BOOK REVIEWS


Muslims and informed non-Muslims alike consider it self-evident that Islam as religion and way of life is based on two sources: the Qurʾān and the Sunnah. Since both were turned into scripture, Islam is considered as inflexible, indeed a hindrance in responding to modern challenges.

The author, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Mount Holyoke College in Massachussetts, attempts to demonstrate forcefully that the second of these assumptions is incorrect because "sunna" means different things to different Muslims — to a point where they "face an intellectual crisis at whose heart is the problem of sunna", their "bitterest point of conflict" (pp. 3, 119).

In fact, long before the appearance of this work several German orientalists like Alois Sprenger, Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht had done their best to discard the entire corpus of Sunnah as unreliable. Muslims had already argued about all conceivable aspects of the Islamic tradition among themselves: Are both the Qurʾān and Sunnah essentially of the same nature, both being revealed (waḥy) or divinely inspired (iḥlām)? If so, are they of equal status? Is the Qurʾān perhaps more in need of the Sunnah than the Sunnah of the Qurʾān? Can the Qurʾān abrogate the Sunnah? Can the Sunnah abrogate the Qurʾān? Are Sunnah and Ḥadīth identical (or is there an independent "living sunnah")? Had large parts of the Sunnah been committed to writing already during the 1st century of Hijrah? Is it admissible that traditions (aḥādīth) considered saḥīḥ on the basis of their chains of transmitters (iṣnād) are rejected for reasons of content (matn)? If so, on which criteria (reason, consistency, historical or contextual grounds)? Is all of the Sunnah religiously binding? If only parts of it are of a legal nature, are these binding permanently and universally?
These questions, all raised throughout much of Muslim history, are an impressive demonstration of the intellectual pluralism of Islamic thought, defeating the popular image of Islam as a rigid and monolithic doctrine of jurisprudence. In fact, the answers given to these questions still position each individual Muslim doctrinally.

Professor Brown profited from field trips to Pakistan and Egypt. 90% of his extensive bibliography, mainly with titles in Arabic and Urdu, consists of Muslim authors. Aside from Shāfi‘, and Ḥanafī jurists, prominence is given to Shāh Wālī Allāh (d. 1762), the Yemenite scholar al-Shawkānī (d. 1834), Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), Muḥammad ʻAbduh (d. 1905), Rashīd Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), Muḥammad Tawfīq Șīdqi (Al-Islām huwa al-Qur‘ān, 1906), al-Shiblī (Method of Sifting Prophetic Traditions), Ghulam Ahmad Parwez, Abū al-ʻlā Mawdūdī (d. 1979), Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah bayna Ahl al-Fiqh wa Ahl al-Hadīth, 1989), Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (Kayfa Nata’ānalu ma’ al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah, 1990) — the latter two backed up by the I.I.I.T. in Herndon, VA — and Fazlur Rehman (Islamic Methodology in History, 1965), the author's main inspiration.

The outcome is a major orientalist contribution to the science of Ḥadīth rooted both in Western and Muslim scientific tradition. If I were to teach Ḥadīth, this book would be required reading for my introductory class.

Brown is aware that theological challenges to the authority of the Sunnah invariably were challenges as well to the authority of specific people, be they clans (Umayyah), parties (Shi‘ah) or functionaries (Muhaddithūn versus Fuqahā‘). Thus, whenever Ahl al-Qur‘ān are at odds with Ahl al-Hadīth — to take the two extreme positions — vested interests are at stake. It is to the credit of the author that he recognizes that modern "fundamentalist" Islamic revivalists cannot but focus on the Sunnah for being serious about bringing Islam back as a complete, concrete way of life. But those who recognize that, like the Muslim Brothers, are remarkably moderate and pragmatic in steering a middle course between those who flirt with the rejection of the Sunnah and those who consider it supreme in an out-and-out literal sense. Such people defend the Sunnah against the deniers of Ḥadīth while claiming the right to reinterpret the traditions (p. 134).

Throughout the book the fact emerges that the Islamic Ummah is holding on to its Sunnah unswervingly, regardless of all theological and historical debates. The Ummah rightly suspects that the Salafi critique of Islamic jurisprudence might lead to a critique of the authenticity of the Sunnah and end up with a challenge to the Qur‘ānic revelation; therefore their instinctive resistance even to the most justified critical effort. So much so that even secularist Muslim thinkers never seem to question
whether the model of the Prophet (peace be on him) is to be emulated (imitatio Muhammadi) but only on which basis, i.e. how to do it (p. 138)?

This explains the absurdity that even the radical opponents of tradition still tend to base their Sunnah critique on that very Sunnah.

May Allah preserve of it all that is authentic and helpful as guidance.

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One of the characteristics of the modern age in the realm of religious thinking and spiritual contemplation is — in my opinion — confusion. The scientific mind of the twentieth century which does not heed to, or so it claims and tries to prove, any irrational or undefined or undefinable objective, phenomenon or idea seems to be forgetting itself and rushing towards all sorts of messages and ideas introducing itself in the name of spirituality, mysticism or metareligious consciousness for reasons repeatedly dealt with by writers from the East and the West in the field of mysticism and clearly illustrated in the introduction of all books having been published and being published under the title 'mysticism' or 'spiritualism'. This state of affairs does not trouble the western mind at all, the mind which seems to have concluded for itself that religion is a matter of faith and individual consciousness, not a matter of science and human reason. What matters here is the individual happiness and personal satisfaction, not the objective reality, well-defined sound theory or clear-cut spiritual conception or theologically backed rationally consistent mystical practices.

These type of pseudo-mystical and spiritually superficial and religiously shallow writings and movements are becoming very popular in the west and in many parts of the world among groups that could not adopt themselves to the teachings of any particular religion, any behavioural philosophy or credal system. Since Humanism without any

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