BOOK REVIEW


The book under review presents a penetrating, though sometimes subjective, analysis of Shibli's religious and political thought. This is a Master's thesis submitted in 1973 to the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, Canada, and published with slight changes. 'His colourful and complex personality', 'the essential rationalist impulse of the man' and 'the neglected modernist side of his thought' (preface) were some of the reasons for author's choice of Shibli as a subject of her study. In her opinion no aspect of Shibli's life has so far been properly studied. After surveying various books and articles on Shibli she concludes that "dearth of serious writing" on him was also a factor which prompted her to study this subject.

The book falls into three chapters, Rationalist Theology; Changing law, and Liberal politics. A chronological biobibliography has also been given as an appendix at the end of the book. Professor Adams, in his foreword, appreciates Shibli as "a scholar of formidable learning as well as a thinker of independence of mind." He thinks that the monograph "serves to correct a distorted image by presenting a more rounded view of his imposing personality than was previously available" (p. IX). One might feel, he says, that Shibli could not resolve the problems he discussed, particularly those relating to science and religion. The very fact that as a first rate thinker he gave deep thought to them is itself of much importance. (p. XII). During the course of her discussion of such problems Mrs. Murad has given some reasons why he refrains from resolving them (e.g. p. 82).

In her preface Mrs. Murad shows that "Shibli had a much more modern mind than he is usually credited with". She ascribes his 'variegated and protean mind' to 'his restless soul', 'changing times', 'evolution in his thinking' and 'inconsistency in his thought.' Shibli is an enigma for our author: "a reactionary reformer", a "romanticising apologist", "not a modernist through and through", and "was virtually forced into taking defensive and reactionary position" (Preface). This is one side of his picture. The other side is: 'showing an increasingly realistic, modern liberal tendency', 'liberal progressive spirit," and 'a true forerunner of the breed of Islamic modernists typified by Fazlur Rahman' (p. 120). She differs from Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi (sic) who has attempted to paint him in 'orthodox colours', from Smith who portrays him as "an example of a fairly conservative mind" and "an orthodox rationaliser", from Aziz Ahmad who thinks that "the cast of his mind is essentially medieval" and from Fazlur Rahman who links him with revivalist movements. (Preface). Curiously enough, she thinks that his writings do not reflect call for social reform, protest against degeneration of Muslim society, and that he did not mean removing social evils and raising moral standards.
But she herself contradicts this assertion by saying: “This is not to deny that some of his writings may have indirectly helped the revivalist tendency by portraying the periods of ‘Umar I and the Prophet in glowing nostalgic tones” (p. XVIII). On this point our author becomes so much subjective that she does not even refer to Shibli’s Sīrat al-Nabī, al-Fārīq, and those letters and verses of his where he appears to be orthodox and expresses his desire for reform, directly and indirectly. Shibli was, in her opinion, an intellectualist and was mainly concerned with the intellectual reformation of Islam as a faith; he was trying to redefine the contents and methods of faith—primarily under the impact of the West” (Preface). He sought to make “a new synthesis”, “a new orientation and a new vision of Islam.” She is so much concerned with his modernism that she rather hesitates to call Shibli an ‘ālim, but considers him more properly a Kātib of ‘Abbāsid or Mamlūk period with a secular spirit which characterised this class (p. XXII). Thus she cuts him loose from the class of ‘ulamd’. Like her preface she projects the same extreme view about Shibli throughout the book. She portrays him as a “modernist” through and through, neglecting or misinterpreting the evidence wherever it contradicts her point of view.

In chapter I, analysing Shibli’s views on rationalist theology Mrs. Murad says that material conditions and modern challenge to social institutions of Islam raised the problem “whether faith and reason can accommodate one another.” The conflict was between religion and scientific thought. Hence Sayyid Aḥmad Kháñ felt the need of a new Kalām and showed that Islam was in conformity with modern sciences. Following him, Shibli also felt such a need and proposed a different solution of the problem. But he distinguished between philosophy and modern science by saying that their subject matters and scopes were absolutely separate. The confusion arises when science and religion tamper with each other. This led to the spread of unbelief in Europe where the scope of religion was very vast. But there is no such danger in Islam as it already differentiates between affairs of the world and affairs of religion. But science and philosophy or science and religion no longer remained neutral: the laws of science became a philosophy and a religion unto themselves. Thus they clashed with revelation. Hence Shibli had to define his position.

Shibli casts doubt on the certainty and finality of the laws discussed by science. He questions whether all laws of nature were discovered and determined by science. He of course found a way to explain scientifically “the other-worldly” in Islam. But he differs from Sayyid Aḥmad Kháñ who deprived Islam of its other-worldliness or supernatural elements. He believed that Islam should be explained as far as possible in a rational way to make it acceptable to the modern mind. This led him to propose for constructing a new ‘Ilm al-Kalām. It may be pointed out that his works on Kalām show that he wanted to give an answer in his new Kalām to his critics on problems like polygamy, divorce, jihād and slavery in the context of modern situation. He calls them legal and socio-ethical problems. But he does not discuss these problems in his al-Kalām. Thus his desire of formulating a new Kalām could not be fulfilled. But our author does not give us any satisfactory answer to this question. She, however, discusses how Shibli wanted not to throw away the old ‘Ilm al-Kalām in toto, but to reconstruct it “according to old principles and new taste.” (p. 14). He also criticized the medieval
Muslim theologians who were mistaken by attributing several views on certain problems to the Greek philosophers who were in fact silent on those issues. The main concern of *Kalâm*, in his opinion, was the refutation of atheists and not of philosophers, who did not believe in any religion and whose main target was the Qur'ān.

Mrs. Murad gives us an excellent analysis of Shibli's views on Ash'arism. He was vehemently opposed to Ash'arite doctrines and severely criticised them. "In a sense", she says, "Shibli's works on *Kalâm* are not but a concerted attempt to discredit the basic tenets of Ash'arism and uphold those of Mu'tazilism". (p. 19). In his opinion, its importance was historical. Al-Ash'ari sought to strike a middle course between reason and tradition. To show the reasonableness of Islam in the modern world he had to uphold some views of the Mu'tazila: freedom of will and action, causal relationship, that divine commands are based on reason, justice and goodness, and that things are possessed of inalienable properties. (p. 22). This is what Shibli meant by "old principles" and what he regarded as "useful" in the medieval *Kalâm*. He took pains to show that al-Ghazālī, though believed in Ash'arism, himself exposed its defects. He concluded that Ash'arism was good for the common people, and it had no reality nor did it give any satisfaction. He criticises the Ash'arite doctrine that prophecy is bestowed by God arbitrarily on any man. He thinks that one should believe in prophecy by knowing its reality and its function in human life. A prophet, in his opinion, is endowed with a spiritual power to perceive the ultimate realities and moral concepts. This power in a prophet is inborn. "It is beyond the realm of intellect and learning". He does not take a miracle as a necessary condition for prophecy. But he believes in its occurrence, and thinks that a miracle is not a break of natural law of cause and effect, but only a deviation from the habit (*ādah).

He found in Rumi a clear and more convincing way of argumentation to present faith. He prefers Rumi's method of proving the existing God by the process of dematerialisation of things beginning from the inanimate objects up to the animal stage. The decreasing materiality reaches non-material and non-sensible existent, i.e. God.

In Chapter II Mrs. Murad delineates Shibli's views on changing law. Here she finds an opportunity to portray him as a modernist of extreme type of our times. According to her, for Shibli Islam meant beliefs, rituals and morals. (p. 76). Hence the laws relating to social, political and legal activity are subject to change as they fall within the category of "worldly affairs". Shibli, of course, has taken a liberal stand on the question of change, but not to the extent to which our author seeks to drag him. We shall deal with some of these points in the following paragraphs.

Shibli quotes Shāh Wali Allah in support of his view that while legislating on social problems one should keep in view the customs of the people to whom a prophet is sent, and the people of the future generations should not be pressed hard about them. (p. 72). He then himself refers to the customs of Arabia and says that it will be apparent from this principle to what extent they have been taken into consideration in determining the punishments of the Islamic *Shar'īa* and "how far it is necessary to be bound with exactly the same, specific punishments," (p. 73). After citing these words of Shibli,
she remarks: "These words speak for themselves and hardly need any comment. However, one should mention as a matter of record that, though Shibli never spelled out positively his attitude towards the Qur'ân as a source of law, he obviously did not regard the Qur'ânic nuṣūṣ, at least those which pertained to criminal law, as final and eternal". (p. 73). One might ask the learned author when Shibli himself is non-committed on this question, why is she so much worried to give a clear-cut judgement about his attitude towards the Qur'ân as a source of law? If Shibli does not take the Qur'ânic nuṣūṣ as eternal and wants to ignore those Qur'anic injunctions which were influenced by the customs of Arabia, such as punishments of theft, fornication and murder etc. what are those Qur'anic nuṣūṣ which Shibli takes as eternal? Is it not a fact that the whole Qur'ân was revealed in a seventh-century Arabian society? Its commands reflect the Arab element not only in criminal law, but also in other spheres. If we follow this logic, the Qur'ân should be divided into eternal and ephemeral or practicable and non-practicable. Eternal is meant for the Muslims of the whole community and ephemeral for the Muslims of the Prophet's time. But who will decide which of the Qur'anic nuṣūṣ are influenced by the customs of the Arabs and which not? Our author also says that Shibli limited the role of Ḥadith (p. 76) in law, and according to her, he does not consider the Qur'anic nuṣūṣ as final. Then what remains there to stand on? Shāh Wali Allah, of course, talks of considering the customs of the people in legislation, but Shibli has used it in a much broader sense which he did not mean. Sayyid Sulaymān Nadawī also points out this omission (Ḥayāt Shibli, p. 120). Mrs. Murad has misinterpreted Shibli to the extent that she presented her unwittingly as denying eternity of the Qur'ânic nuṣūṣ. This is in fact a great blame on him. He discusses the punishments for theft, fornication, murder and robbery in his last work Sīrat al-Nabī (II, 132-138). About cutting off the hand of a thief he remarks, "The punishment of amputating the hands of thieves was in vogue in pre-Islamic Arabia. Islam also retained it." (Ibid., II, 136) In his Sīrat al-Nabī he has devoted a full chapter on punishments. Here he does not say that these punishments were influenced by the customs of the Arabs, and hence were not eternal. Our author unfortunately does not refer to this book of Shibli in her work. She does not even include it in the bibliography where she mentions Shibli's various works. One must objectively present the material on the subject and then reach some conclusion.

Mrs. Murad has elaborately discussed Shibli's views on custom ('urf) where he extensively quoted Ibn 'Abidin al-Shāmī and concluded that rulings change with the change of custom. But to what extent? Where the new custom is not incompatible with dalīl sharʿī so as to necessitate the abandonment of naṣṣ the custom would be upheld. Analysing all this, our learned author concludes: "Why has Shibli gone to all this trouble of quoting extensively from Shāmī. Not, we believes, because he was interested in establishing the finality and permanent validity of the nuṣūṣ." (p. 76). She thinks that Shibli was interested in stressing the principle of movement and change of Islamic law. Our author has unfortunately made a supposition that Shibli did not believe in the "finality and validity of the nuṣūṣ". She purposely stresses this point again and again in this chapter. We have already refuted this point. But we must add something more here, as the charge is most serious. It is worthy of note that
despite his versatility Shibli had made a deep study of Islamic law and jurisprudence. When he used the terms nuṣūṣ, da‘īt shar‘ī, īḥādāt, ra‘y and ‘urf, he was fully aware of what he meant by them. It is inappropriate, rather absurd to say, as our learned author seeks to prove, that Shibli was not interested in stressing the permanent value of the nuṣūṣ. When Shibli or any other scholar uses the term naṣṣ by it he means something clear, unequivocal in meaning and of permanent value. Questions that are disputed amongst the scholars and open to reasoning are not based on nuṣūṣ. Hence it has been said that the nuṣūṣ are numbered. Shibli’s own writings refute this charge levelled against him. About the change of custom the author herself says, “The effect to which Shibli is quoting Shāmi is that, except for those which are established by a clear naṣṣ...” (p. 74). Why does he make this exception when he does not believe in the eternal validity of a naṣṣ? Moreover, Shibli quotes a tradition of the Prophet to distinguish between legislative and non-legislative commands. It says, “you are more aware of your worldly affairs” (al-Kalām, p. 220, and cited by the author on p. 69). When Shibli quotes this tradition to show the principle that some commands are legislative and others not, he must have certainly believed in the permanent validity of this tradition. Otherwise there is no sense in quoting this tradition. But we do not know whether our author takes this tradition as a naṣṣ or not. It appears that there is some confusion in the thinking of the author for want of her deep knowledge in the Islamic disciplines, particularly in Fiqh, Usūl, and Hadith. She does not know the rulings about ‘urf and has unnecessarily overemphasised ‘urf vis-à-vis naṣṣ.

In her obsession with modernism she goes to extremes. She believes that no one can specify something universal and lasting in the Islamic Shari‘a in view of ever-changing circumstances of human world. Let us quote her verbatim: “But the question still remains: how far would Shibli have gone? Was there anything of lasting, universal value in the societal norms of Islamic Shari‘a? Put like that, Shibli would surely have answered the question in the affirmative. What he would not have found easy to specify, perhaps no one who has once been exposed to the human flux called history could, is the name of that something universal and lasting. Any decision in this regard would remain, in the final analysis, arbitrary in the sense that it would primarily be based on practical considerations of an ever-changing world.” (pp. 77-78)

It may be pointed out that human society is of course ever-changing by its nature. But the Qur‘ān certainly provides us with some social values which are of universal and lasting nature. These values serve as a beacon light, indeed guidelines or bases for building social, economic and legal system in every age and clime. The form may sometimes change with the change of circumstances, but not the norm if it is grounded in the values of permanent nature. The question raised by Mrs. Murad is not something new. It has been much discussed by the occidental scholars and Muslim modernists. It is worthy of remark that such questions were not raised by Shibli himself. It is the learned author who denies in the Islamic Shari‘a “something universal and lasting.” We would have appreciated if Mrs. Murad, instead of writing on Shibli, had written a book dealing with the eternity of the Qur‘ānic injunctions, permanent validity of nuṣūṣ, changing i‘jāw, nature of the Shari‘a law, and similar other modernistic problems.
Shibli wrote an article 'Pardah awr Islām' (veiling of women in Islam) in reply to Ameer Ali's article on pardah in which he proved that pardah was a late development. Refuting him Shibli proved that pardah existed in Arabia long before Islam and "was regularised and made compulsory by it", and that it was in vogue among the upper-class women as compared to the lower-class. (p. 80) In this article Shibli has defended pardah and taken it as a compulsory injunction of Islam. But Mrs. Murad is not happy with her modernist Shibli on this stand. Let us see how she interprets his point of view on pardah to her favour. She says: "It can be noticed that Shibli is simply stating that pardah is a religious injunction, and that, too. more as a fact of history than as a fact of religion. At any rate, nowhere does he say that it is absolute or unchangeable. In fact, if one may be permitted to draw any conclusion from the fact that Shibli is linking the origin and development of the idea and institution of pardah with the evolving social distinctions and protectivism, following in the wake of the onward march of civilisation, we would say that he was not inclined towards bestowing a permanent character upon pardah". (pp. 80-81). The fact that pardah is a religious injunction, as she asserts herself, carries no weight for her. She is not correct in her conclusion that Shibli traced the history of pardah to link it with social evolution with the development of civilisation. He, in fact, traced its history to refute Ameer Ali's standpoint. Besides, one may ask her where does Shibli clearly say that pardah is changeable, particularly when he says that Islam made it compulsory? (p. 80). She thinks that Shibli's statements on pardah are conflicting. On the one hand he appreciates the pardah observed by the Begam of Bhopal, and on the other hand he favoured the loose silken gown used by Turkish women. He commends Qāsim Amin's work on freedom of women as well as Farid Wajdi's work that was written in its refutation. (pp. 81-82) Finding no convincing answer to this contradiction she says: "The answer probably is that the poor man was caught in the middle." (p. 82) Does she mean to say that Shibli was originally opposed to pardah but he had no courage to express his point of view clearly for fear of the 'ulamā'? But this reason she has rejected herself many times in this book. It may be noted that Shibli was an upholder of pardah as such and considered it an Islamic injunction. But he might have differed from the orthodox point of view of pardah, i.e., entire seclusion of women, and have had his own liberal interpretation of this institution. The author herself has elaborated this point on pp. 83-84. But unnecessarily she tends to confuse the problems.

In Chapter III she discusses Shibli's political thought. This chapter provides us with fresh materials and wealth of information on the subject. "The fountain head of Shibli's politics on international level", she remarks, "was a sense of the community of Islam" and not revivalism and pan-Islamism. (p. 89). He disagreed with Sayyid Ahmad Khān's advice not to join Indian National Congress and publicly disowned this policy. One finds full expression of his political ideas in his article "Musalmān Ki political Kanwat" (The Political change in the Muslims). He boldly followed the policy of Hindū-Muslim unity and wanted that both should struggle together rather than fight against each other. But in his opinion Muslims fell short of this standard. He criticised the Muslim League for their slogan that Hindūs were dominating Muslims. He maintained that if the demands of Congress were met, the destiny of India would be changed.
He wanted to see the Muslim League reformed and function like another political party. He also made certain suggestions for it. One of them was to remove big land-owners from its executive committee. In the enthusiasm of his desire for Hindu-Muslim unity he even wrote that the Hindus never invaded Iran and Arabia; it is the Muslims who invaded India and destroyed the temples. By this the Muslim feeling was injured and he had to write a sort of postscript. In her opinion Shibli was a liberal and democrat in Indian politics. He was, of course, a nationalist, but what type? She thinks that he was influenced by the pro-Congress Muslim leaders, a type represented by Badr al-Din Tayyibji of Bombay.

In her conclusion she says that Shibli wanted change in the religion and on this point there was no distinction between him and Sayyid Ahmad Khan. By his attempt to show Islam as a natural religion Sayyid Ahmad Khan deprived it of its human and divine elements. Hence his conception of Islam could not gain sympathy while Shibli's conception of Islam, being a thing of flesh and blood, and a living organism, became popular. "To him Islam was self-necessitating and self-justifying process of faith and action, even if not a self-explaining and self-relating one." (p. 118). Her conclusion is again far-fetched when she says, "Be that as it may, the fact remains that Shibli was in favour, not only of changing the positive contents of Islamic law, but also of releasing its potential for further changes." (p. 119).

The book, with all its subjectivity and far-fetched conclusions, poses a challenge to Shibli's biographers to revise their views. The response to this challenge will show how far she succeeds in this attempt.

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