BOOK REVIEW


It is a monumental sociological study of non-Christian religions in Asia and Middle East. It is the first serious scholarly survey of such religions extending beyond one particular country, region or political or ideological bloc, and employing a comparative sociological perspective. At present such sociology scarcely exists, as sociology as an academic discipline in the West, is mostly concerned with western religions, namely, Christianity and Judaism in the western context or the new religious movements in the West. Most of the students of sociology are generally quite ignorant of the major existing religions. In fact, this tendency has been responsible for erecting an arbitrary wall between the western society and the rest of the world.

This book, as proposed by its editor, has had three main goals. Firstly, it intended to provide an integrated and objective profile of the interaction of religions and societies in a number of countries of Asia and the Middle East. Secondly, it is meant to encourage comparative and theoretical considerations by identifying not only certain patterns of interaction between religion and society in general but also those patterns which seem to be characteristic for each religion. Thirdly, it was intended to be a scholarly introduction to the sociology of religion in non-western countries.

The contributors have generally endeavoured to follow the above original plan. Under each individual country they have, as far as possible, provided the basic information relating to the general interaction taking place in the unique historico-cultural context in the given society. Each chapter of the book contains a macro-sociological analysis of the role of the given religion(s) in the socio-structural and cultural system of the country under study.

The authors have had the task to identify the role and function of religion(s) in the country under study in the “traditional” as well as modern and the post-world War II times. Under the “Tradional” section, the writers have studied the historical origins of the religion, its appeal to different social groups, its main forms, its historical facts to be mentioned illustratively, its main rituals and doctrines in the country, its contribution to social integration with its reasons, its major socio-political changes and their effects on its structure, meaning and function in the country and lastly, the position and appeal of Christianity as against the religion(s).

Under the modern and contemporary times, the writers have tried to study the main social changes following modernization, national independence, and major political events, relationships between the religion(s) and secularization, changes in civil law, education and politics, new meanings of the religion, its roles and functions in the context of the social changes, analysis of the social response to the new challenges, major structural changes in the
traditional religion, attitudes, position and role of the religious and political leadership, with particular reference to the strategies of political leaders with regard to the religion(s), observance of the traditional religion, the interaction existing in the religious communities with their racial, political, cultural and other reasons, and wherever applicable, the functional unity in the religious diversity.

As is obvious from its outline, this book is a colossal venture, keeping in view the great difficulties which beset such an endeavour, particularly due to the problem of scarcity or, in many cases, inavailability of statistical data on the subject as also the acute dearth of social scientists in this field as well as the danger of the western bias and consequent deformation or distortion of the available materials.

It is, however, satisfying to note that the writers have mostly acquitted themselves of their difficult task quite successfully and have made all possible efforts to make the project a success according to the original plan designed by its able editor, who also happens to be its initiator. The authors have used a large variety of sources: historical and more recent empirical data, unpublished materials, as also journals and newspapers, scholarly and popular literature as well as their own personal field-experience. At the end of each chapter, they have given the relevant references and notes, as well as a selected bibliography on the religion(s) in the country under study.

As regards the qualifications of the contributors to this volume, all of them are social scientists and experts on the country they have treated. Four of them already live in the country under study. All of them are interested in the problems connected with the interaction between religion and society.

The magnitude of the labour of the editor of this great sociological work may be realised from the fact that its editor devoted about six long and valuable years to the enormous job of editing the book, mobilising his full energy from 1975 till he died of a heart attack at Rome Airport on August 29, 1981. He spent this whole period in gathering the papers and attempting to bring about unity of theme and even quality in this book written about different countries by authors who differed in background, discipline and attitude.

There is a lot of useful information provided in the book with regard to the countries and religions followed by them, particularly relating to their doctrines, historical development and major issues connected with their encounter with modernity. Also the remarks and comments given here and there by the editor and writers under the respective countries and the religions treated in this book deserve special attention.

For example, with regard to the future of Israel, the editor in the Introduction of the book has given the following well-judged remarks:

"The future of Israel is still much shrouded in obscurity and subject to several drastic turns of events. Israel's stability in the Middle East is insecure because its presence is perceived as an anomaly in the area—it differs ethnically, linguistically, and religiously from its Arab Muslim neighbours, and it represents to them the epitome of Western technology and imperialism, though it had its own sources of inspiration." (p. 35)
Likewise, the editor has given the following comments with regard to "Islam and the Future" in his Introduction to the book:

"The Islamic panorama displayed above exhibits a large variety of socio-political situations ranging from total secularization to the traditional Islamic state. It also indicates the size and intensity of the ferment of Islam in the world as well as the need for its reinterpretation in order to meet the challenge of modernity. All Muslim societies expect from Islam a substantial contribution to their modernization programs. Given sufficient time to evolve itself, Islam, having met already many challenges of different types, spiritual, intellectual and social, will no doubt resolve the current challenge.

"Along with the reformulation of Islamic law and the development of Islamic ethics and social theory, a new Islamic philosophy and theology have to be built on the basis of the Qur'an. Such intellectual reforms should be correlated with an adequate educational reform relating Islamic teachings to the modern world. These reforms would be the sky to the elaboration and practical implementation of a genuinely Islamic order, standing, in many respects, between the Western and the Soviet models. This reformist undertaking, though difficult to realize, is certainly not impossible and it is very likely to happen." (p. 29)

Similarly, Munir D. Ahmad, the author of the article on "Pakistan: The dream of an Islamic state" concludes with the following remarks, (although the reviewer does not agree with some of his remarks):

"Commitment to the Muslim religion and culture preserved the Muslim community from being assimilated into the Hindu culture, and it became the driving force that created Pakistan as an independent nation. Despite their diverse languages and cultures, Pakistan's Muslims shared a common creed that cemented them in common action.....

"One characteristic peculiar to Islam in Pakistan is its uncompromising conservatism..... The Muslims, as a minority in the Indian sub-continent, were compelled to emphasise and cling tenaciously to the more rigid and formal expressions of religion in order to preserve their social identity. This long defensive stance favoured a protective entrenchment in tradition and prevented the development of a strong concern for adapting Islam to modern needs....

"Moreover, the quality of scholarship of the ulama in Pakistan is generally inferior to most Middle Eastern countries which, among other things, also benefit from frequent contacts with European culture. While in the Middle East there are several examples of ulama who have introduced modernist thinking in Islam, in Pakistan, instead, such men have arisen outside the ranks of the ulama, who still remain largely enclosed in rigidly orthodox traditionalism.

"Most Pakistanis still take Islam on trust, without even understanding the meaning of words uttered in prayers, thus perpetuating an acquiescent mental attitude toward religious tradition, which is both uncritical and unproductive..... A positive search for new ideas which could produce a suitable synthesis between the old faith and the new society is still in the initial stage. It is hoped that the increased spread of modern education in Pakistan will stimulate, in the near future, a reinterpretation of Islamic orthodoxy in the light of modern needs, and successfully bridge the gap between tradition and modernity." (pp. 284-285)."
The article on “Iran: Orthodoxy and heresy in political culture” by Nikkie R. Keddie, who is also the authoress of the book: “Iran, Religion, Politics, and Society” (1980) is relatively less objective and to a great extent subjective and smacks of the “western bias” against the present Islamic revolutionary regime bearing a marked religious stamp. The greater part of the article is devoted to the pre-revolution period, particularly the Pahlavid. The “Conclusion” is also quite “inconclusive”, as it says almost nothing clearly about the future role of religion in the present society of Iran. Rather the brief remarks of the editor in his Introduction with regard to the future role and strong impact of religion and ulama in contemporary Iran and elsewhere in the Muslim world are more meaningful and significant than what has been said in this whole article. In his concluding remarks there the editor says:

“In any case, the experience of the religious revolution in that country (i.e. Iran) is an important event likely to influence religiously inspired social action and protest in other parts of the Islamic world.” (p. 24)

The same editor has, however, made a glaring mistake while giving briefly the “Basic Doctrines” of Islam in his Introduction to the book, where he says:

“Those who adhere to it (i.e. the Sunnah) are called Sunni(s) . . . . Those who reject the Sunnah are known as Shiites.” (p. 9)

This is obviously due to the sheer ignorance of the editor about the basic principles of Shiite jurisprudence, according to which, as in the Sunni jurisprudence, the second basic source of law is the Sunnah, the first being the holy Qur’ân.

In short, despite a few flaws and errors, this valuable work of a great sociologist, published posthumously, is the result of the tremendous labour of its competent writers and capable editor. It is not only the scholarly legacy of Carlo Cadarola but also his monument, as it fills a long felt desideratum in the field of sociological study of the non-Christian world religions, namely, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism, with special reference to the contemporary situations in the countries where these religions are followed and practised.

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