BOOK REVIEW

ISLAM’S RELEVANCE IN THE MODERN WORLD

KASSIM AHMAD

Two major problems of immediate importance confront the Muslim communities today: a healthy relationship with the other religious communities, and an improvement of their socio-economic position. There is still a lot of ignorance and misunderstanding on these crucial issues. Much of this is due to a lack of scientific and concrete analysis of these problems by Muslim writers Maududi, Sayyed Qutb and Hasan ‘Ali Nadwi, three of the more influential Muslim scholars of this century, have been theologians rather than scientists and have been concerned with keeping the Muslims religiously “pure” than teaching them how to practise Islam in a multi-religious and secular world. But a true religion, as Islam is, should be concerned with the practical affairs of men as much as with their other concerns. Moreover, these other concerns- moral and spiritual-need to be stated rationally and shown to be logically connected to their practical affairs.

The author of this collection of sixteen essays on Judaism, Christianity and Islam entitled Religious Dialogue and Revolution* is a comparatively young and unknown Egyptian professor of philosophy, Hassan Hanafi, born in Cairo in 1935. But with this book, published by an Egyptian publisher in 1977, he has opened a way for a fresh, original, dynamic and scientific interpretation of Islam that the Muslim World sorely needs. The essays cover such important topics as methodology of scriptural interpretation, Qur’anic criticism of Judeo-Christian scriptures, influence of Islam on European thought and culture, the status of women, the general question of land, Zionism, an Islamic theory of revolution and religious liberation movements. Although the topics appear to be diverse, a unified theme runs through them, e.g. Islam in the face of other religions and in the face of contemporary reality.

The author, on the whole, takes a decidedly Islamic standpoint throughout all the essays. At the same time, he preserves his scientific objectivity. This is the essays’ greatest strength. Drawing from European research on Biblical criticism, he shows conclusively the superiority of the Qur’an over Judeo-Christian scriptures. The argument is quite simple: whereas the Qur’an is a revelation in verbatim written down directly as it was being received by the Prophet and transmitted thus to mankind, both the Old and New Testaments passed through a period of oral transmission. Having only one source-God-the Qur’an possesses a unity of content. On the other hand, the Biblical scripture, having been transmitted and written by many, possesses a diversity of contents. In both cases, the fact of revelation is not called into question. But its historical authenticity is dependent on the human condition, which determines it, since “the authenticity of a scripture is not guaranteed by divine providence.” (p. 4). The historical

authenticity of a scripture is the work of man, achieved firstly, by the immediate writing down of the text of the revelation (as in the case of the Qur'an) and, secondly, by ascertaining that the passage from oral transmission to the written text is done according to the rules of oral transmission (as in the case of the authentic Hadith).

In this essay on Hermeneutics, the author deals with three matters: the authenticity of scripture in history by the method of historical criticism, the understanding of scripture or science of interpretation, and the realization of scripture in human life which is the final goal of revelation. It is a comprehensive treatment of revelation, including in it a sound methodology of scriptural interpretation. This methodology covers the linguistic, the historical and the philosophical principles of understanding and interpretation.

The second essay entitled "History and Verification-A Qur'anic View on the Scriptures" continues and expands the theme of the first, showing the validity of the Qur'anic criticisms of the Bible and the deviations of both the Jews and the Christians. At the same time, it proves that the Qur'an, although belonging to the same monotheistic Abrahamic scriptural tradition, is neither a borrowing of the Judeo-Christian scripture, as Orientalist assert, nor the same and the equal of it, as the apologists try to make out. The author makes the important point that the Qur'an marks the last phase in a series of divine revelations to mankind sent at various intervals in proportion to the degree of progress of mankind's consciousness. "Its purpose was to free this consciousness from all yokes, material, social or political, in order to be able to conceive the Transcendence and subsequently the realm of the moral law. Man will be then on the edge of two worlds: the Real and the Ideal. Revelation is fulfilled once the consciousness becomes autonomous, when Man becomes rational and free." (p. 34).

The Qur'anic criticisms of the Bible and the transmission of Islamic culture to Europe produced profound results which the author divides into three distinct phases in his third essay entitled "Certainty and Conjecture- A Prototype of Islamic-Christian Relation". The phases are, first, the Patristic Period, which is not a historical but a ideational relationship in which the developed Christology of the Fathers of the Church is counterposed by Islam, appearing, as it did, to restore the threatened ancient monotheism of Noah, Abraham and Moses. The second phase occurred in late Middle Ages when a real cultural interaction in the form of diffusion from the young Islamic culture to the old Christian culture through translations from Arabic into Latin took place. This diffusion continued into modern times and several Western philosophers, poets, writers and social critics-Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Richard Simon, Winckelmann, Renan, Bergson, Thomas Arnold, Bernard Shaw and others-were aware of the Islamic cultural influence on them.

However, the significant thing about the author's analysis of Muslim-Christian relations is the mention also of a third "unconscious stream in which Islamic models or motivations appear behind or underneath new systems in modern times". (p. 65). This unconscious stream is the appearance of a new pattern of thought in Western culture: "rejection of all a priori sources of truth, criticizing tradition, revolting against authority, placing unlimited confidence in human reason, beginning by clear and distinct ideas, looking for rational or concrete evidence and rejecting personification of God or Nature. Here, Islam appears as motivations and intentions rather than results and conclusions. Until now, no scholar has tried to analyse the motivations of Western culture in modern times as Islamic motivations." (p. 65). Because of this,
the author rightly states that "The Principles of philosophy of Descartes, the Short Treatise of Spinoza or the Metaphysical Discourse of Leibniz could well have been written by a Mu'tazilite." (p. 66). However, this is far from saying that Western culture is the realization of Islamic culture or that Western philosophy is the culmination of Islamic philosophy. The organic link between rationalism and revelation, between transcendence and immanence and between the universal and the individual still elude the grasp of Western philosophy. "Only Islam can direct the conscience to keep the focus of things, the integrality of truth and to keep the balance between extremes. Islamic monotheism can guide the European conscience in its wilderness and aberration and guide it towards the focus of reality". (p. 68).

The theme of Islamic cultural influence on the West is further continued in the sixth essay entitled "Jaechim of Fiore and Islam" and the eighth essay on Hegel's aesthetics. The fourth and fifth essays are studies in the relationship between Islam and Judaism based on each religion's view of Abraham and of the position of women. The essay on women, although unfinished, is interesting, because, while stressing the equal position of women with men, it correctly points to the natural, physical and psychological differences between men and women, making for differences in function and for division of labour. Thus, due to this division of labour, the man, in Islam, is totally responsible for the maintenance, welfare and security of his wife and children. For this reason, and not for reason of innate superiority, the famous verse of the Qur'an (4:34) proclaims him the leader of the house. (pp. 88-89).

The second part of the book deals with the main issue of contemporary world—revolution. The European colonial movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries robbed the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America of their homelands. With this colonial movement came Zionism to claim Palestine as the so-called "Promised Land" of the Jews. All these raised the question of the status of land. Who owns the land—the imperialists, the Zionists or the people? Thus "land has become the most important problem of our times." (p. 127). The Qur'an gives a categorical answer: nobody owns the land—neither the imperialists, nor the Zionists, nor the people. It belongs to God. God created it. It belongs to Him and is inherited by Him. Man, being His Vicergerent, has the right to use it, but he is not its possessor or inheritor. In so far as man's right of inheritance to the land can be spoken of, this right is given only to the righteous. All these important points the author makes in the essay entitled "Theology of Land—An Islamic Approach."

The land, part from being the homeland of man, is also history—"a great field of verification of human vocation and the fulfilment of God's words on Earth." (p. 133). This is an extremely important argument. It shows that time will vindicate God's election of man as His Vicergerent on earth and that His words—the Kingdom of God—will be realized by man on earth. This is due to the fact that the earth was created in truth (Qur'an, 29:44) and is therefore sensitive to truth. This is the meaning of God's proclamation in the Qur'an: "I shall most certainly prevail, I and My apostles!" (58:20). The coupling of God to the apostles, and therefore (righteous) mankind, is made not because God is weak to realize His words alone, but to give due regard to His election of man as His Vicergerent on earth. History has proved that God gives the land to the righteous, as a natural outcome of their belief in God and of their good deeds. This is the great vocation of man—to realize God's words on earth. This can only be done by his belief in God—thus freeing him from all
forms of domination, and by his enjoining good and forbidding evil (Qur'an, 3:109). At the present moment in man's history, the great fight is between the oppressed peoples of the Third World against the neo-colonialisms of the superpowers, against Zionism and against racial oppression. Will these conflicts bring about a new world war, many times more destructive than the last, that would end human life? A third world war may indeed come, but if that does happen, it cannot but constitute only an event, if the most overwhelming, in the tremendous historical process to fulfil man's vocation and to realize God's words on earth.

Thus racial oppression, Zionism and neo-colonialisms of the superpowers must be eliminated. Since Zionism has at times been propagated as a liberation movement, the author has a chapter to examine the origins of this movement as part of the European nationalist movements and to debunk it as a counter-liberation movement.

The anti-colonial national liberation movements of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America constitute a great revolutionary current of our times. It is joined to another great revolutionary current - the social liberation of peoples from internal oppression - be it feudalism, fascism and dictatorships of all hues. Both these currents combine to make perhaps the greatest revolution of Man - his liberation from all forms of arbitrary power. This is indeed, as the author has rightly pointed out, the paramount aim of monotheism and of God's revelation to man.

This theme is comprehensively dealt with in the last four essays, particularly the thirteenth and the sixteenth entitled "Religion and Revolution, an Islamic Model" and "Religious Change and cultural Domination". On these the author says: "Religion in its spirit was always a revelation. Revelation came to liberate the human consciousness from all kinds of oppression, material and moral. Nature is not an absolute power but is subject to another power. The affirmation of a Divine Power is not a goal in itself but a means to make human power the highest power in nature. Also the power of a dictator is not an absolute power but subject to another. The affirmation of a higher and a stronger power is not for the sake of God but for the sake of man. It was a means to give man confidence in himself and to make him revolt against all dictatorial powers. Revelation had a function which was the liberation of mankind from all kinds of constraints." (p. 203).

Again: "Revolution is the nature of man. Since the beginning of life, revolt expressed the Nature of Man. Spartacus and the slave revolts in ancient Greece, Guevara and the revolt of the oppressed in our time - both indicate that the foundation of Revolution is in the nature of man. Man is freedom. He revolts by his nature against all kinds of oppression. Man is reason. He revolts in the name of his nature against all kinds of obscurantism. Man is equality and justice. He revolts following his own nature against inequality and injustice. The history of mankind is a history of liberation pushed by Revolution and done by the nature of man. The only possible theology is theology of liberation." (p. 203).

Thus only by the revolutionary acts of faith in God and of enjoining good and forbidding evil than man can realize himself, his God-given and freely-accepted vocation (Quran, 33:72) and finally God's word on earth.
The essay on the Black Muslim movement in America gives a refreshingly original interpretation of that movement. It explains Elijah Muhammad's concept of the 'Nation of Islam' as an intermediary concept confined to the stage of the black American people's struggle for liberation. Thus Elijah Muhammad's "is a Black American interpretation of Islam. In theory, the immanence of God, the continuation of prophecy, the denial of after life, and the racial interpretation of life and history may be wrong. But in practice, in relation to the American conditions, these directives are 'functionally' working." (p. 224). When this stage is over, as with the coming of Malcolm X, "... they leave the Nation of Islam to Islam, converting from the immanence of God to the transcendence of God, from continuation of prophecy to fulfilment of prophecy in Islam and the continuation of reason. They convert from the denial of after life to the affirmation of after life, and from racial pride to universal community." (p. 224).

In the last essay, the author considers two types of social change: one under the process of Islamization, which he characterizes as a natural process, and the other a deformed process under pressure from foreign domination. In the former case, the new value-system comes to perfect the old and not to abolish it. In this process the universal absorbs the particular, and the particular finds its identity in the universal. It is not a cultural domination of the new value system on the old but a cultural upheaval of the old value-system with the new. In the latter case, a less developed value-system comes and tries to dominate a more developed one, against the natural process, thus producing a rejection of the foreign value-system as cultural domination and a reinterpretation of the old value-system as Theology of Liberation, a self-defensive measure against foreign domination. (p. 231).

Dividing religions into natural and supernatural types, the author makes the following significant observation: "A natural type does not impose any extra religious data on nature but it does begin with nature and develops it. It does not force nature in order to make it more natural or less natural. Any effort to make nature more than it is makes it less. Any effort to make it less than it is makes it more. In both cases nature is different from itself." p. 231) Islam is a religion of this type, a natural religion. It is for this reason that the Qur'ân describes Islam as a religion "in accordance with the natural disposition of man." (30:30). Islam is, therefore, natural to man and natural to the whole of creation. This is the profound meaning of the Quranic verse: "Surely the (true) religion with God is Islam." (3:84).

The author enumerates twelve characteristics of a natural religion, namely: monotheistic, operating on man's reason, essentially based on free-will, individualistic, relating man directly with God, giving priority to daily life over dogma, giving priority to practice over theory, excluding all rituals, realistic, universalistic, giving priority to local culture and offering a more developed social system based on social justice and human equality.

It is obvious that in the present world situation of racial, national, political, economic, social and cultural oppressions giving rise to numerous forms of conflicts, a natural religion, such as is offered by Islam, is the only answer. Thus a proper, correct and philosophical understanding of Islam is of the utmost importance.
This is an extremely important book that all Muslims should read. Its importance lies in the fact that it gives a clear, objective, concrete and rational exposition of Islam in its relation to other religions and to contemporary reality. It is entirely free of any traces of narrow-mindedness or apology. The exposition is comprehensive since it takes in its scope Judaism and Christianity and, by extension, all other religions and the contemporary reality of world imperialism, Zionism and Third World revolution. One may at first be put off by the author’s psycho-social reading of the doctrines of creation or emanation or his view on eschatology, but here the author is discussing the differences between a progressive and reactionary theology. However, nowhere does he deny the creation of the world or the reality of Resurrection, both of which are clear teachings of the Qur’an. In spite of a number of typographical errors and some bad translation which should be corrected in subsequent editions, Religious Dialogue and Revolution is a great book that is most welcome.

KASSIM AHMAD

EDITOR’S NOTE

This is a very ably written Book Review on an important and thought provoking book. But some statements made by the author of the book invite comments. For example, on the first page of the Review in the last line, the author says “the authenticity of a scripture is not guaranteed by providence. The historical authenticity of a scripture is the work of man.” In this connection the position of the Qur’an is somewhat different, because God has said in the Holy Qur’an “We sent down the Remembrance (the Qur’an) and we shall preserve it.” So the authenticity of the Qur’an has been guaranteed by Allah and, at the same time, it is the work of man.

In the last paragraph of the second page of the Review, the author while speaking of the Islamic models and motivations that appear behind or underneath new systems in modern times, seems to stress that the placing of unlimited confidence in human reason and rejecting the personification of God is due to Islamic influence. If the author means by the term “personification of God” an anthropomorphic conception of God or the doctrine of Trinity, he is right. But if he means that the West has rejected the notion of a personal God under Islamic influence, he is completely beside the mark, for the God of Islam is a personal God. Of course so far as the personification of the forces of Nature is concerned, its rejection is, no doubt, Islamic. Similarly, unlimited confidence in human reason can not be ascribed to Islamic influence, because although the Islamic Shari’ah is based on reason and the needs and welfare of human beings, no Muslim can be permitted to reject the authority the Nusus (clear texts of the Qur’an and the authentic Hadith) in exercising his faculty of reason. After all the reasoning faculty of man is bounded by certain limits, a fact which is recognised even by some Western philosophers, like Kant. Again, discussing the characteristics of natural religion, the author remarks that natural religion (which is Islam) excludes rituals. This may create a misunderstanding. In Islam, there are no rituals, but there are prayers, fasts and pilgrimage etc. They should not be equated with rituals. The author’s remark that “Revolution is the Nature of
Man", and since the beginning of life revolt expressed the Nature of man must also be controverted. Man is sometimes Revolution, but more often he is obedience and lover of peace. Revolutions are not made every day. Periods of stability have been more numerous in history than periods of Revolution or preparation for Revolution.

*Editor*  
*Islamic Studies.*