

BOOK REVIEWS



1. *THE OXFORD HISTORY OF ISLAM*

Ed. John L. Esposito,

Reviewed by **Maryam Jameelah**



2. *THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS*

Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud,

Reviewed by **Mohammad Din Juahar**



ED. JOHN L. ESPOSITO, *The Oxford History of Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999, pp. 749.

REVIEWED BY MARYAM JAMEELAH, Sant Nagar, Lahore

“...The most hideous aspect of this counter-revolution (Monarchy replacing the Rightly-Guided Caliphate) was the emergence of all three types of Ignorance (i.e. atheism, polytheism and asceticism) under the guise of Islam and their fast-spreading influence in the Islamic community. Atheism grabbed power and authority in the name of Khilafat, but in reality, it was monarchy, the very antithesis of Islam. This change worked a tremendously far-reaching negative influence on the lives and mental attitudes of the chiefs, government officials, soldiers and the ease loving people in general to the extent that their very view of morality and social life was altogether perverted. Then naturally an urge was felt to (project) un-Godly arts, literature, philosophy and science so as to make them fit in with the new patterns of life and trends of

thought. Such things can flourish only under the patronage of wealth and authority. Here then was a large opening for them to emerge freely. Such were the general intellectual conditions that favoured the downpour of all admixtures of philosophy, literature and science from the Greek, Iranian and Indian skies on the Muslim soil... Not only that: the fine arts, which are strictly un-Islamic, found patronage from those who had been forbidden to practice these ugly arts. Polytheism made incursions on the common man's mind and led him into the blind alleys of ignorance and sin. People of the un-Godly communities who embraced Islam... and the world-seeking *ulema* worked hard to distort Qur'an and misinterpret the *Hadith* with a view for making grave and saint-worship an integral part of their system of Islam. Monasticism attacked the religious scholars, spiritual guides, righteous and good-natured people and influenced them in all the above-mentioned evils. Under the impact of this anti-social creed, the Muslim society became impregnated with Greek philosophy, monastic morality and a general pessimistic attitude towards life... It (Sufism) perverted Islamic literature, arts and sciences and incapacitated the thinking elements of the society as if by an injection of morphia (and).... it reinforced monarchy.....¹⁰⁹

These words do not come from the pen of some prejudiced western Orientalist or an over-zealous Christian missionary? No, Not at all! None, but the most famous Islamic revivalist of the 20th century, whose prodigious writings and activities immensely influenced the contemporary Islamic movement all over the globe, is the writer of these remarks.

The book under review effectively refutes this extraordinarily negative view of our history and civilization. It is a very balanced account which defies all efforts by such modern zealots to paint our past black. In its full detailed

¹⁰⁹ (Tajdid-o-Ihya-Din) *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam*, Abul A'la Maududi, Islamic Publication Ltd., Lahore, 1963, pp. 27-30.

and unbiased presentation of all the positive achievements of traditional Islamic civilization to the world in religion, spirituality, military and peaceful conquests, statecraft, commerce, jurisprudence, literature, philosophy, theology and all the arts and sciences, this book can be judged as fair and objective as possible for non-Muslim scholarship.

The Muslim reader can only wish that more space and attention had been given to the Holy Prophet himself and the Rightly-Guided Caliphate without which all this could never have taken place. There should also have been more reliance on Hadith literature and less on western sources. The reader of this book cannot but be astounded that despite all the political turmoil following the assassination of Hazrat Uthman, Islam continued to spread and flourish with undiminished vitality.

As the Holy Prophet and the Qur'an were the final culmination and re-affirmation of all the previous religious Traditions, so did the early Muslims regard themselves as the only rightful heirs to all the civilizations of antiquity. This inspired a tremendous love for knowledge and quest for learning wherever it could be found. The translation of the major Greek, Persian, Indian (and much later, Chinese) classics on science and philosophy into Arabic and their gradual Islamization, was one of the most important events in the history of human civilization. No external military or economic pressures were involved to explain this momentous development, but only love of knowledge for its own sake. This book clearly reveals that had not this intellectual activity taken place, God forbid, Islam

might have remained an obscure Arab sect and never developed into a world religion.

The chapter on the immense achievements of “medieval” Muslim sciences, mathematics and technology unfortunately fails to reply to the key question as to why the scientific, technological and industrial revolution arose in the West and not *Dar ul Islam*?

More than any other single factor, Sufism inspired the forms of Islamic calligraphy, mosque architecture and crafts. The shockingly un-Islamic statue of the half-naked dancing girl which adorned the Umayyad palace in Jericho (p. 231) only illustrates the aesthetic infancy of Muslim art before it had opportunity to mature into its characteristic forms. From the Umayyads, the Abbasids to the Mamluks and Ottomans, these much-maligned monarchs lavishly patronized all the arts, sciences, hospitals, public works and charitable and educational institutions without which Islamic civilization would not have been possible as all these sciences and arts were dependent on patronage.

Illuminating chapters discuss the rich Islamic heritage in Africa, China and South-East Asia, replying to the often-asked question if culture can be separated from religion? The fact is, one is inseparable from the other as no culture can grow in a void. Hence the traditional Chinese, the African, the Indo-Pak and Malaysian expressions of Islamic culture are all equally valid. Islam was never intended to be a uniform monolith but the embodiment of unity in diversity. Never intended to achieve an earthly utopia, despite all

imperfections and failings, traditional Islamic civilization provided maximum stability, equilibrium and collective support for the individual Muslim in his quest for eternal salvation.

All that was thoroughly devastated by the advent of colonialism and post-colonialism. In a brilliantly revealing chapter, Dr. Syed Vali Reza Nasr, Professor of Political Science at San Diego University, presents the colonial and post-colonial period as a colossal loss, both to Muslims themselves and to the world at large which may prove beyond repair and irreversible. He shows how the colonial heritage has decisively shaped the present post-colonial Muslim-majority, anti-Islamic national-states with their emphasis on western-style “Development” and top-down state-managed social and cultural transformation in the modern western image, - a direct successor to the colonial “white-man’s burden” and his “civilizing” mission to “improve” the “natives.”

The final chapter on Islam today by Esposito himself shows how Muslims did survive the colonial mayhem, though with terrible spiritual and cultural impoverishment, illustrated by the preceding chapter on Islam in the modern West. After suffering discontinuity from their heritage by two centuries of alien colonialism, it is hardly surprising when youth today attempt to reconnect, they easily lose their way (see illustration on p. 673)

This book is an eloquent presentation of the incredible richness and depth of traditional Islamic civilization throughout the world from its inception to the present-day.

WAN MOHD NOR WAN DAUD, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas*, ISTAC, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

REVIEWED BY MOHAMMAD DIN JAUHAR, Sadiq Abad.

The currency of modern educational ideas in the Islamic lands is a historical testimony to the epical failure of the Muslims over the past two

hundred years, and practices are the slow, but inexorable, unravelling of the Muslim mind. Education in the contemporary world is like the most pervasive ‘conveyor belt’ transmitting the ideas of the dominant culture and the values system of politico-economic elite to the credulous and dominated generations. Education in the true Foucauldian sense is plugged into the grid of reigning ideas and values, not necessarily predicated on ‘truth’. It is also a master technology of control, which leaves nothing untouched. The content of modern education and the whole process of schooling/disciplining are aimed at ‘manufacturing’ human beings to fulfil certain political and socio-economic objectives set by the political powers that be. The individual and the needs of his self are absent from the whole project of modern education.

The Muslim case was aggravated by our home grown ‘epistemological lackeys’ who, in their effort to ingratiate the colonial masters, messed up everything. They failed to live up to their traditional religious heritage and discover its relevance in the changed times, and miserably failed to see the West for what it really is. Occasional sparks of wisdom were visible in the Muslim societies but they were soon overtaken by the ‘secular darkness’ viciously spreading in the Muslim lands in the wake of colonialism. Iqbal’s following couplet now looks poignant:

T«za phir d«nish-e-Á«ür ney key« wo si-Ár-i-qadâm.

Guzar is ‘ehd mün mumkin nahân be chëb-i-Kalâm

Modern knowledge has revived the ancient magic of Pharaoh

No one can pass through this age without the staff of Moses.

Muslim civilization in the present times looks like a tree, withering fast, losing sap, leaf-less and fruitless, ready to die or about to be cut down for others’ fuel. But lo! All *of* a sudden a robust and sturdy shoot sprouts from the trunk. The tree lives and the forebodings die. This new symbol of the invigorated Muslim life is none other than the formidable Al-Attas. And Wan

Mohd Nor Wan Daud has done a great service to the Muslims in general by writing this book. It is interesting that as the Muslim heartlands bleed and lie humbled in the face of the renewed colonial onslaught, a man from the backyard of the Muslim civilization unexpectedly emerges to lead the battle for the Muslim soul.

No adjectives can do justice to the achievements of Al-Attas. His contribution to the Muslim intellectual life is original, comprehensive and practically viable. First and foremost, as the author says, he has pointed out the root cause of Muslim malaise as “confusion and error in knowledge”. This sets the stage for all socio-political, cultural and educational ills. This in turn fundamentally affects the individuals who lose Islamic *adab*. Their selves are replicas of falsehood and they span out into all walks of Muslim life, thus aggravating the confusion even further. This vicious coterie of false leaders sets up a macabre play of musical chairs, while the Muslim peoples look on befuddled and bamboozled. In other words, apparent Muslim failure is merely an exteriorisation of a deep-seated failure which is spiritual and epistemological.

Dr. Daud fully elaborates Al-Attas’ seminal contributions to the religious thoughts and their bearing on the modern Muslim education. Following the tradition of the higher Sufis, Al-Attas delineates the contours of Islamic metaphysics and world-view of Islam. His metaphysics is rooted in the Islamic fundamentals as set forth in the Qur’an and the *Sunnah*. Once we get this philosopher’s stone, everything is transmuted. Eyes begin to see and hearts begin to hope. The magical dazzle of the modern secularism and its technological achievements begins to flicker off and we see things in proper perspective. This is *adab* which is a blessing of proper worldview of Islam. The man of *adab* is central to the whole Islamic scheme of things. And *adab* means: recognizing and acknowledging the right and proper places of things, the acquisition of good qualities and attributes as well as actions to discipline the mind and soul, and the avoidance of erroneous actions. *Adab* is built on

knowledge, proper methods of knowing and *Áikmah* (wisdom) leading to ‘*adl*’ (justice).

The book dwells long at Al-Attas’ most sustained and in-depth critique of the modern West and its conception of reality. His ideas bring into sharp relief the “the fundamental elements, characteristic of the Western spirit and worldview, that are antithetical to Islam, namely the dualistic view of reality, the secular ideology, the humanistic philosophy and the tragic conception of life”. These elements are worked into the modern humanistic education at universities through literary classics and secular science and philosophy. The modern university suffers from the absence of epistemological authority and the normative ‘character’. The ideals and aims of modern education are always in flux and trapped in a Sisyphean process of becoming. Authority in Muslim education is predicated on the divine guidance and the Absolute Truth of the Holy Qur’an. The presence of the Holy Prophet at the heart of the Muslim education saves it from the meaninglessness of modern becoming and sets up a model before individuals to emulate and achieve.

Islamization of modern knowledge is the natural consequence of Al-Attas’ Islamic metaphysics. Even at the risk of plagiarism and simplification, a real danger to Al-Attas’ preternatural ideas, one cannot help saying that Islamization essentially means bringing the *farí kifíyah* knowledge UNDER the purview of the *farí ‘ayn* knowledge. This is what Islamic *adab* demands and this is what leads to Islamic *adab*. As soon as the divine touches the mundane, its secular crookedness straightens and its profanity is sanctified. Hierarchical view of reality is central to the whole project of Islamization. Al-Attas’ perspective on the role of language in the process of Islamization in the early Islamic history and its role in de-Islamization and secularisation of the Muslims in the modern times is an intellectual *tour de force*. His efforts to rediscover the original definitions of the key terms of Muslim discourse and his resistance to their semantic erosion have greatly strengthened his argument for the Islamization project. If a human being can be ‘Islamised’, so can all his endeavours be. Knowledge, as Dr. Daud shows in the light of

his mentor's ideas, is an attribute of man. Once modern secular knowledge is plugged into the grid of *fari' ayn* knowledge, it will be divinely 'enlightened'.

The author makes a convincing case for a radical transformation of Muslim university education, incorporating the ideas of Al-Attas which have universal relevance. He enumerates all the efforts undertaken in the major Muslim lands in response to the colonial education and the challenge of the modern knowledge and exposes their inadequacy. Interestingly, the author does not mention Jami'ah Usm κ niah, Hyderabad Deccan, where the medium of instruction was Urdu and which produced internationally recognized scholars representing true Muslim character. The Jami'ah was a glorious effort, begun with great difficulty under the interfering English nose. Pakistan is now paying the wages for its forgetfulness of such a successful venture. The stress to transform the higher education is understandable. It is the higher education in the Muslim lands that has brought us low and it is where we traded our dignity for trivial and ephemeral things.

INFORMATION AND COMMENTS

