SIR THOMAS W. ARNOLD AS'A STUDENT OF ISLAM'

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In an essay written five years ago William Montgomery Watt, the well-known Scottish student of Islam, wrote: 'One of the features of our contemporary world is that personal friendship between Muslims and Christians have become possible and even frequent. More than a century ago when Sir William Muir in India was working on the life of Muhammad he was helped by an Indian scholar, but one has the impression that this did not develop into a personal friendship. Some of the great Islamists of the earlier part of this century had Muslim friends - Ignaz Goldziher, Sir H.A.R. Gibb and above all Louis Massignon, who regarded his recovery of his Christian faith as due in large part to the faith of a Muslim friend.[1]

Watt might well have added to the list of the great three the name of another outstanding scholar, Sir Thomas Walker Arnold (1864-1930) whose perceptive and revolutionary study of Muslim history, culture and faith from its inception has been conspicuously marked by friendships and cordial relations throughout with Muslim believers and Muslim scholars of Islam. And Arnold's remarkable achievements as teacher, author and co-founder of important institutions or undertakings in Islamic studies such as the Encyclopaedia of Islam and the School of Oriental [and African] Studies, London, hardly need to be specially mentioned here.

May I state at the same time, in a preliminary way, my agreement with much that Edward Said in his incisive work Orientalism, ten years ago, established as to the essential characteristics of Western study of Islam in general: its powerful structural coherence, its embeddedness in the imperial-colonial structures of Western dominance, its undeniable role as the intellectual side of world-wide Western outreach and conquest and its explicit and implicit 'dogma's as they were conditioned and defined by the peculiar function that orientalist scholarship fulfilled in the given imperial context. And yet, Said's insights do not allow us (and I take it that Said would not like us) to leave untold those outstanding human qualities, scholarly achievements and even prophetic attitudes and insights which are marked by a timeless

quality and whereby orientalists have transcended the conditions of a particular socio-political constellation, i.e. the last phase of world-wide Western and British imperialism.[2]

Arnold, as a citizen of Great Britain, grew up, was shaped land of the by and contributed to as a student his of Islam in the utlookrtand chosen empire. Nevertheless, much in personal fields of special study, many of scholarly insights and depicted by Said, statements transcended the peculiar effected changes in paradigm and continues to invite and challenge students of Islam today, what ever their religious, cultural and political background and conditioning may be. Already in their obituary on Arnold in 1930, H.A.R. Gibb and Theodore Morison notd: The effect of his teaching, if not its deliberate object, was to awaken and encourage in others that same inward study of Islam which he exemplified in his own work. For dogmatic judgements he always had a word of humorous but devastating application criticism, and nothing repelled him more than the application of a purely scholastic casuistry, uninformed by any touch of human sympathy, to any problem of life or religion.[3]

I shall try, then, to sketch here in a rough outline the portrait of Arnold as a student of Islam, in other worlds of Arnold's approach to and conception of Islam's place in a plural world. His early youth and his years as an undergraduate in Cambridge (up to 1888) show him particularly eager and capable in the study of languages, the classical languages Urdu and a Greek and Latin, elements of Sanscrit, Arabic, Persian, Urdu and a host of contemporary European languages (complete command of French, German and Italian, reading knowledge of Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian) 'all of which', as his close friend Sir Aurel Stein pointed out in his obituary, help to account for the azazing range of historical sources he was able to draw upon in some of his works.[4]

Aurel Stein rightly singles out a significant Arnold's marked childhood interest in the history of empire and navy as well as his love of the culture and, especially, the pictorial art of the European Renaissance, and, last but not least, his fascination with St. Francis of Assisi, the Little Flowers of whom he translated during his student years. To quote Aurel Stein again…this translated translation, a little classic in style and language, was more than an early exhibition of remarkable literary skill. The choice of its text serves admirably to illustrate those features in Arnold's character which

filled his life with brightness and endeared him to all in the East and in the West who were brought into closer contact with him. Predominant among them were feelings of sympathetic interest and intuitive comprehension for others, of charity combined with rare clearness of vision of human rights and wrongs. Ready at all times to respond to whatever true joys life could offer and to encourage others to share them, he yet appeared to his friends like a modern disciple of St. Francis. Not without reason, later in India, would those gathered in Lahore in a familiar circle round him, call him the 'saint.'[5]

It was Theodore Beck, through Professor (later Sir) Walter Raleigh, who called Arnold to the staff of the Anglo-Muhammadan College in Aligarh. Starting in 1888 Arnold was to spend almost ten years there. The aim of Aligarh College was to produce a class of Indian Muslims fully equipped to play a leading role in the administration and, increasingly, rule of India, trained to be gentlemen of the kind educated in British Public Schools and at Oxbridge. They were to be at home in the best of their own Muslim culture enriched and interpreted in the light of the values of the West.

In no time young Arnold made friends with leading Muslims there, especially with Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914), seven years his elder. As David Lelyveld in his remarkable study on Aligarh's First Generation has shown recently - and this fact would seem to be significant precisely for assessing Arnold's preferences - Shibli differed from Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) in his 'underlying assumptions' and 'in the ultimate implications' of his thought, in that he stressed the traditional values of Islam, i.e. no attack on taqlid (i.e. the accepting without question the authority of earlier Muslim jurists in matters of Muslim law); the validity of hadis (Traditions); the leading role of the consensus of the 'ulama.[6]Yet Sir Syed and Arnold, Lelyveld points out, saw Shibli's values as representing interests of 'old', traditional learning. Although I doubt whether Lelyveld is right in portraying Sir Syed and Arnold as fully agreeing on basic assumptions, Arnold did promote with Shibli and a number of other young Aligarhians, precisely the element of Urdu and other traditional ideals against a superficial infatuation with certain trappings of Western civilisation naively exalted by Sir Syed and others.

At the same time Arnold gave Shibli private lessons in French to enable him to make use of the important contributions by French scholars in editing and commenting on pivotal and hitherto unpublished sources of classical

Islamic history. Thus Shibli and Arnold must indeed by viewed as spokesmen for an opposing sub current at Aligarh. By arguing that English education would be a hollow thing without 'a high national ideal' and that Muslims must have, confidence in 'the grandeur of Islam both of the past and present' both Arnold and Shibli served to confer - as Lelyveld rightly stresses - 'some measure of legitimacy on Aligarh's claim to be a Muslim college as well as a college for Muslims."[7]

Arnold's classic study on the spread of Islam and the Muslim missionary activity throughout the ages and continents, The Preaching of Islam[8]was very largely the fruit of his Aligarh years. Its most striking characteristic, in Morison's and Gibb's words, is 'the fact that it is fundamentally a book about Moslems, rather than a book about Islam… the warmth of its tone is dictated by friendship with and esteem for the members of the Muslim community.'[9]The third edition of The Preaching of Islam, published shortly after his death in 1930, carries a tribute by R.A. Nicholson, the outstanding scholar of Sufism, to the person and scholar Arnold, Nicholson endorses Aurel Stein's marvel at Arnold's outstanding feat of collecting and critically using so huge an array of multifarious literary materials at Aligarh, far removed from great libraries and engaged in the daily teaching and administrative work of the college.

Although Arnold, in his own words, 'endeavoured to be strictly impartial, that does not mean,' Nicholson comments, 'that his narrative is strictly impersonal. As from Arabia it carries us in succession through Western Asia, Spain, Persia, India, China and Malaya, we feel beneath its calm surface the depth and force of the convictions which animate it.' The whole book, Nicholson further remarks, 'notwithstanding its historical form and scientific method, is in a sense Arnold's protest against the unfairness and prejudice displayed by the many who have imagined and continue to imagine Islam to have been propagated by the sword alone'.[10]Nicholson does however also suggest critically that Arnold may well have gone too far, underrating the excesses of Muslim missionary zeal and of the use of force to effect conversions, at least here and there. The numerous reviews of this important work by many of the most famous contemporary scholars of Islam, all praise the unique combination in it of comprehensive information, painstaking research and fine literary presentation in treating a 'peculiarly complicated and contentious subject' (Stanley Lane Poole). Duncan Black

Macdonald summed up the unanimous praise stating that the work 'marks a definite stage in the development of our knowledge of Islam.[11]

Arnold's work The Caliphate, first published in 1924, the very year when Turkey abolished it, grew out of lectures delivered at the University of London and was based on the researches of a number of orientalists of continental Europe. The book nevertheless, in Gibb's and Morison's judgement, occupies 'a place apart, as an objective investigation into a historical problem' and 'by the breadth of its survey… forms an outstanding contribution to the political history of Islam.'[12]No less an authority than Arnold J. Toynbee commented in highly laudatory terms: 'Sir Thomas Arnold's work is so compact that any attempt to give an adequate account of its contents would transform this review into a second-hand paraphrase of the original.' Toynbee singled out two aspects of the work as a particularly original and convincing contribution, viz. the 'formidably documented and powerfully reasoned refutation of the legend that the Ottoman Sultan Selim I caused al-Mutawakkil, the last of the shadowy Abbasid Caliphs at Cairo, to invest him formally with the Caliphate when he conquered Egypt in 1517, and the depiction of the profound transformation of the institution from 875 to 1258, the year of the pervasively devastating Mongol invasion.[13]

In the light of Arnold's life-long vivid interest in the pictorial arts in general it is not surprising that, especially during the later phase of his scholarly career, he made a number of substantial contributions to the study of Muslim art. The most outstanding of these is the large and beautifully produced volume Painting in Islam (1928) and the Schweich lectures of the British Academy, held during the same year and posthumously published by H.A.R. Gibb in 1932. In the former work Arnold attempted more than an analytical presentation of Islamic painting in its historical sequence: The purpose of the book is rather to indicate the place of painting in the culture of the Islamic world, both in relation to those theological circles who condemned the practice of it, and to those persons who, disregarding the prohibitions of religion, consulted their own taste in encouraging it.'[14]

'At the back of Arnold's aesthetic appreciation', Gibb and Morison aptly remarked, 'lay a scholar's grasp of social and historical factors which affected the history of Islamic art.'[15]Arnold showed a special awareness of the size and nature of the Muslim orthodox rejection of sculpture and painting as means of emphasising dogmatic truths or of instructing the unlettered in the

mysteries of the faith.'[16]'A pathetic attractiveness attaches to an art', Arnold remarked with regard to the survivals of Sassanian and Manichaean art in Persian painting, 'that has succeeded in keeping itself alive and in exerting an influence, through centuries of neglect, and despite all the destructive forces of war and conquest and the fanaticism of hostile theologians. To every student of art, whatever may be his special interest, it is encouraging to recognise the vitality of the artistic impulse, in forms however remote and unfamiliar, and the survival of the love of artistic expression over the hostile forces of destruction.'[17]

Concluding his Schweich lectures, Arnold comes back to the same point: 'The interest ... of these pictures consists largely in the evidence they afford of the refusal of artistic tradition to give way before the attacks of ecclesiastical authorities, and the insight they give into the psychology of the Muslim peoples in the various historical periods in which they make their appearance.'[18]What, ultimately, attracted Arnold to his persistent endeavour to collect, appreciate and publish Muslim pictorial art was to provide evidence that 'the art of every nation and of every age is of interest as an expression of human personality.'[19]Speaks the life-long admirer of the Italian Renaissance and the committed humanist.

However, in order to discern Arnold's view of Islam specifically as religious faith and institution we must turn to his remarkable six penny booklet The Islamic Faith[20]which - written in 1928, towards the end of his life - combines, in Morison's and Gibb's words, 'the most exact scholarship with real insight and understanding.'[21]Let me highlight here just a few notable points made in this pithy, sympathetic and yet not uncritical survey. Right on the second page Arnold corrects the then prevalent 'misleading' way 'to call the Muslim faith Muhammadanism, as though the adherents of it considered Muhammad to he the founder of it ... The name which the Muhammadan world gives to its own faith is Islam - that is, resignation to the will of God.'[22]

At the same time Arnold knows from his life amidst Muslim friends and communities (especially in Aligarh and Lahore) how 'important for a study of the faith of Islam ... is an appreciation of the attitude of his followers towards him and the place which he has filled in the minds of Muslims in succeeding ages.' This is so because 'Muhammad… becomes the pattern for the devout

life and the exemplar of all virtues, and innumerable anecdotes of his speech and behaviour on all possible occasions were recorded.'[23]

In presenting the essence of Islamic ethics Arnold opposes from Qur'anic evidence (Q 33:35) the 'very common error in European writings on Islam' that maintains that Muslims believe that women have no souls. To the Qur'anic evidence he adds the fact that in Islamic history 'women saints have filled an important place ... and there have been men saints who have, sat at the feet of women saints and have humbly accepted them as their guides in the devout life.'[24]

At a time when under the impact of Ignaz Goldziher's studies on the reliability of hadis even some Muslim scholars of Islam tended to adopt an on-the-whole rather negative view of hadis, Arnold makes it a point to stress 'the fact that they [i.e. the hadis] are accepted as genuine by the theologians of Islam, gives them an importance in the formation of Islamic doctrine and observance which cannot be exaggerated.'[25]

Arnold's familiarity with the lived faith of Islam shows again when, in discussing Islam's teaching on God, he stresses 'the abiding place that the thought of God occupies in the mind of the devout Muslim, 'who is used to filling to pauses in ordinary conversation by the mentioning of God, as the daily speech of Muslims clearly shows. Arnold here also mentions the Muslim rosary 'common from one end of the Muslim world to the other.'[26]

Islam's doctrine of Predestination, Arnold points out, 'is not a doctrine of fatalism, as though the affairs of the world were the result Of a fortuitous concomitation of atoms, but a recognition of the all-embracing activity of the wise and loving Creator.'[27]Equally remarkable for his day and age is Arnold's depiction of Muslims' life of prayer and devotion, as his account is pervasively marked by a feel for the spirit of Muslim worship and the conviction that this aspect of Muslim life carries lessons for all other believers.

Furthermore, Arnold does not fall into the trap of assimilating unduly his understanding of the faith of Islam to that of the Christian faith which, to some extent at least, separates the realm of religion from that of political society. 'No correct conception of Islam is possible', he writes, 'if it is regarded merely as a body of religious doctrine…, for the circumstances of its origin made it not merely a religion but also an organized political society.

In Medina Muhammad was accepted not merely as the teacher of a creed, but also as the founder of a state.'[28]Hence, for a proper understanding of the faith of Islam it is important to recognise the place of law in the Islamic system, the Sacred Law of Islam in fact claiming 'to be all-embracing' and concerning itself 'with every department of the life of the believer'.[29]

Arnold does not play down the fact that - as he sees it - 'the rapid success of the victorious armies of the first two generations of the faithful and the divine command in the Qur'an (8:39; 9:29) ... bequeathed to later generations the aggressive ambition of making Islam the dominant power in the world and of creating a world-wide empire.'[30]However, he presents also the other side of the same coin: the same umma urges every Muslim to 'consider himself to be a member of an ideal society, which is bound ultimately to overcome all hostile forces and make the law of God prevail in the world ...'[31]and which acts as 'a constant stimulus' to practise the brotherhood of all Muslim believers (49:10), an ideal succeeding 'in breaking down the barriers of race and country'.31 The theorists of Muslim political Law never contemplated, Arnold adds in view of present-day problems, 'the possibility of Muslims having to live under an alien rule.'[32]

The limits of time do not allow us here to comment in more detail on Arnold's emphasis on the peaceful methods of Muslim missionary activity through the ages nor on his description of the mystical dimension of Islam which, as he states with - in his day - rare insight 'can be shown to be a natural growth out of the teaching of the Qur'an.[33]

Finally, when commenting on modern developments in Islam, Arnold singles out Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938) who 'in spite of his learning and his wide reading, is no mere echo of other men's ideas but is distinctly an original thinker.' In his 'passionate devotion to the person of Muhammad whom he reverences above all as the Prophet of action', Iqbal sees, - so avers Arnold - 'that the regeneration of the Muslim world will be obtained through vigorous expression of personality and by self-affirmation and self-development.'[34]

Allow me to conclude these few observations with a comment on Sir T.W. Arnold's prophetically relevant characterization of the relationship between 'Europe and Islam', as he entitled an essay written in 1922 from which we quote. Arnold there pleads for 'the recognition of common

elements in Christianity and Islam', first in the sphere of the devout life, but, secondly, also on the needed 'emphasis on the fact that the Christian and the Muslim world are both heirs to the same civilization, viz. of ancient Greece and Rome who bequeathed their legacy to both the Christian and Muslim worlds. Arnold concludes this truly ecumenical essay with the plea: 'We must dismiss from our minds the old distinction between East and West. It is a distinction largely based upon ignorance and is now [1922!] out of date, in view of our larger knowledge of the vast complexity which our ignorance used to conceal from us under that easy generalization - the East. Whatever barriers previously existed are now rapidly being broken down, not only those of actual transit which are causing geographical spaces to shrink, but by more rapid and widely diffused communication of ideas... If we are to live in harmony and co-operation with our Muslim fellow subjects [today Arnold would say our Muslim fellow citizens' or, simply 'with one another'] we must come to realize how much more numerous are the points of likeness than those we have hitherto recognized.'[35]

I am convinced that Sir Muhammad Iqbal would have heartily endorsed this plea of his respected friend and thus we have here a fine summary of what this [Iqbal] Academy tries to practice and to project.

NOTES & REFERENCES

* This is the text of a talk given on the occasion of the 'Sir Thomas Arnold Day' organized by the IQBAL ACADEMY (UK) on Saturday 19 November 1988.

[1]In: Dennis MacEoin and Ahmad al-Shahi(eds.), Islam in the Modern World (London: Croom Helm, 1938), p. 1

[2]Edward Said, Orientalism (London: Routlege and Kegan Paul, 1978), passim. See especially the entry 'Orientalism' in the Index of this work.

[3]Theodore Morison and H.A.R. Gibb, 'Sir Thomas Arnold' in The Journal of the Central Asian Society (Oct. 1930), p. 400

[4]Aurel Stein,. 'Thomas Walker Arnold. 1846-1930' in Proceedings of the British Academy (London, 1930), p. 7

[5]Ibid.

[6]David Lelyveld, Aligarh's First Generation. Muslim Solidarity in British India (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 244f. and passim.

[7]Lelyveld, op. cit., pp. 247f.; 248f

[8]First published in parts in Urdu versions. First published in English in London, 1896; rev. 2nd ed., London, 1913; 3rd. unchanged ed. (posthumously), London, 1930; rpt. Lahore: Ashraf, 1961.

[9]Morison and Gibb, op. cit., p. 399

[10]Cf. The Preaching of Islam, 3rd. ed. (London, 1930), p. xiv

[11]Cf. the typescript with extracts from numerous reviews of the work preserved among the unpublished papers of Arnold in SOAS, London.

[12]Gibb and Morison, op. cit., pp. 399-400

[13]BSOAS, III (1925), p. 824

[14]Painting in Islam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), Preface.

[15]Morison and Gibb, op. cit., p. 400

[16]T.W. Arnold, The Old and New Testaments in Muslim Religious Art [The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1928], p. 1

[17]T.W. Arnold, Survivals of Sassanian and Manichaean Art in Persian Painting (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 23

[18]The Old and New Testaments, p. 47

[19]Survivals, p. 23

[20]London: Ernst Benn, 1928. pp. 78. Pott. 4 to.

[21]Morison and Gibb, op. cit., p. 399

[22]The Islamic Faith, p. 6

[23]Ibid., pp. 8; 9

[24]Ibid. p. 15

[25]Ibid., p. 17

[26]Ibid., p. 19

[27]Ibid., p. 24

[28]Ibid., p. 38

[29]Cf. Ibid., p. 41

[30]Ibid., p. 39

[31]Ibid., p. 47

[32]Ibid., p. 50

[33]Ibid., p. 57

[34]Ibid., p. 77

[35]'Europe and Islam' in F.R. Martin (ed.), Western Races and the World [The Unity Series. v], first publ. 1922; rpt. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1968, p. 159