BOOK REVIEWS


Individuals raised and educated in the Modern West who make their way to Islam have to surmount many hurdles before they can reach the intellectual and spiritual resources of Islam. Among these the most obvious is the general anti-Islamic atmosphere prevalent in the West, but this is not the most difficult barrier they have to cross. Their real difficulties begin when they cross this initial hurdle and try to reach the primary sources. Here they encounter the serious problems of understanding a tradition which is based on a worldview which is radically different from modern western conceptions, they find a scholarship which is alien to their academic training, and texts which are totally foreign to their mental habits and mode of thinking acquired through formal and informal education in the West.

Faced with these serious difficulties, but led by the inner light of their new faith, some converts in the West have reached an understanding of Islam's role in the modern world which very few 'born Muslims' seem to possess. Well aware of the problems faced by the post-industrial western societies and the ineffectiveness of the remedies being tried, they see Islam as *the alternative* to everything else being offered in the West. The process through which they reach Islam, their unique position in the world of Islam, their former religious and academic affiliations and their 'westernness' bring a freshness and a certain kind of boldness to their
approach to Islam. This is reflected in the writings of many western converts but Murad Hofmann's two books, *Islam: The Alternative* and *Islam 2000* are particularly permeated with these qualities.

This may very well be a result of his unique life experiences and academic background. Born into a Catholic family on July 6, 1931 in Aschaffenburg, Germany, Murad Hofmann experienced the devastating effects of the strategic bombing and military occupation during the war in his native country before going to Union College (Schenectady, New York) for his university studies. He obtained his doctorate in jurisprudence at Munich University in 1957; the same year he wrote his bar examination. Three years later, he earned a Master's degree from Harvard in American Law (1960). The next year he joined the German foreign service specializing in issues of nuclear defence. Later he served as Director of Information for NATO at Brussels (1983–87), Ambassador to Algeria (1987–90) and Ambassador to Morocco (1990–94). He embraced Islam in 1980; performed *Umrah* in 1982 and *Hajj* in 1992. His experiences of these two trips have been collected in the forthcoming *Voyage to Makkah*.

Dr Hofmann's first book was entitled *A Philosophical Approach to Islam* (Cologne: 1983); this was followed by *On the Role of Islamic Philosophy* (Cologne: 1985). The same year saw the publication of his *Diary of a German Muslim* (in German). This book was translated into English (Cologne: 1987), French (Journal d'un Musulman allemand, Alger: 1990; Rabat: 1993) and Arabic (Yawmiyyât Muslim Almâni, Cairo: al-Ahrâm, 1993). Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss), the renowned Austrian Muslim translator of the Qur'an, wrote the preface to the *Diary* in which he described it as no more and no less than "a dialogue with himself, arising from a German intellectual's intense preoccupation with problems of ethics, morality and aesthetics". (See Maimuna Quddus' review in *Muslim World Book Review*, 9:2, 1989).

But it was the publication of his *Islam als Alternative* (Munich: 1992) which brought forth a fresh voice and lucid reflections on the problems being faced by the modern world and their solutions from an Islamic perspective. Published by a leading German publisher (Eugen Diederichs Verlag) in the wake of the Gulf War, this provocative book was advertised as "an exciting plea for the religion of Islam as an alternative way of life". The book caused a public scandal and Dr Hofmann was attacked by the leftist and feminist circles in the German media and parliament. In a futile attempt to prevent the publication of the book, its detractors claimed that the book defends everything that they perceive to be barbaric: fundamentalism, corporal punishment, stoning and cutting off of hands. Dr Hofmann's German critics demanded his recall from Morocco where he was the German Ambassador. But since its publication, it has not been
attacked in the same manner. Perhaps this is so because the book is the work of a serious thinker and scholar and though it is provocative, and at times harsh, its main arguments are supported by scholarly exposition of issues.

*Islam als Alternative* was subsequently translated into Arabic (*Al-Islām ka-Badīl*, Munich and Kuwait: 1993) and English (*Islam: The Alternative*, Reading: 1993). The excellent English translation by Dr Christiane Banerji reads like an original work and a few factual errors, which were pointed out by Muhammad Aman H. Hobohm who reviewed the German edition (*Muslim World Book Review* 13:1, 1992), have been corrected. In translating the book, the title of the book has been appropriately changed; the exact translation being *Islam as Alternative*.

Divided into twenty short chapters with a preface by Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: The Alternative* brings into sharp relief the most notable features of Islamic civilization and belief system. It attempts to tackle such contemporary issues as the relationship between Islam and the West; fundamentalism; the political system of Islam; Islamic jurisprudence; human rights; Islamic Market Economy; the questions of 'Holy War' and the veil. These issues are at the centre of intellectual (and often emotional) debates, both in the West as well as in the Muslim world. Muslim response to these issues, which are basically imposed on them by the growing influence of the West, has generally been apologetic. But in Murad Hofmann's works, there is no apology for the basic principles established by the *Sharī'ah*. It is a bold attempt to sift the fundamentals from the peripherals, essentials from the superfluous. The book is primarily an effort to describe Islamic beliefs and the position of Muslims on contemporary issues to a western audience. But considering the inroads made by the Western civilization in the world of Islam, the book is also an important contribution to the growing works on Islam which are now available to Muslims who have been deeply impressed by the West but who are seeking answers to complex contemporary issues.

Like Muhammad Asad, who is admiringly quoted in Dr Hofmann's works, the author of *Islam: The Alternative* belongs to that select group of individuals who have clearly perceived the deep spiritual crisis being faced by the western civilization. Their own spiritual journey has led them to Islam and they have the courage and intellectual resources to expose the real causes of the crisis being faced by the West. The following brief statement about the arrogance of the West is one example of the clarity of thought one finds in *Islam: The Alternative*:

Thus, from the middle of our century onwards it seemed only a matter of time before Western culture became the 'obligatory example' (Theordore von Laue), the world culture, with the transformation of all other cultures. From
Seoul to Soho the person of the future would wear jeans, eat hamburgers, drink Coca Cola, smoke Marlboro, speak English, watch CNN, live in a Bauhaus style house in a democratic state and probably be a pro forma member of a Christian Church too (p. 3).

Devoting the first three chapters to the issues related to the western perceptions of Islam and Muslim perceptions of Christianity, the book recounts the history of interaction of Islam and the West (chapter one); gives a summary of the basic Islamic beliefs (chapter two); recalls the early developments in Christianity, especially those after the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) and describes the Islamic teachings regarding the position of Jesus (peace be on him) as well his current status in the West (chapter three).

"Religion and Knowledge", the fourth chapter, attempts to tackle the complicated question of the decline of creativity and quest for knowledge in the Muslim world after the twelfth century. This chapter deals with one of the most serious questions of history of Muslims but, unfortunately, lacks insights. Starting out in the oft-repeated manner of stressing the Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings about knowledge, and quoting a "popular hadith" about going to China in search of knowledge, Dr Hofmann follows the well-trodden path. The reliance on this "popular hadith" is unwarranted in an otherwise thoroughly documented book, for no such hadith is to be found in any authentic collection of ahādīth. But this does not weaken the main argument because several other relevant and sound ahādīth are found on the subject of acquisition of knowledge. This chapter is perhaps the weakest in the whole book for here we find a number of important questions being addressed without going into any in-depth analysis. The inclusion of the fascinating "flying machine" of Ibn Firnâs (d. 888), in a list of otherwise sound and well-established achievements of Muslim scientists could have been avoided, for this invention is not supported by any serious scholar of history of science.

The fifth chapter, "Mysticism", brings out Dr Hofmann's clear perceptions about the balance which is necessarily an abiding condition for all Muslims:

It is all the more important that Islam develops its own spirituality as 'the religion of God'. This presupposes that Muslims always keep their worship of God alive, free from routine, fulfilling their rituals with an inner life by a process of spiritualisation, so that they do not ossify on an exterior level, but achieve an equilibrium in the Benedictine sense of the word between action and contemplation, work and prayer (p. 47).
The chapter on "Fatalism" deals with one of the most ancient mysteries of human existence. The importance of this chapter lies in the fact that Dr Hofmann has attempted a comparative treatment of the question of free will and determinism in Christianity and Islam. A brief summary of Mu'tazili and Ash'ari postulations, leading to Imam Ghazali's formulation, brings us to Dr Hofmann's own conclusions on the subject. His explanation is rather simple:

Because each and every Muslim is aware that, in the final analysis, everything is in God's hands, he begins every deed in His name — Bismillah! — leaving success up to Him. This belief in Allah is also helpful when one suffers misfortune for the awareness that it was maktub (pre-ordained), lessens the gravity of misfortune... As Muhammad Asad observed, Islamic 'fatalism' does not refer to the future, but to that which has already occurred, to the past (pp. 62–63).

"Fundamentalism" is, once again, a short chapter which takes the reader to the original sources of the religion in a narrative rich with examples from other parallel systems of belief. Dealing more with the philosophical aspects rather than the political connotations which have become attached to this term, Dr Hofmann divides fundamentalism into rational fundamentalism and literary fundamentalism and attempts to give a brief analysis of both in reference to Islam. This chapter leads to the chapter entitled "Tolerance or Violence" — one of the most vexing questions for Muslims living in the West where Islam is regularly projected as a religion which propagates violence—. Going back to the Qur'an, Dr Hofmann re-affirms that Islam is a religion of tolerance par excellence.

"Republic or Monarch"?, the ninth chapter of the book, does not deal with the nature of political system in Islam as one would expect; rather it is a rational treatment of the great split among the Muslims which divided them into the Sunnî and the Shī'ah sects. Dr Hofmann's stand is very clear: He does not support the claim that the leadership of the Muslim community can be reserved for a chosen few. He, however, is aware of the doctrinal differences between the two but hopes for a peaceful co-existence between the two sects which would allow them to pray together, even though the deeper doctrinal questions may never be resolved.

The nature of political system in Islam is discussed in the tenth chapter entitled "Integrism: The Islamic State". Here, we have a summary of work that has been done in the area of the theory of state but no new insights or solutions to the problem. What is commendable is the detached approach of the author on a highly controversial issue. Likewise, the next chapter, "Islamic Market Economy", which deals with another much
debated but unresolved question, provides a summary of the Qur'anic principles but does not venture to suggest any new solutions. The chapter on environment is a concise statement of a concerned Muslim who sees a lack of resolve in the Muslim world to protect environment but who is also aware that "neo-colonialism might be seen arriving through the ecological back door...". The short chapter on Islamic Art provides a brief sketch of the author's aesthetic sensibility as he tries to convey the inner dimensions of Islamic art.

"Islamic Jurisprudence", the fourteenth chapter of the book, is a continuation of the pattern of previous chapters where short but lucid historical background is followed by the author's opinions about contemporary realities. Dr Hofmann's training in jurisprudence helps him to first isolate the basic principles of Islamic Jurisprudence and then ask the critical question: "What then, against this background, does the call to introduce the Sharī'ah mean if it is more than a slogan"? (p. 125). But he does not have an answer; only a warning that if "the legal system congealed in the fifteenth century, when the unfortunate notion of 'closing the doors' (taqlid) on responsible new interpretation (ijtihad) had already led to a paralysis of the system" is the answer, it would mean "a fundamentalism which comes to a halt a long way before the foundations".

The last six chapters, "Human Rights"; "Women in Society"; "The Veiled Orient"; "Criminal Law"; "Holy War" and "International Law" deal with serious contemporary questions. Here we find Dr Hofmann's best comments on the state of society in the West as well as in the Muslim world. And here we also have some of the most lucid statements about issues which have been generally dealt with in an apologetic way. His clear insights are formulated in terse prose: "... And this is the crux of the matter: for Western theory simply denies the legal relevance of differences between men and women, while Islam refuses to go along with this fiction" (p. 131). And again in the chapter on "Woman in Society" we have a memorable quote:

In short, Islam adheres to and structures marriage, taking into account the objective role differentiation between men and women. For Islam man and woman have the same dignity, but different tasks; they are of the same value, but have different abilities; they are equal before God, but have different roles in life. The issue of whether or not this is modern is irrelevant. Islam is not a fashion movement. It can wait (p. 144).

_Islam: The Alternative_ was primarily written for a non-Muslim readership whereas _Islam 2000_ addresses fellow Muslims. It is a cry from the heart which highlights the many shortcomings evident in the Muslim
world. "If I am able to offer something", Dr Hofmann writes in the short preface, "it is perhaps realism. Brutal realism some readers may say". And this statement truly summarizes the approach of the author in the seven short chapters which make up this booklet. Dr Hofmann looks at the Muslim world as a global community in an increasingly shrinking world and tries to see its future.

Islam 2000 is a disturbing book: it stares at some of the most agonizing aspects of contemporary Muslim world through the eyes of a Muslim who is thoroughly immersed in the foundations of Islam and who sees how far contemporary Muslims have drifted from Allah's ways.

The first chapter ends with a bold paraphrasing of the thoughts of Muhammad `Abduh and the French Sufis according to which "... Islam may have emigrated from the Muslim world, where one now finds many Muslims but little Islam" (p. 3). The book, however, is not a pessimistic report on the state of the Muslims; it has its own bright moments. But most of these refreshing moments come from the descriptions of prevalent conditions in societies which are outside the traditional Muslim lands where the spread of Islam is gaining momentum. Remembering Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss), Dr Hofmann shares his prediction that "... a successful preaching of Islam may become possible" in the West (Chapter two). "Christology Revisited". Chapter three gives a brief account of the recent developments in western theological circles and ends with the hope that the current trends in the West may lead to a reassessment of the nature of Jesus Christ within the Christian world and it may lead to opening up of new frontiers in the Christian-Jewish-Muslim triologue.

"What Islam Is Up Against", the fourth chapter of the book, is a realistic description of some of the most glaring and unsettling examples of the advances made by the Western civilization in the Muslim world. The second half of the chapter is devoted to the moral and spiritual crisis of the West. This chapter is followed by "Islam and the West: Another Showdown"? which outlines the hypocrisy of the West and the double standards it has maintained regarding Islam. "On the whole, one follows the unofficial doctrine of the Aquarian Age: Anything goes — except if the religion concerned is Islam. In fact, Islam is the only religion that cannot count on being neglect or sincere toleration".

Having himself suffered the hostile attitude of the Western media and leaders, Dr Hofmann has no illusions. He is very emphatic that the antagonistic attitude of the West against Islam is rooted deep in its psyche and that "it would be a dangerous illusion to believe that the spirit of the Crusades has disappeared" (Author's emphasis).
Here we have a first hand account of the nature of dangers which await Muslims in Europe:

Already, there is hardly a day when a mosque is not attacked somewhere in Europe... In Western Europe one can find hundreds of small *masajid* in converted flats or deserted industrial buildings. But, when Muslims try to build a proper mosque, with a minaret, a legal battle ensues — be it in Lyon or Essen. All of a sudden, city fathers seem to consider a smoke stack more aesthetic than a Turkish-style minaret. One even argues that mosques simply do not fit into central European landscape. (Are they being systematically destroyed in Bosnia for that aesthetic reason?)

Muslims have to bargain for every meter height of their minaret and — what an absurdity — even to promise that no *mu`adhdhin* will ever use it so as not to disturb the peace and quiet. This attitude clashes of course with the fact that church bells can always be rung, even at early hours... (p. 34).

The chapter ends with a clear warning:

Let us not fool ourselves: Western prejudice against and defamation of Islam is such that discrimination, fear, and superiority complex can degenerate into anti-Muslim violence any day — as it did on 18 March 1995, for example, when Molotov cocktails were thrown into the mosque and Islamic Center of Munich, Germany (p. 38).

"How to Avoid Catastrophe and Serve Islam", the sixth chapter of the book, is the most important chapter of the book. It is filled with deeply moving reflections of a Muslim who is aware of the dangers which lie ahead for his community. He is convinced that, unless positive measures are taken, a clash between the western world and Islam is inevitable. This observation is born out of author's own experiences as well as the existing situation in the West. But Dr Hofmann hopes that the Muslim communities in Europe and the United States will be able to avert the clash:

*Al hamdu lillah*, there are some sensitive people in the Occident who have grasped how critical the situation already is and who have urged redemptive measures ever since the first deadly attacks against Turkish workers' families by neo-Nazi youths in Germany... (p. 39).

*Islam 2000* offers vivid reflections and solutions without compromising the basic principles:

But let me make clear from the outset that I do not call for any concession which would touch the essentials of the Islamic faith, the Qur'an — God's own word — and the authentic Sunnah of the Prophet. The aim is not to
adapt Islam to modern requirements but to revive it in such a way that its relevance for the modern age can be recognized by even the most recalcitrant Occidental (p. 40).

Dr Hofmann prescribes reforms in education and technology; women’s emancipation; human rights; theory of state and economy; magic and superstitious practices and communications. Education and technology, he feels, are the most important areas for the revivification of Islam. Here we have Dr Hofmann’s most lucid opinions on a number of contemporary issues. The inner light of his faith is evident in the clarity of his thought and expression:

We should squarely admit that an Islamic economy will never be — cannot be and does not want to be — as efficient or as profitable as the western economy, which treats people as economic animals. If we were to imitate the economic approach of the West, we would have to submit each and every aspect of life to the requirements of industrial production. As in the Occident, all aspects of life would be ruled by the laws of economy, and we would all strive for maximization of profit, optimization of production, and the utter limitation of costs.

In the process, the Islamic world would become as materialistic as western society and would also lose its major advantage: The oriental quality of life resulting from the fact that God and man, and not economy or technology, are at the center of concern. This is the very difference between a society ignoring al akhirah (the afterlife) and a society of transcendental orientation... (p. 55).

"The Task Ahead of Us: What a Task"!, the last chapter of the book, recaptures the spirit of the book by focusing, simultaneously, on the existing realities, efforts being made and the work to be done in the future. It brings into focus the differences between the essentials and the peripheral matters and calls for a clear understanding of the solid foundations of Islam. The book ends with a prediction:

Take a look at the rich documentation available on the intellectual development of Islam all through its fourteen centuries. I cannot believe that the last chapters of these books will remain their concluding chapters for long. But given the situation just mentioned, the liveliness of intellectual life necessary for Islamic rejuvenation will probably be found rather in places like Los Angeles, Washington, Leicester, Oxford, Cologne, and Paris than in traditional centers of Muslim learning.

It is, therefore, not far-fetched to expect the intellectual and spiritual revivification of Islam in the twenty-first century to be kindled and propelled
from research done by qualified Muslim thinkers working outside *dar al Islam*.

But Allah knows best, and in Him we trust, and to Him shall we all return (p. 72).

*Muzaffar Iqbal*