BOOK REVIEW


Dr. S. H. Nasr, Professor of the History of Science and Philosophy, Tehran University, needs no introduction. His works entitled, Three Muslim Sages, An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines, Science and Civilization in Islam and Islamic Studies have won him international name and fame.

The present book contains six lectures out of a series of fifteen public lectures delivered by Dr. Naṣr during the time he held the chair of Aga Khan Professor of Islamic Studies in the American University of Beirut (1964-65). These public lectures concern the religion of Islam and the diverse aspects of the civilization it produced.

‘Ideals and Realities of Islam’ has been primarily written for those Western readers who are interested in Islam. It is also meant for those Muslims who have received Western education and are keen to acquaint themselves with the teachings of Islam through English.

The book comprises six chapters dealing with Islam and discussing precisely the Qur’ān, the Prophet, the Shari‘ah or Divine Law, the Ţariqah or Sufism, and Sunnism and Shi‘ism.

The author has, in his scholarly manner, elucidated the major aspects of the Islamic tradition and has made frequent comparisons with other religions, notably with Christianity, which meets Islam in Lebanon.

In these essays, Professor Naṣr has presented “what is most universal in Islam and underlies the beliefs of all the orthodox branches of the tradition”. In the last chapter entitled ‘Sunnism and Shi‘ism’ he has shown without displaying any bias and prejudice that these “two major groups in Islam are unified in the essential principles, and that each presents an interpretation of the faith which is complete in itself”.

While discussing the Prophet and Prophetic Tradition, Professor Naṣr has clarified the belief of the Muslims in the following convincing manner:

“From the Muslim point of view, the Prophet is the Symbol of perfection of both the human person and the human society. He is the prototype of the human individual and the human collectivity. As such he bears certain characteristics in the eye of traditional Muslims which can only be discovered by studying the traditional accounts of him. The Western works on the Prophet, with very few exceptions, are useless from this point of view, no matter how much historical data they provide for the reader. The same holds true in fact for the new type of biographies of the Prophet written by modernized Muslims who neglect systematically any aspect of his being that does not conform to a humanistic and rationalistic framework they have adopted a priori, mostly as a result of either influence from or reaction to the modern Western point of view. The profound characteristics of the Prophet which have guided the Islamic Community over the centuries and have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the Muslim, cannot be discerned save through the traditional sources and the Hadīth, and, of course, the Qur’ān itself which bears the perfume of the soul of the person through whom it was revealed.”
Some of the Orientalists have tried in their own way to either minimise the importance of the Sunnah or reject it altogether by alleging that the mass of the Hadith literature, at least partly, was forged and ascribed to the holy Prophet. Unfortunately, due to the domination of the English in the sub-continent of India-Pakistan and other parts of the world the modern educated Muslims appear to have been greatly misled by the works of these orientalists. In his book Dr. Nasr has, therefore, tried to refute the erroneous view, to my mind, admirably and has exposed the evil genius of the enemies of Islam with remarkable success, as will be revealed from the following:

"The Sunnah of the Prophet and his sayings had left such a profound imprint upon the first generation and those that came immediately afterwards that a forging of new sayings and therefore also new ways of action and procedure in religious questions that already possessed precedence, would have been immediately opposed by the Community. It would have meant a break in the continuity of the whole religious life and pattern of Islam which, in fact, is not discernable. Moreover, the imams, whose sayings are included in the Hadith corpus in Shi'ism and who themselves are the most reliable chain of transmission of prophetic sayings, survived after third Islamic century, that is, after the very period of the collection of the well-known books of Hadith, so that they bridge the period to which the modern critics point as the time of 'forgery' of Hadith. Their very presence in fact is one more proof of the falsity of the arguments presented against the authenticity of Hadith literature, arguments which attack not only the dubious and spurious sayings but the main body of Hadith, according to which Islamic Society has lived and modelled itself since its inception".

"The danger inherent in this criticism of the Hadith lies in decreasing its value in the eyes of those Muslims who, having come under the sway of its arguments, accept the fatally dangerous conclusion that the body of Hadith is not the sayings of the Prophet and therefore does not carry his authority. In this way one of the foundations of Divine Law and a vital source of guidance for the spiritual life is destroyed. It is as if the whole foundation were pulled from underneath the structure of Islam. What would be left in such a case would be the Qur'an, which, being the Word of God, is too sublime to be interpreted and deciphered without the aid of the Prophet. Left by themselves men would in most cases read their own limitations into the Holy Book and the whole homogeneity of Muslim Society and the harmony existing between the Qur'an and the religious life of Islam would be disrupted. There are few problems that call for as immediate action on the part of the Muslim Community as a response by qualified, traditional Muslim authorities in 'Scientific' but not necessarily 'Scientistic'-terms to the charges brought against Hadith literature by modern Western critics who have now also found a few disciples among Muslims. They have found a few followers of Muslim background who have left the traditional point of view and have become enamoured by the apparently scientific method of the critics which only hides an a priori presumption no Muslim can accept, namely the negation of the heavenly origin of the Qur'anic revelation and the actual prophetic power and function of the Prophet".

Just as the Constitution of Pakistan declares that no Law shall be enacted which is repugnant to the Qur'an and Sunnah, and all existing laws shall be brought in line with the spirit of the Qur'an wherever the former are found to be in conflict with the latter, Dr. Naṣr considers the Shari'ah, the Divine Law, as the blueprint of the idea of human life, and states that "the movement of reform throughout Islamic history has been to seek to recreate and reshape human attitude and social institutions, so as to make
them harmonious with the *Shari'ah*. He further says that 'those modern movements which seek to reform the Divine Law rather than human Society are, from the Islamic point of view, in every way an anomaly. ‘Such movements’, he adds, ‘are brought about to a great extent not only through the weakening of religious faith among certain men but also because the modern mentality, which originated in the West with its Christian background, cannot conceive of an immutable Law which is the guide of human society and upon which man should seek to model his individual and social life. There is no better proof of how deeply rooted man's religious heritage is than the modern western attitude towards law which is the same as that of Christianity although so many who have created and who uphold the modern view do not consider themselves as Christians and some even are opposed to Christianity.'

I have extensively quoted from the book for two reasons—(1) to draw the attention of the readers to some of the venomous allegations against the Sunnah and the Revelation itself which are found in the works of some of the Orientalists every now and then, perhaps, just to shake the belief of the modern educated Muslims; and (2) to provide readers with some of the relevant materials immediately to read and judge by themselves as to how convincingly and reasonably Dr. Naṣr has advanced his arguments to justify his Islamic point of view in matters with which we are concerned today.

The book is fervently recommended to all those who are interested in religion and thereby in Islam.

M. S. H. MAŞUMİ