BOOK REVIEWS


The present study is a contribution to the history of Arabic literature to acquaint the Western student with the Eastern culture, its artistic creativity and literature. “It aims at giving the nonspecialist an inkling of the richness of Arab/Muslim literature and the depth of religious and philosophic thought it contains” (Preface). It falls into two parts: Introduction and selection from Arabic literature. The Introduction has been split up into six chapters. The work presents a survey of the problems of religious, theological, and philosophical nature. It provides a critical and analytical appraisal of the ideas contained in the classical Arabic literature. One may compare the present study to R.A. Nicholson’s A Literary History of the Arabs, and H.A.R. Gibb’s Arabic Literature. The former, in the opinion of the author, presents a comprehensive history of Arabic literature within the framework of Islam, while the latter is not meant for the beginner. This work deals with the current ideas and problems evinced in the developing Muslim culture with special emphasis on the approach to them by the Western Arabist and Orientalist (Preface).

The learned author, under the guise of introducing the classical Arabic literature to a layman, has taken the maximum benefit of this opportunity to make the religious attitudes, beliefs and doctrines of the Muslims a target of her trenchant criticism and heinous attacks. She does not provide us with any fresh material, original ideas, or a new line of thought to understand the thought patterns, and culture of Islam. She repeats the clichés of her predecessors harping on the same tune in her analysis and criticism of the Islamic doctrines. In this review, we find no place and scope to refute the baseless objections raised by the author. Here we shall touch upon a few of them.

The main target of her criticism is the Qur’an. She thinks that the Qur’an was revealed in a language that was not commonly spoken in Arabia at that time. “Not only did the Holy Book contain unfamiliar ideas but these were expressed in phrases and terms not current in every day speech” (p. 8). It should be noted that the Arabs were the first addresses of the Qur’an. Had it been revealed in a language not intelligible to them, the Meccan infidels must have rejected it on the same ground. They of course posed a number of questions about the teaching of the Qur’an which sought to undermine their ancient customs and beliefs. But they never complained against the unintelligibility of the Qur’anic language. Moreover, history tells us, if we do not take it as legend, that the Qur’an by its inimitable style and impressive tone captivated the hearts of the Meccans. On a number of occasions they asked the Prophet and his Companions to refrain from reciting the Qur’an publicly. Besides, the Qur’an itself proclaims that it was revealed in plain and clear Arabic language (verses 16:103; 26:195), having no impediment (39:28)
to enable the people to understand it (12:2; 43:3). Had it come down in an occult language not understood by the common man, the purpose of its revelation would have been defeated.

She reiterates the oft-repeated notion of the Orientalists that the Prophet was influenced in his teachings, particularly in the Qur'anic revelations, by Judaism, Christianity, and Arab environment. According to her, the Near Eastern civilization "with its innate religiosity" inspired in the Prophet the religious ideas found in his early preachings. Belief in the revival after death, the idea of Paradise and Hell as portrayed in the Qur'an were all borrowed from the myths and legends of the ancient Near East. The Qur'an, she asserts, repeatedly invokes the sun, the mountains, the ship, the city, the fish, in its early revelations. These were ancient symbols in Near Eastern religious belief for death and resurrection (pp. 17-18).

The Qur'an, it may be pointed out, never claims that it brought forth entirely a new teaching. Instead, it repeats its claim time and again that its essential teachings conform to those proffered by the former prophets and scriptures.

The infidels of Mecca did not believe in the resurrection after death, as the Qur'an tells us (23:37; 45:24). It brings home to them this tenet by mentioning the similitude of the blooming of earth by rainfall after its aridity and death (2:28; 73:164; 41:39; 50:11). The author does not refer to such verses of the Qur'an. Instead she refers to certain pre-Islamic poems and to the myths and legends of ancient Egypt, and infers that "the pagan Arab did ponder death and resurrection in the traditional ancient manner" (p. 18). By this she refers to the two Qur'anic verses (10:23 and 29:65) which mention the sailing of a ship in a stormy sea and the abatement of the storm. She thinks that the Qur'an compares death with the storm, and resurrection with its abatement and the saving of the sailors. This idea, in her opinion, came from the Sacred Scriptures in which the ship was a particular symbol for death and revival (pp. 18-19). By this she seeks to prove that the pagan Arabs were familiar with the idea of resurrection as a result of the scriptural legends which prevailed among them. This misinterpretation of these two Qur'anic verses seem to be improbable. In these verses the Qur'an is simply calling the attention of unbelievers to the unity of God. It argues that when they are surrounded by a storm in a sea, they call upon God alone, and disassociate themselves from their idols. But when they are saved by God, they again associate the idols with Him. It is simply saying that when they worship God alone in danger, why not in peace. Furthermore, the Arabs were known for their navigation and foreign trade. They undertook long voyages to various countries for this purpose. Their encounter with storm on sea was a matter of everyday life. The simile of the ship and the storm is perfectly consistent with the context which the Qur'an is implying in the verses. The Meccan infidels could understand better the divine message in the terms already familiar to them. Therefore the assertion of the author about the foreign provenance is untenable.

The Qur'an describes the anecdotes of the past communities in the early Meccan Sūrah briefly, whereas in the later communications it mentions their details. Accounting for this arrangement she observes that the Prophet at the early stage, particularly during his stay at Mecca, was familiar with the legends of the Near East. Hence the early Meccan Sūrah do not present the Biblical personalities as history. As the Prophet's association
with Jews developed, he became acquainted with the historical personalities by his contact with them. She substantiates her proposition by citing a number of examples, especially of Pharaoh. "Only after his audience—in particular the Jews of his environment—associated Muhammad's sermons with the familiar Biblical persons (who were themselves the end-product of the same evolution, without having left in the Old Testament easily recognizable traces of the consecutive steps comparable to those in the Koran), only then did Muhammad gradually substitute the "historical" Fir'awn and the historical Yûnus for the mythological ones" (p. 40). By the same thesis she provides a solution of the problem that vexed the Western scholarship of the Biblical stories found in the poetry of Ummayyah b. Abi'l-Šalt, a contemporary of the Prophet (pp. 40-41).

In the frenzy of her preposterous skepticism our author forgets that she herself has previously asserted that the 'Holy Book contains unfamiliar ideas'" (p. 8). Now she is proving that the Prophet was familiar with the legends of the Near East and that the Mecicans were acquainted with these stories. This is a contradiction of her own thesis.

Her thesis is untenable for two reasons. The Biblical anecdotes are generally found in the Meccan SûrahS. The author has not provided any concrete proof and positive evidence to show that the Prophet had borrowed this material from the Jews at Mecca, for the later Meccan SûrahS provide details of these stories. Second, the Qur'an mentions the story of Pharaoh in the Meccan SûrahS more frequently and in greater detail than in the Medinan SûrahS. Moreover, the Medinan SûrahS do not furnish any fresh material about Pharaoh so that we call it historical. The brief description of an historical event at one place, and its detailed treatment at another does not indicate its development from myth to history. In fact, it depends on the context and circumstance of a communication where to condense and where to amplify. The early Meccan SûrahS are short and concise; would it be reasonable to expatriate the historical account of the past communities in these short SûrahS?

The author is full of praise for renowned medieval historian philosopher Ibn Khaldûn, calling him "the most outstanding historian of medieval times", a "Sociologist", and a "Political scientist" (pp. 61-62). She dwells at length on his Muqaddimah and brings out its significant features, its motif, and its pioneering character in the philosophy of history. She however regrets that in his purely historiographical work 'Ibar, Ibn Khaldûn does not follow "his own insights" and theories propounded by him in the Muqaddimah. To this she herself replies that he was reluctant "to offend traditional attitudes towards sacred personalities and sacrosanct values". But in the Muqaddimah, he felt free to present his "unusual thoughts and sharp analysis of traditional concepts" to his students and friends, but not to the general audience. This was, she presumes, a prevailing custom in medieval times (p. 65). This presumption might be true in part, but this is not the only reason. It is to be noted that both the Muqaddimah and the 'Ibar were written for general audience. If Ibn Khaldûn had any reluctance to offend the "traditional attitudes" in 'Ibar, he would have avoided presenting his free criticism on traditional values in the Muqaddimah too. Hence this idea carries no weight.
It is of course easy to formulate general principles and theories of a science; but they are to be tested and verified by the phenomena of actual facts. If Ibn Khaldün had applied these principles and theories to his historiographical work, he would not have come out of this difficult task with success. The factor of time was involved in the verification of these principles. Hence he accomplished his *Ibar on the same principles followed by his predecessors, and left the theories, philosophy and principles of history for the future generations to test, verify, think over, and apply them.

While explaining the nature of the Qur'anic laws the author incorrectly quotes a Qur'anic verse, "There is no unwillingness (forced conversion) in Islam (lā ʾikrāha fīʾl-ʾIslām)" (2:257), p. 72. The verse referred to should be corrected as "Lā ʾikrāha fīʾl-dīn" There is no compulsion in religion.

About Ḍāliḳ b. Anas she writes, "He was a practising judge who had to adjudicate actual cases, in contrast to Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150 A.H./768 A.D.) the leading spirit of the "Irāqī school who did not hold such office" (pp.73-74). This statement is totally incorrect. Ḍāliḳ never remained a practising judge at Medina. We find no such report about him in his biographies.

She does not give any credit to the eminent medieval Muslim philosophers like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. She believes that they were influenced by Greek philosophy in their thought, particularly by Neo-Platonism. They harmonised its doctrines and theories with the Qur'anic dogma and doctrines and further developed them (pp. 80-81). The interaction between the Greek and Muslim philosophic thought cannot be denied. Modern researches have however revealed the original contribution of Muslim philosophers to this subject. That too must be admitted.

She accuses modern Muslim scholarship of devoting its efforts not to finding new solutions "for age-old, and still unsolved problems", but to refining the material as presented by their forefathers. She finds "no fresh insights" in the modern Muslim thinking in diverse fields (pp. 116-118). Modern works in the field of religion produced by Muslim scholars are, in her opinion, "apologetic, conservative, and on the whole devoid of the creative spirit that characterized the works of classical Muslim thinkers," (p. 118). The main reason for not adopting "new look" at old deep-seated dogmas is, in her view that the Qurʾān was accepted by Muslims as "incontrovertible Revelation" (p. 117). She is surprised to find that an eminent modern thinker like Mūhammad Ḥaqī “returns in the end to his starting point, the inviolability of Revelation" (p. 118).

Her evaluation of contemporary Muslim scholarship might be correct in a sense, although it is not without exaggeration. Out of a large number of creative minds of modern Muslim world she singles out only Haykal and Muhammad ‘Abduh whom she labels as "apologetic", a term frequently used by the Western Orientalists for Muslim scholars who advocate and defend orthodox viewpoint. A great deal of creative work produced by Muslim scholars in different fields today cannot be ignored.

Curiously enough, our author demands a Muslim scholar to disassociate himself from the Qurʾān in his religious thinking, and to take it as controvertible. Is it possible
for a Muslim? The Qur'an, it goes without saying, is the hub of all his intellectual activity, the mainspring of his thought, and the principal source of his inspiration. Belief in the Qur'an, as she suggests, is not the reason for deterioration of modern Muslim scholarship. The factors lie elsewhere that cannot be analysed here.

This book is primarily meant, as the Preface indicates, for creating a "better understanding" between East and West. But this is replete with fallacies, distortion of facts, misinterpretation of the material and tendentious statements. Will this approach of a Western scholar, it may be fairly asked, in presenting an Eastern culture create a better understanding between West and the Third World? We would have appreciated this work, despite its implausible interpretations and far-fetched statements if it could make some genuine contribution to the subject. One would rather hesitate to call this study a scholarly work in its field.

Islamabad. — Ahmad Hasan

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