
The Bosnian writer Dr Smail Balić, the silver haired octogenarian, living since 1945 in Austria near Vienna, is the doyen of the articulate European Muslims. Yet it is little pleasure to read his latest book under review, because it suffers from under-editing and other serious shortcomings.

Firstly, the incorporation of eight essays, written between 1989 and 1999, has itself led to many, virtually verbatim repetitions, some occurring in one and the same chapter (see, for instance, pp. 132 and 134). At least half the entries contain indications of being outdated. (For instance, the author shows no awareness of the fact that Ismā‘īl al-Fārūqī was no more alive after 1986). In fact, proper editing could have reduced the book to half its present size.

Secondly, with a few exceptions such as the chapter on “Islam in European Schools”, the book reproduces texts of lectures which naturally appear less coherent when read than when heard.

Thirdly, in most cases, the author abruptly jumps from one issue to another to the point where one loses sight of the subject under discussion. Therefore, the ‘Table of Contents’ is misleading. For instance, consider p. 25 where four subsequent paragraphs deal with (i) Allah’s Mercy; (ii) the Islamic Concept of State; (iii) Islamic Philosophy; and (iv) The Ḥanbalī School of Law.

Fourthly, the author invariably takes up the same limited number of favourite points, rarely attempting to go below the surface. In fact, there is no in-depth analysis of any subject except the history of Islam in Bosnia (pp. 178–192). Additionally, the author shows himself to be extremely opinionated and rash in his judgements, viewing the world exclusively in black or white.

Coming to his ideological stance Balić wishes the (former) “Bosnian paradigm of Islam” to become the prototype of a liberal, secular, and enlightened EURO-Islam. Therefore, he rejects the “hard”, “rigid”, and “retrograde” orthodox Islam now found in the “Asian” Orient, the Arab world and Africa. His diatribes against the “Asianization” and “Africanization” of Islam sound indeed racist. To cite just one instance: “Afro-

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1 It is noted with a sad heart that Dr Smail Balić passed away in March 2002. We are indebted to Dr Balić for a great many things, but especially for his serving as one of the guest editors of this journal’s special issue “Islam in the Balkans” (vol. 36, nos. 2 and 3, 1997). Ed.
Asiatic Islam in its most regressive forms bounces against Europe” (p. 21. See also pp. 100 and 116).

Against this background, one is never in doubt of Balić’s strengths and weaknesses. The author has a more firm grip on the following: mysticism, neo-platonism, philosophy, esoterism, the Mu’tazilah, secular states (like Turkey, Tunisia and Indonesia), Ḥanafī law for the diaspora Muslims, rationalism, and the Ahmadiyyah sect. So are people like ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Raziq, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Ḥusayn Amin, Qāsim Amin, Sa’īd al-‘Ashmāwī, Mohamed Arkoun, Fārid al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār, Jacques Berque, Khalid Duran, Asghar Ali Engineer, Fārid Esack, Muhammad Talbi, Bassam Tibi, al-Zamakhshari, and Naṣr Abū Zayd. His weaknesses comprise Orthodoxy, Traditionalism, Khawārij, Fundamentalism, Ḥanbalism, Wahhabiism, Asceticism, Conservatism, Literalism, Folklorism, Qur’ānic Schools (“spiritual ghettos”), Afro-Asiatic Islam, political Islam, normative Sunnah, ḫudūd laws, hijab. So are people like Abū ‘l-A’lā al-Mawdūdī, ‘Alī Shari‘ati, Ḥasan al-Turābī, Ibn Taymiyyah and Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī.

These two lists give an idea of what the author is after: making Islam at long last go through the 18th century enlightenment that it supposedly has missed so that it might become acceptable to the Occident to such a degree that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can peacefully live together under the rational common roof of Gotthelf Ephraim Lessing’s Ring Parable (from his drama Nathan, the Wise) with none claiming to own the truth. A post-modern dream par excellence!

In order to make this possible, the author jettisons most of what other Muslims consider the very core of their faith:

(i) The Qur’ān is treated as a product “with an historical and human dimension”, Muḥammad (peace be on him) having been no more than an “obliging mouthpiece for God” (p. 121). Thus, many Qur’ānic passages, if not all, are seen as time-bound. For Balić, asbāb al-nuzūl studies prove that the Qur’ān is partially “a product of the circumstances of the time” (p. 203). (The opposite is, of course, true: The contextualizing of certain revelations leads to a better understanding of them without excluding that they are normative for all times). Balić feels no qualms in saying that “in view of its genesis, individual statements of the Qur’ān are definitely liable to change, or relative, or ambivalent” (p. 39), in spite of all that this boundless relativism entails.

(ii) The Sunnah is treated simply as the “word of a man” and hence non-binding, as if the Qur’ān had never asked Muslims to follow Allah and His Prophet (peace be on him). In terms of Ḥadīth critique, Balić seems to be vying with Goldziher and Schacht by claiming that virtually all traditions are apocryphal (p. 57): at best they are a “reflex of the religious, social, and
political conditions of the transmitters” (p. 45). Therefore, according to Balić, “to act in accordance with the Sunnah is to act against reason and conscience” (p. 151) — as simple as that. Adherence to the tradition cannot replace faith, he argues. The right question to ask would have been whether one can be a Muslim without even accepting the concept of Sunnah.

(iii) Muhammad (peace be on him) is treated as “a human being like all others, except that he had to fulfil a divine teaching job” (p. 29). Time and again, Balić delights in the formulation that Muḥammad (peace be on him) had been retroactively “catapulted into the role of a politician” (p. 53) and “stylized as supreme authority” (p. 199), which “perverted Islam into becoming politics” (p. 218).

(iv) Shari‘ah norms like the family and inheritance laws prescribed in the Qur’ān are dispensed with by the author because (sic!) that is what has been done in “Muslim majority countries” like (Kemalist) Turkey and (Communist) Albania. All other divine norms that he considers “obsolete”, as norms that he feels uneasy about and which he decries as “unreasonable”. In fact, the author constantly treats ijtihād and the Qur’ānic verse (2: 256) which lays down the principle: “no coercion in religion” as a licence to pick and choose at will (p. 149). Do I really have to point out that the Qur’ānic verse 2: 256, which forbids forcing Islam down the throats of people, is fully consistent with the existence of immutable divine norms, binding for all Muslims, whenever and wherever? If normativity is treated as coercion in and by itself, Islam, too, would become a realm where “anything goes”.

At any rate, with ‘profound’ arguments like “there is nothing about kerchiefs in the Qur’ān” (p. 209), Balić presents modern Islam as being without hijāb, beards, Islamic penal law, and of course, without any objection against taking interest (riḥa) — the latter opinion being justified by the equally profound argument that “banks are not exploited that way” (p. 40). Most importantly, the author seeks complete female emancipation in keeping with the Occidental human rights codes. Alas, he is unaware of the fact that of all people Ḥasan al-Turābī, about whom he is excessively negative, had already made in 1973 a much more convincing and coherent Islamic case for women’s emancipation in his pioneering study on Women, Islam and Muslim Society. (Of course, this is quite in contrast to the author, for al-Turābī gets down to the nitty-gritty of the problem and does not confine himself simply to making sweeping statements).

The author is deeply disappointed about the situation of Islam in the present-day Muslim world and deplores its negative impact on the Western perceptions of his religion. Most Muslims, both in the east and the west, share these concerns. The problem is that while Balić finds nothing wrong in the enlightened, modern West, he finds everything wrong in the Muslim Orient.
(i) The traditional Muslims are described as following a wrong perception of the real world, suffering acutely from a “loss of reality”, of adhering to a pre-scientific, scholastic theology, and following an outdated, ineffective educational system. Their belief that Islam is a complete way of life which is valid for all times and places, is highly naïve (p. 27). Unless they open up to the “progressive world”, they are bound to remain confined in the “morbid forms of the past” (p. 44). The traditional Islamic society, like the Qurʾān itself, was inherently authoritarian (pp. 69, 167). Therefore, the modern politicization of Islam is disastrous. Islam in fact now serves as an Ersatz (nationalism) in the Arab-Persian world. It is no wonder, then, that even terrorism has now appeared in an Islamic garb. With the Muslims’ “rigid fixation” with norms, their “shariatization” they were about to destroy the internal peace of their societies (p. 153). Because of the petrol-supported growth of Wahhabism all over the world, the author sees no real Islamic renaissance on the horizon.

(ii) At the same time, Balic is greatly impressed by several aspects of Christianity, noting that that religion emphasises spirituality more than Islam does (p. 65). Therefore, he pleads for an Islamic aggiornamento with European Muslims showing the way leading to the adoption by Islam of secularisation (including the complete separation of state and religion), democracy (including division of powers), all Occidental human rights, and the principles of humanism. Balic favours the adoption of all the “grandiose achievements of the enlightenment” (p. 43), whose great thinkers for him “symbolise the peak of humanistic development” (p. 155). In fact, for him the “European way of life categorically demands Muslims to integrate into its culture” (p. 48).

This capitulation called Euro-Islam, “legitimately reduces faith to creed, social duties, and morality for Muslims whose belief is an entirely subjective matter” — a “medicine for the heart” (pp. 98, 201). For Balic, ideal Muslims in fact “obtain the contents of their faith through mystical experience” (p. 67), being permanent God-seekers who create their very own beliefs, in full freedom, because religion, “a category of reason”, must never contradict common sense (p. 109). Thus, “nothing good that is advantageous for society can be bid’ah (p. 71). One might venture to ask: Who judges, and by which standards, as to what is advantageous and what is not?

Against this background, one feels perplexed, wondering as to whereon the identity of a Western Muslim a la Balic would be grounded? Would there be any concrete limits for his behaviour, any particular content of his creed aside from believing in the existence of an abstract God in the manner the 18th century deists like Johann Wolfgang, von Goethe and Lessing had believed?
Smail Balić seems to give an answer to this crucial question by nostalgically harking back to the Islam of his childhood in Bosnia (p. 178). Accordingly, Euro-Muslims should:

- be mystic, gnostic, and syncretistic;
- separate state and religion;
- believe in a “dear God” (as Christians are wont to call Him);
- accept Muhammad (peace be on him) as one of many saints;
- pray if and whenever they feel like so doing;
- make religious instruction optional;
- appreciate a good glass of wine;
- take their religious duties lightly, like the Bektashi dervishes of old; and
- be monogamous and fair to their wives.

This, then, is the “real Islam” as practised in Turkey and the Balkans and as applauded by Balić as “a harbinger of the coming secularisation of the Muslim world” (p. 208). What a recommendation!

Is this really more than a universal humanism with some Islamic sugarcoating? Would such an Islam remain a recognisable religion? Could such an Islam become a viable alternative to an Occident in deep cultural crisis? This kind of “Islam”, far removed from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah, might have some appeal for a few so-called ‘cultural’ Muslims or for the European governments. But — may Allah be thanked — it is unlikely to impact on the attitude and lifeways of the majority of the practising European Muslims who try earnestly to follow their religion which remains rooted in the Qur’ān and the Sunnah.

Even the Bosnian Muslims, who were persecuted for being considered to be truly faithful to Islam, have recently begun to practice Islam without having recourse to their former licence (p. 180). This angers the author who feels that Wahhābi Arabs of Arab aid organisations had begun to rob Bosniaks of their “identity”. Balić, in fact, feels that his countrymen are now suffering from friends (Arabs) and foes (Serbs and Croats) alike (pp. 176, 191).

As mystics are wont to, the author is eager to build bridges to the other two monotheistic religions, underlining time and again that Islam is an ontological category (p. 110); that is, it has a universal character. This is why he thinks that one should drop all irritants, right from the Qur’ānic verses on slavery in the Qur’ān and the (un-Islamic) stoning of adulterers to the (un-Islamic) execution of people for mere riddah, and the concept of dār al-ḥarb. The problem with the author is that rather than pursue his aims intra-Islamically, he relies on following an un-Islamic methodology and throws out the baby together with the bath-water. Rather than debunk its immutability,
Balić could have had recourse to the Qur’an itself in order to establish that slavery stood abolished, that women were essentially equal to men, that stoning was Biblical only (and thus de-rotated), and that there was no penalty in this world for mere *riddab*.

Similarly, he could have solved *Islamicly* the issues of democracy, human rights, and *hijāb* rather than turn his back on the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*. Likewise, he could have been less harsh in decrying Muslims for their shortcomings. Suppression of women, for instance, is not a peculiarly Muslim phenomenon. Even when a Muslim adopts a critical posture towards his people, he should not go to the extent of sounding as if his work was no different from that of non-Muslim Orientalists.

Very serious, too, are the objections against Balić’s conclusions from the premise that Islam is a rational religion (*dīn al-ʿaql*). This statement simply means to him that the Islamic revelation accords with reason. In fact Islam’s rationality does not mean that man is allowed, in his hubris, to arrogantly turn his own reasoning into the highest criterion (*al-furqān*) of what is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is false. The author’s attitude, in the final analysis, corresponds to the fatal enlightenment dictum that man is the “measure of all things”. Typically, the author is not disturbed by the terrible results of the enlightenment ‘rationalism’ which made the 20th century the bloodiest one in all history. Nor is he conscious of the depth of the moral crisis of the post-modern society as a consequence of its ‘rational’ pursuit of a life without God. In view of the above, one should applaud, rather than question, Muslims’ attitude of considering themselves and other humans simply “created beings in a created universe” (p. 156).

Finally, it might be noted that Balić’s way of being a Muslim is that of Sufis, albeit it is too intellectual to be practicable for the Muslim rank and file.

Should there be a second edition, the author should distinguish between Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 111), who is invariably called “Muhammad” al-Ghazālī in the book (pp. 79–81, 126). This is being careless because the late Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1996), a well-known Egyptian scholar, belongs to the 14th/20th century, and thus comes about a thousand years after Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, the famous Muslim theologian and Sufi who has left an indelible imprint on Muslim thought.

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