

# TOWARD ISLAMIC ANTHROPOLOGY

**Akbar S. Ahmad New Era Publications, Ann Arbor, 1986, pp.79.**

An Islamic or Muslim perspective, when propounded in a discipline, prompts skepticism. When such a work is by a Muslim, skepticism crystallizes into doubt and dismissal. Such is Western academic training.

And justifiably so a lot of the 'scholarly' work undertaken in Muslim countries continues in its tired old way. Biography spins into hagiography, history into uncritical treatise, studies in theology and jurisprudence into mere repetition of classical works. The few references, or notes or quotes are vague and inexact. This practice perhaps caused by morality of pre-printing era is, now, inexcusable. The printing press arrived in Muslim countries at least a century ago. But practices persist. Mechanics of press operation have been learnt. Scholarly attitude is slow to be learnt.

But when a Muslim trained in the best European institutions, and equipped with both, scholarly sophistication and methodology writes, things begin to stir. Fazl ur-Rahman, Aziz Ahmad, Martin Lings (Abu Bakr Sirajuddin) and the youngest of them, Akbar S. Ahmad are such academics. The first two are primarily concerned with -Islam and its historical, social and theological aspects. Martin Ling's chief concern is the mystical and spiritual dimension. Each has contributed considerably towards correcting some of the assumptions and presumptions of the 'orientalists'.

Akber S. Ahmad, trained as an anthropologist, looks at a complex discipline from an angle which is bound to promote controversy and, hopefully, reinforce recent moves by Muslim intellectuals to interpret disciplines from Islamic Muslim viewpoint. Thereby expanding the discipline beyond its Euro-centric focus and shaking Muslim 'scholarship' from its persisting stupor.

As the full title states, the work discusses 'Definition Dogms and Directions'. This tri-partite division is not limited to the Muslim aspect of anthropology. It extends to the general concerns of the discipline itself. The work then is descriptive, analytic and prescriptive.

Covering the first 50 pages, the descriptive section is the longest. Key ideas are placed in the general parameters of the subject. The early contributions of the missionaries and colonial administrators to the discipline are narrated, European, British and American emphases stated, the relationship of anthropology to other sciences shown and nice distinctions ‘between ethnology ethnography, social and cultural economic anthropology made clear.

When Ahmad examines the ‘Colonial Encounter’ he neither runs with ‘orientalists’ nor runs with Edward Said and his ilk. While he accepts some of Edward Said’s devastating conclusions about the biases of the ‘orientalists’, he is also aware of the limited usefulness of the work of some ‘orientalists’. For a third world intellectual this can be quite damning. But Ahmad’s is the ‘middle path’, the golden mean’ prompted by intellectual balance:

‘Not all colonial ethnography is defective, although its political assumptions are.’ (p. 26)

The second, analytic section is challenging. Some of the factors that have influenced Western perception of Muslim societies are discussed. Citing example from contemporary work on Islam he uncovers some of the pervading, explicit and implicit, biases and warns that prejudiced works should not be dismissed as ‘nonsense’. Instead Islamic scholars should reply:

‘If not, their silence will be taken as an incapacity to prepare a suitable answer.’ (p. 51)

The author has taken issue with prof. Barth and his wife, Pehrson and Frederik Bailey who have worked in Muslim societies. The reaction is predictable:

‘When I suggest we refer to the holistic Islamic frame work (Islam as culture and politics) when examining Muslim Tribal/groups..., I was criticized for attacking Western anthropologists and Colonialism...My work was seen as an Islamic challenge.’ (p.55)

The final section is most relevant to the aims of the International Institute of Islamic Thought which has sponsored the series of works for the “Islamization of the (Sciences”.

The author states that the works of Ibn Khaldun and al-Biruni (973-1048) provide sound academic start for Islamic anthropology as a discipline. He defines it as:

“The study of Muslim groups by scholars committed to the universalistic principles of Islam-humanity, knowledge, tolerance-relating micro village trival studies in particular to the larger historical and ideological frames of Islam. Islam is here understood not as theology but sociology. The definition does not preclude non-Muslims”. (p.56)

The methodological position that Ahmad advocates is not “eclecticism”.

“There is only one Islam, and there can be only one Islam, but there are many Muslim societies, we must attempt to place the multitude of Muslim societies within the frame-work of one universal Islam”. (p. 58).

A nice distinction, but precisely one where conceptual crystallization by Muslim intellectuals is most needed. The key words in the definition are “humanity, knowledge, tolerance”. One could take issue with that. These qualities are common to all religions. What then distinguishes Islamic anthropology? Can there be such disciplines as Christian, Buddhist and Jewish anthropology? Specially to the view of the internal impulse rather than the subject group?

The historical experience of a people and the ideological parameters of their dynamic does prompt distinctions. Society is shaped by, and shapes, its people. When Islam is seen as sociology, the permutations and combinations of Islam as theology and indigenous group are rich and varied; from the Hindu-influenced Maples of India and the Javanese of Indonesia, to the magic-oriented Muslims of Nigeria. The range is broad and exciting and disturbing. Will studies of these groups constitute “Islamic” anthropology?

The definition does not preclude non-Muslims who study Muslims groups with “humanity, knowledge, tolerance”. Then what about the study of non-Muslim societies (Hindu) by Muslim scholars (al-Biruni)? In short, how Muslim is Muslim?

The answer has been provided ad nauseam by Mullah pontification. It is time for informed opinions. Until the Islamic ‘ideal’ or framework in

sociological and anthropological terms is defined the whole endeavour is bound to take on a whimsical character.

The ideal has been identified. In more aspects than one, it has been, and continues to be, the Muslim society during the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Unfortunately, it has been seen either in myopic “orientalist” perspective, or has been couched in generative religious jargon, or discussed in fragments by Muslim scholars. No clear holistic model emerges. What is needed is to evolve the model and examine it in operative contemporary terms. Only when its relevance is made immediate will it exert the necessary influence to place Muslim societies-and by extension, academic disciplines-within the framework of one universal Islam.

The author’s seven recommendations merit attention on the highest level. They could practically help in intellectual proliferation of the Islamic revival. Slim, but not slight, the work is important for the issues raised and the answers proposed.

**M. Athar Tahir**