this task of reformulation one more fundamental need will have to be satisfied if Islamic theology and law are not only to meet the requirements of modern man and society from the nihilistic demoralizing effects of crass secularism. It is that in the new reconstruction, the specifically moral and religious emotions must be given due place and incorporated as an integral element (p. 254).

Fāḍlur Raḥmān thus speaks from a reformer’s point of view and his relentless self-critical spirit makes his work more analytical than expository. His keen historical sense and his personal interest in the Faith also make his study reasonably interpretative, because in his view “it is impossible simply to describe a religion and particularly his own faith and fail to convey to the reader anything of that inner intensity of life which constitutes that faith” (p. XI). In this respect, this work may be said to have been particularly addressed to the Muslims themselves and in accordance with their present requirements, it aims not merely at delineating the spirit but also resurrecting the essence of Islam and the elan of the past history of the Muslims in order to direct them towards the future progress not only of the Muslim world but also of humanity at large. Concluding his chapter on Muḥammad, he says:

“But the real achievements of Muḥammad are to be judged, in the long run, not on the basis of how many times he married, not even on the basis of his personal achievements in a most brilliant career—he himself was so self-effacing that he referred every bit of it to God; but on the basis of what he bequeathed to mankind, which still constitutes the best solution for mankind’s ills” (p. 29).

He even goes to attempt for the first time, to reduce the concept of Islam into a number of reduction terms, which is badly needed for a functional definition and clear understanding of Islam as a practical way of life. “Muḥammad’s monotheism was, from the very beginning,” he says, “linked up with a humanism and a sense of social and economic justice whose intensity is no less than the intensity of the monotheistic idea, so that whoever carefully reads the early Revelations of the Prophet cannot escape the conclusion that the two must be regarded as expressions of the same experience” (p. 12). In other words, “the Prophet seems to insist: One God—one humanity” (p. 12); that is to say, on the establishment of a social order on the bases of monotheism, socio-economic justice, egalitarianism” (p. 13).

In this sense, one can perhaps judge Fāḍlur Raḥmān’s Islam as not only the fulfilment of Ameer ʿAll’s Spirit but also as heralding a new era of heart-searching self-criticism. On the other hand, Dr. Raḥmān also appears to have been somewhat conscious that his present work might have to bear the burden of superseding and replacing the European series on Muḥammadanism, whose avowed aim of making an objective assessment of doctrinal and historical evolution of Islam, found a reasonable fulfilment in H. A. R. Gibb’s latest publication (1961). Basically therefore, he aims at an objective and informative study (p. XI) to suit the academic needs of the non-Muslim scholars as well; but unable to
confine his work strictly within these limits, for the reasons explained above, he applies a ‘critical-analytical-interpretative’ method for, what may be termed a ‘critical review’ of the “general development of Islam throughout the approximately fourteen centuries of its existence” (p. XI), which at once distinguishes the present work from those of Ameer 'Ali, H. A. R. Gibb and others.

Dr. Rahmān believes not only in the development of Islamic social system (ideology included) since the earliest times but also in a ‘concrete process of growth’ through which this development has proceeded during the past fourteen hundred years. Rather an analytical study of the history of Islam has convinced him that this development has, in fact, patterned itself on a dialectical process—moving forward in a ‘gradual progression’ or a stage by stage synthetic process. The process began with the ‘original thrust’ of Islam, namely monotheism-cum-egalitarianism-cum-socio-economic-justice, on the Arabian society that produced ‘inner tension’ in the nascent body-politic of Islam leading to a synthesis or re-adjustment by accepting some of the Arabian customs with necessary modifications. This integrated Arabian-Islamic society then became the first term of a still broader tension the other term being provided by the impact of Perso-Roman influences leading eventually to a broader re-adjustment or synthesis and so on and so forth. In his analysis, he has also empirically demonstrated that in the process of the growth of the body-politic of Islam, such ‘tensions’ were often resolved synthetically or by broadening the horizon but also occasionally by complete or partial rejection of the extraneous elements.

This theory of ‘synthetic progressivism’ (which is categorically different from Ibn Khaldunian and Hegelian dialecticism) bears close affinity to Shah Wali Allah’s theory of Taḥḥiq and is suggestive of his deep influence on our author. Moreover, following up this theory, our author has been able to go deeper than Syed Ameer 'Ali in resurrecting not only the essence of Islam but also its ‘original thrust’ as noted above (p. 12), which knowingly or unknowingly still remains the most potent driving force as well as the prime source of strength of the Muslim society. Elaborating on this theme, he says in a recent article (Islamic Studies, Islamic Research Institute, Rawalpindi, Dec. 1966, p. 323):—

“If one studies the early, short, forceful, and indeed explosive surahs of the Qur‘ān, which, in the standard arrangement of the Qur‘ān, appear at its end, one finds only two themes insistently preached there. One is the Unity of God, over against the sectional and tribal godlings of Arabia, and the other is an essential egalitarianism, along with its obvious consequences of socio-economic and spiritual justice. Indeed, so strong is this second aspect that a pre-eminent present-day scholar of Islam, Professor H. A. R. Gibb, has said that Islam is essentially a social movement pressed into religious channels. There also seems to exist, on reflection, a positive link between the moral-spiritual ideal of monotheism on the one hand, and the idea of egalitarianism and of a just society, on the other. The Qur‘ān seems to say that, if there is one God, then essentially there must be one humanity”.

Coming to the tail-end of his analysis, the same theory enables him to pronounce with knowledge:

“The task of rethinking and reformulating Islam at the present juncture is more acute and radical than has faced the Muslims since the 3rd/9th century, and the requisite performance is equivalent to the performance of the first two centuries and a half. In other words, the thinking Muslim has to go right behind the early post-Prophetic formative period itself and to reconstruct it all over again” (p. 251).
He, however, complains at this point, that this is "exactly what the conservatives, who still largely control the mainsprings of power in the Community, not only refuse to do but completely fail even to recognize the need to do" (p. 251).

It is very likely that the Western Orientalists as well as the conservative 'Ulamā' would find our author at fault almost in every page of this book since he has exploded many of their fond theories. Nevertheless, on second thought, both would also find it necessary to reformulate their ideas on fresh bases as our author has remarkably succeeded in undermining many of their arguments.

There is no doubt that Dr. Rahmān is a modernist Muslim. But he is one who believes, unlike many others, that the Muslim modernists of our time have failed to produce anything like even the near solution of the perilous problems which have been staring in their face for the last one and a half centuries. Rather, he feels very deeply that the Islamic revivalist movements (pre-modernist reform movements) of the 18th and 19th centuries, which were many and whose influence was widespread over the Muslim world, had given, a lead in the right direction (pp. 206-211), and that the fate of the body politic of Islam is essentially bound up with the conservative section of the Muslims who still form the bulk of the Ummah. Whether the Muslim modernists will be able to bring Islam again on the wheel of the times will, therefore, depend on their ability to carry the conservative Muslims with them.

In conclusion, it may be emphasized that the present work must not be judged as a final exposition of the Islamic system of life; rather it must be taken, as it itself claims to be, as an "exploratory" study on Islam. As such, it has opened up a new and wide field for methodical research in Islamic studies, which, if seriously pursued by competent scholars, will not only result in the improvement of our knowledge in Islamics but will also test the hypothesis of Dr. Rahmān underlying the present work. The scholars may also check up such factual errors in matters of detail, from which any general work like the present one must of necessity suffer on account of its dependence on the contributions of numerous research scholars working in special fields. For instance, the reliance of our author on the Encyclopaedia of Islam has resulted in the repetition of some of the errors committed earlier therein in respect of the Farā'īḍī movement of Bengal, such as putting the date of the birth of Haji Shari'at Allah at A.D. 1764 instead of A.D. 1781 and the date of his return from Makkah to Bengal at A.D. 1802 instead of A.D. 1818 as well as in describing his teacher at Makkah as a Shafi'i Shaykh (p. 204) who was, in fact, Tahir Sombal Ḥanafi (see History of the Farā'īḍī Movement in Bengal, by the present reviewer, Karachi, 1965, chapter III, and article "Chronology of the Farā'īḍī Movement" in Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society, Vol. XIII, Part IV, Oct. 1965, pp. 314-21).

It must also be emphasized that "Islam" is a challenging book which no serious student of Islam can afford to ignore. It is highly desirable that this work is made available in translation to Muslims of different climes and regions speaking different languages all the world over.

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