

A YOUNG MUSLIM'S GUIDE TO THE MODERN WORLD

by
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This is a recent publication. But it speaks to a need which is almost as old as the encounter of the Islamic world itself with the civilization of the modern West. Ever since the Muslim lands came into contact with the western civilization and the Muslim youth started making their educational sojourns to the various centres of learning in the West a need was increasingly felt; a need to understand an alien civilization and its worldview which challenged the very tenets of Islam and which imposed itself on the Islamic world and its peoples. Responses varied, from traditionalist quietism to different brands of modernism to slavish imitation. Occidentalists (who could study the West from an Islamic point of view) were few and far between. Muslim youth, more or less, modelled its responses and approaches to the West according to these paradigms available to it.

As the time went by, there arose another need no less important than the earlier one. Since, for a variety of reasons, the Muslim youth had been estranged from its own tradition, especially from the intellectual heritage of its own civilization, the need to understand the West was coupled with an equally imperative requirement to explain and present the Islamic civilization to them in a manner that would enable them to really appreciate its sacred character and intellectual richness and profundity.

A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World fulfils both these requirements in a simple and straightforward manner. S. Hossein Nasr is one of the few occidentalists that we have. At the same time he is an outstanding scholar of Islamic philosophy, Islamic Science and religion. He has, designed

the book, in three parts, on such a pattern that could meet both the aforementioned needs. The first part, entitled "The Message of Islam", consists of seven chapters, each dealing with one of the important aspects of the Islamic tradition. The first chapter, introduces the concept of revelation and the meaning of religion before opening onto a discussion of the last revelation, the Noble Quran its character and its message;

The Quran constitutes the alpha and omega of the Islamic religion in the sense that all that is Islamic, whether it be its laws, its thoughts, its spiritual and ethical teachings and even its artistic manifestations, have their roots in the explicit or implicit teachings of the sacred Test (p.15)

There is a unity which runs through the whole of Allah's created order and through human society if that society is to be Islamic. There must be unity in human life; there must be unity in the relationship between man and the world of nature; there must be unity in human thought: there must be unity in what man makes, in the art, the architecture and the cities which he creates. All of these forms of unity reflect the Wisdom and Will of Allah in our world, the Will which is embodied most concretely in the Divine Law of the Shari'ah and which should also be expressed in every authentic facet of the Muslim's life. (p. 21)

The importance of Hadith and Sunnah, as the exemplary and elucidator of the Quran, make up the rest of the chapter.

The Hadith literature ranges all the way from discussions of the creation of the world, the hierarchy of angels and of light, the questions of the Will of Allah and of how He rules over the universe, and how both freedom and determinism are intertwined in human life, to human, political, economic and social questions, and practical problems of everyday life dealing with one's family, neighbors and friends, The Ifadith deals also directly and indirectly with questions relating to the ambience in which the Muslim should live, hence with cleanliness, beauty and propriety. There are hadiths which,

along with the Noble Quran, have had a very important role to play in the formation of Islamic art, architecture, city-planning and in fact the whole physical ambience which should reflect the meaning, spirit, and genius of the Islamic revelation. (p. 19-20)

Every authentic religion has sought to reveal different aspects of the infinite Reality of God. "Islamic revelation might he said to be the unveiling of the complete and total doctrine of the nature of God." (p.23)

This is how the author approaches the most central concern of Islam, namely, Tawhid, which underlies the concept of man (male and female), the universe, eschatology and the allied questions and lead them back to its unifying vision. These concepts are the subject of the second chapter. Regarding the concepts of male and female,

It is important to understand that in contrast to modern movements within the Western world and especially America, which try to equate man and woman in a quantitative way as if there were no differences between them. Islam views men and women as complementary beings. At the same time Islam sees them equal in the fundamental or ultimate sense of having an immortal soul and therefore, having the possibility of gaining paradisaic felicity after death or being punished in the infernal states for having disobeyed Allah's Will. (p. 33)

Muslim writers, most often under the influence of Western science and technology, have tried to interpret the traditional sources in such a manner that could accommodate the typically Western and secular approach towards exploiting the world of nature, while turning -a blind eye to the devastating results that such an attitude of 'rape of nature' has brought about. The author alerts the young minds to this danger in the following words.

The Quran, while giving man the power to rule over all things through the fact that Allah taught Adam the names of all things, also gives man the responsibility of custodianship over the created order. The taskhir or subjugation of nature does not mean a selfish and blind conquest and domination of

nature. It means living in harmony with nature, seeing in nature Allah's Wisdom and making use of natural bounties wisely in accordance with man's final end which is to live as a good Muslim and to return to the Creator. The moral laws of Islam in a sense extend beyond human society to embrace the animals, plants, minerals and in fact, the whole of the inanimate world. To live as a good Muslim in this world is to see the Wisdom of Allah everywhere and to care for His creation as He cares for us and that creation Himself. (p. 38)

Teachings about eschatology are usually put aside, not only by ordinary Muslims as the author points out, but also by many a modernist thinker and even those who design the curriculum of Islamic studies in the Muslim countries as well as in the West. The author has given a brief but effective account of Islamic teachings on eschatology to bring out their ultimate significance.

Human life is constituted in such a way that the actions which we perform in this world here and now have consequences not only beyond that moment, not only beyond the immediate confines of this action but even beyond this world because they affect our immortal soul. Man possesses an immortal soul and does not cease to exist at the moment of death for his soul continues to survive in various states in accordance with the way he or she has lived and also of course according to the Mercy of Allah. Here again one sees an interplay between the justice and Mercy of Allah which one cannot reduce to simple bookkeeping and accounting. (p. 39- 40)

The greatest material achievements, not only of the individual but also of whole civilizations, can and in fact do wither away, It is only the eschatological realities which bring into focus the permanent, abiding and eternal consequences of human actions precisely because human beings are beings created for immortality and the eternal world. (p. 44)

Third chapter is devoted to "The Shari'ah", its contents and its application to the society; morality and rights, transactions, family, economics, politics etc.

The Shari'ah is contained in principle in the Noble Quran and in the Noble Quran alone, but this is in principle. In order for it to be manifested, there was need first of all, of course, for the Hadith literature and the Sunnah of the Prophet. The Prophet through his practices and sayings made the Will of God known to the Islamic community and therefore his Sunnah and his Hadith are the second fundamental source of Islamic Law along with the Quran.

The early Islamic community lived in the presence of these two realities. The Quran was ever present and the practices of the Prophet, which were copied and imitated by the Companions and the first generation after them, were so well known that the whole community was in a sense immersed in them. During the early period there were still no codified schools of law. The different interpretations of Shari'ah and the Shari'ah itself had not been codified and formulated in books of jurisprudence as we find later on, but the reality was present. How people lived and acted, how they were judged, what punishment or rewards were given, how transactions were carried out, not to speak of the part of the Shari'ah dealing with religious practices, all of these were present in these earliest generations and served as models for later centuries of Islamic history. In fact, it was the danger of the gradual distancing of the later generations from the source of Islamic revelation and the gradual forgetting of the dazzling example of the Prophet as the perfect embodiment of Islam and the perfect practitioner and promulgator of the Divine Law that caused the great jurists or scholars of Islamic Law to codify the Shari'ah according to various schools. (p. 45-46)

Chapter four, "Islamic Spirituality and Thought" presents an overview of the whole spectrum of Islamic intellectual life displayed in the form of various schools of thought, ranging from the spiritual disciplines to various

schools of theology (Kalam) and philosophy (Falsafah as well as Hikmah) as well as their interaction and cross fertilization through out history. The message it brings home to the young Muslim is,

That various schools of Islamic thought have created a vast treasury of thought which is able to answer the challenges that Western thought poses for Muslims today. Whether it be a question of philosophy of science, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of language, or the relationship between man and God, freewill and determinism, causality or other philosophic questions with which various European and American philosophers have been struggling for the last few centuries, the vast intellectual tradition of Islam has provided answers of enduring validity. (p.84)

Similarly, chapter 5 gives us an overview of "Islamic Science" which is closely wedded to the intellectual life of the Islamic community. The vast panorama of Islamic science is presented through a concise, yet cogent, description of the Muslim achievements in its various branches, i.e. mathematics, astronomy, geology and geography, physics, natural history, alchemy and chemistry, medicine etc. Though Dr. Nasr talks about the influence of the Islamic Sciences at the end, it is refreshing, and significant indeed, to note that the essential message of this chapter is not to buttress or enhance a false sense of pride in our scientific heritage which we bequeathed to the West. The message, which is different from the usual stock answers, is the following.

The significance of the vast Islamic scientific tradition is not only that it gives (to the youth) a sense of pride in their own civilization because of the prestige that science has in the present day world. It is further more a testament to the way Islam was able to cultivate various sciences extensively without becoming alienated from the Islamic world view and without creating a science whose application would destroy the world of nature and the harmony that must exist between man and the natural environment. The Islamic sciences are not only important from the point of view of science understood in its current Western sense, but they also have a

spiritual and intellectual significance. Their study and understanding is important in order to create a bridge in the mind of young Muslims between Western science, which many of them are studying, and the tenets: of Islam to which they must remain faithful. The great achievement of the Muslim men of science was that they had the most rigorous standards of critical thought and were scientists of integrity without at the same time losing their faith or becoming alienated from the Islamic view of the universe within which all of the Islamic sciences were cultivated.(p.101)

Next chapter briefly describes the arts and literatures of the Islamic peoples and tries to bring out their significance and importance for the human ambiance through calligraphy, different genres of sacred and profane literature, architecture, poetry, plastic arts, crafts of various forms, music and chanting of the Quran.

The chanting of the Quran is in a sense the protu-musical experience for the Muslim soul and it is the origin of the ethos of the classical schools of music as they developed over the centuries as the text of the Quran is the origin of the literatures of the Islamic people. In the same manner, the Quran contains in a subtle way the principles, and is the origin of the spirit of the visual arts of Islam whether they be calligraphy, which was originally directly related to text of the Quran, or architecture, that creates spaces in which the Muslim throughout his life hears the celestial beauty of the Word of Allah echoing from the mihrab throughout the spaces of the mosque, and from the minaret throughout the spaces comprising the Islamic urban environment. (p. 115)

Chapter seven, which concludes the first part, deals with the issues related to the different responses of the Islamic world to the West in the modern times. The author has provided us a brief but extremely perceptive analysis of these responses which he terms as the modernist, revivalist or fundamentalist, millennialist and traditionalist. (p. 127) The comments which the author has made about one of these trends, a trend which is much

discussed and debated in the present day scholarship, namely, fundamentalism is worth quoting here in full.

The whole phenomenon of revivalism or so-called fundamentalism is a very complicated one and covers a spectrum ranging from moderate forms which go back to the puritanical and revivalist movements of the thirteenth and fourteenth Islamic century reformers to types of movements which, while trying to reassert the primacy of the Shari'ah, also use a great deal of the language and ideas of nineteenth century European revolutionary and ideological thought. It is not, therefore, possible here to give a general description which would cover every aspect of all of these phenomena known under the rubric of revivalism or "fundamentalism." Nevertheless, it can be asserted that most of these movements share together on the one hand a concern for the preservation and revival of the Shari'ab the political and social independence of Muslims and opposition to Western social norms, and on the other hand, a passive attitude and indifference to the penetration of Western science and technology and various kinds of Western managerial and administrative institutions and ways of thinking which accompany the adoption of technology. Also, nearly all these movements share in the fact that they ignore the significance of Islamic art, architecture and city planning and are impervious to the need for the preservation of the artistic and aesthetic environment of Islam and for its protection from intrusion by Western norms. This attitude also holds true for the Islamic intellectual tradition which they usually neglect except for that concerns directly the faith, juridical matters and ritual practice. In fact none of these movements has led to a flowering of Islamic thought or art, philosophy or literature. (p. 126)

All these chapters provide a wealth of objectively presented historical information combined with a profound intellectual insight which enable the

reader to create the most needed, indispensable bridge between himself and his religion.

The responses mentioned above concern the Western civilization. But what is that itself? Part two, again divided into seven chapters, provides an answer to the reader through a series of penetrating analyses of "Religion in the Modern West" (ch.8), "Modern Western Philosophy and Schools of Thought" (ch.9) "Modern Science and Technology" (ch.10), "Political, Social and Economic life of the Modern World." (ch.11), "Modern Education Its History, Theories and Philosophies" (ch.12), "Art in the Modern West" (ch.13) and "The Modern Life Style" (ch.14).

The author has given the rationale for an introduction and study of the West in the following words.

Most of the Islamic world still suffers from the lack of a profound knowledge of the West while it is being deeply affected by the ideas, products, external manifestations and activities of the Western world ranging from cars to computers, from the cinema to literature, from philosophical ideas to economics. Western ideas and values continue to flood the Islamic world through the mass media and other means for the transfer of information from one side of the world to the other. What is lacking is not information about the West or Muslims who have contact with the west, but a knowledge from the Islamic point of view of the roots of the culture and ideas of the Western world, a knowledge which alone can provide Muslims with the means necessary to confront the challenges of the modern West and to provide an Islamic response to them.

It is precisely with his need in mind that we turn in the next section of this book to an analysis of Western civilization that gave rise to the modern world which in turn has left the imprint of its ideas and points of view upon the Islamic world during the last few centuries. It is hoped that the young Muslim, who must carry the responsibility and the burden for the future of the Islamic world upon his or her shoulders, will

be able to carry out this responsibility more successfully by gaining a more profound knowledge of the West. Such a knowledge will not only enable that person to navigate more successfully upon the very dangerous and stormy sea of the modern world and to protect his or her faith against all of the dangers lurking at every corner, it will also help to formulate, with the help of Allah, the necessary Islamic responses which would guarantee for those young Muslims and for the Islamic world as a whole, for which young educated Muslims will of necessity become leaders, a safe future, and will also safeguard the continuation of a civilization impregnated by the message of the Quran. But more important than that, such a knowledge will help to defend the religion at the heart of that civilization, a religion which has continued to echo over the ages and is still the vehicle for the truths revealed in the Noble Quran through the Blessed Prophet of Allah who was destined to bring the final plenary message from Heaven to present day humanity. (p. 131)

Chapter eight traces the history and significance of religion in the West, down to the modern times, and not only helps the reader to form an idea of the role of religion which it has had historically in the West, but also provides keys to understand the growth of anti religious modernism which now threatens Islam.

Two diametrically opposed points of view concerning religion in the West are to be seen among Muslims. Some consider all Westerners to be Christians, with the small Jewish minority being of course an exception, and often refer to Westerners as "those Christians" as if the West were the West of the Middle Ages when the Crusades were carried out and Western civilization lived in what has been called the Age of Faith. Another group of Muslims hold the opposite view that all Westerners are materialists or agnostics and skeptics and in fact there is no religion among the Westerners.

Now it is essential to insist that both of these views are false. On the one hand, the West since the seventeenth century and

even before that since the Renaissance has been moving in the direction of secularization and the dilution of religion in the everyday life of man.- As a result, there are numerous Westerners who are no- longer technically speaking Christians or Jews although they are inheritors of Christianity and Judaism. And yet there are still a fairly large number of people who practice Christianity and also Judaism within a civilization which itself can no longer be called a Christian civilization. It is very important for Muslims to understand the exact situation as far as the role of religion in the West is concerned and to avoid the extreme views currently held by so many people in the Islamic world. A young Muslim will never be able to understand the modern world without understanding the role of religion and also its eclipse in the West during the incubation, birth, growth and spread of the modern world in Europe and America and its later spread to other lands. (p. 136)

However in the West, in contrast to Islam, opposition began to be created against the authority of religion and against Catholicism in particular as a result of very complicated internal factors. These factors included the gradual loss of certain aspects of the inner teachings of Christianity, the excessive use of consolations and relics, the gradual rationalization of Christian religious thought and the skepticism inherent in late medieval nominalist theology.

This opposition took several different forms during, what has come to be known as the Renaissance. During this period, one can see, on the one hand, the rise of humanism and individualism which were to become later hallmarks of modern civilization and which opposed the domination of religion in general and the religious civilization of the Middle Ages in particular. On the other hand, there was a religious reaction resulting in the rise of Protestantism and the Reformation, which sought to go back to early Christianity rooted in the Bible and especially the Gospels, hence the term

Evangelicalism, which became associated with this movement. (p. 137)

The author, then, traces the history of the rise of different branches of Christianity, their interfaith struggles and dissensions, and what is more important from the point of view of the present work, their influence on various Western societies and political units resulting in a myriad of religious phenomenon and tendencies which, in turn, shaped the events in the West, through a lengthy process of secularization. Counter currents of thought as well as reactions to these tendencies are also described briefly since they explain the some what perplexing and ambiguous phenomenon manifested in the rejection of religion while at the same time an increasing interest in the revival and rediscovery of religion which expresses itself in the wide usage of term "spirituality" or the seeking of "meaningful life styles" (p.147) The author also observes that,

The role of religion is, however, far from being negligible in the modern West. In fact, many of the tendencies of Westerners, even those who do not consider themselves to be religious, have a religious foundation. Also the role of religion has been important in the recent downfall of Communism in Eastern Europe and within the former Soviet Union. The young Muslim who first comes to the West should not at all misunderstand the role of religion as being totally negligible on the basis of the fact that he sees so much promiscuity and laxity in sexual morality or observes so many people who are against religious teachings and who display so much indifference to the practice of religion. Today in fact there is a greater interest in religion in the West than there was a few decades ago, mostly due to the breakdown of many Western ideologies and idols of the mind which had grown out of eighteenth and nineteenth century European thought and which had taken the place of religion. These ideologies have gradually fallen aside and their danger and power of destruction have become manifest as never before. Today religion in the West is attracting a large number of intelligent people to its study and also to some extent to its fold more

than perhaps at any time since the secularization of the religious civilization of the West several centuries ago.....

It is in the matrix of these complicated forces and pattern that the role of religion in the West must be understood today. And it is also in the light of both the secularization of traditional religion and the quest for meaning and the rediscovery of religion as the foundation of human life in the West that one must understand the role of Islam in the West today. (p. 147)

Chapter nine focuses on modern western Philosophy and its schools of thought which served as the second most influential element in the history of the western mind-set.

The author alludes to this important factor in the following quote:

It is very important for the Muslims who wish to know the West to realize the significance of the philosophical ideas which have come into being during the last few centuries in the modern world, ideas which are not derived from a supra-individual source as is the case of traditional philosophy. Rather, modern philosophies are usually borne of the attempts of individual philosophers who seek, through the use of reason or empirical data, to create an all encompassing system which is then soon faced with the criticism by another philosopher who destroys the older mental construct to replace it with another. .

Nevertheless, the ideas which have issued forth from the various figures and schools of philosophy in the West during the past centuries must be known because of their great importance in the political, social, economic, ethical, aesthetic and other realms. They in fact have created for the most part and define to this day what constitutes modernism and world

view of the modern world. Many a person from the East, including Muslims, is not able to understand modern Western civilization precisely because he or she only looks at its surface aspects without paying attention to the philosophical ideas which underlie that world. At this particular juncture of human history critical understanding and study of the ideas and history of western thought, (which is also to a great extent the history of modern thought) from the Islamic point of view is absolutely essential. (p.179)

In order to give the reader an idea of it, Dr. Nasr has briefly introduced about thirty notable philosophers/schools of thought from the West, medieval as well as modern, indicating their influence on the western world view on the one hand and, on the other hand, drawing the attention of the reader to an entirely different role that philosophy played in the West which was, moreover, quite different from its role and position in the Islamic civilization where it was always closely allied to religion.

From among the philosophers of the medieval period which have been introduced in this chapter are St. Augustine, J. Scout§ Erigena, St. Anselm, St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas. Names of modern philosophers include Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibnitz, Berkeley, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Kant, Hegel and German Idealism, Schopenhauer, Keirkegaard, Marx, Bergson, Nietzsche, Husserl, Freud and Psychoanalysis, A.N. Whitehead, Russell, Heidegger and J.P. Sartre.

The various figures and schools of modern thought have followed upon the wake of one another starting with the rebellion of reason against both the intellect and revelation, leading to the development of critical philosophy trying to curtail the powers of reason and the rise of ideologies and system building in the thirteenth/nineteenth century, followed by the criticism of Hegelian and other types of systematic philosophy by existentialism. One can observe during this century the division of philosophy in the West into phenomenology and existentialism on the one hand, the latter based upon the anguish of individual existence and the like, and positivism based upon the use of logic closely related

to experimental science and neglect of other problems and issues especially of a metaphysical nature on the other. (p. 177-8)

Tenth chapter discusses the central role played by modern science and its application in the form of technology in the modern world and analyzes few of the extremely influential concepts which have reached the Islamic World as well, like evolutionism, scientism, reductionism etc. Modern technology, blindly followed and applied in most parts of the Islamic world, also receives adequate treatment here by way of a critique of its negative aspects threatening the human environment and even the whole chain of life on earth.

The author has also highlighted the basic difference between Islamic science and the concept and method of science understood in its modern western sense

In contrast, Western science is based on considering the natural world as a reality which is separate from both Allah and the higher levels of being. At best, Allah is accepted as the creator of the world, as a mason who has built a house which now stands on its own. His intrusion into the running of the world and His continuous sustenance of it are not accepted in the modern scientific worldview. There are in fact very profound differences between the worldview of Western science and that of Islamic science. To consider Western science simply as a continuation of Islamic science is, therefore, to misunderstand completely both the epistemological foundations of the two sciences and the relationship that each has to the world of faith and revelation. It is also to misunderstand the metaphysical and philosophical backgrounds of the two sciences. Islamic science always relates lower levels of being to the higher and considers the physical world to be simply the lowest plane in the hierarchic reality of the universe reflecting Allah's Wisdom, while modern science considers the physical world to be an independent reality which can be studied and known

in an ultimate sense without any reference to a higher level of reality. (p. 182)

Subsequent chapters deal with the historical roots, evolution of institutions and imminent crises attendant on political, social and economical life, modern education, arts and modern life style. These chapters also describe the impact these aspects of the Western civilization had on the Islamic world and explain why a Muslim cannot understand the modern world and cannot continue to live as a Muslim in the modern World without understanding, in depth, these aspects of the West.

Today, Western education is in a great crisis even in seeking successfully to achieve the distorted goals of the secularization of knowledge, material domination, cultivation of individualism and all of the other elements which the Islamic worldview rejects. This system is doubly dangerous for Muslims both because it is in a state of crisis within itself and also because even if it were not to be in conflict within itself, it would be in discord with the Islamic perspective and the values which Islam cherishes most dearly. It is therefore, very critical at a time when Muslims must learn various Western disciplines, including not only science and technology but other disciplines as well, in order to be able to provide their own answers and master their own destinies in a world in which they are faced with vast challenges, that they become fully cognizant of the meaning, role and function of education and educational institutions, including especially the philosophies which underlie them. In this way, they may become able to learn to the extent possible what they wish to learn of Western disciplines without becoming excessively contaminated in an unconscious way by forces which could distort their religious perspective, uproot them spiritually and intellectually, alienate them from their own traditional background and simply add another potent element contributing to disorder and chaos within Islamic society itself. (p. 216)

A young Muslim cannot understand the modern world and cannot continue to live as a Muslim in the modern world without understanding, in depth, not only the various aspects of the modern lifestyle in its ever changing kaleidoscopic nature, but also the impact 'hat this lifestyle has, often unconsciously, upon Muslims who may not be fully prepared to respond to the challenges which it poses for themselves as individuals and most of all for them as Muslims who have dedicated themselves to Allah and have surrendered themselves to the Divine Will. Needless to say, it is this Will which has the last say because Allah's Will is always triumphant. But in our contemporary world the very presence of this lifestyle poses a challenge of the utmost importance, complementing the philosophical, scientific and theological challenges of modernism, and, in fact, presents a more powerful current against which the Muslim youth, whether they are in the Islamic world or studying in the West, must learn to swim an presents challenges for which Muslims of different ages, whether parents or the younger generation, must learn to provide authentic Islamic answers. (p. 235)

Third part, comprising of one chapter entitled "The Young Muslim and the Islamic Response to the Modern World", suggests the ways a genuine Islamic response could be modelled by the youth in four categories; religious, spiritual and intellectual—social, economic and political—artistic, and life style in order to draw a "map" which can guide Muslims, especially the young, through this bewildering world of contending and opposing forces and anti-religious elements which make up the modern scene.

We may add at the end that Dr. Nasr's work is not only useful for the Muslim youth but for those teachers as well who are engaged in the training and education of the Muslim youth.