CLASSICAL ARAB ISLAM: THE CULTURE AND HERITAGE OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Professor Khalidi, the author of this well-researched study, presents Islamic culture in terms of the past, by examining Arab Islamic culture of the Classical period. He maintains that in order to understand modern history, one must always look to the past. This is even more relevant in the case of modern Arab Islamic culture. The author touches upon such themes as the question of relationship between the time-honoured beliefs and social class; the importance of the judiciary in the formulation of classical Islamic culture; and the clash between the views of “Orientalist” Arab Muslim scholars who see Arab Islamic culture through the eyes of the West and the “chauvinists” who claim for Arab Islamic culture a perennial modernity that parallels that of the West.

The author argues that Islam spreads its message at four different levels, the Divine, the Prophetic, the Communal, and the Individual. Islam as revealed by God is in the Qurān; as taught by the Prophet, it is in Ḥadīth; as interpreted by the scholarly community, it is in the consensus; as defined by the individual, it is in analogical reasoning. The Divine, the Prophetic, the communal, the individual are in that order of importance.

The Qurān is therefore distinct from the Old and New Testaments; to be Muslim, God is as near as any physical copy of the Qurān.

The author then introduces doctrinal content of the Qurān, by saying that its theology is timeless. The Quranic “philosophy of history” has its main theme, the struggle throughout history between the righteous and unrighteous, good men and evil men, prophets and kings. It is in this constant struggle that we perceive the deepest cause for the rise and fall of states, kingdoms and nations. We find quite clearly in the Qurān that God plays an active role in the human drama (e.g. 9:14:25:26). The troops of God, who are the angles fight alongside the Muslims. With such a powerful and all knowing God, man’s freedom becomes a relative although a real problem.

The author has developed the thesis that Ḥadīth is the record of the relationship between the Prophet and his people. In fact, much of the inner vitality of Islam as a religion is derived from this dynamic relationship. The Ḥadīth is the record of the first two centuries of a historic relationship, and like all historic relationship, it passed through various stages until it was finally set down by Muslim scholars in the ninth century in the form we possess today.

The author stresses that the greatest importance must be attached to Fiqh, or jurisprudence, for two reasons: the first quantitative and the second qualitative. Quantitatively,
speaking, more works on Fiqh were produced by this civilization than on any other single Islamic science. Qualitatively Fiqh has been and remains the most basic part of the Islamic curriculum.

As regards the value of history, the historians of the ninth and tenth centuries had little difficulty in justifying their activity, especially when we bear in mind the great importance attached to history in the Qur'an. For one thing, history was the record of the encounter of God with man, and by studying the history of that encounter, man could gain deeper knowledge of his relation of God. But there was also a humanistic value in the study of history. In studying the history of man, one gained a deeper understanding of human politics and society. Accordingly, many Muslim historians addressed themselves either directly or indirectly to the ruling circles of their times, who were often willing to benefit from the political "lessons" that history had to teach. Much of this history is political in nature, centering on political turmoil and on the sayings and doings of great men. History is a "mirror for princes", where the secret of political power could be learnt and employed to best advantages. Thus, the historian Miskawayhi (d. 1030) prunes history of everything but its major political events, which he maintains are likely to occur again in the future. He omits all miracles of Prophets because they are of no practical values. His history, significantly entitled "The Experience of Nations" seeks to establish the true value of history: "of all people, those who stand to gain most value and benefit from it are those who have attained great prominence in life, such as viziers, army leaders and rulers of cities."

In a larger sense, history was also seen as a repository of human wisdom. It was here that historians made their contribution to the "great debate" of the ninth century. Many of them included in their histories lengthy introductions on the cultural history of ancient nations. They quoted extensively from their wise men or philosophers on diverse topics of interest to the Muslim community. This is where the wisdom of the past was seen to be relevant to Islamic wisdom.

From the viewpoint of the modern historian, classical Arabic Islamic historiography contains a very rich corpus of accurately ascertained facts. And while much of it relates to the sayings and doings of great men, there is also such material about populist movements and traditions. The classical historians no doubt reflected the concerns of their own scholarly class, and their attitude towards, "commoners", was frequently one of contempt. These commoners, however, were not banished, either from their histories or from biographical dictionaries. From this it is possible for the modern historian to reconstruct a vivid socio-economic portrait of a major world civilization. This task has yet to begin in earnest.

As regards the Sufi movement itself, one might draw fruitful parallel between certain aspects of that mood and the Romantic mood of early nineteenth century Europe, Sufism, like Romanticism, represented a revolt against the formalism and intellectual dogmatism that seemed to them to dominate the lives of fellow religionists. Ritualism and reason were no longer adequate as expressions of the totality of religious experience. Also, like Romantics, the Sufi mood sought an outlet in a heightening and quickening of the perception of Divine reality. This is why he attempts to analyse the literary imagery of the Sufis, for it is often in this imagery that one finds a way to unravel, and perhaps even to share, in intensity of their religious experience.
To underline this contrast between the psyche and the mind, the Sufis frequently resorted to sensual imagery. This heightening of experience, is represented in their imagery as a heightening or intensification of the sense of taste (dhawq). For it is tasting that constitutes for them the most direct, the most intense sense experience of all. Tasting is the sum total, the quintessence of sense experience, the one in which the psyche partakes most fully in that which is to be experienced. To know God is to taste the joy of His presence, to partake in the ecstasy of the communion with him.

This, in brief, is what one might call the Sufi mood. It is necessary, however before we proceed to an analysis of Sufi imagery to say something about the historical origins and development of Sufism and to situate it in time and space within Muslim culture as a whole for he does not want to give the impression that Sufism was somehow a freakish or outlandish movement in Islam. By examining its origins and development, he hopes to show that Islam, from its earliest days, contained within it the seeds of Sufi development. It is also important to remember that the Sufis from the beginning attached a very special importance to meditation upon the Qur'an and were some of its most interesting and attractive commentators.

The God that the Sufi vision reveals is a God of tender mercy, comfort and love – a God that renders all human preoccupations irrelevant and insignificant, infusing all creation with His light, a light that dispels all doubt, a light that makes all things intelligible, constant spiritual exercise and discipline make this light a daily dimension of the life of the Sufi, so that wherever he turns, the light of God is reflected upon his surroundings. Ibn-al-`Arabi speaks of the helplessness of the Sufi as if when all other concerns have been set aside, the Sufi, finds his whole being exclusively pre-occupied with the Divine presence, his will so perfectly in harmony with God that all else is polytheism.

Islamic political thought in the classical period may, broadly speaking, be divided into three major streams that had little or no connection with one another. The first may be termed the philosophical stream and may be defined as an attempt on the part of certain Muslim philosophers to recast the political philosophy of Plato into an Islamic mould. The second stream in Islamic political thought is the one that grew out of Ada and may be defined as the attempt on the part of certain Muslim thinkers to recast the political wisdom – literature of Greece, Persia, India and their own historical experiences into an Islamic mould. The third stream and by far the largest in volume, though not necessarily in influence is the one which grew out of jurisprudence (fiqh) and may be defined as the attempt on the part of certain Muslim jurists to define the nature of the Caliphate or the Sultanate, either in theoretical or in practical terms.

If the history of Islamic political theory is analysed from the viewpoint of its theorists, the Ulma, we can detect the increasing involvement of the scholar class in political affairs as well as the enhancement of their own self-image to the point where it is they rather than the caliphate who are the time guardians of the Muslim polity.

The author concludes with two principal aims in mind. The first is a critical examination of certain contemporary Arab views on classical Arab Islamic culture while the second is an attempt to formulate his views on the problem of the past and the present that is, what has become widely known in the Arab world today as the question of the 'turath' or heritage. He begins by arguing that the two issues, that is, the critical examination as well as the individual formulation of opinion, are intimately connected. He further attempts to show that "scholarly detachment" is a luxury we cannot afford in
the Arab world today and that the problem of the 'turoth' is highly polemical so much so, in fact, that in the interests of accuracy if of nothing else, it is incumbent upon the author to address the reader from within this polemic rather than from outside.

COLONEL GHULAM SARWAR

Mehmed Ekrem Bey