

THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF ISLAM

Islamic Spirituality: Foundations, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1987, pp. 450.

Dry-as-dust books on Islam in English or English translation abound in plenty from the rationalist and activist viewpoint, stressing the supreme necessity for the political, economic and social reconstruction of the Muslim world on the basis of Islam. Too often all such efforts in this direction only result in more westernization and secularization under Muslim labels and slogans. As an inevitable consequence of this misguided literature, the non-Muslims or unformed Muslims in the West may be easily convinced by hostile Christian missionary propaganda that Islam is a religion of worldliness and sensuality, intrinsically lacking in any genuine spiritual merits. This reminds the reviewer of an experience related by a very close Muslim friend who is a convert: "One summer years ago, "she relates, " my family was travelling in Italy. My husband and I without children went into a magnificent old cathedral in Rome. The interior was dim and fragrant with incense. At the altar High, Mass was being chanted in Latin and the entire atmosphere was filled with holiness. In the midst of the deep spirituality of that church, my daughter asked me; "Why can't Islam be holy like this?" I was shocked by her words into the fact that it is just this same spirituality which is missing from the lives of so many of us contemporary Muslims busy as we are from morning to night in Islamic political "movements" and "activities, " not because it is not basic and vital to Islam but because we have lost it or hidden it away from sight as something of which we feel ashamed."

The present book under review offers itself humbly as the ideal antidote to this deadly poison. The first part deals with the roots of Islamic tradition as found in the Quran, Hadith, Sunnah, the life of the Holy Prophet and the deeper dimensions .of Salat, Haj, fasting during 'Ramadan and Jihad.' The second part discusses the distinctions between Sunnism, Shi'ism, and also a fine essay on female spirituality in Islam. Part three deals with Sufism which the authors assert, far from being the result of alien influences and borrowings, was an integral part of Islam from its very beginning.

“Aside from the question of providential acquisitions which are part of the normal growth of a traditional civilization, the Sufis are the most implacably conservative element in the Islamic community. In other words, if they necessarily yield to pressure from above, they have shown themselves adamant in resisting pressures from below like those which demand “conformity to the age in which we live”. Such slogans are parried by Sufism....by the question, “Does the age deserve conformity to it?” The same sense of values includes both the consciousness of all that is most essential to the spiritual heritage of Islam and the will to protect it. For three generations and more, the Sufis have been blamed throughout the Near and Middle East for “centuries of stagnation in the Muslim world” and they have incurred hostility from many sides as the last outposts of resistance to modernization in every Muslim country. Only now is there a gleam of recognition, perhaps increasing, that the Sufis were right! (p. 237)

The concluding portion is demoted to an explanation of the nature of God, the angels, the cosmos and the natural order, eschatology and man.

“Many Western observers visiting the lands of Islam before modern manners infiltrated the community and before modern dress with all it implies in the way of vulgarization of the human form, was widely adopted, have remarked upon the ‘priestly bearing’ of ordinary Muslims going about their everyday business. This air of dignity, control, and self-containment as of one who walks always in the presence of the sacred, relates directly to the concept of vicegerency,, for it goes without saying that the representative of God on earth must of necessity comport himself with dignity. (p. 371)

This work is quite unique in contemporary Islamic literature in that it is characterized by a warm-hearted acceptance of the entire heritage of Islamic history and culture in contrast to the activist type of popular books on Islam which would contemptuously reject more than twelve centuries of Muslim civilization as un-Islamic. But the greatest virtue of this book is its beautiful spirit of love and faith which characterizes it from beginning to end. And the product of that love in Islam is Daw’ah in its truest and noblest senses:-

“Many a soul-weary and broken-hearted person would find refuge in the Khanqahs of the saints. The arms of the revered Sufis were ever open to welcome those whom fate had jilted or who had been forsaken by their

Kinsmen or society. The dejected, the anguished and the outcast would come to them and find shelter, food, love and recognition... When the spiritual guide and mentor of Khwaja Nizamuddin Aulia was sending him off finally to settle in Delhi, he bestowed this blessing upon him. "You will be like a huge shady tree under which God's creatures will find comfort..." Thanks to the Sufi saints there existed in (Mughul) India, hundreds of such huge shady trees under whose merciful shade, broken-down travellers used to find new life and hope."

Islamic spirituality: Foundations is essential reading for all those in search of such heights of love and Divine blessings.

Maryam Jameelah

Note and Reference

Muslims in India, Abdul Hasan Ali Nadwi, Academy of Islamic Research & Publications, Lucknow, p. 64.